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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 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
the communal aspect of faith, much response to Fox's call to us to become the people of God. The absence of Quaker art has the paradoxical consequence that though today individual Friends may be sensitively appreciative of the esthetic dimension, our group life is still ascetic, indeed an-esthetic: unresponsive to the sensuous, to the emotions (the latter reflected, as Candida Palmer notes, in our fear of conflict and tension) and to the humorous.

Her essay leads us to ask a question which we have mostly comfortingly ignored: how might we relate Quaker art (and art interpreted from a Quaker perspective) to the life of our Meetings? I find in her own most visible answer what strikes me as still too anti-esthetic a tone — because too utilitarian. She seems to value art primarily for its illustrative power. As she demonstrates, the Quaker work of fiction can dramatically embody our distinctive worldview, and can help us to see and acknowledge our shadow sides. What she wants illustrated is a more complex and sophisticated morality than the one conveyed in sentimentally "religious" fiction, but the implied vision of art is still a didactic one. (Such a vision is perhaps always the easiest to define — at least if one knows one cannot opt instead for a simplistic version of the "art for art's sake" counter-vision.) But the question persists even if her own proposed answer does not wholly satisfy. As does the other question that recurs throughout her essay: What makes a Quaker artist Quaker?

The demise of sectarian Quakerism has bequeathed us the question of what is distinctively Quaker about the theology, the worship, the lifestyle of contemporary Quakers. One could respond to this question deductively or inductively, theoretically or phenomenologically. My approach will be descriptive not normative; for I do not begin with any pre-established definition of Quaker art or Quaker artist. I don't so much want to propose any evaluative criteria as to explore carefully, critically, caringly, what Quaker artists and critics who see their being Quakers as relevant to their work do.

If we want to foster Quaker art we must do so by giving attention to the work that is presently being done. As Candida Palmer observes, our artists need to be confirmed in their talents (and I suspect such confirmation is better served by our reading their work with an ear both appreciative and critical than by recording them as Quaker artists — but then I feel the same about Quaker ministers). Such confirmation if it is intended as serious encouragement implies making our critical judgments as tough and honest as we would were we writing for a professional journal, though undoubtedly with some additional and different questions in mind. Such rigor is necessary if we really mean that we care about art as art, about criticism as art criticism, and not judging either simply as ornamented morality. I care more that the poetry is good poetry than that it is Quaker poetry; the latter question only becomes relevant if the answer to the first is affirmative. For I believe that any question about the moral value of art is worth asking only about art whose formal embodiment of its vision helps us see newly, freshly, more subtly, and doesn't simply confirm us in our prior prejudices.

It is also important, I believe, that we undertake our reading with a willingness to bring differences, tensions, reservations into the open. I agree with Candida Palmer that one of the things art can do is to help open us to an appreciation of tension still too rare among Friends. (It is perhaps significant that it is in an issue devoted to Friends and the esthetic that we talk explicitly in these pages as to how most helpfully to respond to the work of others whose central commitments one shares. Clearly this is something that we who contribute to Quaker Religious Thought still need to work on. Often in these pages, it seems to me, we are too polite to one another and other times too defensive. Sometimes it is precisely the most significant differences that are not deemed worth working through; occasionally it is the in-group disagreements that are most intensely expressed. Though we are clear that we want to avoid the aridity of scholastic debate and to include the element of personal commitment, just having a format that invites response and counter-response has not magically solved the issue for us. Perhaps we need a better culture of theo-
logical reflection as well as the theological reflections on culture for which Candida Palmer calls.)

Paul Lacey’s collection of critical essays, *The Inner War: Forms and Themes in Recent American Poetry* (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1972, 132 pp., $3.95) is an examination of five contemporary poets and especially of the religious motifs and concerns visible in their poetry. None of the five are Friends but Paul Lacey is, and his acknowledgments in the preface suggest that he self-consciously writes as a Quaker critic, that he recognizes how his religious standpoint informs his questions, perceptions and judgments. (It seems clear to me that neither the Quaker artist nor the Quaker critic would write exclusively for his fellow Quakers, but rather that he would look upon Friends as “his own people,” as those from whom he expects the most sensitive response.) I want to explore how this shows itself, to ask whether his Quaker starting-point leads him to do violence or justice to his texts, and to inquire in what ways Paul Lacey’s readings are illuminating to us.

