Cultural Impedimenta Old and New in Friend's Relation to the Arts: Some Preliminary Reflections

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“There are Friends, and the world.” This was my introduction to understanding an outgoing era of Quaker development in North America in the early 1950’s, as I came from a different Quaker experience in another part of the geographical world.

Other equally imprecise catchalls have also been around: “Friends are of the world but not in it.” “Quakers are do-it-yourself Protestants.” “Christians are different but different alike.” “Only screwball Friends are Christians.” And the latest superb gem from the pen of John McCandless summing up his findings on Liberal Quakerism (Friends Journal, Vol. 18, p. 464): “There is no pale, and Richard Nixon is beyond it.”

These snappy bon mots have one common denominator: Friends today are unsure of their group identity, suggesting that there was a time when they were surer of it. Furthermore, these flippancies indicate an area of difficulty in relating to the larger world.

This “area of difficulty” the present essay attempts to explore, tentatively, hoping to arrive eventually at a clearer theology upon which Friends might base an adequate relation to the world, and to the fine arts in particular.

THE AREA OF DIFFICULTY

A strong separate and separated Quaker identity persisted well into this century, although the onslaught on traditional beliefs and lifestyles began to be felt some hundred years earlier. By the 1950’s the gradual erosion of distinctive testimonies, plainness of speech and dress, the simple life, and particular worship forms had reached a point where many outspokenly considered these to be impedimenta along the road to effective contemporary social witness and healthy self-development. In a 1969 Friends General Conference statement of Conference objectives, the brief introduction includes these sentences: “We must realize that the Church at large has not produced an independent Christian culture. We are not only part of society — we are too often its servant. The seekers of our time want a deeper fellowship, sharing a prophetic vision of things to come.” There are no clear definitions of what is meant by “society” or “prophetic,” or who are categorized as “seekers.” One is led to the interpretation that there are no substantive distinctions now separating Friends from society in general, and that our vocation and contribution as instruments for betterment become meaningful only inasmuch as we are participants within the general sociological framework.

This has not always been so — as is well documented — and contradicts much of the unique genius of early Quaker insight, lending weight to the “do-it-yourself Protestantism” charge. Not so clearly documented are the lacks in Quaker doctrinal which stultified the development of our own in-group culture to the point of large-scale repudiation, resulting in the claim, as made in the 1969 FGC statement, that our intrinsic mission exists as leavening participants within general society. It is a sadly recurring theme that spiritual and emotional energies which break the bounds of a too narrowly conceived tradition, once released, pick up a host of new impedimenta, often equally enervating. A graduate student of Quakerism recently explained it this way, “Most Quaker development really just happens — later they justify it, after the fact.” If true, this is hardly uniquely Quaker. However, our traditional anti-theological bias persists sufficiently for diverse and haphazard innovation to take strong hold before the tardy voice of Johnny-come-too-lately doctrine catches up, evaluates and blazes the way.

Both the liberalizing of a restrictive in-group culture, and the becoming part of society at large, belong then to the latter
stages of an older syndrome which frees Friends from the early communal conception of their faith (a conception akin to the apostolic witness). Over the last hundred years this reinterpretation has infused, among other things, a greater appreciation of the arts into the Quaker bloodstream, but has singularly failed in the formulation of new, sound doctrine concerning the relation to surrounding culture. Perhaps it has not even applied itself to the task. Friends have become followers, largely, of “what goes” currently in serious and quasi-religious circles (as well as in youth counter-culture circles): faddists caught up in one new wave of methodology or self and group improvement after another. (More on these “fringe benefits” later.) If earlier generations of Friends can be thought of as living on a starvation diet, aesthetically and sensorily — in conscious antagonism to the world — modern Friends have their cultural problems too. We still do not know how to relate those “enriched” or “liberated” areas of our lives to the life of the meeting. We do not know yet where to look for a currently valid and vital group identity. We are frequently forced to live “double,” or even “triple,” lives when our life in the world, and our life in the meeting — sometimes widely separated — have not found a uniting, common doctrine. Too often modern Friends reflect the “scattering” George Fox decried so vehemently.

"THE GOOD OLD DAYS" & "THE NEW OLD DAYS"

A very useful piece of legwork, tracing Friends relation to the arts, has been done by Frederick J. Nicholson in his Friends Home Service Committee paperback, Quakers and the Arts (London, 1968). Nicholson sifted through the journals and pronouncements of Friends from the Society’s inception, and has quoted liberally from pertinent material in the writings of George Fox, Thomas Ellwood, Francis Howgill, William Penn, inter alia, through the London Yearly Meeting Queries of this century. On this side of the Atlantic a parallel development can be traced, with the separations and migrations west of groups of Friends causing most of the variations — slowing some trends, accelerating others.
Conversely, Can the Church (the ekklesia) be gathered—become a primary community for its membership—without finding a cultural expression?

