



The Conrad Grebel Review

Volume 16, Number 3

Fall 1998

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Editorial

The artist within any society or community is frequently the one who shocks, provokes, inspires or, perhaps more often, is misunderstood. The work of Vancouver and Saskatoon-based artist Susan Shantz has alternately shocked and delighted the Ontario Mennonite community that she grew up in. Her *Ancestral Spirits: Bed* that adorns the cover of this issue playfully celebrates and satirizes such Mennonite motifs as ancestry, progeny, and sobriety. Yet the cartoon reproductive organs that practically jump off the figures startled and disturbed some viewers when the piece was exhibited. The work spoke both about and to the ethnic and religious heritage of the artist. Shantz's more recent work, *Satiare* (not pictured) – an assemblage of household objects on a massive fibre-glass table, all encrusted in dried tomato paste – is equally provocative but the linkages to her background are less obvious.

The articles in this issue offer varying perspectives on the overall theme of the arts and aesthetic values as they intersect with religious culture and theology. The oft-times tenuous and suspicious relationship between artist and theologian or between artists and the religious communities they identify with is not an easy subject of analysis. When the theological orientation and ethno-religious community is the Mennonites, the relationship is made more complex by a heritage of iconoclasm, an emphasis on simplicity and functionality in material life, and general suspicion of those 'liars' who create out of their imaginations.

The contributors to this issue – some artists themselves, others observers of the arts – all come from a Mennonite background. Each has grappled, at some level, with the place of the arts in a community which prioritizes the voice of the theologian and pastor. Margaret Loewen Reimer most directly examines the uneasy place of the 'artistic imagination' in the Mennonite faith community. She suggests that in its tendency to deconstruct and reconfigure meaning, art is the language needed to revitalize faith in a world of contradictions. Magdalene Redekop examines the work of five female artists, all with Mennonite roots. She goes beyond an analysis of the ways in which their varied forms of artistic expression speak from their heritage, and intriguingly asks whether Mennonites have particular ways of 'viewing' visual art based on that shared heritage. She places herself in the

role of spectator and suggests that the inherited fear of ‘image’ and its subordination to ‘word’ has ironically drawn Mennonites in a powerful way to visual representations, hoping that they might see something of themselves in the work of art. The spectator thus becomes the specter.

Articles by Cheryl Nafziger-Leis and Phil Stoltzfus are based on papers developed for a forum on Aesthetics and Mennonite Theology at the 1998 American Academy of Religion meetings. Nafziger-Leis, in particular, takes a highly philosophical approach to the question of ‘Is religious art (im)possible?’ Having engaged in “A-Dialogue” with Theodor Adorno for the past number of years, she describes a shift in her own position on art as ideology and concludes that art can be transcendent, spiritual, even religious, but only if it does not strive to be such. In an essay akin to philosophical art itself, taking the reader from Bertolt Brecht to MTV to Paul Tillich, Phil Stoltzfus suggests that aesthetics – “the philosophical reflection upon the meaning of artistic experience” – has been more problematic for Mennonites than artistic expression itself. As a theologian and an artist, Stoltzfus argues against the mutual exclusivity of theological and artistic language. He proposes a model of performative envisioning in which Mennonite theologizing draws not only on historicism, biblical hermeneutics, and ethics, for instance, but also on sensual sensibilities, worldly engagement, and that which is experiential and improvisatory. In a sense, we are brought back to a celebration of the artistic imagination theorized at the outset by Margaret Loewen Reimer. Tuning in to the aesthetic possibilities of the task may indeed awaken the Mennonite theological imagination.

Two artists offer *Reflections* in this issue. Growing up in a conservative Mennonite community, fashion designer Julie Musselman struggled with personal ideas and ideals about beauty that fit neither the plain and modest Anna Baptist of her religion, nor the superficial and overdone Menno Barbie. She observes that her church’s emphasis on not looking beautiful resulted in an obsession with personal appearance; rejecting the image became the idol. Musselman’s aesthetic journey ended up with Anna Beautiful, for whom beauty encompassed much more than the physical. The second *Reflection*, by musician/composer Carol Ann Weaver, chronicles a career of collaboration, where different artistic media fuse together in the creative process.

If there is a connection between the articles of this issue and the *Literary Refraction* by Dallas Wiebe, it may lie in the nature of the questions posed. Like many artists, who often turn the doctrinal and historical canon upside down or accepted ‘truth’ inside out, Wiebe asks whether a Mennonite can also be an atheist. The *Refractions* in this issue include poems by Julia Kasdorf and Jeff Gundy.

In a sense, all the writers in this issue and their subjects are ‘shattering images.’ While not following the example of some Anabaptists who literally smashed church icons, they challenge conventions that can be more akin to idolatry than any creation from the artistic imagination. I hope you are challenged by these diverse musings on the creative muse.

Marlene Epp, *editor*

Cover illustration *Susan Shantz, Ancestral Spirits: Bed, 1988.*
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Mennonites and the Artistic Imagination

Margaret Loewen Reimer

In 1984, a film crew came to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, to make the movie, *Witness*. This Hollywood invasion, both literal and artistic, caused an uproar among Mennonites. The *Gospel Herald* printed vehement attacks on Hollywood's exploitation of the Amish, written by "experts" who themselves had "publicized" Old Order folk through their books, films, and photographs. One of these experts defended himself by contrasting documentary films that serve "historic and instructional purposes" with Hollywood movies that "alter reality in any way that will entertain with maximum profit." Jan Rubes, a Canadian who played the Amish father in *Witness*, said that the protests didn't come from the Amish, but from "professors . . . who write books about the Amish and exploit them more than anybody" (CBC's *Morningside* [radio program], Feb. 15, 1985).

I've often thought about this debate in relation to Mennonites and the arts. Are some subjects off-limits to artists? Who gets to tell the story? Which story? In exploring these questions, I propose to look at what it means to imagine, what language we use to convey the truths of the imagination, and what imaginative creativity has to do with faith. I come to this topic out of my experience as a student of literature and as a Mennonite journalist with a special passion for the arts.

During a discussion on CBC's *Morningside* (July 2, 1996), someone asked, "Why do so many good singers come from the Mennonite tradition?" Saskatchewan musician Connie Kaldor was quick to reply: "Because they can't dance." Seriously, why is the art of singing so acceptable, while the other arts, particularly theater and dance, have been suspect? It's not just that we have always been a singing people (in fact, we haven't – Conrad Grebel,

Margaret Loewen Reimer, who has a PhD in English from the University of Toronto, is associate editor of the Canadian Mennonite. This article is condensed from a series of three lectures given at Canadian Mennonite Bible College in January 1998.

our eminent spiritual ancestor, was opposed to any music in worship). The reasons have to do with the very essence of our faith.

In Julia Kasdorf's poem, "The only photograph of my father as a boy," the young Amish boy is transformed by the click of the camera: "That click, something flew out of him . . . And something flew in."¹ The camera – that instrument of illusion, of forbidden images, of pride – snatches away an essential part of the boy's heritage and replaces it with the arrogance of worldly knowledge. This image captures the Mennonite suspicion of art.

When Ontario bishop Jacob H. Janzen came to Canada in 1924, he was already known for his German dramas and fiction. In 1946 he wrote: "When I came to Canada and in my broken English tried to make plain to a [Swiss] Mennonite bishop that I was a 'novelist' . . . he was much surprised. He then tried to make plain to me that 'novelists' were fiction writers and that fiction was a lie. I surely would not want to represent myself to him as a professional liar. I admitted to myself, but not aloud to him, that I was just that kind of 'liar' which had caused him such a shock."²

Writers such as Janzen and Arnold Dyck reflected what we might call a "Low German imagination," the earthy humor of rural life. But something else "flew in" that moment in 1962 when Rudy Wiebe's novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, destroyed the peace of Canadian Mennonites.³ Why was Wiebe's novel so threatening? For one thing, he was an insider – editor of a denominational magazine, *Mennonite Brethren Herald*. He was looking at Mennonites in a new way, scrutinizing the sacred and the profane through the same artistic filter. And he was translating Mennonite experience into a new language: the language of English, the language of fiction. This novel signalled a new imagination breaking into Canadian Mennonite life.

The biblical imagination

Art is dangerous, and Mennonites have always recognized that. It's not only that it is unpredictable or uncontrollable. At a fundamental level, the act of creating can be an act of hubris, of competition with the One Creator God who can't be defined or named, and who demands that we make for ourselves no "graven image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" (Exodus 20). This biblical warning against images has been used by various branches of

the church to warn against any visible depictions of God and even against art itself. “Woe to him who strives with his maker,” says Isaiah 45.

The commandment against images isn’t just some quaint warning against foreign idols. At stake is the belief that God can’t be understood or portrayed by even the farthest reaches of our imagination. At stake is the belief that divinity is something else than the world we know through our senses, the world out of which we create. Jahweh communicates with his people not through a tangible presence or visual image but through the Word. And so the Hebrews become supreme artists of the word – from poetic declarations of faith to blood-curdling tales of sex and violence.

To pit word against image, however, is to misrepresent biblical artistry. For the biblical word carries within itself a host of imaginative forms and elements that have inspired the artistic imagination through the centuries. The warning against images did not deter the ancient Hebrews from longing for the sight of God, for visible expressions of the invisible. “Show me your face,” begged Moses (Exodus 33). But he only got to see the effect of God passing by – the back of God, says the story. “I saw visions of God,” proclaimed Ezekiel as he described fantastic winged creatures and four vast wheels and the great throne with the creature of light and fire.

In fact, one could say that the fundamental aspect of the biblical imagination is not iconoclasm but an obsession with “image.” For the Hebrews, of all people, were intensely engaged in making the invisible visible, with translating spiritual reality into human activity. We human beings, after all, are images of the divine. This image-consciousness expresses itself in an obsession with the body. The Bible is full of body language: the church as the body of Christ, the resurrection of the body, Israel as the bride of God (evoking the Genesis image of marriage as “one flesh”). What counted most for the Hebrews was bodily obedience. The biblical writers never shy away from exploring the implications of the body – in all its degradation and its glory – culminating in the very embodiment of God in human form. This vision of incarnation, the Word made flesh, is a central aspect of the biblical imagination. It holds in tension the mystery of divinity with the solid immediacy of human flesh, the same impulse that drives all art.

One could say that the Bible has left us a legacy of ambivalence about art. While the people are to avoid physical representations of divinity, their

temple is to convey all the splendor and color they can possibly muster (Exodus 26). And the biblical writers have no qualms about constructing glorious verbal images. In Revelation, the angel says to John, “Don’t write this down. All the mysteries will be revealed at the end of time.” Meanwhile, of course, John writes furiously, giving us some of the most fabulous images in all of literature.

The artistry of the Bible, then, springs from the defining motives of any art – to make the invisible visible, the untouchable touchable. And in many ways we have the same suspicion of the biblical imagination as we have of other art. To Mennonite Christians, the Bible is about faithful discipleship and love and piety. What are we to do with all those mythic tales of floods and monsters, dreams and magic, and the end of the world? And what about those horrible stories of murder, rape, and incest?

Like any good art, it doesn’t all fit easily together – even the images of God seem contradictory: we see a God who hurls threats at his wayward people and wreaks vengeance on the enemy, alongside a God who embodies grace and love of enemies. We are confronted with a grand vision of the universe, as well as a messy world ruled by pettiness and scheming. The Bible is full of clashing images and contradictory messages which can only be held together by the imagination.

The word “imagination” comes, of course, from the word “image” – a representation or embodiment of an idea or person. It helps to distinguish between the imaginative and the imaginary, the latter being closer to our understanding of illusion or fantasy. The imagination is the power to form mental images, to perceive something not present to the senses. Samuel Taylor Coleridge described the imagination as a power that seeks the truths which underlie our fantasies and dreams, a power that unifies experience and fantasy in a new understanding.⁴ For Northrop Frye, that great organizer of the mythic realm, the imagination is what makes sense of the world. The great biblical myth – the story of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation – becomes a “myth to live by” in a way that purely literary myths cannot, says Frye. It takes on ultimate significance, ultimate reality, for those who believe.⁵

The Hebraic influence

It was my fascination with the interplay between the biblical and the literary that drew me to a doctoral thesis on “Hebraism” in English literature.⁶ The starting point for my thesis was Matthew Arnold’s claim that two forces – Hellenism and Hebraism – are the major shapers of western culture. Arnold defined Hellenism (or the Classical tradition) as the love of “pure knowledge,” that which invests life with clearness and radiance, governed by flexibility and “spontaneity of consciousness.” In contrast, Hebraism – a word he coined – is “the energy driving practice,” the overriding obligation to “duty, self-control, and work,” rooted in earnestness and “strictness of conscience.”⁷ In other words, Hebraism holds goodness to be the highest value; Hellenism, beauty.

In literary terms, “Hebraism” has become identified with the preference for the natural (real) over the artificial (ideal), and the individual struggle over the realized universal. By this definition, the artistry of our day is dominated by Hebraism, fed by the spirit of post-Enlightenment materialism that locates the “real” in the empirical world, not in the supernatural or ideal sphere. That poses an interesting dilemma for Mennonites. Our affinity for biblical Hebraism – the focus on morality and hard work, our suspicion of “fancy” – has led us straight into the promised land of modernity. We tend to be uneasy with art that is simply fanciful, playful, or beautiful for its own sake.

Not that Mennonites have been exempt from the urge to beautify and create. We have a history of beautiful gardens, embroidery, handicrafts, and quilts. But art has been considered a servant – a servant of function and of faith. That’s why singing is so acceptable – it is the ultimate communal activity, a harmony of the aesthetic and religious. Individual artists risk the sin of pride and undermine community. But wherein lies the real pride? Is it in daring to create, in putting ourselves on display? Or does the greater pride consist in refusing to create, to perform, to develop our God-given ability to imagine? Mennonite sectarianism has been built on the drive to stay simple and separate, to protect what we have, to remain “self-righteous.” To write, to paint, to compose, is to become publicly vulnerable, to risk interpretation and misunderstanding. It means not being able to control the reviews.

For some artists among us, the risk of going public has been high. At the same time it has meant a kind of resurrection – both for the artist and for

Mennonite self-understanding. The artistic imagination is providing new perspectives on old stories, new angles from which to examine ourselves. Sometimes perceptions clash and people of religious faith feel violated by art. For artists, too, can be tempted to close their imaginations to the complexity and variety of religious faith. That's why the church and theorist need to talk to each other.

Shattered images

At the *Mennonite Reporter*, now *Canadian Mennonite*, we have tried to keep in touch with what Mennonites are doing in the arts. That's because we believe that the artistic imagination and the religious imagination are so closely related to each other. But we keep getting the same questions: How can you call poet Patrick Friesen a Mennonite when he spurns the church, or singer Ben Heppner a Mennonite when he grew up in the Alliance church? Several assumptions have guided our thinking: 1) In literature, at least, there is an identifiable body of art that is shaped by a Mennonite ethos – by the beliefs and customs of a distinctive community. 2) “Mennonite artist” is a useful code word for those whose art reflects their experience of the Mennonite community. 3) Artists' responses to their Mennonite heritage vary greatly – from condemnation to comedy, from nostalgia to deep religious commitment.

But is there really such a thing as a Mennonite ethos or a Mennonite story? Historians in the past few decades have moved decisively into a polygenesis theory of Mennonite origins. Mennonite artists are deconstructing our assumptions in even more discomfoting ways.

“Be careful, memory will trick you,” says writer John Weier. “It tells you everything you wish to know. Nothing you remember is true. Father remembers only the good things. That's his story, the good and happy story. The rest he can blame on the Russians. Mother remembers nothing. Was it really that bad?”⁸

Which stories are true? Memory will trick you. Your parents will trick you. Your church will trick you. Look deeper to find meaning, if there is any. That's the creed not only of artists but of many seekers in our time. There are as many stories as there are individuals and everyone has the right to tell them. In this postmodern time, the code we had to decipher meaning is disintegrating and we are left with discontinuous pieces and silences. Our

attempts to create, some say, are only games we play against the darkness. How do we believe in such an environment, we who assume meaning not only in words but in The Word? If the code to our faith is lost, we are left with nothing more than superstition.

Ironically, even as art deconstructs or reconfigures meaning, it offers perhaps the greatest potential for renewed faith. I believe profoundly that the artistic imagination can help us hold together the many clashing realities we live with, to bridge the vast gulf between biblical understandings and the creeds of our own time, between the competing gods of our culture and our personal truths. We need more than one language, one understanding, to make any sense of life. We know the imagination can be dangerous, but it can also help us face the contradictions and hold them together within a larger understanding.

Patrick Friesen speaks of living “with one foot in the shade / trying to be true and double-crossing you every step of the way”⁹ The poet stands on the divide between sun and shade, truth and deception, a lost soul who yet dares speak a word. He also stands on the divide of history as he looks back at his Mennonite boyhood:

I know the Steinbach boy is dead
betrayed and murdered seventy times seven by me and anyone else
who helped
and still I go to the cemetery again and again
because it’s a beloved place
where horses used to wheel and boys played with fire.¹⁰

The Steinbach boy may be dead, killed by a too-narrow vision and by other factors, but the poet still goes back to the “beloved place” which shapes his imagination.

That doesn’t sound postmodern to me. It’s a leap of faith, a balancing act – between past and present, coherence and chaos, the Mennonite child and the modern man. In fact, many Mennonite artists find themselves in exactly this discomfiting space. “Insofar as the writers . . . continue to feel the pain and confusion that attends the demise of a coherent order, they are modernists. Where the pain shows signs of disappearing altogether, their work may begin to reflect something of the numbing solipsism of the postmodern temperament,” said Hildi Froese Tiessen in a journal featuring

Mennonite writing.¹¹ It is into this space that our imagination projects us.

Poet Sarah Klassen reminds us:

Abandon foolish dreams of arrival.
Resign yourself to the absolute
necessity of departure. Dead weight
of cumbersome luggage must be cast off.
When you become translucent, luminous
as morning
you can travel where you will.¹²

Abandon foolish dreams of arrival. Learn to live with the uncertainty, the incompleteness. Strive to become translucent, says the poet, permitting the light to pass through. Good art, like good theology, has that transparency – it allows truth to shine through it to illuminate the human condition. It may not give us answers, but it provides, as Robert Frost said, “a momentary stay against confusion.” And no matter how much today’s writers mutter about the loss of the external referent or the impossibility of meaning, I believe that every creative act is an assumption of coherence, of meaning, because all art imposes some kind of form and order on its reality.

Making connections

During my thesis defence at the University of Toronto, my examiners became most agitated over my assumption of coherence. How could I assume a connection between biblical notions and the views of nineteenth-century writers? How could I imagine that one could trace a strand of thought through different centuries? In a literary climate enamoured with disjunction and discontinuity, it was difficult to communicate.

But that is the problem we all face today. How can we presume connections between the world of the Bible and the world of television? How can our children, reared on *The Simpsons* and *X-Files*, make sense of the Sermon on the Mount? And yet, Christians believe that there is a continuity through the ages, that our story is somehow linked to the biblical story and to the history of the world. If we believe that, then we must also believe that religious truths are related to other truths, that the Bible is part of a much larger canon that includes the many cultural “texts” that shape us every day.

That means daring to dress ancient truths in contemporary garb. One of the great pleasures of my studies was discovering the medieval mystery plays. These biblical drama cycles, performed on the Feast of Corpus Christi, translated the whole story of the Bible – from creation to doomsday – into a spectacle of entertainment. Biblical heroes were humanized in shocking ways and the “bad guys,” especially the devil, made obscenely wicked. Five centuries later, these plays still brim with humor and ingenuity. Perhaps inspired by this medieval audacity, I wrote a Christmas pageant some years ago which included Old Testament scenes not usually associated with Advent. One scene was a spiteful squabble between Hosea and Gomer which, in the hands of ten-year-old actors, turned into hilarious farce.

The congregation was perplexed, but for me the experience was an exhilarating experiment in exploring the biblical imagination. With my own children, I have tried to inspire an inclusive imagination, to place the treasures of the faith beside the treasures of our cultural heritage: Are Samson and Hercules really so different? How does Star Wars compare to Israelite wars? Does Tamar’s abuse speak to abuse in our day? If we try to “protect” the Bible by shutting it away in a religious closet, confining it to a safe, intra-textual discussion, we withdraw it further and further from the other conversations that shape us. For we live our lives in an inter-textual debate with the world around us, a debate in which the Bible is becoming more and more irrelevant.

The language of faith

How do we speak of faith in our day? The enlightenment of our reason, which convinced us that the earth is not flat, had the unfortunate effect of flattening out our imagination. Modernism tried to convince us that the demonstrated reality of science is more true than the demonstrated reality of faith, and that empirical truth is more real than metaphorical truth. Biblical criticism, too, has often succeeded only in literalizing what was literary. While most Christians are no longer arguing about the scientific accuracy of Genesis 1, we’re still in the middle of debating the gender of God and the genetics of the virgin birth. And for most of us, “dogma” and “creed” still conjure up visions of stone tablets instead of the fragrance of poetry. These days we are seeing yet another kind of religious reductionism. Postmodern passions are

seeking to escape the limits of scientism by floating away on the clouds of self-help spirituality and Celestine prophecies. They are no closer than literalists to the spirit of the biblical word.

“May God us keep / From Single vision & Newton’s sleep!” cried William Blake, whose mystical visions were a fierce protest against the one-dimensional thinking of Newtonian science.¹³ In his 1963 CBC Massey Lectures, “The Educated Imagination,” Northrop Frye outlined the variety of disciplines we study and the various “languages” we need to understand them. Different kinds of experience need different ways of thinking and speaking.¹⁴ Medieval interpreters understood the dangers better than we do when they insisted that there are at least four levels of meaning in the Bible, four ways of reading: 1) The literal, not literalistic, level is straightforward reading; 2) The allegorical is the symbolic meaning; 3) The moral level teaches us how to live; 4) The anagogical or mystical meaning speaks of future hope. All of these are important, for they apply to different aspects of reality and experience.

We need different languages for different realities in our lives. But what if these languages don’t harmonize? Think of the Tower of Babel, with its confusion of voices. We usually see the Pentecost story as the restoration of communication, of unity. But look again. At Pentecost we still have all the different voices. They may hear truth differently but they manage to communicate. How do we keep the discordant voices speaking to each other in our lives?

We can look to art for analogies. Art is created out of tension, even violence. “Art begins in a wound, an imperfection – a wound inherent in the nature of life itself,” said critic John Gardner.¹⁵ The metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century made their mark by forcibly yoking together discordant images and ideas, thereby forging new and unexpected meaning. Art springs from the coming together of the senses, the intellect and the emotions – art, said T.S. Eliot, is “the sensuous apprehension of ideas.”¹⁶ It can help us bring together the different realms of our experience.

One of the highlights of my recent sabbatical year in Europe was seeing the Issenheim altar by Matthias Grünewald. The large center panel of the Advent scene shows the conventional mother and child. Above Mary is a luminous vision of the God of hosts – a figure of almost pure light surrounded

by impressions of a vast army. On the left panel, a lively angel orchestra, led by an enthusiastic cellist, is serenading the mother and child. But look closely, in the back of this bright orchestra lurks a demon.

That demonic figure amidst the angels speaks powerfully to me. It says that the images that jolt my comfortable faith, that clash with my preconceptions, may in fact have the most to teach me. Art that brings together the contradictions can push out the boundaries of my faith and help me contemplate a larger picture, a picture that includes the gaps and the silences. For Mennonites, the gaps may include many things. Above the pacifist Jesus is the God of armies. Behind the humble servant lurks the demon of self-righteousness. Mixed with the glorious choral harmonies are the discords and unresolved cadences. An imaginative faith recognizes that all of these are part of the picture.

But what if the larger picture includes too much for us to bear? Our culture tends toward excess, pushing the boundaries further and further to stimulate our jaded sensibilities. In our uncensored environment, can one talk about a moral imagination? Someone once asked Rudy Wiebe about the purpose of art: “The whole purpose of art, of poetry, of story-telling, is to make us better. Okay? Let’s leave it at that,” said Wiebe.¹⁷ How does art make us better?

Morality and the imagination were linked in an interesting article on Dorothy Parker, the cynical New York writer who died in 1967. The tragedy of Parker’s career is that Parker had no imagination, said the writer. “People are always telling us how there is no connection between moral strength and artistic strength: how Picasso preyed on women, how Wagner hated Jews, how you can be a terrible person and still be a great artist. But the case of Parker reminds us that, while the relation between morality and imagination may be a complicated one, it does exist. Hope, forgiveness – these are not just moral actions. They are enlargements of the mind. Without them, you remain in the tunnel of the self. Parker was morally a child all her life. She had a clear vision of the bad, but it never taught her anything about the good.”¹⁸

Enlargements of the mind. Clear vision. These are criteria of judgment we should be applying to the images of our time. Popular culture these days is caught somewhere between robot wars and banal exercises in

self-gratification. Excess and inanity are the ruling forces behind much of what influences us. (Maybe we should be petitioning TV networks for real sex and real violence.) To counter these visions, we clutch at political correctness and ideology. Or we take refuge in nostalgia or sentimentality. Sentimentality (“emotional promiscuity,” Norman Mailer calls it) is one of the biggest dangers to the imagination.

When I ponder the arts from a Christian perspective I always come back to that fierce southern American Catholic, Flannery O’Connor. She summarized her own artistic creed with characteristic bluntness: “My subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil.” Christians are in the best position to delve into the world’s evil, she says, because “writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable Redemption is meaningless unless there is cause for it in the actual life we live.”¹⁹

Inferior art (or would-be art) is the real violation of the commandment against images, for it circumscribes and limits the possibilities of the human spirit. It confuses “real life” with what comes naturally, not recognizing that the most natural is not necessarily the most human. True art, sometimes through abhorrent means, strives to expand our experience of reality, to reveal more angles of the truth. But that may mean less certainty. In these fragmented times, Christians are not immune to the erosion of what they thought they knew for sure. We share the world’s bewilderment with too much information and too little knowledge, the pain of too many feelings and not enough understanding. We have entered the writhing pains of a creation yearning to be reborn, as Romans puts it. Can we still speak truth? Perhaps it will be a more tentative truth, a more vulnerable truth.

“We live in an era of violent excess,” noted Robert Detweiler of Emory University in a 1997 lecture.²⁰ But that’s nothing new – we hear this excess already in the Old Testament: “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands.” But the Bible also gives us examples of good excess, said this speaker, a scholar of literature and religion. Mary Magdalene invades Jesus’ privacy in a fit of bad manners and pours expensive perfume on his feet. She displays what we might call an “excess of imagination.” This good excess is evident in our time in the “stubborn will to believe.” In the midst of

the postmodern shattering of the reality we knew, we reach out to infinity for rescue. This requires an act of the imagination; it is an act that “divinizes our anxious time.”

One of the most memorable images Detweiler used was the medieval image of Christ as the harrower of hell, prying open with his cross the jaws of Satan, forcing the beast to vomit up the bodies of the damned. This excessive image portrays the energy of resurrection, he said, as excess is transformed by the cross.

Sacramental reality

Several years ago, I reviewed a book called *Art of the Spirit: Contemporary Canadian Fabric Art*.²¹ It’s a collection of liturgical art, art for worship – clerical vestments, altar cloths, banners, even coffin palls. The book bowled me over! For a Mennonite reader like me, the book should have contained a warning: “Beware the shock of encountering the spirit made visible.” The bold designs and vibrant colours, the imaginative leaps, had the effect of too-rich food after a life of bread and butter.

Included in the book was a work by Mennonite artist Susan Shantz, entitled “Cathedral II.” This multi-media piece was the only work not meant for public worship. It shows a conservative Mennonite couple sitting in an enclosed space that resembles the gothic structures of grander spaces. The description says that Shantz’s “person-sized” construction is a play on the tension between her “imageless heritage and her own need for a more visual and sensual religious expression.”

Why do we have such “artless” worship? Is it because our Protestant spirit is so intact, or do we simply lack a spiritual imagination?

I have a son for whom the visible world is a metaphor for the reality of his imagination. When he was very young, he was enchanted by the beautiful roses that were growing in our yard. “They look just like real ones,” he said to me. “But they are real,” I responded. “No, I mean like the ones in pictures.” When he was baptized, he said that the significance of that momentous act only sank in when he first ate the bread of communion. When he heard “This is the bread of the world,” my son felt for the first time that God is actually part of the physical world, the world of the senses, and not only a spiritual force.

While we believe that God is present in the natural world, Mennonites are careful not to equate God with nature or with human beings. We don't recognize a physical presence in the bread and wine. Our Confession of Faith speaks of the Lord's Supper as a "sign" of God's presence. For us, God's presence in communion is confined to the memory of Jesus or to the visible community. Is that enough?

I remember an argument between a Catholic and Protestant over transubstantiation – the belief that the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Christ. The Protestant argued that transubstantiation is a misunderstanding of metaphor. "Religious language is always metaphor," said the Protestant. "Yours is the misunderstanding," said the Catholic. "For I know that I am not eating human flesh and drinking human blood. But I know at the same time that the bread and the wine have truly become the blood and body of Christ as I partake of them." This belief moves us beyond metaphor to mystery, from memory to sacrament.

There are powerful realities in our faith that we cannot just leave as metaphor. We may try to literalize them on the one hand, or spiritualize them on the other, but they defy both categories. They are mysteries, miracles, and we believe them by faith. Take resurrection, for example. It takes us through all that we know to the "other side of reason," as someone put it. It frees us from necessity, from the tyranny of cause and effect, by opening our eyes to a different universe. In theological terms, we speak of ontological reality, the foundation of life behind the empirical manifestations of it. In imaginative terms, we can say that faith opens our eyes to an enchanted world, a world full of sacred magic.

That sounds almost pagan, doesn't it? One of the things that early Anabaptists rejected was the notion that certain images or certain spaces were more magical, more sacred, than others. In denouncing beautiful churches and priestly ceremony, Anabaptists believed that they were making all of life sacred. But what happened? The magic and the mystery almost vanished altogether and we found ourselves allied with the modern spirit that secularized (de-sacralized) the world. One of the ironies about atheistic communism was that its people remained much less materialistic than we in the Christian West. Someone who lived in Poland in the 1970s told us: "The

Poles can hardly get bread or milk or butter in the shops, but they can buy flowers on every street corner.” They knew what nourishes the soul.

A sacramentalist believes simply that the greater may be perceived in the lesser (the world in a grain of sand, as Blake said). To see sacred magic in the physical world is to have a sacramental view of the world. A Catholic colleague of mine, Andrew Britz, brings together his sacramental tradition with a keen social conscience. “We don’t receive sacraments; we become them,” he says.²² We are Christ’s body in the world. A Mennonite friend talks about the family as sacrament – there are moments in the experience of family when the divine breaks into our lives and God takes on flesh. We embody the sacred. We are the means of God’s grace to the world. That’s a wonderful union of sacramental and Mennonite thinking.

Today, we see evidence of a renewed imagination among us. The environmental movement is trying to recover the sacredness of nature; spiritualist movements are discovering God in every living thing; current theology, particularly feminist theology, is giving heightened significance to the body. But what kind of sacramentalism is this? It plays too easily into our culture’s sanctification of the personal without enlarging our capacity to appreciate the Otherness of reality – that which lies outside ourselves. We have much art of the body these days, but does it convey the spirit which gives it life? As Teilhard de Chardin said, “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.” That’s a different way of seeing.

Changing images

One of the things Mennonites have experienced in the past two decades is the power of images and symbols. Look what happens when we challenge the image of God as father. Or the mode of baptism. The intensity of our response does not come from rational argument or an act of the will. Our associations with certain symbols of the faith arise from deep within us; they have shaped how we experience faith.

During a recent retreat, abuse survivors were invited symbolically to lay down their burdens by placing stones around the foot of a small cross. For some, the cross was a symbol of comfort because it represented Christ’s own experience of abuse. For others, it triggered the most painful associations

of abuse and it had to be removed. They had opposite responses to this image of the Christian faith. God as father is another image that elicits extreme response. One of the current solutions is to add the image of mother or parent. That doesn't get at the real problem, in my opinion. We've simply ended up in a fight over gender, which is not where we want to be. How can we contemplate the person of God in the twenty-first century? We need some radical re-imagining on that one.