The title of his first chapter, “Witnesses to the Spiritual,” suggests how central the religious theme is to his exploration: he wants to look at what contemporary poets have to say about the spiritual state of our world and how their critique relates to that of theologians. This for him implies attention to poetic form and innovation not so much for its own sake or because it brings pleasure, but because the artist uses form as his way of seeing freshly into themes. Form is the revelation of content. Paul Lacey quotes Anne Sexton, “Form is a trick in order to get at truth,” and clearly sees it as an indispensable trick. Thus he helps us to see that appreciation of art has to be appreciation not of its abstractable truth but of the way that truth is presented. He refers to the imagination as “the faculty of discovery,” and looks to poets not for “answers” to the questions they and we must wrestle with but for a way of wrestling. His essays seek to show us how insight emerges from “inner war.”

The poems he discusses here bespeak a different esthetic from the one shaped by Eliot and Pound: they are more overtly personal documents, and less formally “poetic,” closer to journals and notebooks. Conflict, tension, ambiguity are still important words in his critical vocabulary, but when used with respect to these poets they refer not primarily to elements of the poem’s structure but to the poet’s inner turmoil and his war with contemporary American society. Paul Lacey values the writing of such poetry because it may be a mode of spiritual preparation, may strengthen the imagination so that it may produce not poems alone but more humane institutions, ways of living together.”

Most of the book is devoted to readings of five individual poets (Anne Sexton, William Everson, James Wright, Robert Bly, Denise Levertov), careful, perceptive readings which give us a sense of the styles, themes, development of their work and which seem to succeed as invitations to read the poetry itself if it is unfamiliar to us (to succeed perhaps less well as invitations to read with new vision the poets whose work we have already read with care ourselves). I understand Paul Lacey’s project to be more to persuade us to read poetry, to let it take us to the edge of things, than to ask us to focus on his criticism. Nevertheless it seems appropriate here not to rehearse his analyses but to try instead to name what they imply about what are for him the most important things to say about contemporary poetry and our relation to it.

He shows how for many of these poets the literalistic Christianity of their childhood has come to seem confining, even crippling. Yet their alienation from that tradition creates a sense of separation from community, an anguished loneliness. They write poetry as therapy, as part of what is actually a religious search. Both Bly and Wright speak of trying through the making of poems to transform self-hatred into acceptance and trust. Paul Lacey shows us how often all these poets use religious language to describe their poetic activity. They speak of poetry as incarnation, transformation, confession, epiphany, ritual resolution, communion. They leave literal Christianity behind but still depend on Christian (and for Denise Levertov, Hasidic) imagery. These poems show the still lively resources of the tradition if it is appropriated imaginatively. When the
appropriation is more dogmatic as is true of Everson (Brother Antoninus), we have a poetry of explication not discovery, moral discourse “arranged to give the impression of poetry.” Yet neither Paul Lacey nor the poets he is writing about offer us an easy celebration of art as religious surrogate. They are too aware of how the turn to writing fails to produce the transformation sought. They see how easily the poetic concern to give form and meaning to the world can become a turning away from it. They long through poetry to show forth how things are their own meanings, but discover that a deliberately sacralizing art removes things from the human world. They want somehow to indicate the entanglement of self and politics, to relate through poetry not only to the world of nature but to the world of men, which means to the particular social context of contemporary America. The volume ends with the discussion of Denise Levertov, with praise for her coming to regard the function of poetry not as the creation of self but as seeing and celebrating the world, and with respect for how radically this has transformed her way of making poems. She has had to “relearn the alphabet” in order to “relearn the world.”

Paul Lacey’s own religious concern makes him acutely sensitive to the centrality of religious and moral questioning in the work of these poets and to the ways in which their formal struggles participate in that questioning. He shows us their importance as perceptive and articulate witnesses to the contemporary relation to the spiritual, and makes us aware how problematic that relation is.

