



COUNTERPOINT by Esther Mürer

The Spoilsport

From my first FGC Gathering, in 1982, I vividly remember a plenary talk by Nancy Brock Beck, a dancer, on the topic "Playing together." One passage which lit up the sky for me—and here she may have been building on Huizinga's classic work on play, *Homo Ludens*—was the following:

All play has rules, which are absolutely binding. If the rules are transgressed, the play world collapses; the game is over, and everybody goes back to ordinary life. The player who breaks the rules or ignores them is a spoilsport. This is not the same as cheating. The person who cheats pretends to be following the rules. Nobody likes cheating or spoiling the game, but it is interesting to note that of the two the cheater is usually treated less harshly than the spoilsport. The latter is generally ostracized from the group, punished by being excluded, because he or she has destroyed the illusion—a word that means literally "in-play". This discrepancy in treatment carries over into ordinary life too. There is more tolerance in society for the cheat and the hypocrite than for the apostate, the heretic, or the prophet.

Quakers have a long history of being spoilsports. Early Friends paid dearly for refusing to play games of war, as well as games involving distinctions in social rank or elaborate consumption. One could describe the Quaker testimonies as a list of games which—following the example of that quintessential spoilsport, Jesus Christ—we decline to play. Seeking first the Kingdom of God means being a spoilsport.

Along with these more serious games, early Friends also took a dim view of "vain, unprofitable amusements"—which included not only games and sports, but the arts as well:

It is not lawful for Christians to use games, sports, plays, comedies, or other recreations which are inconsistent with Christian silence, gravity, or sobriety. (Robert Barclay, 1676).

It is advised that a watchful care be exercised over our youth, to prevent their going to stage-plays, horse-races, music, dancing, or any such vain sports and pastimes. (Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1806).

When we realize that the category "Art" or "the arts" —used as an inclusive term for painting, sculpture, literature, music, theater, and dance—was unknown before 19th century, it is less surprising to find arts linked with sports and games in the 17th. (The link persists in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's 1997 *Faith and Practice*, where the arts are subsumed under "family recreation." Recommended activities include "reading aloud, gardening, music, and arts and crafts as well as games and sports." These "should stress cooperation and inclusiveness, and should resist the materialism of our culture"" [p 71].)

Types & Shadows

JOURNAL OF THE FELLOWSHIP OF QUAKERS IN THE ARTS

Issue #22, Summer 2001

In a sense I guess one could say that art is a game. There are rules and limits imposed by the nature of the medium. Other rules are more arbitrary or "occasional"; they are given—or chosen, or emerge—as boundaries or guidelines for the task at hand.

In another sense, though, art defies all rules. Obedience to the Muse may mean a continual effort to break through the boundaries, push the limits of the medium so as to reconcile the irreconcilable, speak the unspeakable, eff the ineffable, juxtapose pieces of the truth one has been given in unique ways, uplifting or not.

To the extent that art is of the Spirit, it is untamable. And this untamability is, always has been, always will be, deeply threatening. We need those games to ward off existential terror. But the Spirit continually subverts our efforts to agree on the rules, to set boundaries.

And so the Spirit becomes an enemy which must be suppressed or contained. And thus it becomes of crucial importance to tame the arts. For the artist who plays by the Spirit's rules is a spoilsport.

One way of taming the arts is to bend them to the service of what Walter Wink calls "the domination system," or as Chuck Fager put it [*T&S #21*], to use them "to promote idolatry, mindless luxury and consumption, not to mention political oppression." Early Friends rightly steered clear of such perversions. But they made the mistake of concluding that the arts were necessarily perverse by nature.

But what of today's uneasy tolerance of the arts as play, ephemeral, a frill which—if sufficiently uplifting—could be beneficial? Have Friends simply found an alternative way of taming the arts—of quenching the Spirit?

It likewise disturbs me that when I say that Quakers are, or should be, spoilsports, I so often meet with blank incomprehension. Are the arts accepted by modern Friends for the same reason that we so rarely go to prison for our faith? Are we simply conformed to this world?

What are we willing to risk? What am I willing to risk?

Types & Shadows is published quarterly by the Fellowship of Quakers in the Arts. Subscriptions are available through membership in the FQA.

This page added September 2002