Nicholson asks none of these questions, contenting himself with the FGC-type outlook quoted, thus plugging for the “enrichment”-style openness that we see in comprehensive school curricula and all kinds of community programs, as well as in the gracious living of the liberal-arts-educated middle classes. He does not examine man’s relation to the arts critically or profoundly, but accepts them as an indispensable ingredient in man’s inner diet, as is milk in an infant’s. This is surprising in a man of a generation which has seen the most cataclysmic evils perpetrated by nations with a high degree of cultivation of the arts and of learning. A further gap in Nicholson’s examination of the source of Quaker asceticism comes from not including the pervasive recent scholarship of Lewis Benson on Fox and other early Friends; especially on their definition of what constitute cultic elements in religion. From Lewis Benson himself we still need a penetrating and detailed analysis of their thought on all matters cultural but not cultic. And most importantly we need to see this in relation to the developing internal group culture, or otherculturism as it is sometimes called, that distinguished Friends from the lifestyle and mores of their time. There is much work yet to be done, as well as much indebtedness to the painstaking work of Frederick Nicholson, Lewis Benson and others.

In probing some answers to the above questions I have examined the circumstances, works and life of Edward Hicks, mainly as recounted in his Memoirs. My own Quaker “works in progress” and Quaker experience I have touched on also. (These do not constitute exhaustive resources or sources.) Hicks, who was by trade a coachmaker and signpainter, bylined himself on occasion “a poor illiterate mechanic.” I’ll use the same ploy, bylining myself “a poor illiterate housewife”; for the answers, ultimately, will have to come by way of our Quaker theologians who are trained and educated to such tasks. We “illiterates” may assign ourselves the booster rôle of giving ‘em the proverbial “kick in the pants” to get going—provided we are receptive also to the boomerang effect once they’ve got things figured. (The mixed metaphors of non-violence!)

**THE DEARTH**

The principal reasons for the dearth in Quaker art to this day need almost no further detailing—the plain, simple life cultivated right into this century included restrictions in every sphere of fine arts, accompanied by a host of notions as to which activities were deemed “Quakerly.” There is some difference of opinion among the scholars about how and why these denials of natural gifts originated. It is clear, though, that in the subsequent “quietist” period these denials became bastions against the encroachment of the world and were greatly fostered. Nicholson in his investigation sees this largely as sequential consolidation of the movement. No matter; when an outgoing, evangelical fervor subsides, the group marking time will feel hard-pressed and threatened by the burgeoning, ongoing culture. The reliance on, and enthronement of, many outward forms “proved” to one and all that the Quaker movement was still a going concern, whatever its spiritual deficiencies. This type of in-group acculturization forms strong bulwarks against the enemy from without, and resistance to change, the enemy from within. Lord Kenneth Clark in his BBC Civilisation series, in the session on the age of Luther and Erasmus, remarks that there is no Protestant art. Critics who deplore the Quaker deficiencies in the arts must keep in mind that at the time of Edward Hicks (some three centuries after Luther) similar attitudes to the fine arts were widespread among contemporary Protestants. Differences regarding the origin of their views (as deriving or not deriving from Puritan influences—depending on whose scholarship you bet on) caused few discernible differences in actual practice during the Nineteenth Century.

For an artist to grow productively in his work he needs a market and/or an audience for his output, a way of supporting himself. Most important of all, he needs to be confirmed in his talent by others. The Society of Friends has provided none of these in the past, for “plain” or doctrinal reasons, and
is not providing them today for her creative artists. We who write, paint, sing, compose, act are obliged to take our wares elsewhere, receiving possibly marginal recognition from our meetings if we are lucky, while there is rarely a shortage of flak. A queasy "tolerance" has become the hallmark today, while Nicholson recounts how the arts fared in "the good old days" — neither worth giving a fuller rerun here.

QUAKER ART?

If Lord Clark is correct (above), then one could conclude that: civilization got along quite well "civilising and developing" without the benefit of Protestants or Quakers. If we've shortchanged anyone, we've shortchanged ourselves. Recently I took two canvases to be hung briefly in Philadelphia, modern interpretations of meeting held inside oldtime meetinghouses, which are part of a Quaker series I am working on. One reaction was: "Why Quaker art? Why not just art — the arts generally and universally; why restrict ourselves to Quaker experience?"

We need to find answers in two areas (both to be explored more fully later):

1) In terms of the artist's need — we have touched on the "scattering" tendencies of present-day Quakerism. If members find they cannot bring the most meaningful sides or experiences of their lives into the orbit of the meeting and the Society, then they are forced to live compartmentalized, even divided lives. This does not affect only the Quaker artist. We see it particularly today in the plight of youth who find they often cannot bring their most meaningful relationships into the life of the meeting, if for different reasons. This is accentuated in an industrial age when we can no longer provide each other with "Quaker" jobs or livelihoods.

2) In terms of the Society's needs — we must explore what art is and can do. Where it has been incorporated into schools, religious education, conference programs, it has been so largely in terms of self-expression and self-realization. There are other important sides to art, not least the illustrative side. Through art we can explore our shadow side, our possibilities and pitfalls. We can take a more objective look at ourselves from ten paces back, as it were. I have been much impressed with Judson Jerome's play, Candle in the Straw — based on the Naylor/Fox conflict — and with Paul Lacey's analysis of the play. If every applicant for membership would make a study of these, thinking through the implications of "What is spiritual authority?" in the concretized situation of the play, they would confront a dimension of their future membership which eludes most Books of Discipline.