As non-sacramentalists, we tend to domesticate powerful images of the faith. Think of baptism. For some, baptism demands a literal immersion; for others it is enough to symbolize an inner cleansing with a few drops of water. But look at the biblical images of salvation – death of the old person, being reborn, cataclysmic change. The picture conveyed in the Bible is not the water that washes but the flood that drowns. Can our muted practice of sprinkling convey the power of that symbol? Another symbol that has become entirely domesticated is the cross. If we really want to convey its meaning, why don't we erect a gallows, or even better, mount an electric chair in the front of the church? Sometimes it just seems easier to choose whatever meaning fits our experience or is the most politically correct at the moment.

These days, God as parent is definitely more palatable than God as judge. And it's easier to speak about the Jesus of good works than about the Christ who was before the creation of the world. So we choose one, instead of hanging on to the mystery. It's hard to keep the clashing images together – you can't get a more contradictory image than Jesus Christ who is fully man and fully God – but that is the paradoxical imagination we have inherited. We want so badly to reconcile everything and hold truth in understandable pieces, but faith isn't like that and neither is the world. We know that truth cannot be contained or enclosed; it cannot be fixed in one place and time, in one medium. It is more like a magnet, drawing us to its centre. Our creations, our images, are attempts to reveal and to give form, but we know that just as no image can enclose divinity, so our creations and imaginings remain incomplete visions of the truth we seek.

What does all this mean for worship? Last Easter I attended a vigil which began at 11:00 P.M. on Holy Saturday. It included a candle-lit procession through the dark, ceremonies of penance and other exotic rites, and the dramatic uncovering of banners and decorating of the altar with greenery

right after midnight. But the drama couldn't really take off in that drab little room, and the glorious readings got bogged down by the stumbling lay voices. It was all a bit awkward. But maybe that's also part of the contradiction – we mortals trying to convey the immortal.

What is the appropriate language for worship? There is a difference between public and private language, between the vernacular and the colloquial. I suggest that the colloquial is too “flat” or limiting for public worship. That doesn't mean we have to return to the King James Bible, although on occasion we may want to. Much as I love Elizabethan language, I am convinced the church must speak in the language of today. But that doesn't mean casual liturgy. I have a special problem with unskilled Bible reading. In some traditions, the whole congregation rises in respect when the Gospels are read. As a so-called biblical people, the least we can do is make the Bible reading a heightened moment, the dramatic focal point of worship. Public worship demands the distance we speak about in art – a stepping back from the strictly personal into stylized form and public voice.

Annie Dillard, an American writer with a mystical eye, is amazed at how casually and unconsciously we gather on Sunday mornings to worship the creator of the universe. “We should all be wearing crash helmets,” she says. “Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake some day and take offence, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”²³ Do our liturgies reflect our belief in an almighty God? Rites and rituals are not affectation; they are attempts to lift us above the limits of mortality and give us a glimpse of the mysterious eternal. Worship must nourish not only our personal emotions but our communal soul, not only our minds but our collective imagination. Let us end with a hymn.

Let us sing now a hymn to the healer
physician of the broken tongue,
judge of the merciful sentence . . .
Let us sing also between the lines,
the harmony of spaces,
the resonance of what is left unsaid;
sing the witless howl, on leash,

unleashed.
Let us sing to the Healer
who gathers our voice in the night
and returns it again on the Wind

In the night of our singing
the light we are given, have given,
is gathered, is given once more
in the round perfect moon of our singing.
In the pale of our night
by the wit of our tone
by the translucent bone in the teeth of our tongue
we are singing our souls into Light.²⁴

Notes

¹ Julia Kasdorf, *Sleeping Preacher* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992).

² J. H. Janzen, *Mennonite Life*, 1946.

³ Rudy Wiebe, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1962).

⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Biographia Literaria" (1817), in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. 2 (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1962).

⁵ Northrop Frye, *The Great Code* (Toronto: Academic Press Canada, 1982).

⁶ Margaret Loewen Reimer, "Hebraism in English Literature: A Study of Matthew Arnold and George Eliot." Dissertation for Faculty of English, University of Toronto, 1993.

⁷ Matthew Arnold, "Culture and Anarchy" (1869) in *Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1961).

⁸ John Weier, *Steppe: A Novel* (Saskatoon: Thistledown Press, 1995).

⁹ Patrick Friesen, "pa poem: singing elijah," in *Unearthly Horses* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1984).

- ¹⁰ Patrick Friesen, "location," in *Unearthly Horses* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1984).
- ¹¹ Hildi Froese Tiessen, *Prairie Fire*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Summer 1990).
- ¹² Sarah Klassen, "Reasons for delay," in *Borderwatch* (Windsor: Netherlandic Press, 1993).
- ¹³ William Blake, "Letter to Thomas Butts" (1802), in Blake: *Complete Writings* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1969).
- ¹⁴ Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Toronto: CBC Enterprises, 1963).
- ¹⁵ John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1979).
- ¹⁶ T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* (Georgetown: Rutledge, Chapman & Hall, 1961).
- ¹⁷ Rudy Wiebe in *Books in Canada* (Feb. 1980).
- ¹⁸ Joan Acocella, *The New Yorker* (Aug. 16, 1993).
- ¹⁹ Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969).
- ²⁰ Robert Detweiler, "Literary Echoes of Postmodernism" (American of American Academy of Religion, 1997).
- ²¹ Helen Bradfield, et al., eds., *Art of the Spirit: Contemporary Canadian Fabric Art* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1992).
- ²² Andrew Britz, *Prairie Messenger* (Feb. 19, 1997).
- ²³ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1988).
- ²⁴ David Waltner Toews, "The Editor's Song," *The Impossible Uprooting* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1995).

The Painted Body Stares Back: Five Female Artists and the “Mennonite” Spectator

Magdalene Redekop

In the beginning was the quilt. Priscilla Reimer, the curator of a 1990 Winnipeg exhibition entitled “Mennonite Artist: Insider as Outsider,” noted that “there is no identifiable tradition of Mennonite art” unless you include “fraktur, quilting, and other forms of decorative design.”¹ In *Primitivism*, Franz Boas cites an analogous example. Among the Californian Indians, basketry is the chief industry. “Basket-making is an occupation of women and thus it happens that among the Californian Indians only women are creative artists.”² Quilt-making is an occupation of women and thus it happens that among Mennonites only women are creative artists. This cheerful logic is belied by the fact that many of the artists in the 1990 exhibition (male and female) told Priscilla Reimer that they were artists in spite of, not because of, being Mennonite. We are taught to begin, of course, with the Word, and the scripture that looms large is the writing on the tablet that Moses brought down from the mountain: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.” The heritage of contemporary Jewish women artists is similar in many ways, with the important difference that within Judaism decorative art has a central place in religious rituals. Reimer notes that the work of Mennonite artists can be seen as an attempt “to fill the emptiness left by a heritage devoid of visual imagery.”³

I want to ask questions in two inter-related areas. The first concerns the art itself. When these Mennonite artists *do* fill the void, are the works they produce in any way influenced by that nonrepresentational decorative tradition or, for that matter, by the violent response to representational images that is a central feature of Anabaptist history? I am acutely aware, when I pose such questions, of the fact that I am a fish out of my own disciplinary waters. I also remember Blake’s words of warning: “To generalize is to be an idiot.” It is not my aim here to come up with some kind of ethnic recipe.

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Lured into interdisciplinary waters by my own ethnicity, however, I am venturing ahead because there are questions that seem to demand my attention.

While reading an interview with Wanda Koop, for example, I took notice when she commented on a “figurative undercurrent” in her work that she didn’t “allow to really happen until 1985.” Until that time, she said, “I avoided using figurative images . . . I would often paint figures in and then paint them out.” The interviewer, Robert Enright, asked the obvious question: “Why would you have suppressed that figurative impulse, even if unconsciously?” In reply, Koop speculated only that at the time it wasn’t “cool” to be “hot.” The question was left hanging there and there it still is, begging to be asked and to be historicized. Other questions follow. When Koop did begin to break through whatever it was that was suppressing the figurative, why did she make masks and mask-like faces – African, Chinese, hockey-masks? When I look at them consciously with “Mennonite” eyes, the decorative patterns seem to expose what they cover, conveying both desire and fear.

But what does it mean to look with “Mennonite” eyes? A second group of questions relates not to the work of specific artists but to what E.H. Gombrich called “the beholder’s share.” Do Mennonite ways of seeing visual art (or not seeing it) contain any residual influences from those long-ago iconoclastic scenes of destruction that shaped our identity – statues toppled, stained glass systematically smashed, icons demolished, cathedrals gutted? Since the social history of Mennonite attitudes to art has not been written, it is difficult to trace the historical roots of our way of seeing. My argument here will be based on my own honest responses to the works in question – how could it be anything else? Yet I am also trying to imagine a collective “Mennonite” response that is not identical with my personal way of looking. To deal with this dilemma I will put on, for purposes of this argument, the mask of the “Mennonite” spectator.

It is hard to define a negative, but our continuing resistance to visual art can be made visible if we contrast it with the collective Mennonite response to music. Gathie Falk is as famous in the area of the visual arts as Ben Heppner is in the area of music, but her name is not known by most Mennonites. The same community that has no problem with Wagner responds with hostility or indifference to the powerful images being made by our visual artists. To be fair, this difference in response and this suspicion of “difficult” abstract

art is not unique to Mennonites and is partly the result of differences in the medium. In music the technology of reproduction is more “in tune with” the art; a recording may not be adequate but it is not hostile to what the artist is doing, and most of us have a large collection of such recordings.

The same is not true in the visual arts. Much recent visual art does not reproduce well and is prohibitively expensive in the original, yet it has to survive in a “culture dominated by pictures, visual simulations, stereotypes, illusions, copies, reproductions, imitations, and fantasies.” W.J.T. Mitchell notes that it is “a commonplace of modern cultural criticism that images have a power in our world undreamed of by the ancient idolaters.” He refers to this as a “modern, secular idolatry linked with the ideology of Western science and rationalism” and comments that the “real miracle has been the successful resistance of pictorial artists to this idolatry, their insistence on continuing to show us more than meets the eye with whatever resources they can muster.”⁴

I like to imagine that our decorative tradition helps our female artists to do their part in this miracle but if so, then it’s a David-and-Goliath confrontation in which the decorative folk tradition is not even David. It is just a small stone in the slingshot. The history and technology of western mimesis is Goliath, but unlike the Old Testament giant, this one is unkillable. While discussing her set of “five eight-foot square pared down hockey masks” with Robert Enright, Wanda Koop commented: “It’s a mass media culture, it’s a killer culture.”⁵ I sometimes wonder if the long history of our own decorative tradition predisposes me to be attracted to the decorative folk traditions of other cultures. It makes sense, after all, that for a “people apart,” this would be one of the most visible bridges to an “other” culture. When Koop walked through Toronto’s Chinatown, she chose to buy paper cut-outs rather than landscape brush paintings.

On the basis of my own, albeit limited, viewing experience, I hypothesize that the “decorative” element in the work of our Mennonite artists helps them to work forcefully against the grain of mass media reproductions. Nicole Dubreuil-Blondin refers to the metaphysical baggage that has clung to representation and that has tied the pictorial sign to “a transcendent Real, or Subject.” It does seem to me that Mennonite women artists travel light in this sense. What Dubreuil-Blondin urges that artists do with an emphasis on the painterly, our artists seem to do with the decorative – and they do it *as if*

it's no sweat. This element of lightness and play combines with a decorative emphasis on the materiality of the medium to challenge the pretensions of transparency and transcendent meaning that can weigh down any work of art.⁶

If you turn from the decorative element in avant-garde art to the decorative objects themselves, the issues are further complicated by nostalgia. Quilts have come to be very highly valued among Mennonites as nostalgic collectors' items, commanding increasingly high prices. Nostalgia supports an anti-intellectual view of art. The works I will consider below act instead as a catalyst for thought, and one of the questions they invite us to ask is, What is it that is covered up when quilts are used in this fetishistic way? David Freedberg speaks of the "myth of aniconism," the myth "that there can be a culture that has no images of the deity at all."⁷ Mennonite cultures, being built on precisely that myth, tend (perhaps more than other groups) to construct a nostalgic, pseudo-aesthetic with the quilts.

I am not denying the beauty of the quilts, nor do I wish to denigrate the women who make them. On the contrary: I celebrate their work. Within a larger feminist perspective, our Mennonite foremothers are seen as part of a history of art that offers alternatives to the excesses of the mainstream western tradition. Within the decorative tradition, man is not the measure of all things. Flowers are just as important. There's a welcome humility, also, in the unashamed acknowledgement within the decorative tradition of the way the art is limited by the need for thrift. Stencils, formulaic patterns, iron-on transfers, and many other aids are used. Our foremothers went quietly against the grain of centuries of western art history, using primitive technology to make anti-classical designs, working within the often severe economic and social conditions of their times. It was not only the restrictions deriving from theology but also the material conditions of their lives that led them to keep the decorative tradition alive. While the men were working to recover the Anabaptist vision, they worked to recover the rocking chair.

If we want to *see* the work made by the artists among us, however, we must resist what Susan Stewart has called "the social disease of nostalgia" which gives the past a fake authenticity and thus kills the present. Nostalgia, as Stewart notes, is "a sadness without an object . . . the past it seeks has never existed . . ." Hostile to history, it "threatens to reproduce itself" over and over again as "a felt lack."⁸ We need to historicize our *response* to art and to interrogate the assumptions that shape our experience of it. It should

be possible to pay tribute to those thousands of Mennonite women who kept the decorative tradition alive through the centuries but to do so in a way that would, at the same time, open up connections between that tradition and the smaller but significant number of contemporary women artists. One way to do this would be to ask questions concerning power and the making of art that apply not only to quilts but also to contemporary art. Who makes it? Who buys it? Who controls the form, the price, the reception? If we pay attention, the works of our artists have a lot to teach us about these issues. I agree with Elaine Showalter that we must “deromanticize the art of the quilt, situate it in its historical contexts, and discard many of the sentimental stereotypes of an idealized, sisterly, and nonhierarchic women’s culture that cling to it.”⁹

In my slide-lectures on this topic,¹⁰ I have used the metaphor of textile to visualize the opposition of the decorative and the mimetic, seeing them as the warp and woof of a fabric that may be tested by pulling first one way, then the other. At one stage, after too many nights spent reading martyrs’ tales, I convinced myself that I was hearing voices in the quilt.¹¹ I had in mind what Sophocles called the “voice of the shuttle,” the story of Philomela, whose tongue was cut out but who told the story of her rape by weaving a tapestry.

It was because Philomela was so good at making lifelike renderings that her sister could read the story in the tapestry. Such realistic representations of human figures are quintessential Hellenic examples of the thread of classic realism, and reflect the classical reverence for the human body and the value placed on the individual. Unlike geometric decorative patterns, representational images have a power to move the spectator. “People are sexually aroused by pictures,” notes Freedberg, “they break pictures . . . they mutilate them, kiss them, cry before them, and go on journeys to them; they are calmed by them, stirred by them, and incited to revolt. . . .”¹² Such responses, despite or because of our history, exist as much among Mennonites as in any other group. You have to have a powerful response to images to be willing to die in an effort to deny their power – or to wish for the death of the image-maker. In the book of comments at one of Koop’s exhibitions, a viewer wrote: “Wanda Koop should be hanged.” Not a pretty threat, but one illustrating Mitchell’s point that the various historical instances of iconoclasm

(including the Anabaptist) reflect an ambivalence which is a constant feature of the human response to images.¹³

The complex psychology of this response is reduced in the Judaeo-Christian tradition by a theology which splits off the spirit from the body. St. Augustine defines idolatry as the “subordination of the true spiritual image to the false material one.”¹⁴ We should be safe from the danger of idolatry, then, if we keep subordinating the material to the spiritual. The illusion of such safety is apparent in the pictures of martyrs with which most of us are familiar. Jan Luyken’s engravings for *The Martyrs Mirror* are an example of the comfort we still find in images of shared suffering. Representations of earlier Catholic martyrdoms often show a *tavoletta*, the comforting image of Christ, being held up to a man about to be executed. The stories that accompany these pictures are an example of what Mitchell calls “ekphrastic hope.” Ecphrasis is a rhetorical figure – meaning a verbal representation of a visual display – that seems to me particularly useful in accounting for Mennonite responses to art. Word and Image: it’s like a struggle for possession of the Mennonite soul. No wonder we need to escape into music. Sometimes, however, we allow ourselves to steal a look at the old engravings.

Mitchell expands the use of the word *ekphrastic* and this expansion suits my needs here. “Ekphrastic hope” is that moment when the beholder hopes to overcome the “otherness of visual representation”¹⁵ and it is exemplified by Luyken’s engravings even though the martyrs do not hold *tavolettas*. This hope, however, is explicitly repudiated by the theology of the martyrdom. Theology would have us believe that the sacrifice and suffering that is apotheosized in these pictures results from a rejection of false material comforts and affirms a spiritual comfort. Anneken Hendriks, burned at Amsterdam in 1571, is represented by Luyken bound to a ladder that is about to be thrust into the flames. Her eyes gaze up past the billowing smoke to heaven and her hands point upwards in prayer. The image has an extra power because she is a woman. Eve tempted Adam with the things of this earth and caused the fall but even women – the picture seems to say – can on occasion rise to this high spiritual level.¹⁶

Ilse Friesen, noting examples of statues of crucified women, believes that they testify

to a tremendous religio-psychological need on the part of women for an image of extreme female suffering and ultimate iconic significance, something that was not met by the official iconography of the church.¹⁷

I would not by any means deny this need but would argue, again, that we should historicize it by recognizing that such iconophilia coexists with iconophobia. The Anabaptist in me remains wary of a tendency to idolatry. Does not the image of the woman suffering for not worshipping an icon, itself become an icon? If we are urged to imitate this woman's faith and she, in turn, is an imitation of Christ, then how does this relate to Luyken's imitation or mimesis? In the faces represented by Luyken there is a serenity, a *gelassenheit*, that we recognize and honour. Is this our golden calf?

It is a tribute to Jan Luyken's art that he found ways of representing that allowed him to touch on these issues by showing the limits of representation. His engraving of the scene following the martyrdom of Maeyken Wens is an example [illustration on p. 35]. The caption for the picture reads: "Maeyken Wens was burned at Antwerp with a tongue screw in her mouth. Here her sons search and find the screw to keep in memory of their mother's Christian witness, AD 1573."¹⁸ Maeyken's son Adriaen, "aged about fifteen years," is shown hunting among the ashes for the screw while his three-year-old brother looks on. This is literally a graven image, but the engraver has fractured it by trying to represent what cannot be represented. In so doing, he returns us to an awareness of materiality and of our mortality that is ironically comforting because we are the survivors. In this engraving Luyken refuses the representation of the martyr and leaves us with the orphans. The resulting image is not like the cross, a transparent sign leading to transcendental significance, but becomes opaque and troubling. Aware of the mother as a specter that haunts the site, we experience *Verfremdung*, our estrangement as spectators at a distance from the picture. The picture opens up a gap in which the beholder's experience cannot be contained by theological dogma.

If you are a Mennonite beholder, you are probably protesting by now. It only seems to me that Luyken chooses to be with the children, you may be saying, because I am a mother. I, in turn, respond by arguing that just by making an engraving in copper, Luyken chooses to be a part of the very

material world that is rejected by that theology. But the powerful subjective elements unleashed in our response to visual art have to be acknowledged as coexisting with our efforts to see objectively. Objectivity is never achieved, and what we are left with is coexisting and interwoven subjectivities. In taking up the position of spectator, each of us is distanced from the work of art. The act of looking works to collapse the split between subject and object, involving me as a kind of specter inside the work I am viewing.

Recognition of this self/other drama is crucial for the Mennonite spectator, I argue, because of our ethnocentric past and our suspicion of outsiders. James Elkins comments that “we need to believe that vision is a one-way street and that objects are just the passive recipients of our gaze in order to maintain the conviction that we are in control of our vision,” and that we who behold are autonomous, stable selves. We may all “want to be pictures to some degree” and it “may be that when we look at visual art we are seeing examples of that desire”¹⁹ – a desire resembling what Mitchell calls “ekphrastic hope.” Since, however, we are not ordinarily conscious of that desire, there is a considerable shock when the picture offers us a kind of reflection that stares back at us.

This shock effect is what happened in Gathie Falk’s 1972 piece of multi-media performance art, “Red Angel,” which is recorded on video [illustration on p. 35]. Falk claims to have written this piece because she found an old white dress and had to think of something to do with it. “Red Angel” is constructed “like a rondo, with theme A followed by theme B, followed by theme A.”²⁰ It begins with Falk sitting on a red buffet. The body of the artist (inside that dress) is present in her own “painting,” staring back at the audience. The white dress resembles a wedding gown to which are attached enormous white wings (constructed out of foam rubber and chicken feathers). Five tables are positioned in front of the buffet, and each holds a turntable on which is a red apple on which is a red parrot. The parrots take turns singing the round “Row, row, row your boat” as the turntables turn. Falk is the last to join in and the last to finish. When the song is finished, the artist slowly takes off her white dress. Underneath, she is wearing a grey satin dress. An old-fashioned wringer washer is trundled onto the stage by a woman who takes the white dress from Falk, washes it, then leaves. After this the round song is performed again. The last voice heard is that of Falk herself, singing “Life is but a dream.”

In the multi-media art world of the 1960s and '70s, such experimental art perhaps seemed less bizarre than it does now, but there is no question that Falk's performance works are a challenge for the spectator. "Ekphrastic hope" is a dream come true in an absurdly literal way. By her own account, Falk's aim in her performance art was to contrast ordinary actions – like eating an egg or washing clothes – with "slightly exotic events such as shining someone's shoes while he is walking backwards singing an operatic aria . . . sawing popsicles in half and using them as weapons of assault and defence . . ." ²¹ The comedy of Monty Python or the poetry of Edward Lear come to mind, but they are not an adequate context to account for what is happening here. Not surprisingly, Falk's bizarre juxtapositions have baffled many viewers. Does the "Mennonite" historical context help make sense of this? Falk's membership in a small Mennonite church is often cited as if it might, but Mennonite tradition allowed decoration only when it was *useful*. Falk's objects are not functional: a 1936 Ford coupe stuffed with ceramic watermelons won't take you anywhere. Neither will a case of eight ceramic running shoes. Over a hundred bisque cabbages hovering in the air won't feed you. Falk's objects are boldly and gleefully useless. They stand in sharp contrast to a comment Sandra Birdsell made somewhere that "Mennonites are engaged in a joyless search for meaning."

The heterogeneity of Falk's celebrated objects has not stopped critics from trying to label them Mennonite. In 1990, when she came to Toronto to accept the Gershon Iskowitz Award, John Bentley Mays, referring to the "unforgettable image of Gathie Falk sitting behind a row of shiny red parrots," labelled her a "Mennonite artangel." With a cavalier disregard for accuracy or historical context, Mays describes her "simple theatricals" as "bewinged, bedizened and sentimental as a Sunday School Christmas pageant" and pictures her as a school-teacher with "plain-jane bobbed hair . . . transfigured at last into the glamorous high-art angel of her dreams." He then follows up this grotesque caricature with his own nostalgic idealization of her "Mennonite" qualities, claiming that "virtually all" her "quietly joyful works" were produced with "members of Falk's Mennonite community in Vancouver, and performed by them as well." As if there were not dance companies in Vancouver, Toronto, and New York ready and waiting to perform whatever she wrote during those heady days of multi-media happenings! Marshall

McLuhan would dance in his grave for her. Her “Red Angel,” doing a striptease with a white dress over a grey dress, is all dressed up and ready to join in the transformations of Blake’s heaven and hell. Who needs Mennonites? Mays does not allow such facts to get in the way of his headlong rush towards a nostalgic utopia that really is no place.

In these performances, if only for a moment, there was peace on earth and freedom from the hungry games of power. There was the loveliness of cherishing ordinary things – from cabbages and eggs to old songs and old friends – as an act of religious gratitude and blessing, and the beauty of dwelling on the earth in the bonds of kindness.²²

This absurd excuse for art criticism dramatizes what happens if the beholder denies his own ambivalent subjective response while straining for pseudo-objectivity. Mays, estranged by the technique, assumed that he must have stumbled into a Mennonite church, but Falk’s experiment in “Red Angel” has more profound implications than any Sunday School pageant. Her bodily entry into the otherness of the work of art is radically transgressive. Perhaps being Mennonite, one of the “people apart,” gave her the energy to repudiate separation.

That is speculation. What is more certain is that the Mennonite emphasis on music was an advantage, particularly at that time. When Robert Enright observed that Falk took to the form “like a duck to water during those Intermedia workshops given by Deborah Hay in 1968,” she pointed out that her training in “harmony and counterpoint and all that stuff” might have helped her.²³ Her funkiness is another story. “Funk art” is a phrase that was coined to describe the wacky artwork coming out of California in the late 1950s and ’60s. It is fascinating to speculate about the reasons why one of the most courageous examples of funk art in Canada was a Mennonite woman. Perhaps she is that rare creature: a Mennonite eccentric. Falk’s importance to Canadian art, in any case, now goes far beyond a sixties phenomenon and she has herself been “installed” in the canon of top Canadian artists. This would not have happened if her performances had really been a representation of “peace on earth.” More like the peace that shall destroy many, her work is of particular interest in relation to the work of younger artists coming out of Mennonite communities. By shattering boundaries, Falk

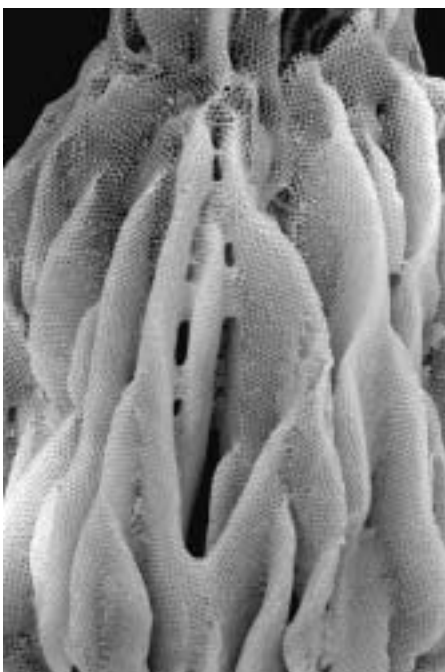


Above: Adriaen Wens hunts among the ashes for his mother's tongue screw while his three-year-old brother looks on. Jan Luyken, Engraving. Used by permission of the Conrad Grebel College Archives

Below: Gathie Falk, Red Angel, Performance, 1972. Photo by Chick Rice.



Above:
*Lois Klassen, Household
Lamps, 1988.*
Used by permission



Below:
*Aganetha Dyck, The Glass Dress,
from The Extended Wedding
Party, glass and beeswax, 1998.*
*Photo by Peter Dyck. Used by
permission of the artist.*

opened up possibilities for ways of making that play, as did “Red Angel,” with the conflicting emotions of the Mennonite spectator.

Lois Klassen’s “Household Lamps” is like an inside-out version of “Red Angel” – an uncanny illustration of a point made by James Elkins. Our eyes are designed to seek out “complete figures.” Even when faced with a smear, we automatically look for bodies and “instinctively repair fragments into wholes and search for continuous contours and closed curves.”²⁴ If we can’t see a body, we’ll make do with a face or a hand. Using the uniforms of the medical profession, Lois Klassen’s hands, following the work of her eyes, have shaped the outlines of the human form. The empty uniforms activate a spectator response that psychoneurologists call “subjective contour completion.” We prefer to see bodies and if we can’t have them, “we continue to see them as afterimages or ghosts.” Klassen has managed to suspend the viewer in that state of “ekphrastic fascination,” which turns the spectator into a specter hovering between hope and fear. The spectator’s projection into this body expresses a longing, a hope for “the transformation of the dead, passive image into a living creature.” The moment of fear comes when we recoil, as we do in Luyken’s engraving of Mayken Wens’s orphans, from the possibility of such a unity:

All the goals of ‘ekphrastic hope,’ of achieving vision, iconicity, or a ‘still moment’ of plastic presence . . . become, from this point of view, sinister and dangerous All the utopian aspirations of ekphrasis – that the mute image be endowed with a voice . . . all these aspirations begin to look idolatrous and fetishistic.²⁵

In “Red Angel,” Gathie Falk braved “ekphrastic fear” by entering the image and filling it with her own voice. In “Household Lamps,” Lois Klassen represents the image as empty vessel so that in trying and failing to enter it we become aware of our desires and fears. Moreover, because the vessel may be filled with artificial light at the flick of a switch, Klassen locates this experience in the technological place where we all live.

Unlike “Red Angel,” “Household Lamps” [illustration on p. 36] also communicates an awareness of the gender-specific nature of this process. Florence Nightingale, the lady with the lamp, and other sisters of mercy are hovering somewhere, but aware of the deviscerated dresses we know better

than to expect an easy comfort. W.J.T. Mitchell relates “ekphrastic fascination” to the issue of cultural domination in which the “‘self’ is understood to be an active, speaking seeing subject, while the ‘other’ is projected as passive, seen, and (usually) silent object.”²⁶ The otherness of art is often represented as the feminine object of a gaze or as a body to be entered. The gender-specific response of the spectator to the otherness of the figure in art has implications for the tension between decoration and mimesis within Mennonite art. Women in Mennonite communities were allowed, within limits, to make decorative objects. The scene begins to look more threatening when the woman’s body or her represented figure is the object being decorated. Wanda Koop has spoken about “western culture’s search for beauty” as the “desire for control and perfection” which is “exercised over the female body.” Her comments on “Paintings for Dimly Lit Rooms” show that she is aware of the importance of gender-specific looking even when the paintings are not representations of the female body. Those paintings, she says, may be “like a woman’s body – something perfected and idealized that we look at, but what kind of grief has been suffered to make that beauty, and what was destroyed in the process?”²⁷

“Household Lamps” has been described as an installation that uses uniforms to criticize uniformity, but this seems to me very inadequate for the incredible power of this work. I suspect that the power has to do with the way it is able to contain the powerfully conflicting emotions involved in “ekphrastic fascination.” James Elkins notes that the viewer of medical illustrations has to work hard at not seeing, in order to view the schema instead of the detail. Klassen’s representation of these shapes, her appropriation of these mimic forms as decorative household objects, her transformation of the “art” into a functional, technological object, complete with switches – all this works to create a visceral response. Since, however, there are no viscera present, this visceral response is turned into a thoughtful response.

Klassen’s lamps are an example of another point made by Elkins: “When we do not have bodies in front of us, we hallucinate them.” Susan Shantz’s “Ancestral Spirits: Bed, 1988” [cover illustration, this journal] on the other hand, shows us that “when we do, we try to control them by covering them with language.”²⁸ There seems to be a private Mennonite joke hidden

in this installation, as if it is daring us to protest. Like Madonna, the “Ancestral Spirits” wear their underthings on the outside. A family portrait should draw our eyes immediately to the faces, but Shantz subverts that focus.

The dialogue set up here by the counterpoint of decoration and mimesis resembles the one defined by Barthes in *Camera Lucida* as a contrast of *studium* and *punctum*. The *studium* is a “‘good’ photograph: it utters respectability, family life, conformism, Sunday best”²⁹ By acting out of the woman’s right to decorate, Shantz subverts the ideology of the *studium* with cut-outs that act like *punctum* – like punctuation or like subversive appliqué on a photograph already cut up into quilt-like squares. The photograph, writes Barthes, is like the Sanskrit *tathata*: “*tat* means *that* in Sanskrit and suggests the gesture of a child pointing his finger at something and saying: *that, there it is, lo!* but says nothing else; a photograph cannot be transformed”³⁰ Well, maybe not, but Susan Shantz gives it a whirl.

Any child walking past this installation is not likely to point at the photograph but rather at the cut-out genitalia. The penis could itself be a finger pointing upwards to heaven. A small child, seeing a baby’s face in the uterus, would point the finger in self-recognition, thus domesticating the installation. Speaking of the maternal body, Freud wrote that “there is no other place of which one can say with so much certainty that one has already been there.”³¹ The phallus is another story. A snail shape is clearly discernable in one ball, but I looked in vain for a face or a figure. The reproduction of “Ancestral Spirits” in *Mennonite Artist: Insider as Outsider* is not of very high quality and my middle-aged eyes are deteriorating, so I resorted to borrowing the magnifying glass my husband uses to look at his stamp collection. The result was that I saw red and green spots on the black and white photograph, but no face or figure. You can find a face if you turn the picture upside-down, making the penis a cartoonish nose and the testes two eyes. Why not? Freud saw parts of the facial pattern repeated and “strewn across the body’s surface. The anus, the urethra, and the vagina were once called ‘the other face’: an appropriate name for mock eyes, noses, and mouths.” So powerful is our desire to project ourselves into the otherness of the object, that even “a simple triangle can be a faciality machine, with its lowest vertex for a mouth and the upper ones for eyes.”³² When desire turns into fear, gender splits again. Freud saw the Medusa as “the prototype of all horrifying

faces . . . the female genitals,”³³ but Shantz puts phallus and uterus on a flat playing field. The Judaeo-Christian myth of a father-created world (fabricated by hand) and the older myths of a mother-created world (born from a womb or an egg) are posed as cultural constructs that could be altered – almost like improvisations.

