Types & Shadows
JOURNAL OF THE FELLOWSHIP OF QUAKERS IN THE ARTS
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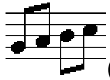**COUNTERPOINT by Esther Mürer**

Artists' Questions, Quaker Questions

In his letter on p. 4, Douglas Gwyn speaks of "self-referentiality" as a trap which leads to legalism, both in the Society of Friends and in the arts. I think he means that Quakers talk to other Quakers and artists talk to other artists; there is an in-group jargon and there are in-group rules, and the ability to play by those rules may come to take precedence over fidelity to the Muse/Inward Teacher.

As Quaker artists we may find ourselves trying to play by both sets of rules at once, judging our work by two different sets of criteria. Here I will call them "artists' questions" and "Quaker questions," and will treat them as more separate than they usually are.

In the more rarefied realms of the arts the criteria for judging excellence are questions like:

> Does it advance the art form?
> Does it build on the best of what has gone before in a way that addresses the questions artists are currently asking?
> Does it set useful problems and provide useful solutions?

And most centrally:

> How can I use this medium to say what I am meant to say, with power?

Quakers, on the other hand, tend to ask questions like:

> Is it in accord with Friends testimonies—peace, simplicity, equality, community, respect for creation, truth?
> Does it choose life?
> Does it heal?
> Does it subvert the domination system and further the reign of God?

Of course these two sets of criteria do intersect. There have always been many artists deeply concerned with the "Quaker questions." Quakers are notoriously less able to understand the relevance of the "artists' questions."

I find that *both* sets of questions yield helpful guidelines for judging my own art. Both serve to clarify my understanding of my call. I grow as an artist by letting myself be stretched by those greater than I. Struggling with the limits of my medium increases the power of my work. Being grounded in the testimonies helps me to avoid making art into an idol. The interplay of both sets illumines the eternal in our present situation, and strengthens my prophetic witness.

But either, wrongly used, may endanger my artistic integrity. My art must involve an intense *encounter* with the creative spirit. If I view these questions as standards external to the work and to the process, real encounter may not be possible. In the presence of mystery, of the numinous, the question "what good is this?" does not arise. My task is to encounter the creative spirit on the one hand and the limits of my medium on the other. If I can truly and fully do this, I can trust that the result will be good.

When feel that I am struggling against alien pressures from both directions at once, the tension becomes unbearable. I am tempted to scrap one set of questions in favor of the other. But that way lies the trap of self-referentiality—and legalism.

So I must continue to hold both sets in creative tension, to let them inform and correct each other. To the extent that I can do this, I build bridges between art and faith, both for myself and for others.

What relevance do the "artists' questions" and the "Quaker questions" have to your work?

How does each undergird, sustain and inspire you? How do they inform and correct each other?

Do you experience conflicts between them?

Are you able to live in the tensions?

What are you doing to lift up the "artists' questions" for Quakers, and vice versa?

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Letter to the Editor and Excerpt from *The Covenant Crucified*

by Douglas Gwyn

Dear Esther—

Thanks for your piece ["Art and the Lamb's War"]....Your question about whether the Lamb's War might have been sustained through a Quaker embrace of the arts is an interesting one. In a way, I think there was an artistic sense to living out the testimonies in a serious way, just as Jews sometimes find great creativity in living kosher. Then "art" is not some separate realm of existence. But as cultural signifiers, Quaker codes no doubt lost their communicative power as time went on, and the self-referentiality led to legalism. I guess legalism also pervades the arts whenever a particular "school" succeeds enough to perpetuate itself and become self-referential in its own way--"mannered" I suppose is the appropriate word.

Douglas Gwyn

"To the Musicioners": An Early Quaker Critique of the Arts

A brief excerpt from Douglas Gwyn's recent book, The Covenant Crucified: Quakers and the Rise of Capitalism *(Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1995).*

Early Quaker critiques of "vain pastimes" were not novel. Puritans had long stressed plainness in dress and lifestyle, and had criticized the arts, which they saw as distractions from spiritual life (for example, theaters were closed during Cromwell's rule).

Early Quaker polemics often added radical socioeconomic insight. Humphrey Smith wrote in 1658 *To the Musicioners, to the Harpers, the Minstrels, the Singers, the Dancers, the Persecutors; from one who loved Dancing and Musick as his Life.* There he develops a biblical critique of the arts.