If the Society doesn't want Quaker art, it doesn't want Quaker artists! The two are inseparable other than in the schizophrenic "scattered" existence alluded to.

A brief footage of rerun could help at this point — for the newcomer or amnesiac — because there have been distinct emphases in Friends' objection to the arts beyond the self-denial of sensory gratification. One consideration was veracity — lingering to this day in some families — which shuns all fiction, theater, make-believe, fantasy, or impressionistic renderings. For some Hicksite Friends the Bible was excluded for these reasons. Portrait painting (and sitting for) was accounted a chief instrument of untruth, an act of impersonation! The first daguerreotypes posed a real dilemma, Nicholson tells us. Friends with natural abilities in the graphic arts could as early as the eighteenth century be found among cartographers and botanists; a Quaker naturalist accompanied Captain Cook's Pacific expedition. Theirs were truthful pursuits. (Is the prevalence of contemporary Quaker photographic art over Quaker paintings related or coincidental?) Usefulness is the other important consideration, coming currently into its own again among "simplified living" Friends. Nicholson recounts that a member was labored with over his acquisition of a collection of paintings. When he explained to his meeting that quite apart from the enjoyment this was a very sound financial investment, Friends were reconciled. Simplified utilitarian theories for immediate returns, dictated by necessities of livelihood, survived especially among farming and frontier Quaker groups. Again, one shouldn't overstep this, for in all times...
the creative arts have been easily suspended under duress. Rarely have they provided anything but a capricious living.

SHOULD WE “RECORD” QUAKER ARTISTS?

Were we to do so, and not record Quaker doctors, teachers or apothecaries, we would have to show that artists provide a unique and important ministry which the Society can’t afford to be without — akin to the spoken ministry. I believe this should be done eventually, in as carefully selective a manner as the recording of ministers. Recording is not an award for excellence but rather a charge of responsibility to the meeting in a special competence that is recognized and confirmed by the meeting. Art is hard work, as Edward Hicks’ Memoirs clearly show. Even the arts-for-arts-sake wing (and the art-for-the-artist’s-sakes) might agree that some artists have a greater gift for “speaking to the condition of meeting” than do others. For the non-recorded or aspiring artist, or First-day painter, such recording practice would tend to confirm him in his pursuit, as we also confirm (support) our weekend workcampers and relief workers in theirs. It is a moot question whether the self-indulgent proclivities that could entrap an artist are any more deplorable than the do-goodism we see in many “good works,” or the monopolizing of the spoken ministry by Friends not always inspired — and furthermore, the Lord, in his perservity and self-will, often knows how to produce fruits out of all!

THE CASE OF EDWARD HICKS,
MINISTER, PAINTER, QUAKER JOURNALIST, 1780-1849

Edward Hicks provides a clearly delineated historical situation of a talented Quaker artist and journal writer, as well as highly esteemed minister in the faith, at a time when the Society of Friends suffered its severest strains and ruptures. The Separation occurred in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in 1827, and Edward Hicks, active in meetings in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, was part of it. Of pertinent interest to this essay is how Hicks in this situation was able to utilize some, but not others, of his unusual talents in directly influencing the life of the Society in his area.

Hicks’ self-taught style of painting is now identified as “primitive,” and his work rated as leading in the field of American primitivist painting. In this sense primitive is a technical term. Edward Hicks himself used this same word in another specialized sense, describing himself as a “primitive” Friend, “a follower of Fox, Penn and Barclay” as distinguished from the two Orthodox factions, and those to whom they referred as Hicksites — accounted followers of the teaching of Edward’s cousin, Elias. Though Edward Hicks deplores subsequent developments in the Hicksite group, he is found squarely in that camp and “agin” the Orthodox.

This double usage of the word primitive in special connotations, both concerning Edward Hicks, has caused confusion, leading some commentators to interpret Hicks’ religious ministry, Weltanschauung, and mode of artistic expression to be simplistic — untutored and therefore unsophisticated. This is clearly mistaken. Though lacking formal education, Hicks in his Memoirs speaks with a self-conscious clarity in these areas which belies the use of the word “primitive” as meaning naive or unformed. His writing in his Memoirs is articulate, with a commendable range and control of vocabulary, and reveals a heartwarming, if complex, personality. Here we read of aware, honest encounter with his own inner difficulties; a person comes through who has read considerably and thought deeply on many subjects. A child of his time, he is knowledgeable of, and acquainted with, the contemporary political and social scene — related in his own idiom, the oft-misunderstood grace language of the “followers of Fox, Penn and Barclay,” to whom he was staunchly faithful. In fact, Hicks’ situation could be described as his being entrapped by his own faithfulness.