There is something very satisfying about Shantz’s playful “Mennonite” domestication of these symbols. Perhaps the struggle between the decorative and the mimetic in “Ancestral Spirits” is what she had to make before she could move on. One could say of Shantz what Enright says of Koop: her recent work “looks easy in carrying the weight of all the thinking that led to its intense simplicity.”³⁴ In “Hibernaculum 1994” four containers stand on delicate legs. The curved legs look frail and yet tough because our eye joins in the making, constructing imaginary human legs, poised, balancing, dancing. In this exhibition Shantz worked with “faux surfaces” like arborite that are in conversation with “materials near the end-point of disintegration: bark, ash, petals.” Ann Newdigate points out that preparing her own materials is a labor of love for Shantz. She breaks up the twigs into tiny pieces and there is

an affinity between this kind of activity and the repetition of the quilting process with which she is familiar from her Mennonite past Because it has no utilitarian function but is informed by domestic labour, and because it is located in a contemporary gallery far from a domestic context, the work challenges the traditional understanding of value, gender and labour.³⁵

The image of materials in a state near disintegration points to a dark thread of continuity that runs through the work of all these women. In “Ancestral Spirits” there is this “terrible thing” that is in every photograph, and that is the return of the dead. Referring to the “funereal immobility” of photographs, Barthes claims that photography has its origins in a theater in which the actors played the role of the Dead. To “make oneself up was to designate oneself as a body simultaneously living and dead.” Photography, for Barthes, is a “primitive theater, a kind of *Tableau Vivant*, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead.”³⁶ The power of Shantz’s “Ancestral Spirits” comes from much more than an exploitation of the nostalgia evoked by the typical melancholy of old

photographs. It activates and neutralizes, in fact, the terror that comes with the photograph so ubiquitous in Mennonite homes: the photograph of a corpse. In 1985, the artist they once called Funky Falk, thought by some to be whimsical, surprised curators of the Vancouver Art Gallery by insisting that the exhibition catalogue for her retrospective should contain a photograph of her father's corpse. Beside the coffin stands her mother, holding Gathie in her arms. Falk told a reporter from *The Vancouver Sun*:

I really wanted that picture in the catalogue because that's when it all started for me. I have always been forced to look at those photographs from a tiny child because every year or so there'd be a photograph from Russia with a member of the family like that, and the other members sitting beside the dead body.³⁷

This kind of *studium* is familiar to the Mennonite spectator and the *punctum* is always the same: a dead body. Non-Mennonites, unaware of the drama of spectator and specter and seeing it only as a morbid spectacle, will shudder. To make matters worse, the corpse (like the resurrected mother at the end of Rudy Wiebe's *My Lovely Enemy*) is not dead for the Mennonite spectator. "Even in death it's alive," Gathie Falk insisted to what must have been a slightly stunned reporter. "Those atoms are still there. It's changing into something else"

This dynamic metaphor of transformation is present in the work of all these artists. The willingness to survive, to escape martyrdom, to change with the transforming process – all these seem to be a part of the enduring power of their work. Transformation, as both metaphor and reality, is certainly at the heart of Aganetha Dyck's art. If you asked Dyck to play the part of the washer-woman in "Red Angel," there's no telling what might happen to Falk's white dress. During the 1970s, Dyck began shrinking woolen sweaters and "transformed hundreds of garments into miniature forms and set them up in installations on rocks and marching down a country road. Their shrinking rendered them both absurd and dense with the implications of former wearers."³⁸ Like many another female artist, but with more boldness and no apology, Dyck "merged home economics with art" and set out to redeem the triviality of household objects. Jars of pickled buttons were followed by found objects covered in beeswax. Transformation now describes not only Dyck's themes and methods but also the methods of the bees that work in co-operation

with her. In her installation, “The Extended Wedding Party,” various objects from the wedding party are displayed, encrusted with honeycomb. The centerpiece is the glass wedding dress [illustration on p. 36], located in a glass cage along with the bees who are busily embroidering it with honeycomb.

Weddings are associated with gifts, the central gift being the “hand” of the bride. I have not spoken, so far, about the relation between the decorative tradition and the act of giving, but the concept of the gift is at the heart of the tradition. Perhaps this is why the sale of quilts to collectors seems like a betrayal. A gift, writes Lewis Hyde, is “not a gift if it is not in motion There are other forms of property that stand still, that mark a boundary or resist momentum, but the gift keeps going.”³⁹ The image of a gift in motion defines the life of decorative objects in a Mennonite community, and it also seems to define Dyck’s approach to creation as transformation. The gifts at her extended wedding party are as soaked with irony as with beeswax, but by her own participation in the co-operative process, she sets up an affirmative gift exchange that defies the forces pulling us down to death and disintegration.

When you receive a gift, “giving a return gift is the final act in the labor of gratitude.”⁴⁰ Appropriately enough, then, Aganetha Dyck’s work has inspired poems that are themselves a transformation of *ekphrasis* – a verbal representation of a visual display. Poet Sarah Klassen’s verbal representations of Dyck’s visual display give a new twist to the ancient trope. A spectator who has been with me up to this point and who has followed the spectator/specter drama going on in “Red Angel,” “Household Lamps,” and “Ancestral Spirits” will not be surprised to find that Dyck’s partly finished wedding dress activates “ekphrastic fascination.” In response to this fascination, Klassen creates a voice to contain the conflicting pulls of desire and fear. Like Falk’s dress and Klassen’s uniforms, Dyck’s wedding dress is in need of a body. In her response to the empty dress, Klassen acknowledges the powerful conflicting emotions of “ekphrastic fear” and “ekphrastic hope” and allows them both into her poem. The result of this mixture is anxiety and that, in fact, is the title of her poem about the wedding dress:

She prays the tenuous marriage
garment will gain substance.
Proper texture. She wants the bees
to be industrious. She longs to be
covered. She touches with a fingertip

the slowly growing fabric
probes each tiny waxen cell
and whispers:
he loves me
he loves me not⁴¹

The last two lines are a children's rhyme and, at the same time, become the disembodied voice of the naked body that is the "intended" for the wedding dress. It is tempting, if we remember that John sees the church as a bride in Revelation, to see this as a picture of the ambivalent love affair of "a people apart" with otherness. The Mennonite spectator longs for union with the other:

we want the honey-
voiced lover for a bridegroom. We long to hold
in our naked hands the poisonous snake
with its fantastic patterned skin,
its beautiful forked tongue.

But the Mennonite spectator, still trapped in the old binaries, fears that the naked woman may be the Whore of Babylon and that the decorated body, as fantastically patterned as a Haida mask, is really the Serpent. Like Falk, Klassen is stripping away the layers of our ideological and theological clothing. The figurative language of her poem is itself like a decorative covering. Because it remains opaque, masked, it refuses to become a transparent vehicle to transcendental meaning. Instead, it reflects back to us our own emotional involvement as spectators at "The Extended Wedding Party." Like the wedding guest in Coleridge's "Rime," we become spectators in a dialogue with a specter. If women, especially, become sadder and wiser, they may learn that the forked tongue is made up of their own desires and fears.

Dyck's transformations are ongoing even now as I write. She has commissioned Di Brandt to write a poem for her bees and plans to have it transcribed into Braille and then put on a tablet which she will install in her hive. Will the bees be able to read the poem? Will they create new braille poetry by fabricating new dots? The questions asked are similar to those expressed by Wanda Koop: "What are we looking at here? Are we looking at

a painting, are we looking at objects, are we looking at the idea of the painting? Where does the painting begin, where does it end? So it gets thrown right back to the viewer.”⁴²

When I am the spectator looking at Koop’s recent work, I am aware of the force behind the questions that are thrown at me. Koop is a powerful artist and the range of her work is breathtaking: “Christ crowned with thorns, a sea shell, a male torso, an exquisite orchid, a cluster of cherries, fires on a distant riverbank, abstracted buildings, an oil pump on the prairie, a star, a huge teardrop, a simple screen.”⁴³ She is planning a film project with her mother, based on her Russian Mennonite grandmother’s dream “about an angel taking her across the Dnieper River to heaven.”⁴⁴ This readiness to work from inside the technology of this “killer culture” should not be surprising since she has, for over twenty years, taken “extensive film and video notes of the natural and built environment to keep herself ‘visually articulate,’ an activity she analogizes to playing scales on a piano.”⁴⁵ I believe that Koop’s strength is based at least in part on her ability to balance the competing claims of what I have called the decorative and the mimetic, and to absorb and contain both the desire and fear that this process activates. Robin Laurence puts it this way:

Far from conforming to the critical conventions of our age the assumption that photography has displaced painting from its mimetic function, [and] the subsequent assignment of non-representational practice to painting . . . Koop confounds expectations and rearranges parameters. Her practice argues not displacement but equal and intertwining collaboration between photo-mechanical and painted media.⁴⁶

Koop’s practice involves the spectator in such a profound and intimate way that in writing about her work I have difficulty maintaining the pose of Mennonite spectator. Her recent painting of a gigantic teardrop commands attention with what Robert Enright has called “a remarkable optical intensity.” It “vibrates and hovers, and is both in the space of the painting and outside it.”⁴⁷ Is this the visceral fluid absent in Klassen’s “Household Lamps”? Koop herself does not hesitate during interviews to trace the sadness in her work back to the Russian Mennonite past. “I had a grandmother,” she told Enright, “whose idea of a bedtime story was describing the horrors of the Russian

Revolution and how her parents were shot.”⁴⁸ Koop has commented somewhere that she paints gigantic canvases because it makes painting an intimate physical experience – like dancing. Even her awareness of this is conditioned by her Mennonite experience.

I used to have a recurring dream and in this dream I would have a choice of becoming a dancer or a painter and then I would wake up with a start and realize that I would be a painter because, being a Mennonite, you couldn’t dance.⁴⁹

I never have learned how to dance, but I have found that it is hard to stand still in front of Koop’s teardrop. Her art, like that envisioned by Yeats in “Among School Children,” is a labor that “is blossoming or dancing where/ The body is not bruised to pleasure soul.” Like him she aims to arrive at that place where it is not possible to “know the dancer from the dance.”⁵⁰

The act of making – of representing an image or decorating a body – is charged with powerful and conflicting desires, fears, and memories for all people. Because of our particular history, however, this process may be more intense for Mennonites. Robert Enright once noted that a “good deal of Koop’s compulsion to paint arises from her need to drive out personal demons,” and cited as an example how she neutralized her terror of mountains by painting them in a stylized way. Perhaps some of these demons are not only personal but have a collective form as well. “I’m always afraid the world is ending,” Koop told Enright, “so what some of these paintings represent is that cold, isolating fear in my mind.”⁵¹ Oddly enough, despite this apocalyptic language, Koop almost invariably speaks of her Mennonite experience as benign. She told Enright that “the spiritual aspect of being Mennonite is very intense” and that this “has had a profound effect” on her work. She seems to have no experience of what is now termed spiritual abuse, but looks back “very fondly” on nights spent cracking peanuts and listening to “Back to the Bible” programs on the radio.

How do you neutralize a fear that the world is coming to an end? By making a world. As Elaine Scarry has argued,⁵² almost any horror can be “made better” by an act of making, and Koop’s parents allowed her an enviable freedom: “I knew that I could make whatever I wanted,” Koop says, “and I could probably make it better.”⁵³ As I remember it, however, even decoration

was not always benign. It could, for example, take the form of a wall motto with a single eye gazing out over the words, Thou God seest me.

I think of that motto now as I look at a reproduction of Koop's "Memorial" in spite of the fact that "Memorial" has nothing overtly to do with Mennonite history. Koop conceived it in Japan, where I also lived for a year, and the painting whispers to me about stone gardens in temples in Kyoto. It began for Koop in Tokyo, where she saw a memorial "consisting of small, asymmetrical stones placed into symmetrical hollows carved into a stone wall." In Venice a few months later this image was transformed for her when she saw "a Louis Bourgeois sculpture which also consisted of stones placed in hollows carved in a stone wall," but here "the small stones had been painted to resemble eyeballs."⁵⁴ In "Memorial," the iris on the left is a gorgeous shade of green and the one on the right is a brownish hump. When I look at those painted eyes staring back at me, I can feel the mask of the Mennonite spectator slipping. And I haven't even seen the original. In my imagination I hang it beside the decorated eye of the God who sees everything.

If art has its uses to neutralize terror, then Wanda Koop's "Memorial" might just do the job.

Notes

¹ Priscilla B. Reimer, Curator, "Introduction," *Mennonite Artist: The Insider as Outsider* (An Exhibition of Visual Art by Artists of Mennonite Heritage), Main/Access Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, July 6-29, 1990.

² Franz Boas, in Wylie Sypher, ed., *Art History: An Anthology of Modern Criticism* (New York: Vintage, 1963), 5.

³ Reimer, 9.

⁴ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 2.

⁵ "The Transformative Art of Wanda Koop," Interview with Robert Enright, *Border Crossings* (Fall 1986): 104.

⁶ Nicole Dubreuil-Blondin, "A Woman's Touch: Towards a Theoretical Status of Painterliness in the Feminist Approach to Representation of Painting," in *ReImagining Women: Representations of Women in Culture*, ed. Shirley Neuman and Glennis Stephenson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993) 151, 147.

⁷ David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 54.

⁸ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 23-24.

⁹ Elaine Showalter, "Piecing and Writing," in *The Poetics of Gender*, ed. Nancy K. Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 227.

¹⁰ I am grateful to the audiences at these lectures for encouraging me to pursue these questions. I am particularly indebted to Dr. Harry Loewen, then Chair of Mennonite Studies, who invited me to give three lectures at the University of Winnipeg in November 1992.

¹¹ "Five Fine Funky Female Artists Fracture a Few Graven Images" was a slide-lecture given at "Quiet in the Land? Women of Anabaptist Traditions in Historical Perspective," a conference held at Millersville University, Pennsylvania, June 8-11, 1995. I am grateful for the small but supportive audience who took me seriously when I heard voices in the quilt and who even joined in when Deco and Mimi broke into song.

¹² Freedberg, 1.

¹³ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 36. Mitchell describes Milton's writing as "the scene of a struggle between iconoclastic distrust of the outward image and iconophilic fascination with its power." This seems to be an apt description for many contemporary "Mennonite" artists.

¹⁴ Quoted by Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, 32.

¹⁵ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 157.

¹⁶ Thielemans J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians* . . . [1660], trans. Joseph F. Sohm (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1950), 873.

¹⁷ Ilse Friesen, "With Open Arms: Ancient Images of the Female in Contemporary Art," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 5. 2 (1987): 130.

¹⁸ *Martyrs Mirror*, 980.

¹⁹ James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1996), 74.

²⁰ Gathie Falk, "A Short History of Performance Art As It Influenced or Failed to Influence My Work (1981)," *Documents in Canadian Art*, ed. Douglas Fetherling (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1987), 310.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 310.

²² John Bentley Mays, "Christian faith permeates work of artangel Falk," *The Globe and Mail*, Saturday, March 24, 1990, C15.

²³ Gathie Falk, "The Thing in the Head That's There." Interview with Robert Enright, *Border Crossings* (1993), 23.

²⁴ Elkins, 125.

²⁵ Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 168, 156.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 157.

²⁷ Wanda Koop, Interview with Claire Gravel, October 25, 1993. Xerox copy in the files of the Leo Kamen Gallery; source not identified.

²⁸ Elkins, 159.

²⁹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 43.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

³¹ Freud, quoted by Barthes, 40.

³² Elkins, 178-9.

³³ *Ibid.*, 172.

³⁴ Wanda Koop, "The Beauty of Longing," Interview with Robert Enright, *Border Crossings* (1996), 14.

³⁵ Ann Newdigate, *Canadian Art* (Spring 1995) 91. Also Susan Shantz, "Artist's Statement" accompanying "in her nature," Exhibition at Glendon Gallery, York University, 1996.

³⁶ Barthes, 31-2.

³⁷ Quoted by Eve Johnson, "Artist they once called Funky Falk," *The Vancouver Sun*, October 12, 1985, C4.

³⁸ “Aganetha Dyck: *The Wedding Dress, The Extended Wedding Party*, 1995, in *Female Gazes: Seventy-Five Women Artists*, ed. Elizabeth Martin and Vivian Meyer (Toronto: Second Story Press, 1997), 124-5.

³⁹ Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 4.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁴¹ Sarah Klassen, *Dangerous Elements* (Quarry Press, forthcoming).

⁴² Koop, “The Beauty of Longing,” 18.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁵ Robin Laurence, *Wanda Koop: See Everything/See Nothing*. Published on the occasion of an exhibition at the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, B.C., February 14 to March 21, 1998, 4.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁷ Koop, “The Beauty of Longing,” 21.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁹ Koop, “The Transformative Art of Wanda Koop.” Interview with Robert Enright, *Border Crossings* (Fall 1986), 95-96.

⁵⁰ William Butler Yeats, “Among School Children,” *Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1963), 244-45.

⁵¹ Koop, quoted by Robert Enright in “Thinking Big,” *Canadian Art* (Fall 1984), 41.

⁵² Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

⁵³ Koop, “The Beauty of Longing,” 21. Koop describes her father as a folk-artist and quotes her mother as repeatedly saying that “a creative mess is a good mess.” In “The Transformative Art of Wanda Koop,” *Border Crossings* (Fall 1986), 95.

⁵⁴ Laurence, 11.

A-Dialogue¹ with Adorno: So, What About the Impossibility of Religious Art Today?

Cheryl Nafziger-Leis

Thinking men and artists have not infrequently described a sense of being not quite there, of not playing along, a feeling as if they were not themselves at all, but a kind of spectator . . . [T]he spectator's posture expresses doubt that this could be all.²

Background

If we believe that there really is some truth to G.W.F. Hegel's understanding of the dynamic of a dialectic, then we would expect that one thought is superseded by another, is "sublated" into another, and thought keeps evolving into new thoughts. If we also believe Theodor Adorno's revision of the Hegelian dialectic, then such a dynamic process does not happen smoothly but in fits and starts. The particular remnants of what has come before do not disappear but remain distinct from the whole process, so that rather than a complete system or a whole as Hegel proposed, Adorno allows for fragments which are incomplete. Key to any discussion on Adorno is the acknowledgment of his insistence on the fragmentary nature of thought and the inability of concepts to grasp the truth of the whole which they claim they grasp. If, as he contends, philosophy "lives on because the moment to realize it was missed"³ and as a result, "philosophy is obliged to critique itself," then the most we can hope to offer in any philosophical discussion will be a constellation of fragmentary ruminations full of holes, through which we might catch a glimpse of a momentary fragile balance of something which might possibly resemble an insight into truth.

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That established, my own fragmentary ruminations continue to evolve. In December 1996 I defended my Ph.D. dissertation on religion and art, and was asked almost two years later to speak to the same topic at the Mennonite Forum of the 1998 American Academy of Religion annual meeting.⁴ As I review the arguments I defended before the examining committee, I am struck with the central truth of Hegel's theory: thesis is sublated by antithesis and resolved in synthesis; thought – or Spirit, as Hegel referred to it – keeps moving, it is dynamic, and therefore it changes. I am also struck by the truth of Adorno's revision: this is not a smooth or easily categorized process, nor is it by any means complete.

The dissertation focused on Adorno's understanding of the ideological uses and misuses of art.⁵ Theodor W. Adorno was a twentieth-century German philosopher of Jewish descent and a member of the Frankfurt School of philosophers. He focused most of his discussions of the use and misuse of art on politics and art. I gleaned from his understanding and critique of religion, especially in its institutional form, his aesthetic theory, and his limited number of writings on religion and art, what his theories mean in terms of the use of art by religion.⁶ Although Adorno followed in the Hegelian tradition, in many ways he turned Hegel's thought on its head. Adorno's thought followed the dynamic of the dialectic: Hegel's thought as the thesis, Adorno's own disagreements with Hegel as the antithesis, and finally Adorno's own resulting theories as the synthesis. Adorno's result was not a comfortable melding of the several parts of Hegelianism into a complete whole. Indeed, he kept revising his own thought – also fragmentary in nature.

What follows below, is the next step, with Adorno's thought as the thesis (building on Hegel, of course), my bringing together Adorno's thoughts on art, ideology and religion as the antithesis, and finally the resulting conclusions moving away from Adorno as the synthesis. However, the synthesis cannot be said to be complete or finished, for there are distinct fragments of particular earlier argument which refuse to be sublated, and there is sure to be further revision.

The argument of the dissertation began with this statement: Art's "true affinity with religion"⁷ is in its relationship to truth; but art, created and manipulated to be the mouthpiece of religion in its institutional form, becomes a means to the end of maintaining and supporting the institution. That is, art

used as a means to an end is no longer viewed as art, but as something else: a tool. The focus of the argument was on the difference between art which can be considered autonomous and art which is the tool of something outside of itself. And the question asked was: Can art be autonomous and religious? According to Adorno, the answer is: Not anymore, for it either becomes didactic or nostalgic. Two years later, I recognize that a large piece is missing from that logic and the context has changed.

To begin, I will offer definitions of the term “art” as it is used in this paper, with reference to both Hegel and Adorno, and then build on Hegel’s understanding of the dialectical movement of Spirit (also sometimes referred to as “Consciousness”) through history and its manifestations in art, as well as Adorno’s understanding of what art does. To understand why Adorno distrusts the possibility of religious art today, we should briefly examine his thoughts on religion. Although I concede that it may no longer be possible for there to be “religious art” for the reasons he articulated, art can still evoke what is at the heart of religion. So far this agrees with Adorno. For at the heart of religion for him was a critique of the world around it, a prophetic cry which named the unarticulated suffering. Any hope for a world which is “totally other” cannot, however, be articulated directly, Adorno states. Only by focusing on the despair of the world and by maintaining a dialectic with that world through a relentless negative critique might one catch a glimpse of a trace of something other.⁸ He speaks of some intimation of a world without suffering, but will not allow art to begin to take part in any sort of a description thereof. Even a mere evocation is forbidden, for of great importance to him is the Jewish *Bilderverbot* (banning of images) which will not allow the name of God to be spoken, nor any description thereof to be attempted.

Because of this insistence, a great deal of art which through beauty evokes in us a sense of wonder and wakes up within us a sense of something greater than ourselves, causing us to remember our way back to God, all of this is missing, indeed, is not permissible in Adorno’s understanding of art. All that is within art which is awesome and beautiful is not allowed because none of this can ever quite match what it would name. As a result, it dare not be. Such a position is no longer acceptable to me. What I want to argue for is an articulation of that hope which is beyond despair – an articulation which

nevertheless maintains the tension of the dialectic of the beautiful and the ugly within the work of art itself. In fact, to insist that art focus on the ugly and the despair, that art critique the world around it via relentless negativity, already diminishes the tension of the dialectic in art. Such a focus leans so heavily on the side of negativity that in effect it does away with the other side of the tension equation. Adorno does state that all art, by the mere fact that it is art, is already a critique of the world around it because it has moved outside of reality to show forth some aspect of that reality for examination. However, while he insists that art's negativity maintains the tension between the work of art and the world around it, where the tension is diminished is in the work of art itself. There must be a way to allow for art which stirs something of beauty deep within us in ways other than only through the negation of that beauty yet which also remains true to the critique of that beauty. Moving away from Adorno's insistence on negative critique, I am calling for art in which we experience the love and the critique, the joy and the pain, the beauty and the ugly. Even if we cannot quite describe the truth of this tension, we know it. And knowing is perhaps where we must stop.

What is art?

This discussion depends on an understanding of art according to Hegel's theory and Adorno's revision of it. Hegel's theory is based on the premise that with the forward movement of history, Spirit (or Consciousness) is ever evolving. Indeed, it is Spirit's evolution that propels the movement of history. That evolution continues as a dynamic process which Hegel refers to as dialectic, where when each moment of history is fully developed, it gives rise to its own negation, which then leads to the next moment in the dialectical process. The Spirit is a universal abstract which posits itself in a finite particular form – such as an art object – which is to say that it negates itself in its opposite. Only by negating itself as a universal in a particular form, its opposite, does Spirit gain objective existence. The particular form is the opposite of the universal, but at the same time it is a particular aspect of it.

Hegel speaks of the *Geschichtlichkeit der Kunst* or historicity of art. This does not merely imply an art object *qua* historical object, but that art as an historical object is a vehicle of truth at a specific time in history. Throughout history, according to Hegel, art has had a role in humanity's self-understanding

and the orientation of humanity's actions and interpretation of the world. Art arises out of a particular time and place, and is a mediator of truth in that context. The history of art, in Hegel's system, is the history of spirit moving as it strives for the ideal, for the synthesis of content and form. Art in history is the form which the content of Spirit takes on as the most adequate, the most true, to Spirit at that time and in that place. However, these moments of a coming together of Spirit and its form do not last; they dissolve and Spirit moves on. Liberto Santoro explains Hegel in this manner: the moments of art "represent the epochal visions and the profound modes of conceiving reality in different cultures. They are different moments of truth: the different modes through which reality reaches the light of human consciousness along its historical development."⁹

According to Adorno, "[a]rt is not some well demarcated area but a momentary, fragile balance."¹⁰ The key for him is art which is authentic, is autonomous, and maintains its autonomy by insisting on its non-identity with its context. That is, art is different from what is around it and refuses to be ruled by a law external to itself. Yet, art is not created *ex nihilo*. Rather, it is created out of and in response to its social-historical context. Thus, akin to Hegel, art is a creation specific to that context, for it grows out of and responds to a particular context at a particular time and depends for its voice upon the material out of which it is created. Art has a necessary and intimate connection to its context. This is crucial for Adorno, in terms of his view that art is a medium of truth, for it is only from the vantage point of an intimate relation with its social-historical moment that art can critique reality. For Adorno, when art no longer speaks to its context, it is like a theology or a religious institution which has lost touch with the concrete and particular world around it and is no longer relevant to its social-historical moment. In such a case, the possible affinity between art and religion, which Adorno does allow, is lost, for both have lost their relationship with truth – an essential argument in what follows.

For both Adorno and Hegel art and truth are inextricably intertwined with time and place in history. Where Adorno vehemently disagrees with Hegel is in the latter's tendency to systematize art into a seemingly continuous development – one manifestation dissolving into the next via sublation. Adorno argues that the resolution of *Aufhebung* (sublation) – the key to

Hegel's method – is precisely what represses the difference of the particular manifestation, robbing art “of the dialectical vitality it has within its specific social-historical context.”¹¹ Art is what it is because it is something totally other than its social-historical moment, and it maintains a critical dialectical tension not only with its present moment but also with the tradition of art that came before it.

Adorno's understanding of the task of art

Central to Adorno's view is that art critique its social-historical condition and that it do so by negating that condition. Art tears away the veil of illusions which hide the truth of reality and shows the awful truth for what it really is. The truth is the suffering of the world, and art is to be the voice of that suffering – the *Leidensprache*. Adorno believes so strongly that art is to articulate the oppressive conditions of its social context he proposes that “surely it would be better for art to vanish altogether than to forget suffering, which is art's expression and which gives substance to its form. Suffering, not positivity, is the humane content of art.”¹² To be this voice of suffering, “art has to make use of the ugly in order to denounce the world which creates and recreates ugliness in its own image.”¹³ Arguing along the same line, Andreas Merten, a contemporary German scholar, states that in the world as we know it, a world which “has been abandoned by beauty,” the only appropriate form for art is the ugly, the *nicht mehr schöne Kunst* – an art which is no longer beautiful.¹⁴ Accordingly, for art to be beautiful is the same as saying it is fine for art to ignore suffering; it is in a sense to reclaim the veil which hides the suffering. Art which is beautiful, which is positive, resolves the tension of the dialectic of the difference between reality as it appears under the spell of illusion (pretending all is well) and reality as it really is in its fractured ugly truth. It is seen to serve merely to placate a world already under a placating spell.

Adorno had once stated that to write poetry after Auschwitz was barbaric. He later retracted that statement, acknowledging that it was still necessary to write poetry, not because an ugly world needed beauty but because suffering still needed a voice and art was the most appropriate and most truthful form of that voice. Almost thirty years after his death, suffering has not yet been eradicated from this world. Nevertheless, I differ with

Adorno's insistence that art must be that voice of suffering by portraying only the ugly and negating the world around it; indeed, I disagree that art must only be the voice of suffering. Instead, I suggest that the beautiful is also "the humane content of art" even in a world of suffering, and it is possible that such art is still a voice of truth. While Adorno would have us believe that we can only invoke a world which is totally other than the present in a manner of the *via negativa* – as will become clear – I can no longer limit art to that way of being art. Certainly, as he argues, any articulation of a world which is totally other than what we know will be colored by the context in which the articulation is made and therefore will fall short of being anything totally other. Nevertheless, the "relentless negativity" Adorno insists we adhere to is not the only possibility.

Adorno's critique of religion

To understand Adorno's argument against religious art, we should note his accusation that religion, throughout its various historical manifestations, legitimated the domineering and oppressive social structures of its social-historical context and used art as a tool to promote those structures. If Christianity can be viewed as "another ideology of social conservatism in the service of the preservation of prevailing social forms,"¹⁵ then the institutional forms of religion may be in many ways no different from other institutions which are "oppressive and exploitative forces."¹⁶ Agreeing with Adorno, Max Horkheimer claims that the Christian church with its official forms of a hierarchy of power has all too often exchanged the truth of its religious ideal – being the voice of the suffering and the oppressed – for pragmatism, as it has come to recognize that maintenance of "its own social position depends on the continued existence of the basic traits of the present system."¹⁷ If the system were to change, established church institutions could lose their positions of authority. Not holding out any hope for change, Adorno and Horkheimer accuse the historical manifestations of the social institution of the Christian religion of being a manipulative force no better than other institutions which are bound to self-sustain along the lines of an established and accepted ideology.¹⁸ According to Adorno's colleague Herbert Marcuse, the "history of idealism is also the history of its coming to terms with the established order"¹⁹; from the perspective of Adorno, the same can be said

of the history of the Christian church. A movement which began as a revolutionary ideal has often adapted itself to the context of the world around it and adopted the forms of that world for its own authoritative structures. Indeed, one cannot deny the fact that “religion has rarely been a positive, liberal force. Religion is not nice; it has been responsible for more death and suffering than any other human activity.”²⁰

Another view of Adorno’s references to religion, however, insists that his “self-consciously non-religious, negative-dialectical writings need to be placed back into the context of their more explicitly theological roots.” Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr. proposes that Adorno’s “anti-systematic project” was “informed heavily by the Jewish negative-theological tradition.”²¹ While Floyd is not alone in this contention²² in light of Adorno’s own insistence on his atheism, references he makes to theology and the negative theology tradition must be taken as metaphorical. When he does speak affirmatively of theology, Adorno does not mean a theology as the worldview of a certain religious community, directed by that community’s aims and authorities. Rather, he refers to what he perceives as the emancipatory impulse which lies at the core of theology. It is, in his estimation, this impulse, the ideals of theology, which remain as theological fragments, uncoupled from the official structures of an established religion. Today these fragments are “put to the test,” as he states in his essay “*Vernunft und Offenbarung*,” not when they remain attached to religious communities and authorities but in the context of the world in which we live, “in the secular and profane.”²³

Adorno and Horkheimer, do, nonetheless, make explicit and significant references to the Jewish *Bilderverbot*, as in their *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*:

In Jewish religion . . . the bond between name and being is still recognized in the ban on pronouncing the name of God. The disenchanted world of Judaism conciliates magic by negating it in the idea of God. Jewish religion allows no word that would alleviate the despair of all that is mortal. It associates hope only with the prohibition against calling on what is false as God, against invoking the finite as the infinite, lies as truth. The guarantee of salvation lies in the rejection of any belief that would replace it: it is knowledge obtained in the denunciation of illusion.²⁴

They conclude that all that can be said about God, hope, or salvation is what they are not. Any positive attributes are mere illusion, mere lies. As in any reference to theology, it is the ideals of salvation and redemption, the hope for emancipation from the inhumane conditions of this world, which must be understood here. For Adorno and Horkheimer, these terms have thrown off the garments of religion which, as Horkheimer states, “lost its function of expressing the ideal, to the extent that it became the bedfellow of the state.”²⁵

Briefly, the tradition of negative theology asserts that it is rationally inconceivable to speak of God, or of the Absolute, as Adorno often states. Positive theology, on the other hand, maintains that God can be named and that all names and all things, “so far as they are positive,” are attributable to and point to God, to the Absolute, which is “the ground of all being.”²⁶ Negative theology denies this possibility and maintains that all names for God, or for the Absolute, disappear; however, the “existence of God is not in question.”²⁷ Adorno insists on “extreme fidelity” to the ban on images of God and will not even allow for utopian thinking, because all such thinking will be merely based on the present, and “no utopian model is free of the present.”²⁸ And the present is far from utopian. The very utopian telos of Adorno’s critical theory, “the concept of ‘redemption,’” may not be thought of, spoken of, or described concretely because all such thinking, speaking, and describing would be “insufficient means.” Adorno and Horkheimer argue that “the justness of the image” of any possible hope of redemption is preserved precisely in the “faithful pursuit of its prohibition.”²⁹ They refer to this faithful pursuit as “determinate negativity” which, they explain, “rejects the defective ideas of the Absolute.”³⁰ The most that is permitted is to say that utopia will be “categorically totally other than all that has appeared in history to date: it will be free of all domination.”³¹ And the most that art can do is give form to the ugliness and the despair which are the truth of reality now. The marks of hope can only be glimpsed negatively – or in the contradiction of hope. For Adorno, it is no longer possible for religion to show us a glimpse of this hope. Instead, the only possible glimpse is in the subversive negation of present reality as revealed in art.