He notes that music began with Jubal, son of Cain the murderer (Gen 4:21). Smith argues from the story of Cain that the arts develop in the violence, wealth, and power that are concentrated in the building of cities (which begins with Cain). Music and dance encourage lightness and vanity, which bring spiritual violence within and material oppression without. The nature of Cain and

Jubal will therefore slay the man of sorrows within—and without as well. He adds the examples of Saul and Herod to his argument: when King Saul departed from God's counsel, he took comfort in David's harp-playing; after watching Salome dance, Herod ordered John the Baptist beheaded.

Smith's wholesale rejection of the arts is extreme. But his critique makes it clear that neither religion nor the arts can pretend not to be socially situated and politically positioned either for or against God's kingdom on earth.

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Homage to Cézanne

from Powderhouse *by Jens Bjørneboe*
Translated from the Norwegian by Esther Greenleaf Mürer

In May I participated in a reading commemorating the 20th anniversary of the death of the Norwegian writer Jens Bjørneboe (1920-1976), several of whose novels I have translated. Due to the proximity of this event to the Cézanne exhibit in Philadelphia I include this excerpt from Bjørneboe's novel Powderhouse (1969) [2000 update: *— published by Dufour Editions in 2000. For further info see my web site* Jens Bjørneboe in English] *—Ed.*

.... Paul Cézanne, man of private means, petit bourgeois and amateur painter, a man who ran away from the war against the Prussians, who ran away from the Commune, who didn't give a damn for France, for freedom or the revolution—who sat among his apple trees and his wonderful faraway blue mountains, which he painted again and again. The old *rentier* and amateur painter. An old, old fool, who thought he was a painter, who sat among his flower pots, his greenhouses and his big, blue mountains, who moved to the south of France—solely because the seasons were more stable there, and his observations could continue under unchanged conditions month after month. The old village idiot, Paul Cézanne—no, he had no relation to the revolution of '71: he didn't eat rats and he wasn't a sharpshooter. He was no revolutionary—at any rate not at that moment; he ate his cheese and drank his red wine, as every decent petit bourgeois in this fantastic brutal land of the Guillotine has always done, without letting himself be bothered by the smell of blood from the scaffold.

He just painted—like the old, crazy amateur he was, picture after picture—he often took months to plan one or two brush strokes. He was an old *rentier*, an old bourgeois who thought he was a painter. And in the meantime the revolution passed by. The old *rentier* and amateur went on painting.

Slowly, surely and quietly he changed our image of the world. Our whole world looked different after Paul Cézanne had painted it. Systematically and from the bottom up he reconstructed our whole image of the world into a new one, using cubes, circles, ellipses and cylinders, treating his materials in a way the like of which has never been seen in the history of the world: he made white lead, cobalt blue, siccative, linseed oil and turpentine unite in a surface which was more beautiful than any gem, lovelier and truer than any enamel.

But the most important thing was: he *rebuilt* our image of the world.

After Paul Cézanne the world was different from before.

What did his contemporaries achieve in Paris during the Commune? Not a little! Their names live, and we love these names. But who *changed* the world? The old *rentier* and petit bourgeois, with his little house and his bank account—he rebuilt the world.

There is no opposition in this, only clarity. Only *clarity!*

One day a very old man, an old *rentier* and idiot who thought he was a painter, went out once more to paint from nature, the way *he* saw it. Not as others had thought it or felt it or seen it.

He painted—as a faithful naturalist and witness to the truth—his own picture of the world, and it has become ours. Then came the rain, and the old man packed up his painting gear, and the wind was strong and the rain was violent, and the next day they found a very old *rentier* and amateur painter lying beside the road—still with his paintbox under his arm.

He still needed three days to die. So strong was the old man.

What is left today of the Paris Commune of that time, aside from a couple of plays about it, good but never altogether true? I don't know, but it isn't much.

What remains of the petit bourgeois with the bank account? What remains of Paul Cézanne—of his thick, blue-black beard and his bald crown?

What he left behind is a changed world.

One can ask oneself: who was the *great* revolutionary? Was it the pistoleers in Paris (*no* evil shall be said of them!)? — Or *was* it the little petit bourgeois in Provence, Paul Cézanne, with his bit of cheese, his red wine and his paintbrushes carefully rinsed in turpentine?

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