There is little occasion for latter-day psychologizing and speculating on the “meaning” of his art or ministry when a journal writer is so uncommonly articulate. The modern penchant for reconstructing factual biography from an artist’s work sheds little real light, and often results in much misinterpretation. In the case of Edward Hicks, the very mild vari-
ations in style and composition seen in his extensive Peaceable Kingdom series — of which close to one hundred are still extant — can only by far-fetched speculation be regarded as representing the passionate feelings he so clearly expresses in words over the split and later developments in the Society of Friends. Nor do such would-be biographers appear to understand the manner in which an artist may fondle both his subject and his medium — perfecting technique, glorying in a new color, trying again and again to capture a vision glimpsed. Artists digest their material in a complex, experiential process, and rarely regurgitate it in photographic or biographic likeness. Art is seldom a log of events, or a simple mirror of inner trauma.

The significant question for Friends to ask about Hicks’ art is why the doctrinal, in-group ruptures are not reflected graphically in his paintings. Why does a man so prolifically productive with a paintbrush not attempt to explore these tensions which tore at his very soul?

Once, on a laborious northern winter journey in the ministry, Hicks arrived late for meeting. Quietly he took up a seat behind the door. He was recognized and later reproached, “Why did thee not come and take thy seat?” (on the facing bench as was accorded an itinerant minister). This capsulated experience points clearly to the dilemma for a creative Friend whose gift in the ministry was a talent recognized, while his painting he himself castigates as “one of those trifling and insignificant arts,” not considered in harmony with a Christian’s way of life — especially that of a primitive Friend. Biographers, however, have made too much of this “trifling art” passage without completing the quotation which ends with this all-important sentence (Memoirs, p. 71), “Had I my time to go over again I think I would take the advice given me... about the time I was [temporarily] quitting painting: ‘Edward, thee has now the source of independence within thyself, in thy peculiar talent for painting. Keep to it, within the bounds of innocence and usefulness, and thee can always be comfortable!’” Edward did not take the advice, tried farming for a while, and found himself and household often in: “the Street called Strait” — except when he sold paintings! The next paragraph is even clearer in showing how Hicks was able to reconcile apparent divergences between his belief and practice — using Paul’s teaching on working with one’s hands and being content in one’s life situation. His Memoirs go on to cite Thomas Ellwood (pp. 71-72): “As to the calling or business by which they got their living, Thomas Ellwood informs us a particular friend of his was a barber, and followed dressing noblemen’s heads. And from my own observation and experience, I am rather disposed to believe that too many of those conscientious difficulties about our outward calling or business that we have learned as a trade to get our living by, which are in themselves honest and innocent, have originated more in fanaticism than the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus.”

Had Friends at that time owned even a simple, positive theology of culture that could have confirmed an artist in his inner calling, and recognized his gift as an instrument for speaking to the condition of the Society, it is conceivable that Friend Hicks might have done so; that his canvases might have illuminated graphically the sad ruptures the Society was about to suffer; that Friends could have seen themselves, literally, moving towards the precipice, and backtracked. This is a big might (and a mighty long sentence!) — pure and unjustified speculation. It is justified only in the actual evidence presented so forcefully in Hicks’ Memoirs, in sharp contrast to his stylized, repetitive subjects which are able to express an idyllic state of “having arrived” but cannot seem to examine the travail en route. The fault lies with Friends’ inadequate theology which does not include the examining of inner group (or individual) conflicts. Fox strongly reiterates Jesus, “Be ye then perfect,” thus increasing the difficulty for subsequent generations of Friends to explore, interpret and face the “gray” shadow areas in themselves. (Instead they covered themselves with gray!)

From personal experience with a paintbrush I do know with what pleasure (or compulsion) an artist can explore the same subject many times till it’s worked out of his system, or a new love usurps its throne. When a series accumulates over a dozen closely similar renderings it is pertinent to look for pos-
sible reasons why the artist "stuck" there — not as judgment of his art and personality, but as an assessment of his options. An important bearing on Hicks' output was undoubtedly his circumscribed market — the kind of art works and subjects his buyers would allow in their homes. (Nicholson lists the three pictures found in British Friends' homes: Penn's Treaty with the Indians, Interior of a Slaveship, and a Plan of Ackworth School!) Hicks was an intelligent "people watcher," describing jealousies, rivalries, pride, self-aggrandizement; he knew well the quibbling criticisms which reflected his own unhappiness and the perplexing problem of sinful thoughts arising in the mind uninvited — all these he could articulate in words, but alas, not on canvas.

THE UNDERLYING TENSIONS

Why does this essay then not plead for Friends to embrace the arts and evolve a new arts-theology? The problem is more pervasive and at a more basic level than merely dealing with the fine arts, and recreation therein. Friends' doctrine offers little equipment for dealing with personal or in-group "interior" conflict — this despite our history of mediating other people's outward disputes with some inspiring results. If Lewis Benson's reading of Fox is right (do read his Catholic Quakerism) there appears to be no Quaker doctrine that tension is germane, even necessary, to human existence and to life itself. In part, this is of course a modern finding and formulation. But Fox seems to affirm the reverse: if the believers are truly "in the light" all "contentions," inner and outer, will fall away.