Religion's patronage of art

In his essay "Theses Upon Art and Religion Today," Adorno argues that the unity between art and religion is irretrievably lost. If indeed there ever was such a unity, it was based on "the whole objective structure of society during certain phases of history" and not the subjective convictions of the artist.³² In fact, the possibility of a unity between religion and art is, he claims, problematic in itself. He calls this unity an "exalted unity" which is largely a romantic projection. This unity would only have been possible during times of the creation of art qua ritual symbols, "which were works of art only accidentally."³³ Even during supposed periods of the unity of religion and art qua art – such as the age of the classical Greeks – it was a repressive unity "largely superimposed upon art."³⁴

In contrast, other scholars argue for an intimate relation between religion and art, claiming that "religion has been an inexhaustible spring of artistic expression."³⁵ But references to this relationship throughout the history of the Christian church, for example, more often than not prove Adorno correct. Indeed, the church has benefited from the illustrative and pedagogical aspects of the arts in spreading the Christian message. Starting in approximately 970 CE European peasants, for instance, unable to comprehend the Latin Mass, were taught the theology of the church through dramatization of biblical stories. Even earlier, paintings, carvings, and sculpture portrayed the message of the Christian faith. As early as the fourth century CE Christian rhetoricians, schooled in the rhetorical tradition of antiquity, established a close relationship between art and literature in their sermons. In their estimation, reference to a work of art brought out the point of the literature more clearly; only the emphasis had now changed to Christian literature and Christian works of art. The goal was, through the use of this familiar rhetorical technique, to win "the heathen listeners to the Christian faith."³⁶ Although Christian rhetoricians did not change the techniques they did modify, through their Christian beliefs and the expression thereof, the general approach to and view of art. The outer forms of art were not changed, but the social function definitely was. "For classical antiquity, works of art had above all an aesthetic meaning, for Christianity, an other-than-aesthetic meaning [*ausseraesthetischen Sinn*]."³⁷ The images are granted no individual value and are all made for one goal only, that of getting across the message of the

church. As such, works of art remain subordinate to their didactic-pragmatic function as dictated by the official church position.

Church patronage of visual artists has significantly declined, especially among the wings of the Christian church established in the sixteenth-century Reformation. This loss of patronage has not meant the death of art, however. As Adorno notes, art has in fact “flourished,”³⁸ freed from the restrictions placed upon it by the authorities of the church who wanted it to “respect the moral censorship and the aesthetic program of the church,” in short, to proclaim the church’s message.³⁹

Christians in the twentieth century have responded in several ways to the distance that has arisen between the church and the development of the arts. Responses of those who maintain the notion that art must proclaim the Christian message are exemplified by the following:

. . . as far as the Church is concerned, there is at least a chance once again that the arts may be used to express Christian ideas, instead of being used exclusively – or nearly so – to present secular humanism in the guise of biblical charades. But if this chance is not to be lost, artists must be employed; and moreover they must be told what the Christian faith is if they do not already know [sic].⁴⁰

The art form of drama, in particular, has been cited as beneficial to the church: “the Christian dramatist’s aim is conversion and . . . the spectator of a Christian drama should go away in the sure and certain hope of the consequences to himself of the historical Resurrection.”⁴¹ But after having gained its autonomy, is this the type of relationship into which art should once again enter?

Horst Schwebel, director of the Marburg (Germany) Institute for contemporary art and the church, firmly believes that “[i]t should become obvious, that [leaders in the church] ought to take seriously art as an autonomous partner, and seek to come into discussion with art and await from art its own autonomous contribution, without – with whatever refined means – forcing it to a position of subordination.”⁴² Members of the church must come to appreciate art not for its ability to “bring to life the content of the sermon, to give a bit of atmosphere to a functional room, to beautify monotone cities, or to communicate political convictions.”⁴³ Andreas Mertin, an associate of Schwebel’s, urges caution, however: if one does re-introduce

art into church buildings, one runs the risk of art regressing to a “devotional item and religious kitsch.”⁴⁴ Thus, the other misuse of art leads to art becoming merely a nice piece of nostalgia. The premise argued again and again by the scholars at the Marburg Institute is that autonomous art must remain autonomous even in the contemporary context of the church. Likewise, Adorno in his “Theses Upon Art and Religion Today” maintains that “[a]n artist who still deserves that name should proclaim nothing, not even humanism.”⁴⁵

But, if art is not to proclaim anything, not even humanism, what is the possible relationship between art and religion? Adorno acknowledges that art does have a “true affinity with religion” in its relationship to truth. But in light of his view of what has become of religion, this affinity now only remains between art and the ideals of religion. Any attempt to produce “religious art” in the present context is, in Adorno’s opinion, “nothing but blasphemy.”⁴⁶ Art must therefore carry on as the voice of truth crying out without reference to religion. His reason for saying this is that it is not “through the pronouncement of moral tenets or by bringing about some moral effect – that art partakes of morality, linking it to the ideal of a more humane society.”⁴⁷

All of this leads us, once again, to the *Bilderverbot*. On the one hand, art’s affinity with the ideals of religion, art’s relationship to truth, is quickly nullified in any attempt to put the Absolute into images. To abide by the ban on images means that one dare not subordinate absoluteness to what it is not, for to do so is to trivialize any yearning for the possibility of hope for something other than what we know. At the same time, to subordinate art to the ideological goals of religion, making it into a tool of proselytization on the street corners or requiring it to fulfill a function as the mouthpiece of religion’s message even in the context of the church, is to refuse to acknowledge art’s autonomy. So, following Adorno, how could there be any possibility of religious art today?

I agree with Adorno and his colleague Max Horkheimer, who said that “art, since it became autonomous, has preserved the utopia that evaporated from religion.”⁴⁸ This continues to be true if one insists on referring to the social-historical manifestations of religion in its institutional forms, which have often abandoned the ideals of religion in favor of preserving the institution. These institutions of religion have not been kind to art, but

historically have used it for their own purpose rather than allowing the integrity of art to stand on its own. But if one means the *ideals* of religion, uncoupled from the institutions of religion, one could argue for the increasing possibility of religious art in the present context. However, with Adorno, I would still insist that even in this context one should not attempt to add “spiritual meaning and . . . religious content” to art to make it religious, because such attempts are affected, external decorative additions.⁴⁹

My disagreement with Adorno on the possibility of religious art is based upon my opening premise: Art and religion continue to evolve according to the dynamic of the dialectic. Adorno argued that in a world where the dominant way of being and thinking was no longer influenced by religion, art which is religious is impossible. He stated that if there ever was unity between religion and art, it was “not simply due to [the] subjective convictions and decisions” of the artist, but to the fact that the underlying general theory of the social reality of the time was religious.⁵⁰ The world as Adorno knew it in the mid twentieth-century was one wherein the underlying general theory of the social reality of the time was anything but religious. He knew a world ruled by dictators who exterminated millions for ideological reasons, a world dominated by a “culture industry” which manipulated consumers into passive acceptance of the need to buy and accept the version of the world as portrayed in the American media. In Adorno’s world, a sense of transcendence was totally lacking. In such a world, Adorno rightly argued that “a secular world can scarcely tolerate any sacred art,” for in a social-historical context where religion no longer shapes the order of being, the “prohibition on graven images” of God is even more extensive than it was originally meant.⁵¹

While there may be good reason to contend that the world of the late twentieth century fits the same description, a significant change must be taken into consideration. Just as Adorno pointed to signs in the social-historical world around him, I will indicate signs from the social-historical context within which I speak, in order to argue that the underlying general theory of the present social reality may in large part be increasingly characterized as religious – but uncoupled from religious institutions. Thus, not only is religious art possible today, but it does exist.

And what about now?

If, as Adorno insists, art grows out of its context, then what about art in the present context? Adorno died in 1969. This current discussion is taking place almost thirty years later. Our social-historical context is not the same now as it was then. The most interesting twist of difference is that while religion may be on the wane, spirituality is on the rise. Many people continue to be disillusioned with what they perceive as the strong hand of authority of religious institutions, and they are leaving churches and synagogues in droves because they are no longer finding there what they need. At the same time, there is a general crisis of confidence in modern intellectual, political, scientific, and technological achievements – reason, science, and technology have proven incapable of solving our problems. In the midst of all of this disillusion, many are seeking a power greater than themselves. Adorno would refer to this as merely a desire to believe “because it would be so nice if one could believe again.”⁵² He accused his own contemporaries of returning to the faith of their fathers “not because they were seeking its truth, but rather because they needed orientation for their lives in a world without meaning.”⁵³ The difference between what Adorno saw and what is occurring now is the scale on which it is happening and that most of this seeking is happening at the expense of the church.

I turn once again to Hegel, who theorizes that it is Spirit which influences the movement of the history of art. He applies this same theory to the movement of history and of religion. Just as with the history of art, Spirit influences this movement by incarnating in the most appropriate form for a particular moment. Religion, in Hegel’s scheme, evolves as Spirit incarnates into a particular form appropriate for a particular time and place. As this evolution continues, what came before influences the direction of what comes after. Although within an understanding of the dialectic, each succeeding form negates the one which came before it; negation does not mean it does away with what came before it. In the process of *Aufhebung*, as one moment moves into the next it takes up within it the elements of the previous particular form. However, in agreement with Adorno, this is not a seamless process; rather, particular elements from the past remain in their particularities, and manifestations in the present are often in dialectical tension with the past.

Thus, according to a dialectical understanding of the evolution of history and of the history of religion, the forms religion is taking on now are the most appropriate forms for this time and this place in the history of the evolution of Spirit. It is no wonder that in what has become known as “Spirituality” – however nebulous and undefinable that term may be – at the end of the twentieth century we see remnants of previous incarnations of Spirit, for they are manifestations from the past which have refused to dissipate and fold into new forms. Indeed, while Hegel would have us believe in his *Philosophy of Religion* that Christianity is the epitome of world religions, we see today that not only have other world religions not fallen away, there is instead a resurgence in the practices of other religions. But it is also no wonder that so much of what we see in contemporary Spirituality seems strange, perhaps even bizarre, for these are new forms. Fifty years ago in Adorno’s world, the explosion of a consciousness of Spirituality in the West would have been absurd and totally out of place. Yet now we see signs of spiritual awakening in many unusual places: cutting-edge business magazines have feature articles on spirituality, the religion section in bookstores has grown tremendously – in fact, it is popular now to read and write religious books. In other corners of our social-historical context, we see that some of the most popular television shows and Hollywood movies feature spiritual themes – some to a more nobler extent than others, no doubt. Whether one agrees with it or not, this is not an isolated phenomenon. It may be a phenomenon which many scholars choose to ignore or denigrate, but they do so at the risk of losing touch with their social-historical moment. The question is: Dare we believe Hegel that we are in fact following the prodding of Spirit as it manifests itself in a particular form? Dare we accept the challenge of the dialectic and, while reclaiming aspects of the old, also negate that old and move into a new understanding of what it means to be religious? And if we accept the possibility that the forms in which Spirit is manifest keep evolving, then what does this mean about the possibility of religious art today?

Before tackling these questions, we must first address Adorno’s insistence on art’s relentless negativity. There is no doubt that for Adorno the existence of art is essential; indeed, he believes that the last hope for humanity is art. As the voice of suffering and the desire for what has never-yet-been, art must speak. But is this the only way in which it can speak? In order to avoid the risk of masking an alternative ideology in the construction of a

path towards an imperfect Utopia, Adorno insists that art must concentrate on what it does best: critique what is. Art, as “different from the ungodly reality” of that world “negatively embodies an order of things in which empirical being would have its rightful place.”⁵⁴ When the dialectical tension between art and its context ceases to exist, he insists, it is the end of art; for while negative embodiment of its context is the limit of art, it is this which refuses to allow the dialectic to be resolved. Art rearranges the elements of reality in such a way that we begin to understand the significance of the gap we perceive between what is and what ought to be. We begin to doubt that the inhumane conditions we now know might be all that is possible. “[A]ll art is a yearning and nothing else.”⁵⁵ Adorno insists that now we can only know a possible other world in the negative, that is by saying what it will not be:

In the right condition, as in the Jewish *theologoumenon*, all things would differ only a little from the way they are: but not even the least can be conceived now as it would be then. Despite this, we cannot discuss the intelligible character as hovering abstractly, impotently above things in being: we can talk of it only insofar as it keeps arising in reality, in the guilty context of things as they are, brought about by that context.⁵⁶

But must this yearning be limited to negative embodiment in a guilty context?

I would like to propose yet another possibility for art. Adorno focused on art as either autonomous (and therefore a negative critique of its social-historical moment) or as a tool of some ideological leaning. Yet in his work one sees examples of another view, a sense that art is something else. There is a sense that art, which defies description, according to Adorno, also does something which defies description. In many ways, art is a direct knowing of something which cannot be articulated, and the experience of art is also a direct knowing of something which cannot be explained. Art is indeed an “other,” and because it is art it evokes something which is other. But we would not know that other unless we had already glimpsed it. To quote Adorno, we would not “express[] doubt that this could be all,”⁵⁷ unless we had at some point found a trace of something which indicated otherwise. This doubt that what is, really is all, is not based on nothing; for if it were, why then would we despair at what we currently see and wish for something other? Adorno insists that “[g]reyness could not fill us with despair if our minds did

not harbor the concept of different colors, scattered traces of which are not absent from the negative whole.”⁵⁸ But from where do we catch a glimpse? In what do we find a trace of that other?

It is art, which is concrete, that evokes in us something which is not concrete but transcendent. While this evocation of that other, of the Absolute, may be nigh impossible to describe or to put into form, I do not believe the evocation must be limited to its negative. How, for example, can we describe what is evoked upon hearing Samuel Barber’s “Adagio for Strings”? In what way might we begin to give words to that instant where the ever-so-subtle line of body in combination with movement, music, and light creates an exquisite moment in a choreographed dance piece by David Earle? We can’t. We just know it. And yet this is beauty, not a relentless negativity, which evokes that transcendent other.

To begin to indicate what this means for religious art today, I concede that Adorno may be correct in insisting that religious art may be impossible, if by religious art we mean art which seeks to illustrate some religious belief. Certainly in a milieu where the dominant way of thinking no longer accepts the parameters defined by a religious view of the world, religious art would perhaps have little meaning beyond nostalgia, as he suggests. In a secular world, sacred images are mere clichés. And religious art which insists on telling a message or illustrating a point or converting its audience is not art at all, but a tool of something else. In a world where evocations of Spirit is a theme we see in many places, surely it is time once again for art to mediate those evocations. But art’s mediation does not need religious direction or coercion or manipulation. Art is. Art as art which grows out of and responds to its context evokes in us something we cannot put into words.

I cannot agree with Adorno that this response must be limited to a relentlessly negative critique; rather, by holding in tension the beautiful and the ugly of the everyday, the response we see communicated in art brings us in touch with something with which we have lost touch. Plato’s use of the word *anamnesis* is appropriate here, for in art we remember what we once knew but had forgotten – like that longing for something greater than ourselves expressed in so many different if sometimes simplistic ways in our late-twentieth-century western world. It is as if the dialectic of art allows us to step momentarily into a place of light where we suddenly know truth and we know that the darkness out of which art has pulled us is not truth. We

experience it. And we know it. We know it in an instant as if we had always known it but did not know how to speak it.

In refusing to agree that the *via negativa* is the only way, I turn to Maximus of Tyre (ca. AD 125-185):

For the God who is the Father and Creator of all that is, older than the sun, older than the sky, greater than time and eternity and the whole continual flow of nature, is not to be named by any lawgiver, is not to be uttered by any voice, is not to be seen by any eye. But we, being unable to grasp his essence, make use of sounds and names and pictures, of beaten gold and ivory and silver, of plants and rivers, of mountain peaks and torrents, yearning for the knowledge of him and in our weakness naming all that is beautiful in this world after his nature. The same thing happens to those who love others; to them the sweetest sight will be the actual figures of their children, but sweet also will be their memory – they will be happy at [the sight of] a lyre, a little spear, or a chair, perhaps, or a running ground, or anything whatever that wakens the memory of the beloved. Why should I go any further in examining and passing judgment about images? Let all . . . know what is divine; let them know, that is all. If Greeks are stirred to the remembrance of God by the art of Phidias, or the Egyptians by paying worship to animals, or others by a river, or others by fire, I will not quarrel with their differences. Only let them know, let them love, let them remember.⁵⁹

Like Adorno, Maximus of Tyre acknowledges that God cannot be named and that we are unable even to grasp the essence of God. Yet, unlike the insistence on the *via negativa*, Maximus of Tyre allows for the human yearning to express beauty and perfection in some feeble form to stir us to remember God. In our social-historical moment at the end of the twentieth century, a time when so many people are yearning for and many are finding a renewed sense of spirituality as important in their lives – even if it is for lack of a sense of orientation, this does not deny its truthfulness – in such a context, maybe we need to turn from Adorno's mid-century views and allow for a new form of art. Adorno insisted that art must keep changing and artists must constantly invent new forms of art. As one scholar puts it, artists are to create

new forms “in the shadow of the existent.”⁶⁰ In the existing context of today, our approach to art must be different from our approach in the past.

Adorno’s insistence that art not be a tool of something outside itself still ought to remain a warning. Indeed, as soon as artists try to evoke the Spirit of the Divine, they lose their art. It falls flat. It is as if Spirit goes where it wills. I agree with Adorno that religious ideas put on to art are affected external additions. I also agree that the work of art which would express the universal must not grasp after the universal content, and the work which would be religious must not strive to be religious. However, I also insist that art which would critique via the ugly and the painful also falls flat if it does not also express beauty or joy or love. Art which would speak to its social-historical moment must be thoroughly materially mediated in its social-historical context. This means that art which is true to its context must maintain the dialectic of the contradictions of that context. Art which loses sight of one side of the contradiction or the other is no longer truthfully mediated in its context.

To close one’s mind to new understandings of art is not to allow one’s understanding to evolve. This denies the crucial core of what dialectical theory is centered on: the dynamic. For if as Spirit continues to move and we are not willing to participate in some way in that movement, then we will stagnate. This does not mean we have to passively allow the sublation into our thinking of everything that comes along, nor does it mean we pretend that evolution is a seamless, painless venture. But to shut ourselves off from even the possibility of encounter and influence leads only to rigid and ossified old ideas.

Where I end up does not, of course, fit very neatly within the limits of Adorno’s philosophy of art. But engaging in the dialectic is not without risk. It is often safer and easier to find an understanding that makes sense and stick with it – the same thing happens with music and art: golden oldies radio stations abound, and in the 1990s thousands of people flock to see exhibitions of Impressionist art painted a century earlier. If Hegel is right that the history of humanity is the history of the evolution of the Spirit, then to try to stop that evolution by resisting the movement seems ludicrous. The old becomes new in new forms and the new eventually becomes old until it too is rejuvenated with the breath of the movement of Spirit.

Notes

¹ “A-Dialogue” in the Latin sense of the prefix “a” and the preposition “a”: “away from.”

² Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 363.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴ Cheryl Nafziger-Leis, “Art . . . Even After Auschwitz: Adorno’s Critical Theory of Art, Religion and Ideology.” Ph.D. Diss., Centre for the Study of Religion, University of Toronto, December 1996.

⁵ The definition of “ideology” in the dissertation followed the argument of Clifford Geertz that while once a neutral term, “‘ideology’ has become thoroughly ideologized,” it has become saturated with polemical connotation. Geertz no longer allows for ideology to be defined as merely “an ordered system of cultural symbols.” [Clifford Geertz, “Ideology As a Cultural System,” in *Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 194-6.] Thus, I adopted the use of the term which maintained the sense of its critical conception, one which preserved the negative connotation. I also referred to John Thompson: “To study ideology is to study the ways in which meaning (or signification) serves to sustain relations of domination.” John B. Thompson. *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984), 4. Such a definition coincided with the sense of the term as Adorno used it.

⁶ Currently within the field of the study of religion, the definition of the term “religion” and the premises of the study of religion are hotly debated. As a result, it is incumbent upon scholars not only to provide their working definition of the term but also to clearly establish their approach to the study of religion. While it is not necessary to the argument in this paper to explain the methodology to the study of religion I used (for that, see my dissertation pp. 22-33), I do offer the definition of religion upon which the argument does depend. Again I turn to Clifford Geertz, who defined religion as “a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in [human beings] by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.” (Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 90.) Also important to this use of “religion” is that there is no presumption of an essence of religion apart from religion in any of its historical or cultural forms. “Religion is unimaginable apart from the people who practice it in specific contexts.” (Marsha Hewitt, “Liberation Theology and the Emancipation of Religion,” *The Scottish Journal of Theology* XIII.1 (Spring 1992, 22.)) In order to carry out an ideological critique of religion, one must recognize religion as a cultural phenomenon, for otherwise it is “impossible to analyze adequately the admixtures of power and domination that religion harbours and perpetrates.” (Marsha Hewitt, “Ideology Critique, Feminism and the Study of Religion,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* (forthcoming).) Note that the way Adorno and Horkheimer use the

term “religion” often connotes the historical institutional structures of religion, while at other times they use the terms “religion” and “theology” interchangeably. The ways in which they use these terms will be understood in the particular context.

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, “Theses Upon Art and Religion Today,” *Kenyon Review* 7.4 (Autumn 1945), 679.

⁸ Adorno explains that “dialectics is the ontology of the wrong state of things. The right state of things would be free of it: neither a system nor a contradiction.” (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 11.) As he speaks of the necessity of maintaining the dialectic, he is dependent upon the term “negative,” which he uses in a deliberate manner to mean: not to get rid of, but to be in contradiction with, or to show forth that contradiction.

⁹ Liberto Santoro, “Hegel’s Aesthetics and ‘the End of Art,’” *Philosophical Studies* (Ireland) 30 (1984): 63.

¹⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 416.

¹¹ James M. Harding, “Historical Dialectics and the Autonomy of Art in Adorno’s *Aesthetische Theorie*,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 50.3 (Summer 1992): 192.

¹² Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 369.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁴ Andreas Mertin, “Schön, heilig, schrecklich? Marginalien zur Gegenwartskunst,” in Horst Schwebel und Andreas Mertin, eds., *Bilder und ihre Macht: Zum Verhaeltnis von Kunst und christlicher Religion* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1989) 36.

¹⁵ Marsha Hewitt, *Critical Theory of Religion: A Feminist Analysis* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 179.

¹⁶ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964; second ed. 1991), 47.

¹⁷ Max Horkheimer, “Thoughts on Religion,” *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell et al. (New York: Continuum, 1989), 130.

¹⁸ Adorno and Horkheimer did not bother to delineate between the various denominations and various particular manifestations of the Christian religion. For them “religion” referred most often to Christianity unless a specific reference was made to Judaism, and within Christianity they made no distinction between different denominations – an irony, especially

since both were critical of Hegel's use of universal concepts which allowed no room for particular differences to be manifest.

¹⁹ Herbert Marcuse, *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 92.

²⁰ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 110.

²¹ Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr., "Transcendence in the Light of Redemption: Adorno and the Legacy of Rosenzweig and Benjamin," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LXI.3 (Fall 1993), 140. This tradition was mediated to Adorno by Walter Benjamin in their personal correspondence and in Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* [trans. John Osborn (London and New York: Verso, 1985), as well as by the Jewish theologian Franz Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption*, trans. from 1930 edition, William W. Hallo (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971.)

²² Rolf Wiggershaus is another. Cf. Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1994).

²³ Adorno, "Vernunft und Offenbarung," *Gesammelte Schriften* 10.2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 608.

²⁴ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 23. Martin Jay cites an interview which Horkheimer gave in *Der Spiegel*, where he "claimed that Critical Theory's refusal to name the 'other' was derived from the Jewish taboo on naming God or picturing paradise." *Der Spiegel* 5. January, 1970, 24, cited in Jay, *Permanent Exiles*, 280, note 10.

²⁵ Horkheimer, "Thoughts on Religion," 129.

²⁶ Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought: From its Judaic and Hellenistic Origins to Existentialism*, ed. Carl E. Braaten (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1967), 92.

²⁷ Lothar Stresius, *Theodor W. Adornos negative Dialektik: Eine kritische Rekonstruktion* (Frankfurt am Main and Berne: Peter Lang, 1982), 232. Both Stresius and Tillich (cf. Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, 50ff, 90ff.) indicate the Jewish ban on the image of God as a significant source for the tradition of negative theology. But they also emphasize that the tradition as it has come to be known is "unthinkable" without the influence of platonic and neo-platonic philosophy; the absolute who is both one and beyond any possible being, transcending all that exists, could only ever be known indirectly if at all. (*Ibid.*, 233.)

²⁸ Alo Allkemper, *Rettung und Utopie: Studien zu Adorno* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1981), 10.

²⁹ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 24.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Reinhard Kager, *Herrschaft und Versöhnung: Einführung in das Denken Theodor W. Adornos* (Frankfurt and New York: Campus, 1988), 43.

³² Adorno, "Theses Upon Art and Religion Today," 677.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Talcott Parsons (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 242.

³⁶ Andreas Mertin, "Kunstvoll predigen: Der Umgang mit Kunstwerken in homiletischer Perspektive," chap. in *Bilder und ihre Macht: Zum Verhältnis von Kunst und christlicher Religion*, eds. Horst Schwebel and Andreas Mertin (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1989), 214-5. Mertin gives specific examples of this practice in the history of Christian homiletics. He refers, for example, to Basilus von Caesarea who preached on martyrdom with Christ as the referee, as portrayed in a painting by Barlaam, and to Gregory of Nyssa, who, in a sermon on St. Theodor, shows a painting also on the theme of martyrdom with Christ as the umpire in human form. The work cited here is one of the published works of the Marburg Institute. Mertin was a scholar researching at the Marburg Institute from 1983 until 1994. Horst Schwebel, the Director of the Marburg Institute, states: "Since 220 C.E. church art has been placed in the service of preaching." Horst Schwebel, *Autonome Kunst im Raum der Kirche* (Hamburg: Furche, 1968), 9.

³⁷ A. Hauser, *Socialgeschichte der Kunst und Literatur* (Munich, 1983), 133f., in Mertin, "Kunstvoll predigen," 216.

³⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 2.

³⁹ Andreas Mertin, "Der allgemeine und der besondere Ikonoklasmus: Bilderstreit als Paradigma christlicher Kunsterfahrung," in Andreas Mertin and Horst Schwebel, *Kirche und moderne Kunst* (Frankfurt am Main: Athenaeum, 1988), 157.

⁴⁰ A.C. Bridge, "Churches, artists and people," *Church Information Board* (1959), 15, cited in F. J. Glendenning, "The Church and the Arts," in Frank Glendenning, ed., *The Church and the Arts* (London: SCM, 1960), 13.

⁴¹ Hugh Ross Williamson, *Christian Drama* (July 1950), (no p. given), cited in *Ibid.*, 77.

⁴² Horst Schwebel, "Öflinger Thesen zur Verteidigung der autonomen Kunst in der Kirche," in Paul Grab, *Unbequeme Kunst – unbequeme Autonomie* (Oflingen: Edition Diakonieverein Wehr-Oflingen, 1980), 8. Two exhibitions which the Marburg Institute, under Schwebel's direction, curated and organized, addressed biblical themes: Changing Images of Eve, and *Ecce Homo*. Well-known artists from across Europe entered works in these exhibitions. Although a theme for the exhibition was suggested, Schwebel made it very clear to me that the artists were given free reign in terms of their creations. The idea propelling these exhibitions was to invite contemporary responses to these originally biblically-tainted themes. Nevertheless, Schwebel acknowledges that to suggest a theme – especially a biblical theme – is to walk a fine line between dictating what the artist must do and allowing autonomous expression: "An exhibition on a biblical theme is difficult, because the danger of instrumentalization is always present." (Schwebel, "Kunst im Kontext Kirche," 243.) The works in the exhibitions, however, exemplify the possibility of modern art as critical of the artistic tradition, its social-historical context, and the suggested theme, and its – in this case, Christian – tradition. The theme was suggested to give the exhibition a sense of overall coherency, and as a place from which the artist could start and to which he or she could respond. (Schwebel, personal conversations, September-October, 1995.) For more information, cf. the exhibition catalogs: *Die andere Eva: Wandlungen eines biblischen Frauenbildes*, eds. Horst Schwebel and Heinz-Ulrich Schmidt (Menden: Trapez, 1985); *Ecce Homo: Vom Christusbild zum Menschenbild* eds. Horst Schwebel and Heinz-Ulrich Schmidt (Menden: Trapez, 1987).

⁴³ Schwebel, "Öflinger Thesen," 9.

⁴⁴ Andreas Martin, "Schön, heilig, schrecklich? Marginalien zur Gegenwartskunst," in Schwebel and Martin, *Bilder und ihre Macht*, 44.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Adorno, "Theses Upon Art and Religion Today," 679.

⁴⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 329.

⁴⁸ Max Horkheimer, "Art and Mass Culture," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell et al. (New York: Continuum, Seabury Press, 1974), 275.

⁴⁹ Adorno, "Theses Upon Art and Religion Today," 678.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 677.

⁵¹ Adorno, "Sacred Fragment: Schönberg's *Moses und Aron*," chap. in *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London and New York: Verso, 1992), 243.

⁵² Adorno, "Theses Upon Art and Religion Today," 678.

⁵³ Adorno, "Vernunft und Offenbarung," 609.

⁵⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 322.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 397.

⁵⁶ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 147.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 363.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 377-8.

⁵⁹ Maximus of Tyre, "Oration," VIII, 10, trans. by Frederick C. Grant, in *Hellenistic Religions* (New York, 1953), 168.

⁶⁰ Personal conversation with Marsha Hewitt, June 1993.

Performative Envisioning: An Aesthetic Critique of Contemporary Mennonite Theology

Phil Stoltzfus

Once inside, they locked the doors behind them, and then, free from all disturbance from the curious crowds without, began to dismantle the church. The work was done quietly and efficiently . . . Every standing statue was removed from its niche or its base and, together with the base, taken out of the church. It was then either broken up by the masons, if made of stone or plaster, or burned, if made of wood. Every painting was taken down from the altars and burned outside. All murals were chipped away or scraped off the walls. The altars were stripped of all images and vessels, all votive lamps were let down and melted outside, and all crucifixes were removed. Even the carved choir stalls were taken up and burned. Then the walls were whitewashed so that no traces whatsoever of the old decorations and appointments might be seen By Sunday, July 3, 1524, scarcely a statue, a painting, a crucifix, a votive lamp, a reliquary, a shrine, or image or decoration of any sort was to be seen anywhere in the Zurich churches.¹

Introduction

Although the radical iconoclasm of Zwingli's Zurich in the summer before the birth of Anabaptism was doubtless a formative moment in the aesthetic consciousness of the new movement, the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition as a whole has exhibited a wealth of artistic forms of expression throughout its

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history. From the early American singing schools to the flowering of twentieth-century Canadian Mennonite literature, Mennonites have sought creative outlets for articulating an alternative cultural vision while at the same time engaging with the artistic possibilities of the broader cultures in which they found themselves. More recently, North American Mennonites have expanded our artistic competency beyond the folk arts, music, and literature, and into the media of the visual arts, theater, film, architecture, and cyberspace.

