



COUNTERPOINT by Esther Mürer

Why "Types & Shadows"?

Quaker lore does not exactly teem with pithy phrases about the arts--at least not the sort calculated to encourage artists. Our title--more fully "Types, figures and shadows" is perhaps the *kindest* term our ancestors might have used. It comes from the Epistle to the Hebrews, a book beloved of early Friends.

The idea was borrowed from Platonic philosophy, which posits a realm where the ideal forms of everything that exists are kept. Somewhere there is, say, an ideal balloon of which all earthly balloons are but pale copies or shadows. (At the age of two my daughter Phoebe really began to believe this.)

The writer of Hebrews gives the Platonic idea a Jewish twist. For him the forms, events and institutions of the Old Testament are **antitypes** which **prefigure** or **foreshadow** the coming of **Christ, the true Substance** which makes the types and shadows obsolete.

For early Friends the idea of the primacy of "Christ the Substance" came to mean a near-total rejection of sensory means of grace, and of symbolism. The *immediate* experience of God was the goal, and symbols were felt as obstructions.

And yet, as Thomas Kelly writes in his essay "Quakers and Symbolism", immediacy cannot be communicated to others except through the mediation of symbols. A symbol by definition points to something beyond itself. If I point to the sunrise, I mean you to look at the sunrise, not at my finger.

Symbols, of course, easily become idols--ends in themselves. Our gestures become ever more mannered, the sunrise is forgotten. The danger is ever-present that I may become obsessed with "My Ministry" not because it heals, not because it speaks truth, but because it's *mine*.

This is a pitfall for any ministry. Are artists more prone than others to fall into it? Certainly it's harder to avoid the trap when the possibility that one's art might be ministry is not acknowledged in the first place. What if early Friends, instead of shunning the arts, had recognized art's healing and prophetic powers and had sought ways to help artists grow in the spirit?

The realm of sense and symbol--of "types, figures and shadows"--is where we, as artists, live. This is as it should be. The Truth which we as Friends are called to publish can never be anything but fragmentary, for we cannot publish Truth-in-general any more than we can speak language-in-general. We must speak a specific language, work in a specific medium. And

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however great our skill, the nature of the medium will set bounds to our ability to convey our vision.

And yet we must go on trying to convey it. For as Thomas Kelly said, "Where there is no impulse to communicate the good news, there it is doubtful whether there is any living good news to share."

Our types and shadows are needed. If we are faithful, they may provide islands of unity and meaning in the jangling sea of cynicism and discord which surrounds us. If we can point others to the sunrise, we do not labor in vain.

Is there any living good news?

If so, can I put it into words? Can I express it symbolically? Can I share it by nonverbal means?

How do I as an artist let my life speak?

How do I discern when I am falling into idolatry? What do I do about it?

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