There can be no doubt about the destructive forces of tension and conflict, whether leading to serious doctrinal schisms, or to bodily ills in individuals, to warfare, or to hopelessness and negativism — Fox's "scattering" and "confusion." Perhaps the artist more clearly than others explores and utilizes the creative possibilities of tension — the necessity and desirability of conflict, which are the warp and woof of his work, his matrix. (Take the painter who depends on dramatic contrast in color values; the sculptor who physically "fights" his hard medium; the poet who has available to him the all-too-leaden images of words with which to transmit the ephemeral; the writer of fiction who truly loves his impaired characters and is forever raw through living their woundedness. All this is conflict in creative tension. This is dialogue. This is the "mismatched" human condition where not every faculty of reason and senses and body performs in a perfectly orchestrated symphony.)

In his Catholic Quakerism Lewis Benson portrays Fox as seeing no need for dealing with this particular human dilemma. The divergent, warring stresses within will fall away, or come together, as the believer enters the true light, in a hearing and obeying, direct mouth-to-mouth relationship to Christ the head of the church, and through him to God. For Fox and Lewis Benson this conflict/tension side of life has no validity, and exists in the true church only on account of unfaithfulness. Impressive is Fox's own experience, how he felt his former travail and wretchedness as lifted from him. Others also witnessed "in astonishment" this newness of life: "What, is the Kingdom of God come to be with men?" asks Francis Howgill. Belief in the imminence of the Kingdom, added to their personal ecstatic experiences of it, probably gave early Friends a foreshortened view of the church to come — the church they were ushering in. Fox and early Friends did witness most strongly to the gathering into community they experienced, into the new church fellowship of the faithful. What Fox doesn't appear to have addressed himself to, any more than did Jesus, is how this vision and direct experience is to be transmitted to other generations, or at times when the Lord may not indulge himself so astonishingly; how further experience and vision would come to be added. Could Fox have had doubts about the universality and automatic perpetuation of his own intense vision when he later did concern himself with formulating church government? When he approved meetinghouses being erected, some of which have lasted to this day?

The mere fact that church discipline does contain instruction on disownment indicates that Fox could not have been a stranger to internal conflict, disagreements and tensions among the flock! — as Candle in the Straw portrays graphically in a
simulated parallel. Can the reason for not promulgating positive doctrine on inner and in-group conflict derive from Fox's own vivid experience, for the first time in his life feeling "at one" in himself and with God? Would anything less than church and personal harmony cast doubt on his vision, especially since it is all hitched to faithfulness and to being in the true light? This is not entirely idle speculation. Friends to this day are singularly inept in knowing what to make of their "shadow" personalities, or the dark shadows in their meetings — how to deal with them and how to derive meaning from them. (It is not uncommon to find Friends today somehow equating family and marital discord with premeditated preparations for warfare; or not accepting any "generation-gap" tensions as desirable if adolescent children are to embark on a life styled to their needs, superseding that of parents.) Catholic Quakerism attempts to project the unique vision of Fox and his contemporaries, making it applicable to the general "now" scene. Yet the author fails to provide us with any substantive breakthrough in this area of conflict and tension. For Fox, per Lewis Benson, the new church will be ordered, but will neither have rules, nor experience tension over this ordering.*

Journals like Hicks' bring a vital reminder that human happiness does not derive simply from a facile enrichment of man's psychic life, such as one might expect the addition of the fine arts to furnish. Intense spiritual experience is a form of emotional expression; a vibrant religious life is a creative life. There is no proof whatever that Friends on their aesthetic "starvation diet" were less happy or fulfilled — found less meaning in their lives and faith — than most of us do today. Man's happiness is probably tied up more in finding meaning than in whether eight or ten or one hundred of his innate talents are being expressed or exploited. One can attend an adult oil painting class and witness (with wonderment!) how many persons of distinct facility with a paintbrush have absolutely nothing to say! Their paintings are vacant if not banal. Many a "plain" Friend said more with a patchwork quilt or flower garden than do some painters with a paintbrush. Destructive was the persecuting, pharisaic spirit that thrived on denial of flesh and senses. The Friends documented as having kicked against the restrictive fences were likely in a minority till quite recent times. That doesn't help the steady minority of artists, though.

Before we can arrive at new Quaker doctrine on the arts and culture, we need to come to grips positively with the underlying tensions that are a part of the human situation and without which art has nothing much to say.

THE ARTIST AND THE BELOVED COMMUNITY

"Tell what you know best," is advice handed to probably every aspiring writer at some point, and undoubtedly produces reams of subjective ramblings about himself, whom he knows best. Yet the truism has validity. Most practitioners in literature and the graphic arts, at one time or another, are challenged to give shape to their most ardent loves. This may include the beloved community.

For a writer of Quaker fiction there is little beyond discouragement and hard work. If Edward Hicks contended with a circumscribing market, today's writers have to face immense competition from mass distribution. Among ourselves the potential market is tiny, not worth a publisher's investment. Even the most "Quaker" of topics, if designed for the public market, will have to display that quality of mass appeal — a qualified "quality" at best. The result is often indifferent literature which is not very important outside Quakerdom, and speaks no prophetic word within it. Add our stark, dour posture on imaginative fiction, and Friends' reluctance to see themselves, or be seen, in forms other than nostalgia or public relations — it's a dismal scene.