When it comes to *aesthetics*, however – to philosophical reflection upon the meaning of artistic experience – the iconoclastic enthusiasm of the summer of 1524 is still evident. With the exception of work in literary criticism and recent eclectic reflections upon postmodernism, Mennonites have to date produced little in the way of second-order thinking concerning the construction of the senses in our common life, the interaction of our forms of material culture with larger cultural and artistic styles, and the influence of the arts, especially visual and performance arts, in our *theological* self-understanding. This might be seen, of course, as a characteristic deficit of all the theological traditions tracing their roots back to early modern Europe, suspicious as they are of Roman Catholic sacramentalism and the neo-Platonic aesthetics of Beauty underlying it. Yet, from the baroque Pietism of a Bach chorale, to the modernist American architecture of our seminary chapels and churches, to the action-adventure genre of the movie “Witness,” we have in fact all shared – at times deploring, at times celebrating – both the high culture and the popular culture of our neighbors. While at its best fruitful and enriching, this cultural journey among Mennonites seems, nevertheless, to have been conducted largely without the benefit of a broader analytical and critical perspective on the place of distinctively Anabaptist-Mennonite artistic sensibilities (itself a highly debatable concept) within the philosophical and theological project of Western culture as a whole.

There are good reasons why this reflection does not appear to have occurred. Mature theological work among Mennonites in North America arose out of the particular interests of the guild of the historians, rather than the interests of classically trained philosophers or theologians. Furthermore, neither Harold Bender nor C. Henry Smith conceived of their work as cultural history *per se*, but rather as social and intellectual history. As a result, Mennonites at mid-century were given a strong foundation for

conceptualizing the ethical and political distinctives of the Anabaptist Vision, and for subsequently concatenating these concerns, rather creatively, onto a narrativist biblical hermeneutic, progressive social ethics, and a largely neo-orthodox/evangelical theological temperament. Thus God the Father, a nonresistant Jesus, and a quasi-believers church ecclesiology (not to mention, of course, *verenike*, shoo-fly pie, and quilts commanding figures into the five digits) were able to survive the mid-to-late twentieth-century challenges of modernism and postmodernism. But when it comes to a cultural studies competency of any sort of aesthetic acumen, Mennonites are still suffering under an inferiority complex,² just as the “Convent women” are in Toni Morrison’s latest novel *Paradise*, whose leader despairs of their aesthetic sensibilities:

. . . the timbre of each of their voices told the same tale: disorder, deception and . . . drift. The three *d*’s that lead to perdition . . . [S]he could tolerate them, but more and more she wanted to snap their necks. Anything to stop the badly cooked indigestible food, the greedy hammering music, the fights, the raucous empty laughter, the claims. But especially the drift.³

Is it possible for Mennonite thought to find a way out of its own 475-year “drift” into self-induced aesthetic masochism? Instead of continually recycling our philosophical *ethics*, can our intellectual space not entertain – at least for a brief moment – the neglected resources of philosophical *aesthetics*?

Yoder, Barth and Bertolt Brecht: The banality of ideology

John Howard Yoder’s work appears, at first glance, to be bereft of an aesthetic sensibility of any particular import. His reconstruction of Christian pacifism involves a hermeneutic of biblical realism, and an application of text in the service of a cleanly articulated counter-cultural social ethics. Dimensions of theological inquiry having to do with the forces of symbol, poetry, and imagination at play in the larger culture take a distinctly second place to the business of normatively asserting the message of the Christian kerygma. Yoder was successful, however, in instilling in many of us an appreciation for the art of narrative theology and an awareness of the need to

artistically translate, adapt, and practice the gospel in order to adequately resist the larger aesthetics and political temptations of empire. For Yoder, the New Testament itself features successive “restatements in another key” of the original message of Jesus.⁴ Aesthetically, this position can be seen as fundamentally Platonic and logocentric in character. One attempts, as with Plato, to grasp hold of a noumenal, pre-existent form – in this case, the gospel narrative of Luke. The story must then be mimetically set in motion, or performed, through the dialectical activity – in this case, *Nachfolge* – of the community of those who seek the truth. The gospel narrative “as it stands” becomes the aesthetic “text,” and the church as the “body politic” represents those who are hermeneutically faithful to the “practices” entailed in the text.⁵

Such a view is reminiscent of the aesthetic perspective of one of Yoder’s teachers, Karl Barth. Similar to Yoder, Barth was concerned with articulating a narrative theology in response to the cultural “accommodationism” he identified in nineteenth-century theological liberalism.⁶ The aesthetics of his position becomes more explicit in his reflections upon his favorite composer – Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Barth found in Mozart’s compositional style a unique reflection of the primordial ordering harmony of creation:

Could it be that the characteristic basic “sound” of both the earlier and later Mozart – not to be confused with the sound of any other – is in fact the primal sound of music absolutely? Could it be that he discovered and struck this “tone” in its timelessly valid form? . . . It is as though in a small segment the whole universe bursts into song because evidently the man Mozart has apprehended the cosmos and now, functioning only as a medium, brings it into song!⁷

Given the backdrop of this Platonic musicological formalism, it is no wonder that when in his *Church Dogmatics* Barth turns his attention to the concept of Beauty, Christ takes the place of Mozart, becoming for Barth “the form, the beautiful form of the divine being And because we know that [God] is this in this way in Jesus Christ, we must therefore recognize the beauty of God in Jesus Christ.”⁸ The Barthian Wholly Other, revealed through the church’s Word of proclamation, is at the same time discernible in the compositional techniques and thematic relationships of the Mozartian

“parable of the Kingdom.” In such a musicological *and* theological drama, the “Yes” of cosmic Christian hope can most clearly be heard as triumphantly overcoming the ever-present “No” of the human condition. Another of Barth’s students, the Roman Catholic Hans Urs von Balthasar, praises Barth for this introduction of aesthetics, beauty, and “authentic objective form” back into Protestantism.⁹ Von Balthasar’s own program of theological aesthetics is much indebted to neo-Platonic and neo-orthodox formalism, in which the fixed truths of gospel narrative and the “form” of Christ are “dramaturgically” re-actualized through the liturgy and doctrine of the church.

The drawbacks of this Yoderian/Barthian aesthetics can be best illustrated by taking a critical look at one way dramatic narrativity has actually been handled in the genre of modern theater. Bertolt Brecht, for example, developed the concept of the “didactic play” (*Lehrstück*) which sets out to undermine the Romantic grand narratives of capitalist and fascist optimism. Through terse, minimalistic commentaries on everyday underclass life, Brecht invited his audience to rationally objectify its alienation and to entertain an alternative narrative of progressive social change. As claimed by such critics as Theodore Adorno, however, Brecht’s work suffered from an ideological positivism; the work of art for Brecht became fused too tightly to a “blunt objectivism” which was all-too-often “intolerant of ambiguity.”¹⁰ A work like *The Threepenny Opera* (1928), for instance, could be said to lack dramatic autonomy, confined as it was to the artificial expression of liberating presence; at the close of the musical, a horse and rider appear suddenly to bring the ironic “good news” of a happy ending. With the antiseptic moral cognition of a Star Trek episode, Brecht (according to Adorno’s critique) represents for us, in a more aesthetically intense fashion, Yoder’s own conception of the faithful Christian community. The troupe of good Yoderian actors, we might say, may indeed accurately reproduce the truth of the gospel narrative. But they perform out of a formulaically-contrived and sensually-starved monotone because the criterion of aesthetic excellence remains, at the end of the day, a “New Criticism” of textual/communal formalism,¹¹ or what Adorno might call an aesthetics of “ideology.”

Holland, Schleiermacher and MTV: The seduction of expression

Scott Holland's recent work is a welcome Anabaptist-inspired corrective to Yoder. Holland is our best critic of the Yoder/Hauerwas model of the theologian as a "scribe for the collective," and of theological writing as a de-sensualized and de-sexed didacticism:

[T]he hegemonic metaphor of "the Body of Christ" and its attending communal hermeneutics effectively shield us from the ambiguity of our own embodiment and from the mystery of the world as God's body Desire is eclipsed by discipleship; eros toward the world is swallowed up by a churchly ethics of perfection, and the strong singer's voice is lost in the four-part harmony of the collective body.¹²

For Holland, Gordon Kaufman is helpful in articulating a model of theology as imagination, and of the theologian as a "creative composer" for envisioning shalom.¹³ Poetics is to be valued over mimesis, allowing space for a fresh theological re-appropriation of images drawn from ecology, the carnal body, the senses, and human sexuality. Holland advocates, for example, the return of the concept "desire" to contemporary theology, and delights in the seductive transgressions and excesses which the "strange and satisfying sensations of the barn and field" offer to the imagination of his audiences. This perspective takes us radically back to Baumgarten's original modernist formulation of aesthetics in 1750 as the "science of sensual knowing." Such a Brethren/Mennonite construction of the arts as sensual immediacy could thus conceivably be brought into fruitful conversation with a host of Orphic, Epicurean, Pietistic, Romantic, Existentialist, and Postmodernist kindred spirits fighting the perennial philosophical battles against the metaphysicians of morals.

In modern Protestant theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) stands as precisely such a kindred spirit. In response to what he perceived as the Kantian reduction of theology to moral rationalism, Schleiermacher drew from the musical ethos of his sectarian Pietist boyhood among the Moravians, as well as from the Romantic impulses of his turn-of-the-century colleagues in Berlin, to construct a full-fledged "expression" theory of theological aesthetics. The character Eduard in Schleiermacher's *Christmas Eve* drama, for example, concludes that "every fine feeling comes completely to the fore

only when we have found the right musical expression for it And it is precisely to religious feeling that music is most closely related.”¹⁴ Informed by his experience with the felt immediacies of Christian hymnody, sacred choral works, and instrumental music, Schleiermacher identified both religious and artistic experience as rooted in “immediate self-consciousness.” His mature lectures on aesthetics outlined an interpretation of art in general, and music in particular, as human activity in the service of the expression of feeling (*Gefühl*) and mood (*Stimmung*),¹⁵ and his subsequent systematic theology followed this theoretical lead. Christian theology at its best should represent the direct verbal expression of the piety of the church at a given point in time, the center of which is the aesthetically-induced experiential reality of what he called a God-consciousness or “the feeling of utter dependence”:

We shall simply say that this idea [of God], which is nothing more than the expression of the feeling of utter dependence, is the most direct reflection upon it and the most original idea with which we are here concerned [I]t can indeed be said that God is given to us in feeling in an original way¹⁶

In consideration of a Holland-esque contemporary Mennonite theology dealing appropriately with the corporeal, emotive, and experiential dimensions of piety, we might say that Schleiermacher is our most significant ally.

The problem with a theological paradigm of expression for our time can be clarified through exploring the emotive and religious impact of MTV, the 24-hour cable channel which stands as one of the most powerful pop culture media influences upon the affective imagination of those presently in their 20s and 30s. In music video, the meaning of a song is dramatized in a visually fragmented and temporally disjunctive montage of sound bites, often quoting from pre-existing concert footage or other religious, sexual, or political floating signifiers at play in the electronic “datasphere.” As Tom Beaudoin has recently argued, the “Generation Xer” unites these visual and musical moments by attempting to interpretively construct a narrative chain of coherent sensual and erotic images:

Each image in pop culture is a sign (whether a pierced navel, a crucifix, or a fish on a cutting board) that refers to something

else. A reference to sensual religious art in a music video reminds us of worship, sex, devotion, passion. What, we wonder, does *passion* mean, where is it found, and to what does it refer?¹⁷

But such a “chaos theory” of the theological affections can often cross the line of good taste into a facile sentimentalism or soap-opera-esque bedroom romanticism. Even more disconcerting, though, is the problem in such media of the commodification of religious expression – of the cheap evocation of our hidden desire to push, with the repetitive fervor of the scripture song, the God buttons of our sectarian spirituality, all in the service of the transcendent “corporate sponsor.” Expression aesthetics does indeed address head-on the objectivist shortcomings of the Yoderian paradigm, but it can also leave us with a theology in fetishistic captivity to the interior monologues of our individual and communal consciousnesses. In his desire to resurrect the “subversive memory of the erect, carnal body of Jesus,”¹⁸ Holland (along with Schleiermacher before him) has perhaps succeeded only in replacing one ideology with another – the ideology of the *particular* aesthetics of sensuality. It is an attractive move, but one which can make it all too easy for Holland’s detractors to equate aesthetics with a narrative of Epicurean pleasure, and then tragically reject it altogether as an adequate mode of theological reflection.

Friesen, Tillich and Fall Festival: The correlational dilemma

A third opening for aesthetics in contemporary Mennonite theology comes from Duane Friesen, who has been advocating for a revision of Yoder based on the idea of an Anabaptist-informed “theology of culture.” Mennonite identity, for him, involves living in a discerning way out of both the cognitive minority culture of Christian pacifism as well as the dominant culture of Americana, with each informing and orienting itself through the concreteness of the other. Biblical narratives, theological symbols, and Christological norms of the tradition are interpreted by Friesen as phenomena themselves thoroughly embedded in culture rather than in essences or types somehow abstracted from it. The task of the Church is to “sing God’s song” in both harmony and dissonance with “songs of the dominant culture.”¹⁹ A vital component in constructing a holistic yet alternative cultural and theological vision is consideration of our responsibility to experience aesthetic delight

and create aesthetic excellence in our homes, worship spaces, and public landscapes. Furthermore, our material and imaginative culture, both high and low, represents a key intersection between the human spirit and the Holy Spirit:

The visible, outward form of culture should truly express the spirit within, the underlying values which orient our lives. It is my contention that in so far as the visible outward form truly expresses the Spirit of God within, our lives should honor God not only in living the truth and by living ethically responsible lives, but also by the creation of beauty, or aesthetically excellent form.²⁰

Whereas the Barthians connected aesthetics most closely with Christology, Friesen places it in the *third* moment of a Trinitarian theology of culture. The arts become a potential actualization in human cultural life – in the shalom of the city in which one dwells – of the third aspect of the Trinity, the life of the Spirit of God.

Despite Friesen’s deliberate engagement in his work with the thought of Gordon Kaufman, his observations on aesthetics actually drink more deeply from the wells of arguably the most aesthetically attuned Protestant theologian of the twentieth century – Paul Tillich. Shortly after emigrating to the United States from Germany in 1933, Tillich developed the provocative claim that the visual arts had become “a realm of human creativity from which I derived categories for both my philosophical and my theological thought.”²¹ He was fascinated with, in particular, the contributions of German Expressionist painters, through whom he thought a radical, ecstatic “breakthrough” had been achieved in the symbolic capacities of Western culture. The philosophical-aesthetic categories of form, subject matter, and substance provided him the keys to a *theological* interpretation of this stylistic phenomenon, later corresponding to the Trinitarian formulations of Ground of Being, New Being, and Spiritual Presence in his *Systematic Theology*. Like Friesen, Tillich holds that culture is never something over against theology but rather provides the formal structures and subject matter for the aesthetic, symbolic, and ecstatic ground, or “substance,” of religious experience – “religion is the substance of culture and culture is the form of

religion.”²² Tillich’s openness throughout his career to the avant-garde art scene as a barometer of the ever-changing enculturations of “Spiritual Presence” was reflected in his interest right before his death in the phenomenon of Pop Art and its potential connection to the negative theology movement.²³ Twentieth century *artistic* trends most directly signal for Tillich those ambiguities and questions in our symbolic worlds for which it is theology’s task to provide answers.

The Friesen-Tillich approach appears to have the advantage of incorporating within it the best of the previous two models. Both authors see theology as a dialectical movement of correlation between the symbols of Christianity and the sensually enculturated symbols of society at large. The problem of whether even such a distinction as this is valid can be explored through consideration of the aesthetic example of the ethnic festival or street festival – perhaps the site in contemporary American life, both rural and urban, where the rich complexities of our current aesthetic symbolizations of self, community, and society come together most concretely and are most intensely negotiated. At Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas, for instance, mid-October is the time for Fall Festival, a Saturday when thousands of area residents come to campus to celebrate ethnic distinctivenesses (generally Russian Mennonite, but others as well). It also is a time to celebrate our common, public life, as reflected in the “Taste of Newton” street festival which takes place next door in downtown Newton on the Thursday evening before Fall Festival weekend. Newton residents mingle together on Main Street with their Mennonite, Latino, and other neighbors in a cultural performance which acts to re-situate the diversities of the formal, “gospel” texts of the various constituent groups, and to re-integrate their affective, embodied experiences into a new expression of public solidarity and public “taste.”²⁴

In such aesthetic “happenings” it may not always be as clear as the theologians would like about where the “cultural forms” end and the “spiritual presences” begin. Festival goers rarely speak in Trinitarian language, be it the German Idealism of Tillich or the historically concrete Christology and ecclesiology of Friesen. Helpful here are the insights of Ludwig Wittgenstein, for whom philosophical aesthetics begins and ends not with analytical construction but with persistent attention to the upsetting play

of differences at the crossroads of ordinary language and everyday activity:

Language is a characteristic part of a large group of activities – talking, writing, travelling on a bus, meeting a man, etc. We are concentrating [in aesthetics], not on the words ‘good’ or ‘beautiful’, which are entirely uncharacteristic . . . but on the occasions on which they are said – on the enormously complicated situation in which the aesthetic expression has a place, [or even] in which the expression itself has almost a negligible place. . . . If you came to a foreign tribe, whose language you didn’t know at all and you wished to know what words corresponded to ‘good’, ‘fine’, etc., what would you look for? You would look for smiles, gestures, food, toys. . . . How far this takes us from normal aesthetics [and ethics – Translator]. We don’t start from certain words, but from certain occasions or activities.²⁵

A festival is one of the locations in our aesthetic lives where our “official” constructions of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch are most radically de-centered. At their best, Friesen and Tillich as well would want to teach us that in the performative exchanges of festival, we necessarily make ourselves vulnerable to the possibility that aesthetic excellence (i.e., the “Christological norm” or the “Spiritual Presence”) could come to us precisely in the unrehearsed melody of the *other* person or group rather than, necessarily, in the sublime ecstasies of our “own,” perhaps more rigidly rhythmic and harmonious, singing.

An alternative proposal: Performative envisioning

I want to put together the best of the above three options in formulating a “performative envisioning” approach to Mennonite theological aesthetics. First, we need a way of thinking about the aesthetic text which does not reify it into a fixed form of the past, an object of reminiscence and pedestrian *historical* performance, but rather adequately embraces the improvisatory ontology of interpretation. Second, we need a way to think about interiority and affectivity which is not simply an emoting “expression” of the pre-existing psychoses of our fragmentary personal and communal romances but rather opens us up to truly *novel* ways of inter-subjective sensing and feeling. Third,

we need a way of thinking about our diverse cultural and symbolic worlds which is not content to merely “correlate” them with supposedly Christian “norms” or “grounds,” but rather sees Christian self-expressions as themselves a part of the developing creativity of contemporary language and everyday life.

In a short article written several years ago, Gordon Kaufman observed that the creative activity of artists may provide more of a catalyst and model for the activity of theological reflection than we have heretofore realized. Do the arts function simply to *express* Christian theology, or do critical advances in conceptualization sometimes appear *first* in artistic productions and are only later incorporated into our religious structures of meaning?

It probably has been a mistake to have thought of the history of theology as confined to the verbal productions of the guild of theologians. Properly understood it should, perhaps, include all forms of human expressiveness, and the interaction of these various forms with each other, as well as the influence they have had on each other, should be regarded as important subjects for historians of theology to investigate.²⁶

We may indeed find that the arts represent a peculiar cultivation of “traditions of insight, skill, and practice” to “create *the new*” or for more effectively “acting creatively in the world” to “transform” it. Theology, too, like the arts could then be thought of as an enterprise which at its root is about enabling a “new praxis,” and our theological self-education might best be seen not as an exercise in metaphysics, hermeneutics, religious experience, or even construction, *per se*, but rather as an exercise of setting forth a “series” of aesthetic “practices.”²⁷

It is possible to see Kaufman’s idea latent in the other two models as well, and even to trace it back to the text of the “Anabaptist Vision” itself. In his address of 1943, Harold Bender talked in like manner about the role of discipleship as central to the spirit of Anabaptist theology. He was, of course, operating from the paradigm of social ethics, but I think that there are some aesthetic implications to his formulations which Mennonite thinkers have largely failed to exploit. First of all, Bender uses the language of sight – “Vision” – as an aesthetic category to characterize Anabaptism. Vision for Bender is not used in the Platonic sense of a primordial objective form or

essential text which must be imitated. Anabaptist “seeing” was neither a remembering nor a conceptual enlightenment; rather, “the great vision that shaped [the Anabaptists’] course in history and for which they gladly gave their lives” was nothing less than “an action program of definiteness and power.”²⁸ Rather than fixing their goal in some pristine narrative out of the past, the Anabaptists, for Bender, went through a process of *envisioning* a program to be projection into their future.

Second, Anabaptism for Bender did not remain solely a visual art – it did more than just paint a picture and sit back admiring its beautiful symmetry. Discipleship was a program necessarily entailing the “transformation of the entire way of life of the individual believer and of society.” Thus the theology had to be sensed, experienced bodily, and externally expressed through an irreducibly temporal process:

That the Anabaptists not only proclaimed the ideal of full Christian discipleship but achieved, in the eyes of their contemporaries and even of their opponents, a measurably higher level of performance than the average, is fully witnessed by the sources.²⁹

Anabaptism for Bender was a performance art, and its theological symbolizations were always to be considered second-class citizens to the more determinative articulations and critiques of the everyday activities of ethical, sensual, and cultural transformation. Theology in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, properly considered from an aesthetic perspective, is not then just *vision*, but also *music*. It is a musicality which performatively projects its envisioned narrative into the future – not a future far in the distance or up in the heavenly spheres but one which is immediately “at hand.”

Mennonites, I would argue, have been doing aesthetics all along. In Bender’s activist envisioning, Yoder’s theater of discipleship, Holland’s dance of desire, Friesen’s cultural happening, Kaufman’s imaginative composing, and most recently, J. Lawrence Burkholder’s musical “cadenza”³⁰ and Gerald Biesecker-Mast’s “discipleship of performance,”³¹ we see the fragments coming together of a larger Anabaptist-Mennonite philosophical-aesthetic movement of performative envisioning³² – a particular and potentially fruitful contribution of Anabaptist-Mennonite thinking to broader aesthetic discourses in play at the close of the millennium.

In *Paradise*, Toni Morrison's Convent women eventually find community, healing, and new life through theologically-enacted aesthetic experience: painting images of their bodies by candlelight on the basement floor; preparing with massage-like care a meal of roasted hen, baked potato, and apples stuffed with wine-swollen raisins; rubbing their heads with wintergreen and dancing together after dark out in the "hot sweet rain"; and singing on the beach in a moment of solace before "shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise."³³ Taking up all of the formal, sensual, and spiritual resources available to us, may we Mennonites, like Morrison's women, free our artists and our theologians from the ideological captivity of the ethical imagination, and re-activate our capacities to envision new, virtual spaces into which we all can, performatively, sing forth.

Notes

¹ Charles Garside, Jr. *Zwingli and the Arts* (New York: DaCapo Press, 1981), 159-60.

² A delightful exception to this is J. Daniel Hess's call for Mennonites to take up a critical studies perspective in relation to popular culture in "Towards a Hermeneutics of Popular Culture," *Conrad Grebel Review* 11.2 (Spring 1993): 123-35.

³ Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 221-22.

⁴ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 250.

⁵ For a description of Yoder's understanding of the terms in quotation marks, see his *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1992). By "practices," a term he connects with Alasdair MacIntyre (88, n. 76), Yoder is referring specifically to ecclesiological traditions such as communion, baptism, and conversational decision-making.

⁶ Barth's scattered texts touching on aesthetics show a concerted effort to counteract so-called "anthropologically"-centered aesthetic schemes, such as the emphasis on "music and the

eternal feminine” which he believed he found in Schleiermacher’s *Christmas Eve*; see *The Theology of Schleiermacher* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 70.

⁷ Karl Barth, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986 [1956]), 28, 35.

⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2.1 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1957), 664.

⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, Volume I: Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 56.

¹⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 33, 242. Adorno complains about the inability of Brecht to compose satisfactory endings to his plays due to their naive rationalism: “If the discursive element takes primacy, the relation of the artwork to what is external to it becomes all too unmediated and the work accommodates itself even at those points where, as in Brecht, it takes pride in standing in opposition to reality: The work actually becomes positivistic” (99).

¹¹ See Scott Holland’s comparison of the hermeneutics of Barth, along with the “communal formalism” of Yoder, to the literary theory of Russian Formalism and Anglo-American New Criticism in “Communal Hermeneutics as Body Politics or Disembodied Politics?” *Brethren Life and Thought* 40 (Spring 1995): 102.

¹² Holland, “Communal Hermeneutics,” 94.

¹³ “Einbildungskraft: 1. Imagination 2. The Power to Form into One” in Alain Epp Weaver, ed., *Mennonite Theology in Face of Modernity: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Kaufman* (Bethel College: North Newton, Kansas, 1996): 245. See also his “Theology is a Kind of Writing: The Emergence of Theopoetics,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 71.2 (April 1997): 227-41.

¹⁴ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christmas Eve*, tr. Terrence Tice (San Francisco: EM Texts, 1990), 46.

¹⁵ Schleiermacher, *Ästhetik; über den Begriff der Kunst*, Thomas Lehnerer, ed. (Hamburg: Felix Meine Verlag, 1984), 17.

¹⁶ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, MacKintosh and Stewart, eds. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, n.d.), 17, translation altered.

¹⁷ Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 44-47. Beaudoin reports that in one study conducted in 1986, eighty percent of Generation Xers were found to have regularly watched MTV, averaging two hours of viewing daily.

¹⁸ Holland, “Communal Hermeneutics,” 94.

¹⁹ See Duane Friesen, “An Anabaptist Theology of Culture for a New Century,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 13 (Winter 1995): 41ff, 49ff; and “Toward a Theology of Culture: A Dialogue with Gordon Kaufman” in *Mennonite Theology in Face of Modernity*, 98ff, 106ff.

²⁰ This quotation is taken from chapter 6, “Artistic Imagination and the Life of the Spirit” of Friesen’s manuscript *Artists, Citizens, and Philosophers: A Christian Theology of Culture* (draft of November 6, 1998), 228.

²¹ Paul Tillich, “Contemporary Visual Arts and the Revelatory Character of Style” in *On Art and Architecture*, John Dillenberger and Jane Dillenberger, eds. (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 126.

²² Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (London: Oxford, 1959), 42; See also *On the Boundary: An Autobiographical Sketch* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1966 [1936]), 25-28; also in *On Art and Architecture*, 3-6. On Tillich’s review of the visual aesthetics of contemporary art critics as well as his formulation of the categories, see “Religious Style and Religious Material in the Fine Arts” in *On Art and Architecture*, 45-57. Tillich often referred to “style” as an additional category to characterize the dynamic between form (*Form*), subject matter or content (*Inhalt*), and substance (*Gehalt*).

²³ See my article, “The Deconstruction of Expressionism: Paul Tillich’s Encounter with Pop Art,” *North American Paul Tillich Society Newsletter* 21.3 (July 1995): 2-7.

²⁴ One of the organizers of the Newton event, when interviewed by the local newspaper, identified the visible draws of “the food and the entertainment” in making the event successful but also noted the people factor: “It gives you a taste of the people It’s the huge neighborhood activity. You see people of all ages having an opportunity to meet and greet new people and learn something about their community.” Lisa Elliott, “Thousands enjoy a ‘Taste of Newton,’” *The Newton Kansan* (Friday, October 9, 1998), 1, 5.

²⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, Cyril Barrett, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, n.d.), 2-3.

²⁶ Gordon Kaufman, “Theology, the Arts, and Theological Education,” *Theological Education* 31 (1994): 17.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 18-19. See also Kaufman’s formulations in *In Face of Mystery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) of theology as imaginative, constructive conversation (chapters 3, 4, and 5), and his account in chapter 19 of conversation as serendipitous creativity. In illustrating the activity of conversation, Kaufman at one point uses the example of participants being carried

away in the course of a musical performance, but without compromise of the “freedom and creativity” of the performance (276).

²⁸ “The Anabaptist Vision” in *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, Guy F. Hershberger, ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1957), 31.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 43-4.

³⁰ J. Lawrence Burkholder, “Following Christ in a Postmodern World,” comments presented at the “Anabaptism and Postmodernism” conference, Bluffton College, August 8, 1998.

³¹ Gerald Biesecker-Mast, “Recovering the Anabaptist Body (to separate it for the world),” unpublished paper presented at the “Anabaptism and Postmodernism” conference, Bluffton College, August 8, 1998.

³² For a formulation of a view of theology as “performance practice,” drawn from some aesthetic considerations in the work of Kaufman and Ludwig Wittgenstein, see my “How to Stop Constructing Things: Kaufman, Wittgenstein, and the Pragmatic End of Constructivism,” in *Memnonite Life* 52.1 (March 1997): 37-43.

³³ Toni Morrison, *Paradise*, 252-60, 263-5, 283, 318.

From Anna Baptist and Menno Barbie to Anna Beautiful

Julie L. Musselman

When I was five my mom caught me studying myself in the mirror. And caught is the right word. I was trying to figure out if I was pretty. This wasn't the issue for Mom, who gave me no clues as to whether indeed I was pretty. What worried her was this: "If you keep looking in the mirror, Satan is hiding behind it and will jump out and get you." I used to look behind the mirror, trying to imagine how skinny Satan must be to fit in that crack between wall and mirror. My mother, *à la* Seinfeld, was the apparel Nazi, ensuring that I follow the church modesty code and win the war against Satan.

Later, in my teens, what enticed me was the fruit that the church through my mom had forbidden me. Rather than submitting to the command not to look in the mirror, I was seduced by those not themselves forbidden to look; I wanted what they had. So I watched those peers outside my church circles who were like characters in a Harleysville-Souderton version of *Grease*. They were the trend-setters in my world. With their makeup and clothes, they looked to me like the models I pored over in *Seventeen* magazine. These awe-inspiring creatures went to the public high school, not my Mennonite one, so we only crossed paths when I attended football games and went to their school plays or concerns. But I knew all the names of the most popular boys and girls as if I were part of their inner circle, which is of course exactly what I longed to be.

I think of the first girl, the girl tempting Satan to jump out from behind the mirror, as "Anna Baptist." Appearance is nothing, Anna Baptist was taught, and appearance is everything, she also learned. These were – and sometimes are – the mixed messages Mennonite girls often received from mothers who told us Satan lived behind that mirror in which we loved to see ourselves reflected. I don't finally blame my mother. She was passing on what the

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church told her. So if damage was done, the issue needs to be taken up more with the church than with her and other mothers.

Still, these were the messages the church asked mothers to give, and through such admonitions many of us learned at the same time that appearance was to be discounted and that beauty or its absence had to do with our superficial package. The result is that many of us girls have grown up tempted to be “Menno Barbie,” those cookie-cutter women who, lacking Mom’s affirming gaze, look to the fashion world or males for evaluations of our beauty.

How does a woman who has been Anna Baptist and is tempted to be Menno Barbie survive? Drawing on my own experiences and some theoretical resources, I want to propose ways to stay real in the worlds of both Anna and Barbie. I’ll suggest that crucial to my and many women’s survival tactics is experiencing a love which doesn’t stop with the skin – either to reject or worship it – but gazes deep inside to find and affirm beauty. Such a woman then becomes Anna Beautiful. Let me move toward her by telling more stories of Anna Baptist and Menno Barbie, and of the complex ways they kept and keep each other alive while too often holding back the woman of deeper beauty struggling to be born.

Anna Baptist

The Menno Barbie side of me wanted bangs and short hair. But my mom forced me after first grade to let my hair and bangs grow long. I had my hair parted in the middle. This made me not only Anna Baptist but also what Anna so often was and is: plain Jane.

