

# THE BLACK PAINTING IN THE HERMIT HATCH:

*A Note on Thomas Merton and Ad Reinhardt*

— by **Lawrence S. Cunningham**

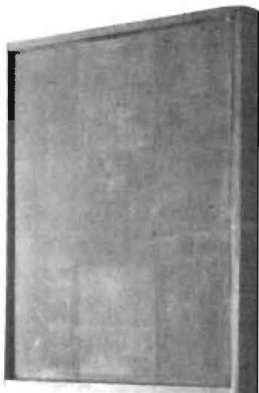
For **Brother Patrick Hart**

The painter Ad Reinhardt died in his studio in New York City on August 31, 1967. On September 5, 1967 Thomas Merton wrote his old friend Robert Lax about the death of their old college classmate and friend after Merton had received the news from Sister Therese Lentfoehr who had sent him an obituary clipped from *The Times*. In that peculiar playful patois he used when corresponding with Lax, Merton wrote: Tomorrow the Solemns. The requiems alone in the hermit hatch. Before the icons the offering. The oblations. The clean oblations all round thunder quiet silence black picture oblations. Make Mass beautiful silence like big black picture speaking requiem. Tears in the shadows of hermit hatch requiems blue black tone...<sup>1</sup>

The letter (and this is equally true of Lax's response) is heavy with grief at the loss of an old friend who had been a fellow contributor to *The Jester* at Columbia University and later, after Merton entered the monastery, a not infrequent correspondent and one time visitor to the abbey. In the late 1950s Reinhardt sent Merton art supplies and encouraged his interest in calligraphy. The two of them exchanged letters with ideas about art; Reinhardt had been especially helpful when Thomas Merton was working on his essay "Art and Worship."<sup>2</sup>

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THE BLACK CROSS PAINTING  
[Front, left - Back, right]

The repeated use of the word “black” refers not only to the traditional colors of the requiem mass (and Merton made it quite plain in his letter that it was going to be an old fashioned requiem; he was testy about new liturgical changes) but to a painting which Reinhardt had sent Merton in 1959. Reinhardt’s painting (he had also sent one to Lax) hung in the “hermit hatch” in pride of place with some icons which Merton particularly liked. Merton’s painting was a smallish canvas (the dimensions are 8 5/8” X 10 1/2”) done in the “black on black” style which Reinhardt had pioneered in the late 1950s. The canvas consists of a pure black ground on which are superimposed two smallish rectangles at top and bottom separated by a thick rectangular black band that crosses the canvas from left to right. It is, in short, a kind of boxy cruciform set on a black ground. On the back of the painting there are five inscriptions in Reinhardt’s hand. Starting clockwise from the top of the stretcher: “For Thomas Merton;” “Small Painting;” “Ad Reinhardt;” and “1957.” In the back center of the canvas, with an arrow, is the word “top.”

Thomas Merton was thrilled with Reinhardt’s gift. Shortly after receiving it he wrote the artist a letter of thanks:

It is a most recollected small painting. It thinks that only one thing is necessary and this is time, but this one thing is by no means apparent to one who will not take the trouble to look. It is a most religious, devout, and latreutic small painting.<sup>3</sup>

That Ad Reinhardt’s painting should appeal to Thomas Merton given the latter’s love for the spare, the gestural, and the empty seems clear. What is most interesting, however, is that Ad Reinhardt, renegade Lutheran, quondam communist, and persistent art agitator should see in his art values not dissimilar to those monastic ones of Merton even though he always denied that his paintings were “religious.” They were paintings; it was the aesthetic that Reinhardt pursued; it was the art that mattered.

Beginning in the late 1950s Reinhardt began to do a large number of “black on black” paintings. It was his way of carrying on the aesthetic program of the New York School of Painting which, since the middle 1940s, had attempted to create a kind of art which was quintessentially painting: flat, all over the canvas, unrelated to the three dimensional picture plane inherited from the Renaissance, free of symbol, icon, or recognizable entity which was not painting pure and simple. One trend, most notably that deriving from the work of Jackson Pollock, was called “action” painting but another, which attracted Reinhardt, followed a path of austere color, extreme linearity, and freedom from emotion; it was a trend which would end in the hard edge of art of the 1960s. Reinhardt’s desire to “pare down” art was both radical and systematic. In 1957 he published his famous manifesto “Twelve Rules for a New Academy.” Each rule, spelt out in some detail, began with a resounding and apodictic “no”: texture, brushwork, sketching, forms, design, color, light, space, time, size or scale, movement, object, subject, matter. It is difficult to think of an aesthetic manifesto that declared its aims more directly in the form of the *via negativa*.<sup>4</sup> It did not receive universal acclaim. Many painters at the time, notably Elaine De Kooning, thought that his manifesto would sound a death knell for painting or, at least, lead it to a dead end.