So why pursue so unpropitious a goal? With eventual publication unlikely? Echoing James Michener's words — to record significant experience. To record a significant part of one's thought (and heart). To set down one's love. To project a shape that has greater totality of that over which one has labored but in part. And, man doesn't live by bread alone. We're told.
(Actually, underneath all this hand-wringing, writers and artists for the most part are self-assured — convinced that what they’re working on is the most important thing in the world for them to be doing. If everyone else would only let us get on with it!)

My current “work in progress” pertinent to this particular essay is a Quaker novel in contemporary setting. It explores “tensions within” as they derive from “being members one of another” — committed to one another and to a faith — in the in-group situation. The characters comprise different ages and backgrounds; they have different abilities to perceive, and to assimilate insight. We see them confronting the same problem basically — the age-old problem: the demands of the community over against the liberty of the individual. No end of changes can be rung (and wrung) on this theme. So why would a writer want to say it all over again and in a contemporary Quaker context? Why imagine new situations when psychology books, mass consumer magazines and newspapers crank out endless case histories that are “true”?

The answer lies partly in what constitutes “truth” in art. Is fiction an idle manipulation? Or is it a legitimate contrivance by which to illuminate the shadow areas, casting a new focus on the timeworn themes? Perhaps the fiction writer is basically a “participant”; armchair case histories are not his meat. He has to put his ideas “into practice,” planting, as it were, the case histories, the theories, the doctrine, the visions, into particularized experiential terms, thereby creating a new pertinence. Herein lie the challenge and truth in fiction.

Presently I am involved with the novel’s two off-stage characters: one is the maverick Renslow Culver who defied his meeting’s discipline; in his disownment and isolation he deteriorated to an untimely death. The reason for his disownment is not necessary here — it didn’t take much in some meetings, and that wasn’t very long ago. It is relevant to explain that in Rennie Culver I “practice” what I’ve preached for years, namely, that the person isolated from the mainstream of life deteriorates. Or is likely to; even the strongest. (On this instinct I continue with the most thankless of tasks, prison visiting. I can’t emphasize my theory often and strongly enough. I have to concretize it in the person of Rennie Culver — who, incidentally, didn’t go to jail.) The other character who remains unseen and is vital to the story is Flame, also deteriorated and broken; a young woman institutionalized in a mental hospital. Flame came apart over the tensions produced in an overly sensitive disposition by a strict, rigorous Quaker upbringing which didn’t teach her how to cope with the larger imperfect world, or with her visionary, much stronger, yet flawed husband, Freeland. All the living characters I have painted as portraits. Flame I have had to paint over and over, and still am not satisfied that I have captured her inherent fragility and madness. In the following excerpts Lynn, in her late teens, and her grandmother, Briar Rose Sprague, discuss first the dead Rennie, and then Flame, both victims of what once had been among the strongest elements in Quakerism — the group identity on which this essay began. Some years back there had been an emotional attachment between Briar and Rennie, whereas Flame is distant blood-kin to both women.

(A problem still to be solved in this New Firbank MS is the “voice” in which I finally will want to tell it — the level of unsophistication. I do not want to talk primarily to Friends Lynn’s age, nor that of Briar. My heart goes out to those in between to whom today’s abundant tensions have become acutely clear in their homes and meetings, but not meaningful; for whom today’s travail has no religious pertinence or significance.)

MS New Firbank, Sequence Lynn/Briar, Excerpt I

... She [Briar] shrugged. “I don’t know who sent it me, Lynn. It arrived in the mail two weeks after his [Renslow Culver’s] death — the postmark was smudged. The poem was in Rennie’s hand — most of it; somebody had added two lines. Then I knew for certain that it would have been hopeless, impossible. Unworkable.”

“But why, Bonne-maman?” They had disposed of the sordid social entrapments a score of times, the taboos and restrictions — never really dispos-
Briar almost whispered her answer. "Because I could not have lived the life of an outcast, an exile — never belonging — an outsider he called himself. He knew what terrible price that exacted from anyone not as free as he was." She sighed, the knobby, rheumatoid fingers clasping, reaching for each other, interlacing painfully, as if this was all they had left to hold. "And even he paid the price he defined and had flung in the Meeting's face. He suffered." After a sunken pause she added more softly yet, "He drank."

Lynn glanced at her grandmother perched comfortless on the hard, backless bench, not a wrinkle out of place. Slowly the girl's voice surfaced, momentarily released from those soul-deep, long ago reservoirs she and her grandmother had once filled with tiny, sparkling drops — only to have them freeze in the rifts of Lynn's teens, and then shatter in the trauma that was to become New Firbank. "In the poem he said that?" Lynn asked, her voice catching.

"No. I knew. It told me that he knew. He must have suffered, separated from his own, from the flock. People who don't know themselves suffer too — but not as much. But when you know it's all been your own doing —"

"But it wasn't!" Lynn sat up, the protest dropping the quivering grass from between her lips. "Renslow Culver was born that way most like — a perverse and bratty kid who'd cross up his family and teachers whenever he could — can't you just see him? He couldn't help it, Bonne-maman — psychologists say —"

"Oh yes he could! I don't know yet if I believe in a heaven and a hell; but I know for a fact that everyone reaches some crossroad, constantly — some watershed. There are always choices."