In third grade, I went repeatedly to school with bags under my eyes. For some reason, due probably, I now think, to the shampoo Mom used on me, my eyes were swollen. “Why are your eyes swollen?” my teacher asked. “Doesn’t your mother care about you? She doesn’t do anything about it.” Because the possibility that my teacher might be right both shamed and frightened me, I didn’t mention my eyes to my mother.

Now I think the issue wasn’t that my mother didn’t love me; rather, this matter-of-factness was one more way she and other parents had been taught to keep Satan at bay. We weren’t to have paid to us the kind of attention

my teacher assumed a child should receive; that was being “fussed over” – and you could feel Satan getting ready to leap out.

Jump to fifth grade. Wednesday nights in summer I used to walk across the porch to my grandmother’s house and find an inconspicuous seat. Then as my aunts and their parents carried out their weekly ritual of touching base with each other, I’d listen to them talk about what was going on in their Mennonite world. I soaked up as much of the conversation as I could, gossip especially. But sometimes I failed in my quest not to be noticed. The worst failure came as I played on the floor with one of my smaller cousins. Aunt Susan pronounced a curse that stayed with me until I was finally able to shed it about fifteen years ago. “Julie,” she pronounced, “really has fat legs.”

For Anna Baptist men, were beings from whom to hide both such ugly things as fat legs and whatever rare beauty a Mennonite woman might possess. I learned this from my mother. After she shed the cape dress, she still insisted on high necklines and supplemented such cover with a scarf to hide any additional skin that might inadvertently pop out.

As a teenager, it seemed to me ridiculous to believe a Mennonite woman could provoke lust in any normal male. We Anna Baptists so steadfastly covered ourselves, so dutifully turned ourselves nondescript and asexual, that it was hard even to imagine being sexually desirable. I couldn’t picture a Mennonite woman prompting lustful thoughts even in her husband. What partner would be attracted to a woman who looked like that? Especially when all around were the “real” bodies with their visible shapes and curves to remind us and the men what we women were all about! Of course one irony was that the very vehicles we used to hide in were precisely what attracted attention and stares.

So there she was, Anna Baptist. She wasn’t supposed to worry about whether she was pretty. She was expected to minimize any prettiness that might nevertheless sneak through. She was given plenty of hints that she might be ugly. Of course exactly the opposite of what the church wanted to happen did happen. I become obsessed with my looks. I was pursued by fears of plainness and haunted by visions of beauty. I became not only Anna Baptist but Menno Barbie.

Adding Menno Barbie

I have been alluding, of course, to the perfectly coiffed, postured, and ever-smiling Barbie doll, the perennial choice of countless young women across North America. Menno Barbies are different than regular Barbies; a Menno Barbie is a Mennonite woman, an Anna Baptist who has been initially (forcibly?) restrained from dressing the way she instinctively chooses. Menno Barbies often grow up staring out, from between the bars of their imprisonment in anti-fashionable Mennonite attitudes, at the beautiful Barbie's of the secular world they want to be. Wannabe Menno Barbies risk the same imprisonments regular Barbies face, only more so.

Cut off from the beauty in their own heritage and not well-versed in secular standards of beauty, they fumble forward. They long for what they don't have without knowing how to find it. Often they become lost, not fully at home either in church or in the world. Often, much as the *nouveau riche*, they seem to think that more is better. This is possibly a reaction to the former emphasis on nonconformity or plainness. Then overdone or obvious display compensates for a former lack and means you are now "with it." This ties in with what I've already said about not having experience with beauty to draw from. Good taste is often naturally formed by a person's familiarity with certain kinds of clothes, jewelry, behaviors. It is not some quality mysteriously bestowed on certain special individuals.

I gave a seminar in Harrisonburg, Virginia several years ago on dressing and creating one's personal style. I chose to wear an outfit representing my profession that I'd have worn to work in New York. A Donna Karan little black dress with a silk jacket, it was understated and *au courant*. Several women later criticized me, wondering why I dressed so "plain." This outfit that communicated elegance and sophistication in the "real" Barbie world didn't pass muster in Menno Barbie's. Here beauty truly was in the eyes of the beholder!

I think there's a Menno Barbie side to my mom, who shed the cape dress thirty years ago but mostly could only long toward whatever secular beauty may have attracted her. This seems to explain her waiting until the last few years, during her 70s, finally to cut her hair. And I see Menno Barbie in my own memories of longing for traits or features that would set me apart not as Anna Baptist but as a girl or woman of beauty.

In my homeless way, for instance, I stumbled into seeing buck teeth as one desirable feature of uniqueness. A girl at my home church also attended eighth grade at my public elementary school. I looked up to her, and she used to pay attention to me. She had an extra set of teeth erupting in the vicinity of her eye teeth, at the corners of her mouth. I thought it awesome to have this row of teeth; I was quite envious of her looks and the shape the extra teeth gave her mouth and lips. So on the day of my second grade picture, I created for myself and the photographer the looks I imagined malocclusion would have given me. Horror contorted my mom's own face when she opened the picture envelope and saw how I had distorted my face to create an effect of lips distended by teeth.

I was baptized when I was ten. I can see a direct correlation between my unruly and uninhibited behavior and the church discipline code. Coming under the rules of the church led to a major suppression of how I wanted to be and to be seen by the public school crowd as well as by my church crowd. I wanted and needed approval simultaneously from both groups – even though what they each approved was contradictory.

But this failed to deter me in my quest. Having always been a more-than-enthusiastic singer, I jumped at the chance to audition for the school musical in seventh grade. A new auditorium had just been completed, which made the event all the more enticing. Given that music was the one subject in which I was well behaved, I was selected for the musical. I never asked my mom whether I could participate in this first of my post-church-membership productions; I just did.

We gave the musical. I sang my brains out. Then my aunt called my mom to say I should confess my sin of participating in this musical with its nonsensical songs. She persisted in this, and my mom told me several times Aunt Anna felt strongly about the matter. I announced, "*I AM NOT going to confess!*" The issue faded, but if my aunt had called the bishop and reported my sin, it would have turned into another story.

Becoming a member of the church also had an effect on my relationships with boys. I had always had a boyfriend from town who was not Mennonite, but now, having staked my claim as a "virtuous woman," I switched hunting grounds. Now I liked a boy who was Mennonite, though not from my church. But eventually he dropped me because, he said, I was

too plain! That was a shock. Such a judgment leveled by a Mennonite farm boy who couldn't even spell was almost too much to handle – and deepened my hunger to be Menno Barbie.

Looking for her, I next invaded the world of the boys who went to Franconia Mennonite School. Since I went to public school, I looked less conservative than the pickin's the guys had at their school. I didn't have to sport a covering except to church. This allowed me in the world of church to reclaim the social status I had regretfully given up by joining church. But at the same time I just couldn't compete with girls who had short hair and perms, who could wear slacks, who were starting to wear make-up.

Pursuing Menno Barbie but often managing more to long for than to become her, I began to feel invisible. I began to feel that if I wasn't noticed I didn't exist. I was like a painting of a landscape devoid of a person. At home I had to work hard helping my mom with dishes, ironing, cleaning, and baby-sitting. Once I decided not to volunteer any details about school at home to see if anyone ever asked me. I remember going through the whole year without anyone inquiring how things were going for me.

So as an eighth grader, now adolescent, I had to create my own importance and recognition. My behavior was a barometer. It rose and fell with how I felt I was viewed, and my Menno Barbie self-assessment hinged totally on my perception of how I looked and what I wore. The emphasis my church placed on how I looked by insisting that I be an Anna Baptist who did *not* care about my looks continued to make Menno Barbie use appearance as the yardstick by which she measured herself and her classmates.

My behavior worsened as none of the boys gave me even a second look, or at least that was what I thought. Because of my lack of self-control in class, I was kicked off the Safety Patrol squad. I spent more time standing in the corner than anyone else. At graduation I forfeited academic honors because of my incessant classroom chatter.

As my teen years continued, I felt a deepening of the dichotomy between the standards of the church and wanting approval from those who exhibited the worldly standards of beauty trumpeted by the media. My Menno Barbie side was persistently attracted to peers who attended public high school or who weren't Mennonite. Yet I wasn't closed to my Anna Baptist side; I still wanted approval from both adults and peers in my church community

whose appearance denoted faithfulness and dedication to those biblical standards of appearance and beauty called nonconformity.

As a teen I was really into music and felt there the tensions between church and world. I listened to WOR out of New York City every Saturday morning for the top ten R & B songs. I was totally thrilled with Bill Haley's "Rock Around the Clock," with James Dean, with Marlon Brando. I knew Elvis's first song by heart, before he made it big as a rock-and-roll star, when he was still country.

I devoured, *especially* because they were denied me, trends in popular culture. I personified 100 percent absorbency – an information junkie! Precisely because it was forbidden, I was a closet American teenager. I knew more about '50s pop culture than probably any kid who actually lived in that world. I was a double agent *extraordinaire*.

Concurrently I was also a full-blown ethnocentric Mennonite with all the accompanying minority characteristics. My experience as a person other than Mennonite was non-existent, so I was totally dependent on the Mennonite church and felt that if that factor were removed I'd be really non-existent and a washout as a person. And this fragile Mennonite identity was founded almost entirely on extraneous exterior qualifiers.

Another important factor in my teen years was the hair culture. But that story begins even earlier, in the summer between fifth and sixth grade, when I was already obsessed with my hair statement. I was so envious of my girl friend. She also sported the circumscribed pigtail but after visiting her non-Mennonite sister-in-law in Ohio returned with a bob. It seemed a miracle to me, and I just longed to have a divine hair intervention happen for me! But I had to manage my own. After suffering for years with those telltale pigtails – an indictment of my heritage even without the head covering – I severed my pigtail ties. The deed took place behind closed doors in the bathroom one day after school in tenth grade, just before supper. Bending low over the toilet, I lopped off several inches of pigtail with my mom's scissors, frantically flushing the despised evidence down the hopper. About one-and-a-half inches of pigtail extensions remained. I carefully arranged the new stubby tails and pinned them together at the base of my neck.

I donned a hairnet and covering like always. My plan was to allow just enough pigtail so the ends would meet and create the same basic effect of the

hair style I had had. But the new length would allow me to slip into a wholly new style, like curls, when I needed them. Then I made my way down to the dinner table. Unfortunately, though I had plotted and premeditated for several years and committed the crime in cold blood, I was careless. Unbeknownst to me, I hadn't totally cleaned up the scene of the crime. Tiny little bits of hair decorating the top edge of the bowl got discovered when my brother lifted the toilet seat later that evening. Spotting the evidence, he gleefully turned me in.

That event served as the battle cry in my war against my nonconformed appearance. I openly rebelled against the church's hair. Then later, as a teenager, all I could think of was how I could possibly pull off cutting or arranging my hair in such a way as to move better between both worlds.

Especially for women hair holds the power of seduction. A lot of female style is communicated by how a woman wears her hair. It often sets the tone for her appearance. Back then the covering complicated it all, and the length interfered with creating placebo do's. I couldn't create a reasonable facsimile of the wispy and feathered 1956 Italian Boy hairstyle when I had hair in braids that extended halfway down my back.

The appearance-related dynamics of an Anna Baptist determined also to be Menno Barbie pursued me into my late 1950s Goshen "Go-Sin" College years. As soon as I entered this most liberal of places in my Mennonite world, I wanted in the worst way to shed my wavy hair and cut bangs. I restrained myself briefly; I didn't want my community to say, "The minute she got there she cut bangs." But after six weeks I did. The timing was bad: I cut my bangs just before a visit from my parents. My mom took one look and started crying.

The *coup de grace* came Saturday night as we waited in the cafeteria line for supper. I actually didn't look my best in this newly-crafted hair style. In fact my bangs looked a lot like "Mamie" bangs because they had a tendency to be wavy instead of lying straight. And to my chagrin, in my new 'do I faintly resembled a woman from our congregation who was insane and had lived her whole life in a state hospital. My dad promptly pointed this out to me and also, I discovered later, to people back home with whom he shared a photo of my new looks. But the comment really meant to make me let my bangs grow was "What do you think Jesus thinks of you now?" At that point

I left my distraught parents standing alone in the line, marched out, and went up to my room on third floor Kulp.

And always somewhere amid the tensions between my Anna Baptist background and Menno Barbie longings were boys and men. Take the “Dear Ruth” incident. That began with the message from my church and mother that looking good or pretty was being sexy or sexual and therefore evil, an emphasis geared mainly to us females! Of course at this time there was no unbiased representation of the body in itself, as in art history or classical paintings – our mottoes and calendars were more benign and uplifting. There was no dispassionate exposure to another view of body aesthetics.

My mother, by her furtive attempts in dealing with me and my appearance, implied that what we as women mostly communicated with our bodies was a sexual message. My mother exhausted a lot energy trying to derail my focus. She was sure I wasn’t to be trusted – and I wasn’t! My mom even enlisted the aid of Ruth Brunk Stoltzfus in controlling her daughter’s passions for boys and her appearance. I found a note written to Ruth and her “Heart To Heart” radio program. Ruth, the Mennonite women’s “Dear Abby,” would read letters from listeners on a special portion of the Saturday morning program. My mother’s said something like, “I have a daughter who only thinks about going out with boys. . . . I ask that you pray that she will see the error of her ways.” That discovery created even more anger. I felt betrayed. Her campaign drove me faster than ever toward getting the approval I needed from boys.

Why such intensities in relation to men? In *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf highlights three verses in Genesis (2:21-23), beginning with, “And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept; and he took one of his ribs. . . .” Women, Wolf believes, allow themselves to be enslaved by the “Rites of Beauty.” She means that men, shaped by the cultural influences of Genesis, experience the right to confer judgment on any woman’s beauty while remaining themselves unjudged.¹

Women in turn believe their bodies are second-rate, God’s afterthought. Women were created from Adam’s rib, but God breathed life directly into Adam. This creation story helps disenfranchise women and causes them to “offer their bodies to any male gaze that will legitimize them.”² As I experienced in my own focus on getting approval from boys and men, male validation gives the female body the legitimacy God has withheld.

The Gaze

Nancy Friday, in *The Power of Beauty*, calls such approval “the Gaze” – and contends that lack of the Gaze can produce women like Anna Baptists as well as Menno Barbies. When the gaze is offered, the results are wonderful.³ Friday highlights that “non-judgmental mirror of adoring eyes in which we saw ourselves reflected, warmed, taken in, and rolled lovingly around” as the foundation of self-esteem. This gaze was depicted on canvas by the early Renaissance artists in the form of a golden beam. Painted between the eye of the mother and the eye of the child, the beam joined their gazes. Friday suggests the golden beam of the gaze can be compared to an “adorable feeding tube between mother and babe.”⁴ She notes that “to each the other is perfect”; physical traits are secondary here.⁵ “The good mother,” Friday continues,

is giving enough of her self so that the child is filled, so nourished by her vision of him that he must exercise his new self, experiment, try out his beauty and lovable qualities on others. . . . Why would questions of being beautiful enough, lovable enough, enter his mind? . . . The sureness of our beauty comes with the package of unconditional love internalized in the first years of life.⁶

Friday intriguingly adds, “Could Jesus have completed his selfless mission without that reflection in his mother’s eyes? I don’t think so.”⁷

My mom, I believe, aimed to be a good mother. She mothered as the church taught her to, and my standing here in reasonable health despite scars suggests there were times she and I exchanged the gaze. Somewhere amid the church’s teachings, the golden beam must have linked us. But I don’t remember basking in the warm glow of the gaze. I’ve struggled to find what Friday describes as “the Golden Beam to be stored inside, the self at rest within the self.”⁸

Some of us, not experiencing the full warmth of that gaze, look to surrogate resources to meet our ache for approval and acceptance. The feeling I’ve often had of operating as two different persons, Anna Baptist and Menno Barbie, seems linked with the difficulty of finding the golden beam. Anna Baptist was affected by ignorance of the golden beauties of that beam. What Menno Barbie felt was a nameless yearning toward the missing gold. Whether

or not we remember feeling our mother's gaze, most of us have to deal with self-acceptance, approval, and feeling loved sooner or later, no matter how we came packaged! Some of us can nurture our spiritual connections, simply bask in God's love, and feel at peace. Some of us on the way to self-discovery get side-tracked and rely on props. This is where we become so in need of validation by the male gaze. This is where today's set of standards for defining happiness, success, and fun get complicated, especially for women. This is where the beauty industry and its advertising hype and the fashion industry sink their claws into the female psyche.

Naomi Wolf's thesis is that the backlash to the revival of the women's movement in the late 1960s and 1970s replaced the exhausting demands of homemaking with the burdens of pursuing an artificially defined and unattainable beauty ideal. This neutralizes women politically, deflecting us from our true goals. We're kept depleted and feeling unworthy. Then we have no confidence to challenge the status quo, become advocates for lower wages, pound on glass ceilings. How ready to pursue personal and political agendas can we be if we feel unattractive and unworthy? So we accept the burdens of Barbie beauty – and with them such consequences as bulimia, anorexia, obsessive awareness of body deficiencies, and spending outrageous sums on cosmetics.⁹

How far the claws of such damaging understandings of beauty penetrate us and how long we participate in this game is up to us. Here we arrive at another turn in the journey. Although the absence of the golden beam may have injured many of us, we can repair the damage through neither the repressions of Anna Baptist nor the strategies of Menno Barbie. Neither rejecting the importance of beauty nor adopting and pursuing Madison Avenue standards of beauty will make us whole. We can fill our souls only if we nurture other understandings of beauty. We can fill our souls only if we nurture beauty in all its various manifestations, by uncovering it in our daily living, and absorbing it through sensory experiences.

Beauty

So much of what I'm saying revolves around beauty, but what *is* beauty? One could write a dissertation on the topic and never pin it down, so I won't claim to do that here. But I can at least circle around beauty, gazing at it from various angles in search of clues.

First some thoughts on beauty that didn't move me. Growing up, my ideas of types of beauty acceptable to the church had to do mainly with flowers, nature, or Bible-related notions. "All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small" always seemed to exclude people. I never could hold onto feeling much after we finished the song. If anything affected me in nature it was the colors of birds. The "beauty of the Scriptures" never spoke much above a whisper to me. The "lilies of the field" story irritated and confused me. Living "A Beautiful Life" (a favorite song) wasn't nearly as appealing as wanting to look beautiful.

Mostly I was drawn to the colored, printed cotton feedbags we got delivered weekly. I lived on a farm surrounded by a big yard, flowers and nature, but not much titillated me like the thought of the dress my mom was going to make me out of those bags lying in wait in our feed house! For me beauty is many things at once. Beauty is relative and can change. Beauty can be in nature – or in feedbag fabric. Beauty is both inclusive and diverse. Beauty includes proportion, balance, tone, shade, and shape for a generic base. Then fuel these elements with the supernatural: beauty affects us at all levels of our awareness and beyond, providing a high-octane exuberance for living. Beauty can set us on fire, but the flames don't so much devour us as leap from a burning bush which instead of being consumed conveys holiness. Beauty, to borrow the old Sunday school definition of a parable, is "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning."

Beauty has much to do with emotion and passion. Someone wrote that beauty is the hardest drug of all. It's an attitude. Its harmonious chords struck between my outer and inner worlds. It's something that wears well. Beauty is a feast you can eat with the eyes,¹⁰ like Michelangelo's David; a 1959 Porsche; scenery in the Emmenthal; the face of a bride, especially one's daughter; that princess line on Stella Alderfer's dress I gazed at during many a church service. Beauty is experiencing the trance two perfectly paired colors can induce. Despite my headcovering as major accessory, beauty is how deliciously hot I felt wearing the lavender dress I created, complete with cummerbund and circle skirt, for my Christopher Dock Mennonite High School baccalaureate.

Beauty is also a feast for the ears experienced through sounds that are riveting and ethereal – Frederic Chiu playing Mendelssohn sonatas, harmonies

in bluegrass or Palestrina, Marian Anderson's contralto, and Ani DeFranco's funky "Amazing Grace." Or the haunting off-key monotone of the great horned owl.

Beauty enters through scent and touch as well. It's the joining of tastes in food, how capers and anchovies create a taste renaissance in vegetables, or the faithful flavor of potato pie. It's the smell of my great grandfather's ripe grapes on the vine.

Beauty goes on and on. It's experiencing the stealth of a freshly steeled boning knife. It's a great idea. It's finding exactly the right words for the moment. It's stories spun by Flaubert, or Mark Twain, or John Ruth. Beauty is love – love in relationships and friendships, love in sharing and experiencing the cascading sights; love found in sounds, smells, touches of beauty with another warm body.

Words from the hymn "Worship the Lord in the Beauty of Holiness" fly occasionally into my head and evoke visceral responses. One of them is to reverse "holiness" and "beauty" to yield "the holiness of beauty," the holiness of the flames of beauty that burn but do not consume. As we each seek the beauty we crave and can sometimes create, how do we find a holy beauty? How do we find a beauty that nurtures us without consuming us? I ask this often in relation to my own pursuit of beauty as a fashion designer. The clothes to which I devote so much of my own creative energy touch only one aspect of beauty but an important one. Clothes evolved out of the universal need for embellishment and decoration connected to the hunger for beauty. And clothes are physical, which relates to my main concern here with beauty in physical appearance. Physical beauty is just one chapter in the beauty story and a limited one at that – yet what a crucial chapter it has become for women in our culture. How do we find an understanding of physical beauty that does not consume us?

I hadn't yet found a holiness of beauty, though I was searching for it in my love of feedbag dresses. This too became a source of tensions between Anna Baptist and Menno Barbie. To my surprise, I was selected in second grade for a solo performance as a blue bird running about singing "Spring is coming, spring is coming." I was to wear a blue dress under my costume but had forgotten to bring it the day of the performance. I had two blue dresses, one a plain one made from cape dress leftovers and one prettier and more

fashionable. I made clear to Mom that I wanted the prettier one and confided to the teacher how much I loved it. Mom brought the plain one.

Why? My theory is that she consciously or unconsciously edited my wardrobe so as not to reveal to the teacher, in the shape of the prettier dress, her own vicarious fantasies of beautiful and frivolous dresses. But if my theory is correct and points to conflicts in my mother's own feelings about dress, it also explains how my mother became for me a source of underground creative and fashion sensibility. I guess she was the training ground for my two-track solution, in which I subversively worked at turning Anna Baptist into Menno Barbie.

I used to muse about why my feedbag dress styles were often more interesting than those of other Mennonite girls. That this was so was confirmed when an eighth-grader named Edna confided to my fourth-grade self that I always had the neatest dresses. I remember the very dress that brought about her comment: it was a pink floral princess line dress with a white Peter Pan collar. The pattern even called for a chain belt and I had one of those too. So there I was, making a fashion statement in a home-sewn feedbag. In this odd and complex way I was struggling to combine my inner and outer lives as well as my mother's preference for Anna Baptist and her occasional underground support of Menno Barbie. I was also, I think now, struggling toward an understanding of beauty that would somehow make the tensions creative.

Maybe my most significant early glimpses of a holiness of beauty able to draw on my heritage without adopting its beauty-denying tendencies came through my aunts. As a girl I decided none of my aunts was especially pretty, but one thing puzzled me. Always fascinated with old photos, I'd often pass the time in my grandmother's parlor looking at her stash. Wedding photos of my aunts fascinated and perplexed me. Regardless of how ordinary they might look now and despite the plain dresses and coverings each had worn for her wedding, in these photos my aunts always looked pretty. There was about them a glow or an aura of beauty. An airbrush wasn't the wand that had waved. Truly for that one day they had been somehow transformed. It seemed to me the magic happened only when you were dressed as a bride.

Already then I had been exposed to the basic component of a bona fide and holy beauty, but the loveliness passed right by me. I couldn't understand until later that my aunts' beauty was being kindled inside by the

love they were experiencing this special day, by the total acceptance of who they were. “You will discover that personal beauty is not about prettiness, but about allowing yourself to be who you are,” say Carla Mason Mathis and Helen Villa Conner in *Triumph of Individual Style*.¹¹ Though they didn’t seem fully to know how to sustain it, value it, and intentionally pass it on, these women had inherited a wholesome approach to beauty. What they had learned, even if they were only able fully to express it on that one day, was how to become a woman other than Anna Baptist or Menno Barbie. I’ll call her Anna Beautiful.

Anna Beautiful

Who is Anna Beautiful? As I glimpsed through my aunts, she is the woman who knows how to deal with appearance in a healthy, natural fashion. Because so few of us have become skilled naturally and unselfconsciously in the language of such beauty, many of us who want to become Anna Beautiful must learn about her beauty much as if it were a second language. As she becomes practiced in this new language of beauty, Anna Beautiful begins to discern what her personal brand is and where it lies. She experiences her unique dialect or accent. Then as she defines her beauty through speaking its language, it emerges as an alternative way to communicate even while she uses the same old set of body parts she originally inherited.

Like a second language, beauty for Anna Beautiful wears into a second nature. It becomes part of Anna Beautiful rather than some disposable quality defined by the gaze of others. We women aiming to be her are bombarded with unrealistic artificial standards that ain’t gonna change much. We need to develop a way of operating over, around, and above the mythologies that distort our quest to be her.

Anna Beautiful has examined her ideas about beauty. She has confronted the experience of feeling powerless against the tyrannies that loom over her when standards are set not by her but by others. Though she still values and enjoys the approving looks of men, she experiences this approval as gift, not necessity. She has come to understand what Ingrid Sischy writing in *What Is Beauty?* means when she says, “Hasn’t every female felt some pressure to be beautiful in a conventional way and experienced a sense of inadequacy because she didn’t live up to some artificial ideal?”¹²

Jan Lemming, publisher of *About Women and Marketing*, describes the thinking behind the creation of women's versions of personal-care products. This marketing exploits women's fears of not being feminine enough. Women know they're judged by their looks; they're afraid if they don't use certain products they won't be as appealing.¹³ Anna Beautiful has seen through and moved beyond such marketing ploys. Carolyn Hillman has met her. In *Love Your Looks*, Hillman debunks the idea that beauty brings happiness. She writes that

in the job market and place of employment . . . the reality is that while being attractive is generally an asset for men, it often works against a woman because attractive women are generally assumed to be feminine and therefore, ipso facto, passive, dependent, emotional, and less competent. . . .¹⁴

Summarizing her chapter on "Ugly Myths, Beautiful You," Hillman says that "What ultimately holds true is that the better a woman's self-esteem, the more likely she is to find a satisfying relationship. . . ."¹⁵ Furthermore, "the more she likes her looks, no matter how close or far they are from the beauty ideal, the better her self-esteem is likely to be."¹⁶

Hillman also mentions interesting findings related to facial attractiveness and marital satisfaction. Researchers looked at women's college yearbook photographs and interviewed the same women in midlife. They found that "in each of the instances in which a relationship between attractiveness and satisfaction was found, the more attractive a woman was judged to be from her college photos, the less happy and the less well-adjusted to her current life she was."¹⁷

Intriguingly and maybe not surprisingly, the research found for men no comparable relationship between attractiveness and satisfaction. "Imagine what would happen," Hillman comments, "if women suddenly put no more effort into looking good than men do – that is, if we continued to care about how we look, but put it more in proportion, and less on the front burner. . . ." She rightly suspects that then we'd still look good, "just as men do, for a fraction of the cost in time and money." She predicts this would bring about a fashion industry revolution. No longer able to extort huge sums from the women they prod into constant dissatisfaction, they'd be "forced to make clothes for women, as they already do for men, that are durable and practical,

in styles that are attractive and abiding.”¹⁸

The Baule (pronounced Bough-lay) – a people of West Africa, Ivory Coast – give an interesting twist to their view of art. It’s “beyond beauty,” it’s “art that takes action.” In a September 28, 1997 *New York Times* review of the “Baule: African Art/Western Eyes” exhibition at the Yale Art Gallery, Holland Cotter writes that “the Baule themselves have no single word for ‘art’ as a privileged class of objects set apart for contemplation.” Instead, “they value the work they make far less for what it looks like than for what it can do, socially or spiritually, to assure stability or positive change within the community.”

The Baule can help us become Anna Beautiful by shifting our focus away from the biological aspects of beauty, important though they are, toward seeing ourselves as works of art whose strength, energy, love, and ensuing beauty come from within. Our beauty then becomes personified, overshadowing the importance of our face. Then, for instance, the guy we expect to judge us is disarmed and not focused only on whatever physical limitations our genes may have given us!

A Baule-like understanding guides my dealing as a fashion designer with our “physical plant” and maximizing its potential. An individual’s physical plant – the body created in the image of God – is my canvas and I attempt to maximize its potential by both covering (or “clothing”) and uncovering this beauty. My aim is to help those with whom I consult draw on their entire beings, spiritual as well as physical, to make of themselves a work of art. I take a personal and pragmatic approach to helping people create their own styles in the dressing room – making “fashion” into one of the helping professions!

Holly Brubach is another woman who has met Anna Beautiful. “What is beauty?” she asks. “Here’s as much as I know,” she answers.

It’s not nearly as rare as we’ve been led to believe. It turns up in the most surprising places. It’s at its most sublime when it’s unaware of itself. It is not a function of youth or a small nose or thin thighs. Those who live their lives in pursuit of it are doomed. It comes in two varieties: The instant-impact type and the slow, time-release kind. In men, it goes by the name of handsomeness, so as not to give offense. YOU’LL KNOW IT WHEN YOU SEE IT.¹⁹

Notes

¹ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (New York: William Morrow, 1991), 93, 87.

² *Ibid.*, 87.

³ Nancy Friday, *The Power of Beauty* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996), 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Wolf, 9-12.

¹⁰ Here I'm indebted to Amy Gross, who in "A Thing of Beauty," in Dorothy Schefer, ed., *What Is Beauty? New Definitions from the Fashion Vanguard* (New York: Universe Publishing, 1997), 61, says of things that are beautiful that "I eat all these things with my eyes."

¹¹ Carla Mason Mathis and Helen Villa Conner, *The Triumph of Individual Style* (Menlo Park, Calif.: Timeless Editions, 1993), 1-2.

¹² "Changing of the Guard," in Schefer, *What is Beauty?*, 95.

¹³ Lemming's views are described in Frances Cerra Whittelsey, "The Price Is Wrong," *Modern Maturity* (Jan.-Feb. 1998), 65.

¹⁴ Carolyn Hillman, *Love Your Looks: How to Stop Criticizing and Start Appreciating Your Appearance* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Fireside, 1996), 52.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁸ Carolyn Hillman, *Love Your Looks*, 211.

¹⁹ Holly Brubach, "What Is Beauty?" in Schefer, *What is Beauty?*, 125.

When Two Plus Two is More Than Four: A Saga of Collaborations

Carol Ann Weaver

In this house I could walk a whole day and never find where I started.

– Shari Wagner, from *Houses*

The middle of three sisters, I was born collaborating with them on our imaginary worlds – extended families, paper doll sisters, music schools and colleges, island countries in the Atlantic. Never enough hours in the day for all the fantasy places, people, and dramas we created together. I knew my inner world had to be vast enough for me to get lost.

As a child, my friend Kathy Stoltzfus (Fairfield) and I co-wrote and co-directed the drama *Susannah the Pioneer Cow*, and my sister Kathie (Kathleen Weaver Kurtz) and I embarked upon a vocal/piano opera based on the fairy tale princess who slept on a pea, *The Real Princess*. Sometime in my teens, I dragged my younger sister Dorothy Jean (Weaver) into writing a libretto for yet another opera, *God Can Work Miracles*, based on New Testament Peter's being released from prison by an angel, performed by a children's choir at our rural Mt. Clinton Mennonite Church.

In Eastern Mennonite High School I collaborated with teachers and students in creating multi-media dramas which served as training ground for my later projects. Standing on stage in my black fashion-statement boots, singing with my favorite friend a polyphonic duo I had composed, *Happily We All Shoot at the Moon*, I felt Robert Lewis Stevenson wrote his text just for us. Collaboration was a free shot towards the moon.

From early on, artistic collaborations have been a way of life for me. Over the years my many collaborations have ranged from projects involving dozens of contributors/actors/planners to my exchanges with a single poet, dancer, artist, or musician. While collaboration is redefined with each new

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project, a common thread throughout is the synchronicity, trust, and energy which creates a life of its own. When I set poetry, I listen for the words to give me song. When I merge musical styles with another performer, I let my music go for a walk in the sonic space between us, often finding it surprising where the music comes out.