Lucy Lippard’s fine monograph on Reinhardt’s work makes it clear that a number of aesthetic principles undergirding the “black on black” paintings would resonate very closely with Thomas Merton’s thinking in the late 1950s.<sup>5</sup> It is not clear that Thomas Merton was privy to all of Reinhardt’s thinking in this period but it is patent that their thinking was running along parallel lines. I would like to single out three points in particular:

1) Reinhardt rescued the common significance of the color black from its characterization as a “badge of hell, the hue of dungeons” (Shakespeare) in order to affirm black as the vehicle of the wisdom of the Tao, the spark of Meister Eckhart, the depth of mystery, and, at a less solemn level, the sacral significance of the clothing of the priest and cleric.

2) There is a paradox in the above understanding of the color black. In the black paintings something arises out of their blackness (which was always, for Reinhardt, a matte not a glossy blackness) that produces a kind of luminosity and a crisp clarity. There was a play between the depth and opacity of the black and an illumination that came from a close observance of that blackness. Light and non-light are held in tension but seen as a whole. Reinhardt achieved, in short, a *coincidentia oppositorum*.

3) Lippard cites a number of critics, among them Barbara Rose, who insist on the ritual quality of the Reinhardt paintings. By ritual she meant not only the slow and meticulous manner in which Reinhardt painted but the stylized approach that one had to take to “see” what Reinhardt was doing. Lippard, quoting Rose, says that despite Reinhardt’s demurrers, one almost instinctively “reads” his paintings with a terminology borrowed from humanism and theology.<sup>6</sup>

It should be obvious from the above that both Reinhardt’s strategy and critical response to the final product of his work would find a sympathetic soul in someone like Thomas Merton. Merton, after all, did his own experiments in gestural abstract painting and calligraphy as an adjunct to contemplation. More exactly, he had made it his life’s vocation to explore the apophatic mystical tradition in both its Western and Eastern manifestations. One cannot think of Reinhardt’s painting hanging in the hermitage without instinctively recalling the writings of Merton on this tradition:

The perfect act is empty. Who can see it? He who forgets form. Out of the formed, the unformed, the empty act proceeds with its own form. Perfect form is momentary. Its perfection vanishes at once. Perfection and emptiness work together for they are the same: the coincidence of momentary form and eternal nothingness. Forget form, and it suddenly appears, ringed and reverberating with its own light, which is nothing. Well, then: stop seeking. Let it all happen. Let it come and go. What? Everything: i.e., nothing.<sup>7</sup>

Merton not only saw no problem in hanging his friend’s picture with the icons; he saw them as complementary. When he wrote to Reinhardt that the painting was “religious” and “devout” and “latreutic” he was only partially joshing the formally irreligious artist; he was equally paying tribute to the deeply contemplative power that he saw in its black depths.

Susan Sontag is one of the most perceptive critics on this apophatic strain in the culture of high modernism. In her powerful (and seminal) essay on the aesthetic of silence Sontag argues that the conscious evocation of emptiness in art (e.g. the paintings of Ad Reinhardt or Barnett Newman) or silence (e.g. the drama of Samuel Beckett; the music of John Cage) is always done against the world of things against which such art stands and, as an ineluctable consequence, “the artist who creates silence or emptiness must produce something dialectical: a full void, an enriching emptiness, a resonating or eloquent silence.”<sup>8</sup> That is a sentiment with which neither Thomas Merton nor Ad Reinhardt would take exception. In some fashion, it could stand as a coda to both their lives and their accomplishments.

#### NOTES

1. Thomas Merton and Robert Lax, *A Catch of Anti-Letters* (Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McNeel, 1978), p. 118.
2. Thomas Merton, “Art and Worship,” *Sponsa Regis* (December, 1959), pp. 114-17.
3. “Five Unpublished Letters from Ad Reinhardt to Thomas Merton and Two in Return,” *Art Forum* (December, 1978), p. 24.
4. Ad Reinhardt, “Twelve Rules for a New Academy,” *Art News* (May, 1957), pp. 37ff.
5. Lucy R. Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1981).
6. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
7. Thomas Merton, “Cables to the Ace,” in *The Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 421.
8. Susan Sontag, “The Aesthetics of Silence,” in *The Susan Sontag Reader* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1982), p. 203. On silence in Thomas Merton, see: John Teahan, “The Place of Silence in Thomas Merton’s Life and Thought,” *The Journal of Religion* (October, 1981), pp. 364-83.