



COUNTERPOINT by Esther Mürer

One Hundred Years Ago

I shall not believe that the arts are finally accepted by our Society until we can claim at least one masterpiece, fostered by us, by our discriminating love and knowledgeable enthusiasm I need hardly say that I do not expect it to bear the label "Quaker" or even "religious" art; it may, indeed, if it is the bearer of new vision, be deplored as "irreligious." —Ormerod Greenwood (1978)

In 1895 Friends of London Yearly Meeting held a Conference at Manchester, to reflect on the state of the Society. As a byproduct it produced two landmark statements on Friends' relation to the arts.

Thomas Hodgkin, reacting to such *fin-de-siècle* currents as impressionism and naturalism:

For human conduct and human happiness, it is far safer to ignore Art altogether, than it is to accept her as the sole guide and arbiter of human life.... Now Art threatens to become Religion in another sense, obliterating all the old landmarks of morality, and deciding by herself, and with reference to artistic considerations alone, what is fitting and becoming in human life. "Everything," so runs the present doctrine, "which *is*, is worthy of being copied by the artist. Untruth in art is the one unpardonable sin...." Under the influence of these new doctrines...painting becomes indecent, fiction filthy, and the drama...a school of vice....

William Charles Braithwaite:

It needs to be recognised that our Society has not escaped the tendency to narrow down spiritual action to certain prescribed ways as a substitute for the reality of the spiritual life....Friends have until recent years repressed all taste for the Fine Arts. These, at their greatest, always contain some revelation of the Spirit of God, which is in the fullest harmony with our spiritual faith....The "fulness of the whole earth is His glory", and we mar the beauty of this message by every limitation we set upon it.

Meanwhile in the same year Leo Tolstoy—whose religious views were very much in harmony with those of Friends—wrote a letter to the *London Times* about the persecution of the Doukhobors, a Russian pacifist sect. The name, which means "spirit fighters", was originally a derogatory label by which the Russian Orthodox authorities accused them of being at war with the Spirit; but they proudly embraced it as conveying that they fought with spiritual, not outward, weapons.

Their plight struck a chord with British Friends, who responded by forming a committee to help the Doukhobors emigrate to Canada. Encouraged, Tolstoy finished up a long-abandoned novel to help finance the project.

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The novel, *Resurrection*, concerns a nobleman who, while serving on a jury in a prostitute's trial for murder, recognizes her as a servant girl he had seduced and abandoned in his youth. Feeling responsible, he accompanies her to Siberia, witnesses the horrors of the Russian penal system, and undergoes a spiritual rebirth as a result.

Resurrection was censored in Russia; a full Russian version was published by the London Quaker firm Headley Bros. in 1901, and translated into many languages, the proceeds going to the Friends Doukhobor Committee. But the subject matter proved a great embarrassment to Friends. The committee minuted that the novel was "unsuitable for general reading;" and the clerk, John Bellows, declaring that the Society of Friends ought not to accept proceeds from "a smutty book," refunded the money out of his own pocket.

Tolstoy responded in English: "...when I wrote the book I abhorred with all my heart the lust and to express this abhorrence was one of the chief aims of the book."

I haven't begun to unpack the implications of this incident, but it illustrates some perennial tensions:

By "unsuitable for general reading" did the committee mean that art should not deal with the shadow? In that case, what room is left for prophecy—and for risk-taking?

Can the community support art which is in advance of the general leading? If so, how can it help artists discern when they are outrunning their own guides (as opposed to the community's)?

Care for the integrity of means and ends is a vital witness. Care for integrity of form and content in a work of art is equally vital. How do these two kinds of integrity intersect? How do they conflict? How can they inform each other? What kind of translation is needed?

SOURCES:

Greenwood quote:

Guest editorial, *Reynard*, No. 32 (Summer 1978) p. 5.

Hodgkin quote:

Ormerod Greenwood, *Signs of Life: Art and Religious Experience* (Swarthmore Lecture 1978) p. 19.

Braithwaite quote:

Frederick J. Nicholson, *Quakers and the Arts* (London: Friends Home Service Committee, 1968) p. 96.

Tolstoy incident:

Rosemary Edmonds, Translator's introduction to Leo Tolstoy, *Resurrection* (Penguin, 1966) p. 6-7

Richenda Scott, *The Quakers in Russia* (London: Michael Joseph, 1964) p.137-9;

George Woodcock and Ivan Avakumovic, *The Doukhobors* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1968) p. 138-9.

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