Multi-media collaborations

As a university professor I found collaborative creation of multi-media projects to be more educationally effective than mere lecturing. At Eastern Mennonite University I wrote pieces for my students to be sung from cat-walks above the auditorium, for pianists playing as their pianos were wheeled into the hall, for dancers crawling out of cabinets on stage, for players improvising avant-garde jazz, for choirs singing as they moved in and out of sight, my compositions often interwoven with those of students. One particularly exciting challenge was working collaboratively with dramatist Barbra Graber to produce live, improvised choral music as part of a Sophocles drama, invoking the spirit of the ancient Greek chorus. Another collaborative gem resulted from working with artist Jerry Lapp, creating a slide production to accompany my piano performance of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

At Concord College in Winnipeg I worked collaboratively with students such as Randolph Peters, Bruce Duggan, and Bonnie Brett, each now a well-established Canadian composer, film-maker, and jazz singer respectively. Always, the planning was as much fun as performance – noisy ideas, scrambling conversations, make-shift light tables to view slide sequences. From rock band to classical piano to avant-garde choral to electroacoustic, these multi-media pieces were unified by theme and theater. A major collaborative project with James Pankratz as photographer involved a slide production accompanying a live-performed chamber piece of mine, *City Primeval*, for which urban slides from around the world were projected. At the University of Waterloo, I was co-organizer of its premiere multi-media, multiple arts event, *Trickster* (1987), for which well-known Canadian writer Sean Virgo provided literary context. The show absorbed drama, dance, visuals, and music I composed for choreographer Paula Ravitz's dance students. With Greek mythology as our theme, the second UW arts

festival was to rove from one part of the university to another, and for this I was composing music, working with dancer Susan Cash. I recall strong arguments the director had with us, as he lobbied for bass guitar to represent a menacing phallic image in one of our pieces. His enjoyment in scripting a rape scene made me uncomfortable. Though this second festival never took place, I learned what happens if trust is lacking and moral compromise is requested. Collaboration can become coercive and less than the sum of its parts.

Already I had started working on a more personal level within my collaborations, creating pieces with artist friends on mutually important themes. I remember improvising piano for a free-wheeling dance piece one Easter Sunday at Erb Street Mennonite Church in Waterloo, working for the first of many times with dancer Dorothy Bowman and artist Susan Shantz. *God-Bearing*, with Susan Shantz's sculpture and Patricia White's script and acting, celebrated women's fertility, giving room for my first feminist music. As we created symbols for our visions, our rehearsals felt like rituals in which spells were woven by a spirit beyond us.

Judith Miller collaborations

After seeing an apocalyptic movie about nuclear holocaust, I went to two contrasting poets – Judith Miller (of Gaelic/Canadian roots) and David Waltner-Toews (of Russian Mennonite roots) – for text. *Afterday* was born, with David's striking war images spoken and Judith's gentle peace images sung. I again turned to Susan Shantz for visuals – evocative, lingering multiple slide images of her sculpture. *Afterday*, scored for singer, reader, electroacoustic tape, keyboards, and projectionist, was premiered at Wilfrid Laurier University, and traveled from Kitchener-Waterloo to Hamilton to Toronto, culminating in an international electroacoustic festival performance in Montreal. This project came from all of us, not just me. Judith, particularly, was invaluable in helping shape the performance.

Now that we had begun working together, Judith Miller and I had much more to create. When she handed me the thick collection of poems which was to become *Timbrel in Her Hand*, I settled into a glass of wine and let the spirits help choose pieces which could best tell stories of these ancient Hebrew women the Old Testament often fails to name. Always in a

collaboration, I find myself choosing the parts of another's work I can best meet, sometimes leaving alone their strongest works which I may not be ready for yet. The sequence I chose included Lot's "wife" who is turned into a pillar of salt and Miriam who leads her people with timbrel and dance, starting with a poem about a harp-playing woman which, afterwards, Judith told me had been written about me! At times collaborations can reveal more about ourselves than we intend.

Timbrel, scored for reader/dancer, singer, keyboard player, mandolinist, and drummer, became a music drama which toured Ontario and various places in the States, including Sweet Honey in the Rock's home-base church in Washington, D.C. The score was published by UW Press, and I released a tape of the piece as well (1988). Again, Judith had participated in all aspects of the performance, guiding the piece toward the visions she had of these Hebrew divas whom she considered more sturdy than Greek goddesses.

After the birth of my daughter Myra, I once more visited Judith with collaboration in mind. Sipping ice water on her front lawn, chasing baby Myra, we dreamed up a piece for which Judith wrote poetry that I set to music, woven around birth stories I had taped from various mothers and my midwife, Elsie Cressman. *Birthstory*, scored for voice, oboe, percussion, and tape, became the first feature-length piece I knew of to be composed on woman's experience of birth-giving. We performed it various times at UW to full houses; as well, the piece was spectacularly staged and choreographed by Elmira Secondary School drama director Gord Davis's Youth Players, winning a Hart House (University of Toronto) performance in the final stage of the Sears Drama Festival (1996).

For our most recent collaboration, Judith came to me with an extended poem on seasons, changes, and journeys for which she wanted some music. Her images of wild geese, white-tailed deer, ravens, "Yonge and Bloor [streets] on the first day of spring" got my toe tapping, and instead of setting the three or four poems she had intended, I set the whole script. Music wouldn't stay away. My ethnic instruments seemed to find their way into this piece, for which Judith had said she wanted "everything" – Kenyan and West African drums, Zimbabwean mbira, ocarina, and rain stick, along with folk/jazz singer, electric guitar, bass, and piano. Following performances in

Canada and the U.S., *I Have Been a Traveller* is currently being recorded for my second CD, with Cate Friesen as singer.

Instrumental collaborations

Though it may be easier to talk about collaborations across art forms than within one art – words, sculpture, dance, music powerfully contrasting each other – purely musical collaborations have been vital as far back as we know. Most pre-literate and non-Western societies have developed rich traditions of instrumental protocol whereby musical patterns are shaped, exchanged, and improvised, reflecting the skill and style of the players. One thinks of the sophisticated Indian ragas, African drumming, heterophony in Balinese gamelans, all of which operate outside written music. Within our highly literate Western culture with its increased focus on musical notation, improvisation has almost become a lost art. But thanks to African-American jazz and traditional folk musicians, this ancient, timeless art of musical exchange is kept alive, with such jazzers as American bassist/band leader Charles Mingus or the Art Ensemble of Chicago developing whole schools of collective improvisation.

Over the years I have played with hundreds of musicians in both composed and improvised music, sometimes making the rules as we go. Abstract improvisations develop an architectural shape of their own which never occurs the same way twice, even when following a chord progression. Since the early 1980s I have collaborated with mandolinist Lyle Friesen in a new-grass, jazz fusion duo, Mooncoin, in which we have played everything from ice-cream parlors in nearby St. Jacobs to a folk/rock festival at Blue Skies to new music concerts in Montreal, Hamilton, Kitchener-Waterloo, and Toronto. Within this combo I learned to comp (accompany within a jazz rhythm), play electric keyboard, create solos from a chord chart, and balance mandolin and piano. Mennonites that we both are, the musical roots we sought were Irish and American fiddle tunes, American jazz and bluegrass, as well as my fusions of new music. Only one Kernlieder inspired composition (commissioned by the late Canadian Mennonite conductor Ben Horch) and one hymn – “Lift Your Glad Voices” – got written into my Mooncoin pieces.

International collaborations

Always interested in African music, I spent 1992-93 in Kenya listening to and studying popular, traditional, and women's music. In one session I collaborated with African musicians, improvising on piano while drummers from the Kenyan National Dance Troupe played traditional dances, directed by my drum teacher, Alfayo Omwandu.

I wanted to compose music in collaboration with Kenyan authors. After choosing six colorful legends from Kenyan oral literature and reversing them in lyric format, I was able to meet with the writer-collectors and learn about the contexts of their legends. Sitting in a cafe in downtown Nairobi, I sang my in-progress Maasai-texted songs to Naomi Kipury, who explained their meanings and nuances. In her crowded office, sandwiched between international phone calls, feminist writer Wanjiku Kabira not only interpreted her Luo and Kikuya stories but sang me a Kikuyu tune which accompanied one of the stories, suggesting I might quote the tune.

Fear of appropriation creeps into the mind of anyone attempting cross-cultural artistic exchange. However, the Kenyan writers of this oral literature seemed happy for me to work with their stories, editing my verses and letting me set to music their treasured, metaphorical legends which remain challenging even for Kenyans to interpret. *Daughter of Olapa* for singer and five players resulted, becoming the centerpiece for my first, same-titled CD. ("Olapa" means "moon" in the Maa language.) In Canada I placed it on a concert entitled "How We Hear Africa," to ensure listeners that my hearing of African stories is Western but hopefully inspired by African sensibilities. Collaboration can never promise more. While in Nairobi I gave a workshop solo-performance of *Olapa* in which I was briefly assisted by a Maasai man singing traditional rhythms – a tiny but vital moment of cultural exchange.

Roots collaborations – Finding my pack

Moving from Africa into my own culture became my next challenge. Though working in a Mennonite context much of my professional life, I have often gravitated outside for artistic influences, feeling somewhat claustrophobic in relation to Mennonite art, fearing formulaic prescriptions would deny artistic authenticity. One foot in, one foot out was my means of surviving Mennonite culture.

Yet when I knew a non-Menno composer had been commissioned to compose the “Mennonite Piano Concerto,” I felt a bit like southern Blacks whose blues were taken over and commercialized by White folk. Was our Menno culture so simplistic that a mere pastiche of our tunes could represent our soul? If so, why were writers – Rudy Wiebe, Di Brandt, Patrick Friesen – sweating blood to come to terms with our complexities? We have writers, but where are our composers? I began to wonder if we musicians could learn something from our writers.

I was asked to compose music for the 1994 Cincinnati Menno Arts Festival, for which I composed *Our Prayer*, addressing Mother God, text collaboratively written with Judith Miller. On the plane there, I was reading in Clarissa Pinkola Estes’s *Women Who Run With the Wolves* that women, like wolves, need to find their own pack. I felt I had no pack. But on hearing Swiss Mennonite poet Julia Kasdorf artfully articulate both love for, yet independence from, her own (and my) background, I began to rediscover my pack, putting me on the path for a collective howl, which resulted in *Quietly Landed?* the following year.

Now that I knew Julia was out there, I was eager to find more such voices and have them come together in a collaborative, multi-media piece for the upcoming Quiet in the Land historical conference about Anabaptist women (Millersville, PA, 1995). Working with collaborators Carol Penner and Cheryl Nafziger-Leis, we put forth calls for women’s stories all over the Mennonite world. “As a woman of Mennonite background have you been silenced? What stories have you never told?” Responses stunned and moved us – my own mother’s piano being taken away in her childhood, Bonnie Loewen’s struggle to gain custody of her child, Julia Kasdorf’s Amish grandmother thrown from a buggy, Di Brandt’s miscarriage, Carol Bauman’s playing timpani in one hand and holding her baby in the other.

We were eager to capture voices of both professional and non-professional writers so that “voice” could remain as close to the ground as possible. With writers’ permissions, we used dozens of stories and poetry as text for the feature-length drama *Quietly Landed?* for which I wrote and played music, beginning with stories of Anabaptist women. Taped voices of great aunt Elizabeth, midwife Elsie Cressman, and Mennonite and Amish congregational singing augmented live-performed settings of Di Brandt’s

poems, Raylene Hinz-Penner's "Wild Woman on the Oklahoma Panhandle," Shari Wagner's "Inheritance," Jean Janzen's "Peaches," and more. The dramatic performance, initially directed by Cheryl Nafziger-Leis, employed up to ten performers, resulting in five sell-out Canadian performances and two American tours, a third being contemplated when my mother, one of the readers, died in 1997.

I was haunted by the final song in our show, "Listen to your story, listen to your voice and let it sing." I had truly "sung" through other's stories and lyrics, hiding behind keyboards and hand drums. This drama was a collective voice, not a venue for my personal story. At times collaborations can keep one's personal voice silent.

Onward

All this was to change while preparing for our last *Quietly Landed?* tour in Spring 1997. Canadian singer/songwriter Cate Friesen asked me to join her on her next concert as a singer/pianist/songwriter. I could no longer hide from my own voice. In Cate I met another May-born, Menno-born, free-spirited, passionate composer/performer whose energy could fill a hall. Both of us with Di Brandt on our CDs, from preacher families with no dancing allowed, altos in high school choirs, one of three sisters, homebirth moms with single children bearing the name Friesen, and mandolin/guitar-playing partners. Though representing different musical styles, we recognize each other's music as being familiar – we come from the same pack.

Our first work session began with a collaborative songwriting venture in which together we spun out a rhythmic/harmonic sequence to some of her words – probably the first time I co-composed music with anyone. Though we didn't keep this piece we kept the collaborative spirit which shapes and energizes our music. Performing each other's music, we have developed a sound neither of us would have found individually – more punchy than bel canto/operatic singing; more layered than usual folk music. Also, it was rare for me to work with a singer who sings with folk/jazz inflections but understands classical music, who shapes my songs from her own sound-image. In turn, she has allowed me to create rooms and worlds as wild as I can imagine within her songs, my favorite of her charts being so minimal and sketchy as to form a tightrope between bedlam and beauty. But most

surprising, I have begun to discover my own singing voice. At times collaborations can lead a person back home.

Our varied musical experiences – folk, rock, classical, avant-garde, jazz – have put us in dialogue with our shared Mennonite/cultural heritage and contemporary music, creating a musical stream which will be heard on my second CD, *Journey Begun* (to be released early in 1999).

When I met Cate I was in the midst of setting *Houses* by American poet Shari Wagner, one of the *Quietly Landed?* contributors. Her extended poem appealed to me because it deals with three sisters. Each sister's house contains mythical hallways, mirrors, rooms, and endless spaces in which to breathe. Amish/Swiss Mennonite ancestors and ghosts "quilt the pattern of [her] life." As the sisters hide homemade necklaces under their dresses, I remember things I too have had to hide, with my Mennonite background. The second sister (symbolically me) "places the necklace in a drawer. . . and when she takes it out there are rubies . . . no one can take away," giving me hope that what I've had to hide can also be redeemed. The sisters who "join hands and arms" to build "a house where we belong" speak for all of us who seek to create new spaces for ourselves while making peace with our past.

My identity with this poetry led me to compose postmodern, neo-classic-tinged music in describing the cleanliness and order of tradition, and funk/jazz/fusion music for the breaking out from this tradition, which Cate and I premiered at the 1997 Goshen Mennonite Writers' Conference, head coverings and safety pin necklaces as stage props.

And back again

Coming full circle, the first Mennonite poet with whom I collaborated, Donna Carol Burkhart, has re-entered my life in a difficult but beautiful way. Her early poems, lavish with desire and angst, inspired my most angular, atonal music for operatic soprano and microtonal clarinet. After the recent tragic death of her 21-year-old son Christopher, our paths crossed again, and she gave me a poem she wrote before Chris was born, about the very church yard in which his ashes are now scattered. In my setting of *West Of Brutus* where "Amish, then Mennonites for decades gathered in this gray, now boarded structure with no steeple," I found Donna's words leading me to a simpler musical style resonant with four-part resolving harmonies from our decade-

long tradition of a *cappella* singing that I knew since childhood. In the best sense of collaboration, her lines circled my music into a refrain, “West of Brutus, coming home to gather.” Surely when she originally wrote this poem, she had no sense that Brutus, Michigan would become a gathering place, a home-coming for others of us.

Even now as I write this I wonder about the nature of collaborations. Does their appeal stem from my need to connect with others on similar paths? Do I gravitate toward kindred spirits for the energy they bring? Am I balanced by others’ voices? If the sum is really greater than the parts, is my own voice sufficient for what I have to say?

I can only say the best collaborations have come when I have least expected them, when I most believed in synchronicity and grace. And strangely enough, they have brought me closer home, giving me infinite room to discover my own voice. Maybe that’s why I value them so highly, because in this house “I can walk a whole day and never find where I started.” And yet, the more I learn about “where I started,” the more house there is to explore!

Literary Refractions

So overwhelming have the dilemmas of this world become for the human soul that it is necessary to clear the air by asking basic questions.

– Peter Solomon Seiltanzer, A.K.A. Skyblue the Badass

Beneath this naif charm of language there lies a considerable philosopher

– Geoffrey Brereton, on Montaigne

When immediately after reading “Can a Mennonite Be an Atheist?” I chatted with Dallas Wiebe on the telephone, he remarked that this essay was a parody of Montaigne (1533-1592), generally acknowledged as the first writer of the “personal” essay: the “familiar” essay rooted in personal experience and observation. Dallas also declared that the essay is “a Skyblue essay in disguise.” (Readers will note, near the end of the essay, the presence of Skyblue, identified elsewhere in Dallas Wiebe’s work as “the irresistible hero, both funny and sad . . . the eternal striver.”) In the “Preface” to Wiebe’s first novel, *Skyblue the Badass*, the narrator observes that Skyblue’s “attendant spirit” has “protected, guided and comforted” him “in the inevitable defeat that is life.”

What follows, then, is a personal essay in the style of Montaigne and in the voice of Skyblue the Badass, another of whose essays, entitled “Skyblue’s Essay on Tolstoy,” begins like this:

Few people realize how small Leo Tolstoy was. Most people think that you must be a big man to write big books. Leo was so small that he could sleep between two pages of *War and Peace*. When he was ready for bed, his wife would say, “Leo, what pages do you want tonight?” And he would say, “Oh, how about 1002 and 1003.” His wife would then open the book to those pages, put a little pillow between them and tuck Leo in. While her husband fell asleep, she would always kneel and pray that during the night no one would come by and slam the book shut.

When I remarked to Dallas on the telephone that I found “Can a Mennonite Be an Atheist?” at once provocative and playful (and, I might add now, oddly,

profoundly moving), he did not demur. “How to discuss this stuff,” he queried, “without sounding pompous, without being preachy?” Wiebe’s approach in “Can a Mennonite Be an Atheist?” – like his approach in much of his work – is, in the words of critic Paul Tiessen, “filled with serious purpose . . . [and with] serious mischief.”¹ It is, in the words of reviewer Wilbur Birkey, a “blend of irony and aspiration.”²

Hildi Froese Tiessen, *Literary Editor*

¹ Paul Tiessen, “Postmodern Practice and Parody: Dallas Wiebe’s *Our Asian Journey*,” unpublished paper presented at the Bluffton College conference on “Anabaptism and Postmodernity,” August 11-13, 1998.

² Wilbur Birkey, “Review of *Our Asian Journey*,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 72.4 (1998), 707.

Can a Mennonite Be an Atheist?

Dallas Wiebe

When Michel Eyquem de Montaigne (1533-1592) wrote what he called an “essai,” what he was doing was testing an idea. He was trying an idea. He was examining an idea to ascertain its validity and its implications. He was “trying” an idea in the sense that the word “try” is used in *Moby Dick* when Melville writes a chapter called “The Try-Works.” Montaigne was “trying” an idea in the sense that we have the word used in “These are the times that try men’s souls.” In addition, Montaigne was using the word “essai” in the sense of the French verb “essayer,” to attempt something, with the implication of determining its nature.

In this essay I want to try to use the word “essay” in Montaigne’s sense. In this essay I want to ask a question and then examine its answer or answers for their validity, their truth. The question I’m posing is as follows: “Can a person be a Mennonite and an atheist?” The question pushes disbelief to the extreme where it can be examined at its most radical expression. It’s an old idea, I know; ideas can often be best tested when they are stated in their extreme form. Ideas, as even the Existentialists realized, can best be examined in their absurd form. “Ideas breach the limits of reason” (Cochlaeus). State a crazy proposition and then try to make sense out of it. Or, define an absurd situation and then try to make sense out of it.

I want to begin with a man I have known for some years. He is the neighborhood bookie in the area of Cincinnati in which I live. I can’t use his real name. Let’s call him “Ishmael.” Now, even though this Ishmael is not educated, I like to talk to him because he mixes up words. He is an unending and surprising source of linguistic humor. Ishmael once tried to give me some

Dallas Wiebe, now professor emeritus at the University of Cincinnati, has published six books, including two novels: Skyblue the Badass (Doubleday-Paris Review, 1969) and Our Asian Journey (MLR Editions Canada, 1997), three volumes of short stories, and one poetry chapbook. Former founding editor of the Cincinnati Poetry Review (1975-1994), Wiebe has won the Aga Khan Fiction Award from Paris Review and the prestigious Pushcart Prize.

“palomino peppers.” He once went to Atlanta, Georgia, where he saw on a street corner some “female personalities.” Once, when discussing a kid who flew a plane across the U.S., Ishmael said the kid was probably just “trying to get his name in *The Book of Genesis*.”

This Ishmael asked me one day if I believed in God and the afterlife. When someone asks me about my religion I usually tell them that I am a Christian anarchist or a heterosecular humanist. I don’t tell them that I’m a Mennonite because they think that means “Amish.” I told Ishmael that I was not an atheist. I said I was an agnostic. “Agnosticism is the effect of a B.A. on a weak mind” (Rev. Gambrinus Philologus Wiebe, *Adagia*). He asked me what that word meant. I explained what an agnostic is. He asked me why I believed the way I did and I told him why. He thought about it for a while and, when I asked him if he believed in God and the afterlife, he said, “Well, Dallas, I guess I’m like you. I’m also one of those ‘obnoxious.’” I didn’t ask him what the odds were that there might be a God and an afterlife. Ishmael will soon be settling the question as to whether there is a God and whether there is an afterlife. Maybe the fact that he is an “obnoxious” also leads him to believe that he can live to an old age and still smoke five packs of cigarettes a day.

It’s the word “obnoxious” that is the operant word here. My question for this essay is of an obnoxious nature. It’s the kind of question no one wants to examine. It’s the kind of question Montaigne would examine. “The impediments of the diurnal collapse before the full thrust” (William Cop). The statement of the question may be obnoxious; the question is not. Mennonites must be ready to address any question, including the most disturbing ones. We must be ready to articulate the enigmas of belief and to look at them honestly and carefully no matter the consequences. It’s an old notion that faith without testing is bound to decay. It’s obvious that belief without doubt is fantasy.

My question is important because Mennonites are no longer farmers and no longer live in coherent communities. Mennonites have dispersed into all levels and kinds of our society. Mennonites live in cities where the stresses are different, not necessarily more severe, but different from those in rural life. Mennonites have entered a wide variety of professions and that too has put stress on traditional Mennonite beliefs. Mennonites live in cities and have

become teachers, doctors, technicians, nurses, engineers, managers, politicians and even lawyers.

The problem I'm addressing comes down to the necessary presence of doubt and skepticism. "Doubt is the womb of the unexpected" (Collegium Porci). (Here the reader should recall Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* for the invidious results of the absence of doubt.) Most professions require some form of professional training. Professionally trained people must acquire the habit of doubt. In short, can Mennonite belief and intellectual discipline be reconciled? It is no secret that doubt and belief don't mix. Skepticism and religion are inevitably in conflict. Religious belief, especially, requires the absence of doubt. Christian fundamentalists – all religious fundamentalists for that matter – demand that belief be accepted without question. The one thing that all religious fundamentalists have in common is that they are right and everyone else is wrong. For them religious belief comes from divine fiat. It is apodictic. It is handed down from a divine source. You can't, in the eyes of most believers, be a believer and say "Honor thy father and thy mother depending on the circumstances." You can't say, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God we hope."

The Bible itself denigrates doubt. In the Gospel of John, chapter 20, when the risen Christ appears to the disciples, Thomas, called Didymus, does not believe the disciples' report that Christ has appeared to them. Thomas insists on touching the wounds. For which we have inherited the opprobrious label "Doubting Thomas." But Thomas is us. We too must doubt without the presence of miracles. Thomas at least got to see the wounds. In her great short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," Flannery O'Connor's character the Misfit does not believe that Christ arose from the dead because he was not, as he says, there to see it. I sympathize with the Misfit. He doubts. Christ responds to Thomas's doubt by saying, "Happy are they who never saw me and yet have found faith" (John 20:29)

The topic that I'm addressing often takes the form in our time of an attack on "secular humanism." The attack by the Christian fundamentalists ignores the crucial role of humanism in Western culture. To begin with, the whole western European system of universities is based on the emergence of what is usually called humanistic learning. The emergence of humanistic

learning came about in order to eliminate ideology from institutions of learning. “Colet fumed while Erasmus tittered” (Beatus Rhenanus). The most important area where ideology had to be removed was in the sciences. Mostly that ideology came from religious institutions, especially in western Europe from the Roman Catholic Church. It was an ideology enforced by political power. Humanism was primarily an attempt to free learning from the constraints of religious controls. Where scientific speculation and the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church clashed, science was suppressed, as in the case of Galileo. It is often said that the suppression of Galileo killed scientific speculation in Italy and drove scientific endeavor into northern Europe.

Whatever the history of the conflict between science and religion was and is, religious fundamentalists are certainly right in fearing secular humanism. They cannot exist comfortably side by side. They are usually seen as enemies. I don't believe that to be true. I don't accept the incompatibility of humanism and religion. I think they reinforce each other as we Mennonites in fact practice in our colleges where our so-called religious colleges teach the liberal arts, that is, western humanistic learning, along with Mennonite theology. The pairing is not so awkward as it at first seems. “Humanism and Mennonitism came from the same matrix” (Willibald Beck).

Mennonitism may have come, as Beck says, as much from humanism as it did from the Bible. The Reformation certainly was “humanistic.” “Erasmus laid the eggs and Luther hatched the chickens” (John le Sauvage). The common notion is that humanism came from the so-called Renaissance in Western culture, which began with a revival of Classical learning and a consequent propagating of Classical ideals. One of those ideals that came with the Renaissance, no matter its source, was religious tolerance and religious freedom. Humanism led to such ideas as belief by consent, not by force. It led to such ideas as the right to disagree. It led to Protestantism. It led to Anabaptism. It led to the secular nation. It led to the right to question official belief. The humanism that grew out of the Renaissance led to many of the ideals which Mennonites came to espouse, even if Mennonites said they came from and indeed did come originally from Scripture. Some of those ideals in our beliefs are pacifism, service to humanity, simple living,

separation of church and state, humble life, worship of God, faith in divine presence.

The problem with “secular humanism” is the word “secular.” It is redundant because humanism must be, perforce, secular. The use of “secular” makes it appear that humanism excludes God and religious belief. It is, in that sense, a dishonest label. Humanism does not mean atheistical. “Secular” means that there is no official religion. We live in a secular nation. There is no official religion for our nation, just as humanism recognizes no one religion as superior to all others. And that’s as it should be. We are free to worship and believe as we see fit. And so are all other believers. That secularism must exist or we inevitably fall into religious orthodoxy with its concomitant religious oppression. Our whole Anabaptist past is an attempt to find personal and communal religious freedom. Mennonites are the children of humanistic learning as much as they are the children of the Reformation, which itself was a result of humanistic learning.

The main reason the fundamentalists attack secular humanism is that they don’t know what humanism is. For them secular humanism means “Theory of Evolution.” One wonders if they have ever read Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* (1859). It might surprise them to know that Darwin was anything but an atheist. They might also be surprised to know that humanism includes the study of religions and religious beliefs, and that much of humanism arose from revulsion to corrupt, contemporary religious practices. The men who founded and propagated humanism were almost all religious men and believers in God. Humanism never was anti-religious. In its formative years it wasn’t even agnostic. It was always associated with religion and religious belief. Religious belief and the study of belief are at the center of humanism because religion is central to the mind of man. “Humanism is the handmaiden of Christianity” (J.B. Wolgamot).

More than that, the assailants of secular humanism don’t understand or want to understand science. When Galileo taught Copernican theories about planets orbiting the sun, his religious critics refused to accept the evidence. They refused to accept scientific data. “They pray with their hands folded so God will not see what’s written on their palms” (Ludovico il Moro). Modern critics of humanistic learning are just as ignorant and have minds that are just as closed. When the Bible says “The heavens declare the glory of God; and

the firmament showeth his handiwork,” anyone who has followed recent astronomical discoveries must say “Yea, yea.” The more we learn about our universe through such machines as the Hubble Space Telescope, the more we see the extraordinary wonder of our universe. If wonder is the source of religious belief, then modern science is working for God, and the fundamentalists ought to wake up and realize that.

I have been an insomniac for as long as I can remember. I lie awake for many hours through the darkness. “When night’s dark curtains fall we think all” (Faustus Andrelinus). While lying in that darkness I try to think about things so that the time is not wasted. One of the ideas I examined for years was, “What is an intellectual?” It finally came to me some years ago what an intellectual is. In the darkness, about 4:00 A.M., it came to me that “An intellectual is a person who knows at all times that he might be wrong.” It was such a simple and, to me, elegant formulation that I got up and wrote it down so that I would remember it. I like my definition so much that I often quote it. You also may quote it if you like, but be sure to credit the source.

If my definition of an intellectual is acceptable, how can an intellectual be a believer in Christianity? Or any religious belief, for that matter? The implications of my definition are immense. If my definition is true, how can an intellectual believe in capital punishment? How can he be patriotic? How can he support any war? How can he read the Bible and not be assailed by doubt? How can he be a Mennonite?

I consider myself an intellectual and a Mennonite. I am aware of the apparent contradiction. I think that situation is not only inevitable given the condition of modern Mennonitism but it is also necessary. In this twentieth soon to be twenty-first century we Mennonites must learn to live in the existential dilemma that our beliefs create. Inevitably Mennonite beliefs will clash with the world we must live in. I say, let’s enjoy the noise. Let us with a gladsome mind add to the banging and clattering. Not only should we accept the dilemmas or our situation, we should revel in them. “Joy cries from the depths when the mind arises to the brink” (Cuthbert Tunstall). The dilemmas we face will keep our minds alive. We will in our ambivalences not lapse into rigid belief. We will in our tensions not lapse into orthodoxy. The conditions that threaten our beliefs will in fact perfect our beliefs.

But there is that matter of doubt. I consider myself an agnostic. But I support the Mennonite Church. It's the only church I've ever joined, it's the only church I would join, and it's the only church I can support. I think the Mennonite Church has an important place in our world. What the Mennonite Church does in regard to relief work and peace work must be supported. The Mennonite Church must be sustained as an institution that offers an alternative to the insane militarism of our own nation and of other nations. The Mennonite Central Committee and the Mennonite Disaster Service are, to me, the perfect embodiments of belief. I believe that belief is what you do, not what you say you believe. I am quite aware that it is an old idea. I am quite aware of the problems caused by such a position. I'm all too aware of the Apostle Paul and his idea of justification by faith. In my belief, the theologians and their theological systems are irrelevant.

You do not have to believe in God in order to believe in the doing of good works and the living of a moral life. What Jesus of Nazareth presumably said in the so-called "Sermon on the Mount" doesn't have to come from God in order to be believed. It doesn't have to come from someone who is the Son of God in order for the truthfulness of its moral vision, the validity of its moral imperatives, to be believed. The Sermon on the Mount stands as one of the greatest of all statements of human morality ever given to mankind, no matter where it came from and no matter who said it. It doesn't have to be apodictic to be believed. It doesn't have to be said by someone who rose from the dead. It takes thought to see that. Even an insomniac agnostic can see that what the Sermon on the Mount sets forth is something that might save this world from its own insanity and therefore must be believed and lived.

Which brings us to the human engine called "thought." Doubt comes from thought. "We are commanded to be thoughtful" (Isaac Stern). But thought also leads to acceptance of what often comes only from thoughtless belief. My version of "The Anabaptist Vision" includes thought and belief and all the attendant difficulties which thinking brings on in the world of belief. I am willing to accept those difficulties because I believe that evil is the product of thoughtlessness as much as it is the violation of divine fiat. "When the mind's away the cat of evil will play" (Eoban of Hesse). Thought, disciplined by doubt and skepticism, leads to moral purity. The Enlightenment thinkers believed that and they were right. Scrupulous thought leads us to

believe that morality begins with doing unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Religious belief, especially fundamentalism, must be tempered by humanistic learning or we get the religious oppression that we now have in Iran, Algeria, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, that is, in nations not touched by secular humanism, nations in which religious beliefs are enforced by military force. Now we see in the U.S. religious fundamentalists attempting to put their beliefs into law, an effort that is a serious threat to religious liberty. We see in our time a dangerous and powerful effort to suppress humanistic learning. The attack on secular humanism is an attack on doubt, humor, and democracy. Doubt, humor, and democracy are anarchic. Even humor must be included among the enemies of fundamentalism because humor and humanism coincide. They undermine totalitarian control. They vitiate authority. Ideology, whether as religious fundamentalism or as political correctness, cannot flourish in a humanistic environment. Humanistic learning is the source of understanding and tolerance. Mennonitism should be based on thoughtfully established and thoughtfully supported ideas as well as Biblical revelation.