At odds with this, and still guessing, Lynn backtracked, "The poem — it said that?"

"To me. Between the lines." Cautiously the stiff, sore fingers explored the contents of her sagging leather purse, as if mindful also of some crumbling, yellowed envelope. Instead her hands produced a neatly typed file card. Briar read it over to herself, then handed it to Lynn.

The card bore no blot of identity. "The dilemma of the strong," read the first line. Neither title, nor signature explained it — not even a give-away Anonymous.

Lynn shook her head slowly, picking up a new grass stem.

The dilemma of the strong,
The venturesome and self-possessed,
Is never their thorny calling...

Their calling Lynn's mind echoed. What is anyone's calling? Rennie Culver was just made that way — cranky, ornery; and quite possibly as forbidding as her dead grandfather, Ephraim Sprague! And there was the hitch! Rennie Culver was made that way, had to be that way. Her bigoted, ramrod Quaker grandfather was the one called to be that way — according to his narrow lights! How could Briar not see the difference? How could she forgive Ephraim? And live with him — She reread the first lines.

Is never their thorny calling,
But the tendril, holding needs —

Lynn paused over that line too. Perhaps Briar did know Rennie's needs. And Ephraim's. What made each of them tick...

The scope of the story line takes little over a week. Briar and Lynn have a number of matters to work out between them.

Excerpt II — on another occasion.

[Briar] ... "Some of us grow insufficient pelt — remain naked — the gray protoplasm never gelling entirely so life imprints enormous footsteps — holes remaining in the inner heart chambers; not healed, never treated, undergone no surgery. And so life keeps affecting us, as it must; moulding us without ever changing us. Hair roots are missing; there is a shortage of cells. We stay at this pre-
cipitous place where the nakedness and the self-preserving instincts try to hold hands — or vie for ascendancy and tear the fabric — "

"You're talking about Flame?" Flame's disintegration Lynn readily grasped, driven to distraction by the unyielding, demanding straitjacket that passed for belief! And Flame too sensitive, too fragile. Driven mad — not Ophelia mad drowning with flowers — Quaker mad! Institutionalized; existing — as a delicate plant that can tolerate neither light nor shade nor heat nor bitter cold. "Crippled — crushed — that's what Flame is — crippled!" she added aloud, thinking, they did this to her — he did it to her; first they, then Freeland! They call this religion, and love!

"Ah yes, poor Flame — not crippled, shattered; she was too brittle; fractured. Crippled we all are, Lynn, where life's heavy boot stepped hard. Flame became ill."

This, Lynn knew, she would never accept. They drove her to it! Distant cousin that Flame was, a surge of fresh identification had rushed to Lynn's heart, ever since the dream castle that was New Firbank — neo-Firbank! — had collapsed. They might all have been spared. "Flame wasn't a weakling, Bonne-maman — she wasn't ill. She was torn to shreds by all of 'em —"

"I suppose you are including me?"

"I don't know." After a moment Lynn conceded more gently, "you and me."

"WHATCHA USETER"

The brief excerpts quoted may provoke dismay akin to that of my Jewish poet friend when she exclaimed, "Why did Portnoy's Complaint have to be about a Jewish mother?" Her reaction surprised me a little. How come this dismay over a fictional rendering when the most self-aware, excruciatingly funny and robust Jewish humor always comes from Jews?

In-group humor is a benign form of self-criticism. Our household lately has laughed itself to a pulp over a reprint of Milt Gross' Nize Baby, Jewish immigrant humor of the Twenties which on the surface is unflattering but on a deeper level

a great tribute! Why then is there so little sturdy, rollicking Quaker humor? The best of in-group humor originates within the group. To joke robustly about one's own foibles, or matters near and dear, expresses deep solidarity, caring, kinship; a sign of maturity in a people who are sure of their identity. When our own, demure, Quaker-gray humor comes of age I will recognize the signs: The time is at hand. The Society is about to take off into orbit and go places!

With humor, as with many things Quakerly or unquakerly, "I all depends whatcha useter?" Nicholson, in Quakers and the Arts, recounts the facts on Daltonism, that special form of color blindness that afflicted Friend John Dalton, the chemist, and became attributed to lack of adequate visual color experience for generations of "plain" Friends. They weren't used to seeing color, and some lost their color sense. The few reactions to my previously mentioned meetinghouse paintings are much in this line — Friends are simply not used to thinking of themselves in terms of artistic statement outside the few standard clichés and have no handle by which to begin. (For young meeting-goers there was absolutely no problem of this kind about the two renderings.) This does not mean we can and should get used to anything, and through habituation ascribe Quaker meaning and validity.

