



COUNTERPOINT by Esther Mürer

## *Art and the Lamb's War*

In a 1972 essay in *Quaker Religious Thought*, Candida Palmer asks how a Quaker spirituality of the arts might be grounded in early Quaker thought. A major difficulty, as she sees it, is that "there appears to be no Quaker doctrine that tension is germane, even necessary, to human existence and to life itself." She goes on:

There can be no doubt about the *destructive* forces of tension and conflict, whether leading to serious doctrinal schisms, or to bodily ills in individuals, to warfare, or to hopelessness and negativism....Perhaps the artist more clearly than others explores and utilizes the *creative* possibilities of tension—the necessity and desirability of *conflict*, which are the warp and woof of his work, his matrix.

In my own work the discipline of accepting, and challenging, the limits of an artistic medium means that on a formal plane I am continually called to reconcile the irreconcilable. As a literary translator, for example, I strive to be as faithful as possible both to the letter and to the spirit of the original—aims which often seem mutually exclusive. Whatever medium I'm working in, the struggle to unify seemingly antagonistic elements—to get the lion to lie down with the lamb—is at the heart of the process, inherent in the work itself.

I wonder, though, if it could be argued that early Friends *did* recognize the positive function of conflict. The *Lamb's War* of 17th-century Quakerism is worth pondering in this regard. This war was first a inner battle in which one's whole being was to be brought under the rule of the Inward Teacher. Once this was accomplished, one could not help but carry the battle out into the social order, in an attempt to bring others to abandon hypocritical "forms without power" for a Spirit-led way of living. But the inner battle had to come first.

Friends stressed that the weapons in this war were not "carnal" but spiritual. We sometimes forget that the declaration to Charles II says, "We utterly deny all *outward* wars and strife." We might say, then, that our forebears' radically holistic vision derived its energy from the recognition that conflict *can* be a creative force—so long as the weapons are spiritual ones. What a tragedy that they couldn't see a positive role for the arts!

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In recent decades the attempt to banish militaristic imagery from our language and thought has become fashionable. It is dangerous to suppose that by suppressing all mention of the existence of conflict we can thereby reduce the sum of violence. A more likely outcome is that we will dull our awareness that the weapons of the Spirit are given to us to be used, and used creatively, against the death-worshipping tendencies within our culture and ourselves.

By the end of the 17th century the Lamb's War had run out of steam. This failure has haunted us ever since. Might things have been different if Friends had understood the vital role of the arts in embodying the creative uses of conflict? What can we do to foster this understanding today?

## *Queries*

**What roles, positive and negative, do conflict and tension play in your work?**

**Do you see any parallels between the Lamb's War and your own road as an artist?**

**What is the relation between the Muse and the Inward Teacher?**

**What struggle have you experienced in trying to bring your life under its rule?**

**How are the inward and outward aspects of the struggle related for you? Is the outward dependent on the inward, or not?**

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