Reading the Bible surely will lead the thoughtful to skepticism and doubt, as it did for me when I first read the King James Version at the age of twelve. I think now that the Bible was written for another time. In a sense, it was not written for us. The earth we live on now includes problems never addressed by the biblical writers. Fortunately for us, revelation is not over. It is constant. We have but to think our way to it. "The sun bursts through the clouds of our unknowing and withers iniquity" (Sylvester Gigli). We don't have to have an anointed one, a Messiah, walking on this earth and telling us that he is the Son of God. We have our minds, as fallible as they are, that can tell us that we must care for the poor, not commit murder, not destroy our environment, love our neighbors, respect our parents, not kill the dark-skinned poor in other lands. Thought can tell us to be Mennonites. Certainly it can reinforce our beliefs. Race hate is the absence of reason. It is also the absence of belief in God. I acknowledge the dilemma and the mutual reinforcement.

Apocalypticists refuse to address the dilemmas that confuse and discomfort. They refuse to address the world at hand. Apocalyptic constructs

are an admission of defeat in the realm of moral conflict. Apocalypticists say, "I quit. Let's get rid of it all." They refuse to learn, to think and to change. They have given up on both thought and belief. I refuse to shut down my mind even at 4:00 A.M. I will not stop thinking even when it leads me into the valley of the shadow because I know that eventually my thinking will cause me to lift up mine eyes unto the hills.

I think, then, that I can be an agnostic and a Mennonite. I think I can be an intellectual and be a part of the Mennonite community. Proximity is not necessary for community; a common set of beliefs is. Given that we live in dispersion and under great stress in our beliefs, we must learn to live in that world where belief and thought are frequently at odds. We must learn to live with doubt. Skyblue says that the great spiritual problem of our time is how to be pious without being religious. He equates religion with mindlessness. I refuse to accept the idea that to be pious you must be thoughtless. "Right thinking is the piety of the pure in heart" (Gratian Pullus). I believe that we can be intellectuals and live with the presence of the knowledge of possible error. What you do is what you believe and what you do must be thoughtful. Morality stems from right thought just as much as it comes from revelation. Right reason can lead to moral perfection. Religious tradition has made thought evil; we must not accept that. Intelligence, doubt, skepticism are not evil. They are necessary parts of our lives and cannot be avoided. We should welcome them. Let's cry out that we are ready.

In the past, Mennonites have accepted theology as a "mind-full" discipline. We have evidence for that in the work of John Howard Yoder. His *The Politics of Jesus* is a great intellectual defense of Mennonite pacifist belief. Yoder achieved a national status of great respect as a thinker. He was honored within his discipline. His work is an example of how belief and the exercise of the mind can co-exist for the enhancement of each other. He was a great Mennonite intellectual.

Mennonites must now achieve that same status in other intellectual disciplines. We all know and must accept the idea that thought is not safe. If it's working well it leads to risky areas of skepticism. It leads to trouble, especially in the area of belief. But that risk must be taken. The risk is, of course, reduced when belief is tempered by thought and thought is tempered by belief. The life of study and learning must remain an option for those who

wish to remain within the Mennonite Church or the Mennonite Church will become “mind-less.” Mennonites must make room for the life of the mind or their church is dead.

Finally, there is the dilemma of the Mennonite writer. I think there is such a thing as a “Mennonite” writer. If such a person doesn’t exist, one can take on the persona or play the role. “It is very hard to assign bounds to the achievements of the faculties of the soul” (Montaigne). As Mennonites enter the literary world and write poetry and fiction, the existential forces become ever stronger. My friend Skyblue says that “To be a writer you must know everything and believe nothing.” It is said that a reader in order to read a piece of fiction must “suspend disbelief.” That may be true. It is also said that when a writer is creating a narrative he must suspend belief. His religious beliefs must be put aside in order to create his narrative. Narratives deal with moral incertitude, with moral dilemmas. To be a successful writer, a writer must enter that world where all belief is suspect. He must enter a world where religion is absent. He must learn to take on sympathetically and seriously the personae of evil. “The face of evil is in your mirror” (Pierre Malet). If Mennonites are to accomplish something of importance as writers of poetry and fiction, they will have to enter that world of the imagination where there is no moral certitude, no matter what the writer’s personal beliefs might be. It is not a comfortable place. “Doubting-Castle” was no daydream of John Bunyan. He knew how dangerous the place is.

At this point Montaigne would probably give us an anecdote from his daily experience. He would throw in a few quotes from Classical literature. He would wrap up his essay with some sleight-of-hand. I doubt that one can be an atheist and still be a Mennonite. I’ll give it some more thought. It’s late as I write this and I have a long dark night ahead of me. In the darkness, it’s easy to compromise on these matters, even if compromise is slightly dishonest. Before turning out my night light, I’ll read my Bible as usual and say a little prayer for the doubters of this world. I’ll ask God to lift up their hearts. I never pray for myself; I think I can handle the problem without outside help. I know that, come the dawn, the problem will still be there.

When I see Ishmael tomorrow, I’ll try my thought on him. I’ll say to him, “I’m not an atheist. I’m a Mennonite agnostic.” He won’t know the difference. He won’t get the joke. He’ll think I’m an Amish man who can’t

harness a horse. Ishmael doesn't know the life of contradiction and the problems it poses. He doesn't care about intellectuals, because they don't place bets with him. He doesn't realize that intellectuals don't gamble because they know at all times that they might be wrong. The only doubt Ishmael has is how much to put on Bender's Vision in the seventh race at Beulah Park. To him I will just be another "obnoxious." He will just complain to me about the "inclimate" weather and how much he had to pay for some "genetic" toilet tissue. As the poet John Sapidus once said, "We dine on our words and therefore our stomachs turn sour."

Driving with Rumi

Jeff Gundy

*So let us not be sure of anything,
only ourselves, only that,
so that miraculous beings
can come running to help.*
– Maulana Jalal al-Din Rumi

I've been talking into this little box with it stuck on pause. But now here I am, going where I'm led by the roads and the signs and the map, trying to stay in my lane and in the clear, trying to drive a little too fast without getting punished, trying to pass some of the traffic and let the rest pass me.

And I have Rumi on the tape player, with spacy Eastern music behind, Coleman Barks' wild southern drawl chanting the secret lines. I've been watching the human stuff go by, road and ditch and overpass and cars, buildings on one side and trucks on the other, how thick it is everywhere. And I've been wishing for some place beyond, behind, above all this, some place pure and true and real, some place before the human world.

A good way back I passed a field of waist-high brush, brownish scrub weeds and wildflowers, and as I zipped by enclosed in the car I had a quick impulse to go hide there, find a place where I could crawl in and take cover. I know how sentimental that is, how unlikely, but it still went through my head.

And Rumi says this:

*But I feel more like a flute
that you put into your mouth
and then neglect to blow.*

And I shut the tape off and let that one settle in the stillness for a while as I go down the road and past a broken-down truck with orange triangles out to

warn the rest of us, and another truckdriver eases toward my lane to give it some space as he passes, but I'm here, he can't go too far. He just has to ease out toward the white line, and I ease out toward the yellow line and we ease on, making our little adjustments, waiting for some wind to blow on our flutes.

And Rumi says this:

*No one knows what makes the soul
wake up so happy. Maybe a dawn breeze
is blowing the veil from the face of God.*

And I don't know what's in my left eye that's making me blink and rub it and blink again thinking if I just irritate it enough it'll come clean. I know if you want to feel how small you are there's nothing like getting in a car by yourself and driving across the world for a little while, learning again how long it takes to get anywhere, how far apart the real things are, how tiny your place in the mind of God must be.

All morning I fussed and stewed on the broken machines I own, how much time and money they will cost to fix. Now I'm riding in one that's not broken, going as fast as I can, my hands a little tired on the steering wheel but I'm going down the road, wheeling toward Wheeling. Oh, it's a gorgeous world and the sun's going down and the golden November light falls sideways on everything, the big flatbed semi loaded with the barksy slices left from cutting lumber out of trees, skins bound off to be firewood or pulp, pieces hanging off everywhere, a big slab nearly in my face as I peel quickly into the left lane to get by, to get ahead, where it can't fall on me.

And Rumi says this:

*Birds make great white sky circles
of their freedom. How do they learn it?
They fall. And falling, they are given wings.*

And plenty of things are circling and falling and whirling, the music whirls, the engine whirls, the pistons and crankshaft, the oil and the antifreeze are whirling and the blood in my body is whirling, my head is whirling as the neurons fire and relax, spark and wink. As for me I'm holding steady, I'm holding the wheel and I'm staying in my lane and I'm getting ready to cross

the bridge to West Virginia, to the next state, I see the blue metal girders arching like some coil reaching out of me, out across the water, touching down, touching something bigger, something older, something else.

– Quotes are from the album *Rumi: The Voice of Longing*

The Little Clerk

Jeff Gundy

Sunday morning, ten o'clock, north through the greening,
partly ruined hills. Miles of thin grass behind the sign

for the Consolidated Coal Company, no fences, nothing moving.
Then cattle in a scrubby draw, black cow calmly grazing the ditch.

In the restaurant I asked dumb questions: Do you like Chicago?
Do you have sons? We both have sons. Do you feel grief,

you asked, when you think of them? Not *about* them, *of* them?
We talk and talk, we do, and then when it matters we go slow

and awkward, hoping not to disappoint. Still you seemed to me
a brother, lost for generations. What should we need to say?

It's all trying to become nobody, you said. I hate religion.
What is the ground of language, if not prayer? This must sound crazy.

You said, You still go to church when you don't have to?
And were impressed, envious maybe. I said I'd stopped trying
to escape, I said I've only almost surrendered. In Holmes County,
crows harry the red hawks. Tourist farms loll among the strip mines.

Three young men in gray stocking caps and plain clothes pump
their bicycles up the highway towards town. We're *not* separate,

you said, we're just *not*. Now you're on a plane, I'm here
with my windows rolled tight, music and coffee and the country

rolling by like a silent movie or the set for the rest of the story,
or the suit the jailors bring for the great man to wear before
the governor. Just before they bring him in the little clerk bends
to tie his shoe. The cup on the dash basks in the sun, so clear,
the slight green flecks, the whirls of brown, the glaze webbed
and crazed, clinging hard. I pick it up, I drink the coffee, still hot
and good. I swing onto the ramp and it slides an inch, adjusting,
as though it's learned some small, precious secret, and from now on . . .

– For LYL

'78 Chevy

Julia Kasdorf

At least one person I know thinks rust is sexy,
and when, at the bottom of a three-mile hill
with ominous runaway truck lanes, my foot hit
the floor without any resistance (master cylinder
cracked and brake lines dry as dirt), I drifted
to a stop at Caruso and Sons Service Station
and Bait Shop. While Jack fixed my brakes,
old Jack gave me a lift, asked where I'd grown up,
where I live now. He knew both towns. When he was young,
he drove a lady half way across the state
because she had no way to see her son in jail.

Julia Kasdorf is author of two collections of poetry, Sleeping Preacher and Eve's Striptease. She teaches writing and literature at Messiah College.

When that kid got out, he was fine, learned a trade
in there, and now cuts everyone's hair in Mount Pleasant.
Jack sees him most days on the street, and the other guy
who was in there with him – both fine. I thanked
Jack for the ride, he batted his eyes, "Always
happy to help a beautiful lady." I could be vexed,
but just felt grateful and flattered, though I know
a compliment costs nothing and means less,
given how little must pass by his gas pumps.

I could inflect this with longing, loss or remorse,
but when I was broke, my dad gave me that car,
which belonged to his step-mom, now deceased,
whose powers of protection surpass St. Christopher's.
And my students, born the year my huge, maroon Impala
rolled off the line, think I'm totally cool and wise
to their '70s aesthetic. The next day, Dad hit
a spotted fawn on a mountain road. Couldn't
have helped it, Mom said, but we all got quiet,
and when I looked out the back, slender legs
fluttered on the berm. That was the next day.
I spin no theories of sacrifice or substitution.
The night after I lost my brakes, I just fell asleep,
safe, without speculation.

Book Reviews

Disquiet in the Land: Cultural Conflict in American Mennonite Communities.
Fred Kniss. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997.

Disquiet in the Land is an ambitious, unconventional, and thought-provoking look at conflicts in American Mennonite churches and communities over the past 125 years. In this volume, a revision of Kniss's doctoral thesis in sociology at the University of Chicago, conflicts among Mennonite people (208 cases, to be exact) come under scrutiny for what they reveal about Mennonite religious ideology and late nineteenth- and twentieth-century adaptations to American life. Kniss's ideas about a conflict-ridden heritage are important and provide linkages between this faith tradition and contemporary analyses of social discord such as James Davison Hunter's *Culture Wars* (1991). Even before the publication of Kniss's book, the author's emphasis on conflict was stimulating debate in Mennonite academic circles – for example, at a June 1996 symposium at Goshen College. But in the end, this book is disappointing: it seems more a study in academic hyperbole than an authentic portrayal of Mennonite strife in all its richness.

The book promotes a revised version of “resource mobilization theory” – a theoretical perspective on social movements that, in Kniss's view, is helpful in explaining how socio-religious groups like Mennonites respond to and contribute to societal changes over time. Kniss is particularly interested in cultural interactions among Mennonites as well as interactions between Mennonites and others, and he argues that ideas and symbols (such as nonresistance and nonconformity) are resources that serve as sources of identity but also portend disunity within the group. Thus, the inevitability of conflict in Mennonite communities is a recurring theme here.

In the volume's two major sections – a historical survey of conflict in selected Mennonite communities from 1870 to 1985, and theoretical explanations of patterns of conflict – Kniss seeks to convince his intended audience of non-Mennonite scholars of several key points. One is that Mennonite individuals and groups, despite their “quiet in the land” image, have quarreled over issues such as Sunday schools, military service

obligations, and proscribed dress, with outcomes ranging from victory and compromise to defeat and schism. Another key point is that American Mennonites are perhaps as likely as any religious group to experience frequent and sustained conflict because of what Kniss identifies as two paradigms existing side-by-side in Mennonite ideology and practice. The first, “traditionalism,” connotes an emphasis on traditional moral values and the importance of biblical and collective authority, while the second, “communalism,” bespeaks Mennonites’ concern for mutual aid, racial justice, pacifism, and congregationalism.

Disquiet in the Land serves up plenty of evidence that, indeed, conflict has been an ongoing facet of American Mennonitism, and that the ideals of traditionalism and communalism, both deeply rooted in this distinctive religious heritage, have not coexisted easily. Kniss suggests that “it is possible to interpret Mennonite history as a dance between two ideological partners, with first one leading, then the other” (137-38). He neglects to explain that “dancing” would have itself been a loaded proposition for his subjects in say, mid-century, and that the metaphor is rather a funny one. But this very issue – of writing for an audience perceived not to know very much about Mennonites in the first place – creates a climate in which Kniss glosses over finer points and unfortunately misses a number of opportunities to give readers a realistic feel for Mennonite church conflicts.

Troubling signs appear as early as the introduction, where Kniss’s use of anecdotal evidence is glib. *Disquiet in the Land* opens with a 1925 incident in a Mennonite congregation in Elida, Ohio, in which several parties disagreed over enforcement of dress regulations. According to an unnamed witness, one participant carried a “carnal weapon” when the dispute escalated to a face-off over control of the church building. Although Kniss does not fully elaborate this incident or explain its outcome, he claims that “although more dramatic than most, this conflict typified many that were sweeping through Mennonite communities in the 1920’s and 1930’s” (2). Later in the introduction he revisits Elida’s “gun-toting Mennonites,” apparently exaggerating the earlier description of a single weapon. Kniss suggests it is profoundly ironic that people who value “unpretentious and peaceable lives” should find themselves in conflict with each other. Scholars outside the Mennonite tradition might very well find the juxtaposition of “peaceable

lives” and conflict intriguing. But certainly Mennonites in the midst of conflict, or reflecting on past friction, do not regard their struggles as somehow inconsistent with peace theology!

Too often *Disquiet in the Land* overreaches in interpreting Mennonite experience. Within congregations the historical consciousness of many members is considerable. In working with Mennonite congregations preparing for church anniversary celebrations, for example, I’ve noticed that their historical memory is remarkable: major conflicts, even those fifty years distant, are well-known and not necessarily perceived as aberrations.

Kniss’s book also seems to homogenize American Mennonitism rather than give due attention to regional and denominational diversity. Although Kniss claims to provide a new model for explaining religious conflict by using some nineteenth- and twentieth-century Mennonites as a case study, he does little to explain how the particular people he focused on, Mennonite Church (MC) folk in four eastern states, differed significantly in historical development, religious ideology, and cultural accommodation from other American Mennonites. This is surprising in light of other sociological literature produced in this decade that highlights Mennonite religious identity as a “mosaic.”

Disquiet in the Land overreaches in its use of evidence as well. For example, Kniss remarks that the 208 examples of conflicts he found by perusing primary and secondary documents in Mennonite archives in Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia represent an *entire* population of identifiable conflicts among MC persons in that region. But the kinds of conflicts revealed in the official papers of church leaders and historians are hardly representative of all church conflicts. Had Kniss examined other kinds of sources as well – oral history, for example, or women’s diaries – he might have been able to claim knowledge of a cross-section of Mennonite conflicts, but even then he would need to acknowledge the selectivity of sources chosen.

Readers will find in this volume a devil’s advocate spirit of debate, as in the assertion that “there may be many good reasons to join or remain in a religious community, but the desire for calm consensus, shared values, and a retreat from uncertainty is not among them” (18). When one thinks of present-day church debates over homosexuality, for example, the point is well taken. *Disquiet in the Land*, despite its flaws, does help put contemporary

controversies into historical perspective. But the statement quoted above is a needless exaggeration. Most Mennonites I know will insist that “shared values” are alive and well within their religious communities.

RACHEL WALTNER GOOSSEN, Goshen College, Goshen, IN

Women Against the Good War: Conscientious Objection and Gender on the American Homefront, 1941-1947. Rachel Waltner Goossen. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997.

The terror, futility, and destructiveness of war have been with us since time immemorial. Because conflict is central to the story of humanity, scholars have studied and been fascinated by war and its narrative power. Facing this strong current, however, are scholars who elect to study peace history, and within this committed and small subset of historians we now find those who concentrate on women’s peace history. Rachel Waltner Goossen is a peace historian who has chosen to examine women conscientious objectors during World War II, the so-called “Good War.”

Goossen, a member of the Mennonite Church, did not investigate the complete spectrum of women’s conscientious objection to WW II; instead she concentrated on the previously hidden history of the 2,000 women pacifists who worked as volunteers, professionals, or paid mental health workers in the Civilian Public Service (CPS) camps and programs set up throughout the United States during the war. Goossen studied archival oral interview transcripts and created a questionnaire that she sent to women who were regular attenders of CPS reunions. In this manner, the stories of 180 women came to light; most of these individuals belonged to the three historic peace churches that administered the camps (Mennonite, Brethren, and Friends), and many were relations or sweethearts or wives of the conscientious objectors (C.O.s) who worked for the CPS.

Goossen argues effectively that the pacifist women whom she studied belonged to church-based “cultures of nonconformity” which encouraged their service-oriented witness against war. Interestingly, many young women in this religious nonresistant pacifist tradition experienced some conflict

between the teachings and practices of their respective conservative patriarchal churches and their pride in being “C.O. girls” or “C.O. women.” Mennonite women in particular, Goossen suggests, came to hold an expansive sense of agency or identity that went beyond the traditional view of the helpmeet pious woman of the faith. Interviews and questionnaire responses reveal that the wartime public service of these C.O. women led them to social activism: “For the rest of their lives, they would regard this wartime program as a foundation for their interest in a multitude of causes, including antiwar activism, racial justice, and – especially for many women alumni [of CPS] – issues of gender equality” (15).

Goossen convincingly presses home the point that the C.O. women were “good citizens” whose alternative service to the state during wartime was motivated primarily by a nonresistant religious tradition. In contrast to World War I suffragist-pacifists, the World War II C.O. women in her sample did not connect conceptually the promotion of peace with the feminist goal of gender equality. It is intriguing to speculate about the extent of feminist consciousness among secular C.O. women in the era of the Good War. If Goossen had expanded her study to include the wartime alternative service of women pacifists who were not members of the historic peace churches – for instance, women members of the War Resisters League (WRL) or of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) – would she have discovered a feminist sensibility or an incipient feminist sensibility among women in these groups? Historian Harriet Alonso argues in her overview of the U.S. women’s peace movement, *Peace as a Women’s Issue* (1993) that even in the “non-feminist” interwar and WW II eras, WILPF (founded in 1915 by WW I suffragist-pacifists) always remained feminist: the structures and values of a patriarchal warmaking state and violence against women, children, and other disadvantaged groups in society were linked in the minds of its members. And as Carrie Foster points out in her study, *The Women and the Warriors: The U.S. Section of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom* (1995), during World War II WILPF members worked closely with the CPS. My own scholarship locates the beginnings of the WRL (founded in 1924) among the feminists, pacifists, C.O.s, and civil libertarians of the WW I era. (See Frances H. Early, *A World Without War: How U.S. Feminists and Pacifists Resisted World War I* [Syracuse University

Press, 1997]). An analysis of WRL women's WW II activism (and CPS-related work) is needed.

Rachel Goossen is to be congratulated for bringing to light this peace narrative of Mennonite, Amish, Brethren, and Quaker women C.O.s. Her scholarship is sound and her prose is clear. Goossen's study is a welcome addition to the field of women's peace history, and is suitable for undergraduate classes in peace and conflict studies, women's studies, and history programs. Photographs and a bibliography enhance the book's value.

FRANCES H. EARLY, Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, NS

Whose Historical Jesus? William E. Arnal and Michel Desjardins, eds. Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1997.

Burton L. Mack begins his essay in this volume by describing an area of loose shale in the Mission Mountains in Montana. A single step off this high ridge of shale can start a hiker on a thousand-foot slide down the mountainside. "You need good boots and a bit of balance if you want to enjoy the ride," observes Mack. "It is dangerous otherwise." He uses this analogy to describe what happened when he stepped into the idea of Jesus as a Cynic-like character. He inadvertently fell into a long slide down a trail he hadn't intended to explore!

This volume has a similar impact on readers who may be only slightly interested in the current flurry of books and thinking about the so-called "Third Quest" for the historical Jesus. If readers hope for a nice, succinct summary of the Jesus Seminar and its opponents or proponents, then they are in for quite a ride. This is not a "nice" or "succinct" book; it is, however, quite a breathtaking one. If you want to get a sense of the diversity and breadth of current North American scholarship on Jesus, this book will fill the bill.

The essays here emerge from the annual meetings of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies in June of 1993 and 1994. The papers are consolidated under two broad headings: "Recent Concerns" and "Enduring Concerns."

The first half, Recent Concerns, includes essays by notable Jesus Seminar participants John Dominic Crossan (“Itinerants and Householders in the Earliest Jesus Movement”) and Burton Mack (“Q and the Cynic-Like Jesus”), and by other scholars. This section focuses on the recent interest in the socio-economic context of Jesus’ life, particularly in the Hellenized context of Galilee, where Cynic preachers abounded. Considerable attention is given to this geographic/social context in essays by Sean Freyne, L. Gregory Bloomquist, and Wendy Cotter.

Two essays differ considerably in style from the heady academic musings of their colleagues, and offer highly readable personal accounts of the value and cost of being scholars. One is Jane Schaber’s “A Feminist Experience of Historical-Jesus Scholarship.” This author details her academic and personal alienation after a Detroit journalist wrote a profile of her work and thinking. The other is Grant LeMarquand’s “The Historical Jesus and African New Testament Scholarship.” LeMarquand describes the “unabashedly confessional” character of the African quest for the historical Jesus. In introducing these two essays, Sandra Walker-Ramisch observes that “disinterested disengaged scholarship is radically at odds with the feminist and African quests for a ‘useful’ Jesus, quests carried out within the context of political struggles.”

The second half of this volume focuses on enduring concerns that persist in the “Quest.” Among these concerns are four strands: the relationship between Jesus and the Jewish sects, especially the Essenes; the eschatological dimension of Jesus’ vision of the Kingdom of God; the distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith; and the question of bias among scholars.

The essays in this half are valuable in their review and assessment of the last century of scholarship. Particularly engaging are those by Harry W. Henaut (“Is the ‘Historical Jesus’ a Christological Construct?”) and Larry W. Hurtado (“A Taxonomy of Recent Historical-Jesus Work”). Henaut regards Martin Kähler’s 1896 statement (“I regard the entire Life-of-Jesus movement as a blind alley”) as prophetic but notes that Kähler was correct to insist that “we cannot reject this movement without understanding what is legitimate in it.” Henaut sees positive contributions in the historical-Jesus movement: the reconstructions of Jesus’ teachings have gone against traditional and

dogmatic understandings of tradition, thus warding off intolerance and fanaticism; the quest for the Jesus of history has also been an agent of renewal, providing an appealing figure to imitate and follow. But, adds Henaut, we must guard against the temptation to follow ideological fads in the name of higher criticism.

Two important threads weave their way through these essays. One is the Jewishness of Jesus. William Arnal, one of the editors, points out contrasting currents on this issue. Some insist that Jesus must be understood as a Jew in first-century Palestine, while others minimize Jesus' Jewishness and seek to place him into a broader Roman, Hellenistic, or Mediterranean milieu. Methodologically, says Arnal, those holding the first view tend to rely more exclusively on the synoptic gospels for their data. Those holding the second view tend to make use of extra-canonical early Christian writings, especially the Gospel of Thomas. This methodological difference cuts to the core of the current debate about Jesus and is the area that causes the most trouble for scholars who wish to take the established canon as primary.

The second thread is the concern about hermeneutical presuppositions. Hans Georg Gadamer's insistence that thinkers need to identify their "horizon" or bias remains a vital reminder in the face of historical-Jesus scholarship. Larry Hurtado's essay is particularly helpful in deciphering agendas and preconceptions which impact various views of Jesus. With this caution in mind, it is harder to be completely convinced, for example, of the validity of Mack's "Cynic Jesus," much as I enjoy his hiking metaphor.

E. Vaage observes that debates about the historical Jesus often function as "academic junk bonds, suggesting real growth in knowledge but serving mainly as a chance for scholars to engage in intellectual competition with each other." That competition may be observed at a few points in this volume, but the scholarly engagement evidenced in these essays does not so much reflect undisciplined rivalry as careful, considered, joyful work.

ADELIA NEUFELD WIENS, Canadian Mennonite Bible College,
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Visions of Jesus: Direct Encounters from the New Testament to Today. Phillip H. Wiebe. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

This book is an insightful investigation of a crucial topic in the psychology of religion. Phillip Wiebe, a philosophy professor at Trinity Western University, writes in the tradition of William James, who emphasized the importance of open-minded description when studying religious phenomena. Wiebe's approach is methodical and thorough as he establishes the historical and psychological context of what he calls "Christic visions." He recounts some thirty visions in detail and examines the changes they brought about in the lives of the subjects. Surprisingly, a thorough analysis of Christic visions is lacking in our culture; ironically, Marian visions have been studied more than Christic ones.

Subjects for this study were drawn mostly through ads in newspapers and religious periodicals in Canada, the United States, Great Britain, and Australia. None of the subjects induced their visionary experience through ascetic practices, hallucinogens, or suggestion. Wiebe weighs carefully the reasons given for their certainty that the vision was in fact Jesus. One of the chief reasons cited was the cultural expectation of what Jesus looked like; in most of the visions, Jesus had long dark brown hair parted in the centre, a fairly long, dark brown beard, blue eyes, and light brown complexion. The feelings evoked – majesty, reverence, being loved, joy – gave percipients the sense they were encountering someone transcendent. The radiance that sometimes accompanied the experience also contributed to the identification of Jesus.

At the outset, Wiebe discusses the most appropriate term to describe these phenomena. He uses the words *vision* and *apparition* interchangeably, and notes that in the literature, the word "apparition" is used mostly by theologians. The primary word applied to this kind of phenomenon in the psychiatric world is *hallucination*, but it prejudges the reality status of the experience, since it refers to the perception of an external object when no such object is actually present. Wiebe observes that *hallucination* is heavily theory-laden and not really a straightforward descriptive term. While he recognizes that in certain psychological disorders the pathological character of hallucinations is clear, he does not find the term helpful in understanding

the cases he examines, because it places “a negative evaluation on the experience of another” (195).

The study of apparitions raises fundamental questions about what is ultimately real. Wiebe maintains that visions erode the materialistic illusion that the world of the senses is the only reality. Visions cannot be judged by the usual scientific standards which call for repeatability, control of variables, quantitative measurement, and experiments to test competing theories of explanation. This difference leads some to dismiss the whole issue of Christic visions as a matter of psychopathology. To those who, in the name of scientific objectivity, admit only visible and measurable evidence as establishing reality, Wiebe points out that even normal scientific theorizing depends on unobservable phenomena. Following philosopher Stephen Braude, he characterizes his method as “semi-experimental,” meaning that he studies phenomena reported to occur repeatedly, even if not obtained in a controlled laboratory setting.

Wiebe’s description of the wide variety of types of Christic appearances is itself a valuable contribution to the literature. Wiebe classifies them into five groups: 1) people have fallen into a trance or dream state; 2) people experience a change in the physical environment they know themselves to be in; 3) people experience the physical environment as they know it to be, apart from the presence of the visionary figure that appeared in it; 4) two or more percipients are simultaneously affected, including cases where they apparently see the same thing; and 5) people experience a reenactment of some event in Jesus’ life.

Wiebe compares the contemporary reports he has collected with New Testament accounts of Christic visions. He observes that the scriptures, in contrast to current reports, present little information about Christ’s appearances. Despite this critical difference, he notes significant similarities between NT and contemporary Christic visions: 1) they are experienced as happening outside the percipient’s conscious control, 2) they are sometimes experienced in a “changed place,” and 3) Christ appears to have a radiant face.

Religious experiences of the type Wiebe examines are foundational because they give intimations of the transcendent dimension of life – psychologically speaking, the most fundamental aspect of religion. They also

ground people with a reason to live, awaken a moral attitude, and evoke a sense of the infinite. Wiebe's work adds to our understanding of the possible origins and functions of visionary religious experience. Interested laypeople and psychologists of religion will find much of interest in this careful study.

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Call for Papers & Conference Announcements

“Apocalypticism and Millennialism: Shaping a Believers Church Eschatology for the 21st Century”

August 8-10, 1999, Bluffton College, Bluffton, Ohio

Diverse histories and theological convictions with regard to millennialism and apocalyptic thought have flourished in the broadly defined believers church tradition. Currently, the dawn of a new millennium has sparked renewed attention to a broad spectrum of issues related to millennial and apocalyptic thought and biblical interpretation. Acting on this confluence of issues, this conference is aimed at constructing a respectable believers church eschatology for the 21st century.

Keynote speakers: Dr. Paul Boyer, University of Wisconsin; Dr. James VanderKam, Notre Dame University

Paper proposals are solicited from across the believers church spectrum, that deal with biblical issues; Jewish and Christian apocalyptic issues; historical perspectives from early, medieval, reformation and North American church history; cultural studies perspectives; and theological, ethical and missiological perspectives. **Deadline for submissions: December 31, 1998**

Inquiries and paper proposals: Dr. Loren L. Johns, Bluffton College, 280 W College Ave., Bluffton, OH, 45817-1196; johnsl@bluffton.edu; 419-358-3280.

“Pluralism and Community: Conversations on the Calling and Character of Anabaptist-Mennonites for Beginning the 21st Century”

March 24-26, 1999, Laurelville Mennonite Church Center

The purpose of this conference is to reflect on a vision for the Mennonite church's calling and role in our changing world. The program includes brief issues papers and group discussion.

Information: Senior Resource Group, c/o C. Norman Kraus, 1210 A Harmony Dr., Harrisonburg, VA, 22802.

Registration: Laurelville Church Center, Rt. 5, Box 145, Mt. Pleasant, PA, 15666