



COUNTERPOINT by Esther Mürer

Art and Friends' Testimonies

There can be no doubt but that Friends' testimonies play an important role in defining a Quaker esthetic. Concern with the testimonies is one of the two things which Gary Sandman finds common to most Quaker art ([T&S #7](#)).

And yet a caveat seems warranted. If used as an external, normative standard by which to judge art, the testimonies--or any other criteria--easily become pernicious and perverse. The testimonies themselves arise out of the ground of Quaker spirituality, and easily become legalistic when divorced from their grounding.

From my days as a graduate student in Russian literature I remember the Six Principles of Socialist Realism, which were the norm under Stalin and which stated that art must:

1. Deal with the common man
2. Be optimistic
3. Convey a "we-feeling"
4. Be self-critical
5. Show the guiding hand of the Party
6. Depict reality in its revolutionary development.

These principles are straight out of the Bible, except that the Party has taken the place of God. They hardly produced a Golden Age of the arts.

If we put God or the Spirit back in its rightful place, though, the Six Principles of Socialist Realism do seem to have Quaker analogs (Six Principles of Quaker Aesthetics?).

To take the six items one by one, here's my own attempt at a translation: (What canst *thou* say? I'd like to hear.)

1. The requirement that art deal with the common man was used as a weapon against experimentation and against individual vision, labeling the prophetic work of a Dostoevsky as "bourgeois decadence". We could translate this principle as "witness to our testimony on equality;" but since I think there is a real tendency among modern Friends to regard good craftsmanship as elitist, I would prefer something like "encourage a sense of all conditions."
2. Optimism: I would say "affirmation-in-spite-of." Some languages have a word for "yes when a no answer is expected" (e.g. French *si*). As George Fox put it: "Sing

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and rejoice, ye children of the Day and of the Light, for the Lord God is at work in this thick night."

3. We-feeling: Translations might range from lifting up the covenant community to a sense of oneness with humanity and with all creation. We-feeling, however construed, can be tough for those of us whose media require us to work largely in solitude. Often the best I can do personally is to cast my bread upon the waters and hope that it will feed somebody.
4. Self-criticism: George Fox again: "Stand still in that which shows and discovers." Self-criticism is what our Queries are about—criticism not just of our individual selves but of our corporate selves as well: meeting, wider faith community, any group to which we belong.
5. Guiding hand: Citing Gary Sandman again, the main thing Quaker artists have in common is a feeling that our art is, or should be, Spirit-led.
6. "Reality in its revolutionary development" deserves its own essay. Read Douglas Gwyn on the Apocalypse of the Word and the X-Covenant. In brief, it is the prophetic element: "Seek ye first the Dominion of God."

To recapitulate, my revised "six principles" look like this:

1. encourage a sense of all conditions
2. be hopeful
3. show a vision of community, oneness
4. "stand still in that which shows and discovers"
5. be Spirit-led
6. seek first the Dominion of God.

It's taken me a long time to overcome my resistance to writing this essay. I hope that it may at least yield a viable set of queries.

The real question is not whether we consciously and externally set out to do these things, but whether they are so pervasive in our lives that they spill over into our art as a matter of course.

If that happens, the testimonies will be part of the picture.

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