

IDENTIFYING HAMMER EDITIONS OF MERTON

Review of

*An Introduction to Victor and Carolyn Hammer with
a Listing of the Books Printed at Their Several Presses*

Compiled by Paul Evans Holbrook

Lexington, Kentucky: The Anvil Press, 1995

500 copies / \$50.00 softcover

Reviewed by **John E. King**

A limited edition about limited editions, this excellent small volume helps students of the Merton bibliographic field to identify the various limited editions Victor and Carolyn Hammer published for writings and translations by Thomas Merton. It also enables all Merton readers to more fully appreciate the relationship between Merton and this remarkable couple. In addition, the book is important for three major reasons.

First, this book is a vibrant example of the small press product. It is printed by Anvil Press, one of the seven presses connected with the Hammer publishing team. The two color dust jacket has a drawing by Gloria Thomas of Victor Hammer's wooden press. The dust jacket is noteworthy since the volume is a paperback edition to begin with. The paper used for the dust jacket is an ivory color with a rough texture. Laid in to the book is an example of the "uncial type" made famous by Victor Hammer. It is an oversize, four page card with a woodcut print of a crystal and plant (an example of the first "ornament" Victor Hammer made as a printer in 1938).

Second, the extensive introduction, a derivative product of seven existing essays or books by Carolyn Hammer and Paul Holbrook, succinctly chronicles the history of the seven presses and many of the personalities connected with them. There are several direct quotes from materials by or about Merton, including the genesis of the poem "Hagia Sophia" which forms the basis for the book project with the same title. One small error somewhat related to Merton occurs when the compiler cites the translator of *Of Scribes* by Cassiodorus (1958) as a "Friar" of the Abbey of Gethsemani when the title should more appropriately be "Frater," since the translator was a novice working under Merton's direction.

Third, the listing of all the books published by the seven Hammer Presses (Stamperia del Santuccio, The Wells College Press, The Bur Press, The Press of Carolyn Reading, The Anvil Press and the King Library Press) provides the context to identify the limited editions (nine) of Merton's books as well as a Merton essay. Several interesting bibliographic details are provided that enhance the full identification of this part of the Merton canon. The citations note these facts: a. that *The Unquiet Conscience* was published in wrappers and only fifty copies were bound (not noted in any published bibliography); b. that Merton's essay "A World of Spiritual Imagery" was written in 1965 but not published until 1981 as part of *Victor Hammer: An Artist's Testament* (this essay is not listed in any of the published bibliographies); c. that 150 copies of *Early Poems* were published; d. that *The Solitary Life* is clearly an essay by Thomas Merton on the subject material and not another presentation of his translation of Guigo's letter "On the Solitary Life" published in three versions as limited editions (Stanbrook Abbey Press, Banyan Press and St. Hugh's Charterhouse).

The volume is important aesthetically. Once again, the Hammer effort has produced a very attractive and visually pleasing book. From the textured wrappers to the choice of the cream paper to the laid-in example

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of a Hammer woodcut and uncial text, this is an impressive product. The cover drawing and photographic work is crisp and distinct.

Two points of criticism should be noted:

A. The volume would be more powerful if the compiler included photocopies of pages and/or covers of significant volumes covered by the listings. People who have handled or own copies of the Merton volumes cited understand this concern. The artistic impact is difficult to convey simply with descriptive verbiage.

B. Limited editions mean limited readership. Since there were only 500 copies printed and 100 were designated for the Grolier Club, not many people will have the opportunity to put this volume in their library. The cost is somewhat restrictive (\$50), but given current book prices for very good printings, the limited numbers printed will probably disappear to collectors before most readers even know that this book has been printed. Merton bibliophiles and librarians should scoop up this book before it is cited as "out-of-print."