On the contrary. We should become more aware of the gaps in our Quaker in-group culture, so far as it persists or renews itself. For the rule of the vacuum applies most effectively — where there is a void, something will rush in to fill it. Often anything. We could sum up Friends' present relation to culture and the arts as one that has abandoned its roots and own in-culture in large measure; one that no longer knows what the unique roots were — Quakerism simply didn't exist for Fox and many generations (and makes little sense now) outside the communal witness; one that explains away today's lack of rootedness in terms of a praiseworthy, amorphous, Quaker openness — open to almost anything from the outside, but running scared of a new openness to significant in-culture development. We lack not only sustaining in-group humor. Why have Friends who have shunned public entertainments
for so long not developed their own games? (An older Friend recounts a childhood giggling game they played when Yearly Meeting was in session: Solemnly a bunch of them would say, “Yearly Meeting has begun, no more laughing, no more fun!” The first to explode the solemnity with mirth would be “it” — “presiding clerk” up front! Have we forgotten that “a child shall lead them”?)

The waves of gimmicks, “isms,” fads that keep inundating our meetings should be understood as filling some of the voids left by recessive or underdeveloped or lapsed aspects of Quaker revelation and practice; borrowings that resemble Quakerism outwardly or marginally (hence my “fringe benefits”), and through emphases on silence or peace or whatever become hitched to Friends’ purposes, but do not originate within the Quaker revelation. This is not always bad. The numerical state of the Society alone preordains this in some measure. It becomes bizarre as in the instance of a Yearly Meeting Religious Education Committee borrowing the Shinto Torii Gate symbol (later withdrawn) as illustrative imprint image for new materials couched in the Christian metaphors, “the way,” “gate,” “door”! Unawareness on the part of the R. E. leadership who didn’t check into the chauvinistic, militaristic aspects of Shinto is incidental. The problem to confront is the vacuum: our own lack of a suitable cultural artifact. We have swept our house so immaculately clean and are left sitting ducks for borrowings of cultic Shinto symbolism, and any number of other preposterous “devils,” to enter in. Words of Thomas Hodgkin are applicable: “The whole tendency is... to substitute the Beautiful for the Holy, as the object of men’s highest admiration; to rob mankind of the knowledge of God...”

THE CHARGE

“Housewives,” “illiterate mechanics,” theologians, religious educators — all — need to backtrack to our significant early Quaker insights and from there promulgate new positive doctrine — a theology of culture, of fluidity of doctrine, of conflict and tension. This is urgent for anyone who does not look forward to entering his meetinghouse one First-day to find a mobile of the Torii Gate dangling in the entrance! (We already have Christmas trees.)

Practicalities: Our colleges and high schools which have not yet instituted courses in Quaker literature, the Journals, and other works should do so forthwith. We need in-residence programs for Quaker writers, artists, musicians, poets — perhaps especially for those not yet “arrived” in their fields. Those concerned with religious education I would charge with curtailing their kiddie programs and concentrating on “catechism classes” in Quaker and Christian doctrine for parents. R. E. still “takes” best in the home, taught even by osmosis; the young parent should be the direct R. E. target, not the kiddies of elementary school age and below.

I would like to see Quaker publishing geared to small, limited editions which may have little outside appeal. While many long-standing denominational publishing houses are going broke, I believe there are ways of doing this successfully; another time and place for discussing the mechanics (the literate mechanics).

Okay — that’s it for now. All theologians and housewives get busy, so that we can say to Friend Hicks and others, “Come, and take thy artist’s seat!”

References
2. Judson Jerome, Candle in the Straw (in Religious Theatre No. 1, Fall 1964), reprinted and obtainable, Friends World Committee, 152-A North 15th Street, Philadelphia, Pa., 19102, $1.00.
3. Edward Hicks, Memoirs (Philadelphia: Merrilaw & Thompson, 1851), p. 251. (On “primitive” Friends, see also pp. 14, 32, 123.)
Friends' Relation to the Arts:
Some Further Preliminary Reflections

CHRIS DOWNING

Although I suppose I might be one of those theologians who Candida Palmer hopes will one day soon direct their energies toward the articulation of a Quaker theology of culture, these present pages do not represent the undertaking of so ambitious a project. Nor are they in any direct sense a response to her essay but simply some mostly independently formulated reflections on Friends' relation to the arts, especially poetry, provoked by two volumes recently issued by Friends closely associated with the Quaker Theological Discussion Group: a book of poems written by John McCandless, a critical study of contemporary poetry prepared by Paul Lacey.

Nevertheless to undertake such a review (particularly for these pages) is inevitably to concern myself with many of the same issues addressed in her fine and punchy article. For I want to look pretty directly at the question of what it might mean to speak of Quaker poetry or Quaker literary criticism (and implicitly, of course, will be presenting my answer to the second question as much by the example of this article itself as by any of the particular criteria I might explicitly name within it).

As Candida Palmer rightly perceives, because the liberation from asceticism paralleled the loss of a strong sense of group identity, the notion of a Quaker art seems to have been problematic in one way or another throughout the Society's history. At first there was almost no Quaker art because of the Society's anti-esthetic bias; now there is hardly any Quaker art because there is so little identification of the Society as the community about whom or for whom one writes. Indeed, for very few contemporary Friends is there much appreciation of