The first poem included in John McCandless’ Yet Still We Kneel (Hemlock Press, Alburtis, Pa., 1972, 80 pp., $5.00) speaks also of an inner war:

Having as all created things the power
to will disharmony and turn away,
break from his orbit like the meteor,
or, fruitless, multiply like cankered cells,

man faces outward from the silent core
of his true being, inwardly at war
but we sense immediately that we are here confronted with a very different kind of poetry from that presented through Paul Lacey’s analyses. This is undisguisedly both a Christmas and a Christian poem: it ends with an invocation of the Holy Child through whom “God and man may yet be reconciled.” The rhythms, the language, the tone are different: the form is conventional, tightly ordered, impersonal.

But rather than dismissing this poetry as Paul Lacey does the didactic poems of William Everson, we should recognize it as calling for a different kind of reading. We cannot respond to its intentions nor its power unless we understand that it does not aim at being personal poetry, that here poetry is seen not as either therapy or revelation but as witness. We miss the point if we look for dramatically novel technical innovations or for agonized personal revelation. In a sense this too is confessional poetry: not the confession of the turmoil of individual search but a confession of faith.

There is in these poems a witness to a deeply religious conviction that is never pietistic, to an ethical vision that escapes moralism. And escapes through its poetic strengths. The morality and the faith are not simply dressed up to give “the impression of poetry.” These poems display John McCandless’ deep delight in poetic forms and in words, in playing with them — seriously. For him there is challenge in taking on a conventional form like that of the sonnet and making it work. The fresh wrestling with inherited form seems authentic corollary to this attempt to give new voice to inherited faith. It validates an impersonality which might seem inappropriate in a looser, more colloquial and individual form. For instance, in “Sonnet for My Thirty-fourth Birthday” it seems natural that it is the guilty inadequacy of everyman before God, not particularly that of John McCandless, which we hear voiced until the last two lines make the reflections more immediate, more pressing:

...And then what justice shall my life afford, that I have lived this year beyond my Lord?
Choice

This life is hard, and full of woe,
its pitfalls deep;
a truth that any bard may know
who troubles sleep.

We dig our holes till time must stop,
then find them steep;
or crop our souls to sow our crop,
which others reap.

We pile up dirt from side to side
and upward creep,
which brings us hurt when down we slide
all in a heap.

To gather me dung from here to damn
makes life seem cheap;
I'd rather be hung for the Lamb
than a sheep.

Yet Still We Kneel, © 1972 by J. H. McCandless. Reprinted by permission.

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Because there is no poetic hubris manifest in a self-conscious calling of attention to original form, we can accept the lines from “If I Forget Thee…”

Lord, I will watch, though all the world should sleep
and

Lord, I will sing, though all the world be dumb
not as a personal claim but as a deeply felt articulation of what faith means.

There are some reminders of W. H. Auden in John McCandless’ way of taking a conventional form and introducing the unexpectedly contemporary turn of phrase, and in his taking a catchy popular rhythm (as in “The Window”) and almost surreptitiously adapting it to his own more serious purposes and showing us how to share his enjoyment at the tension between style and theme. But this is a question of affinity not dependence: John McCandless clearly has his own voice.

He loves words, revels in puns, in using clichés and turning them upside down and thus renewing them, in purposely misquoting (as in the poem “For Wilmer Young” the line, “Because I do not hope to climb / those many fences more” evokes T. S. Eliot’s “Because I do not hope to turn again”). I hear more care for words than for things; there is not in these poems much naming or celebrating of the sensuous, of the physical world; there are few concrete metaphors — mostly conventional symbols or allegories or puns. His is a verbal imagination, and one more attuned to the articulation of ideas than of perceptions. What I respond to most wholly are the reflections of verbal humor, the delight in wordplay made consonant with seriousness of theme. Therefore what I remember most vividly are not whole poems but single lines, yet as I try to select out a few of those I discover how deeply embedded they are in their contexts, how their power evaporates when abstracted from it.

The drawings by Gerard Negelspach which accompany the poems provide a superb visual complement, not so much
because they aptly illustrate particular poems (though they do that) but because they have the same kind of strength and power as graphics that the poems have as word compositions: the same kind of cleanness, simplicity, austerity and humor.

Many of the poems are overtly religious, several are occasional poems written for Advent or Christmas, several explicitly focus on Quaker subjects. But there is no “cheap grace” here and no parochial self-satisfaction. There is instead prophetic criticism, a criticism free of individual breast-beating which yet includes the poet along with the rest of us:

Restless, we probe the pottage of our souls,
finding no birthright, seeking to compose
disordered minds in primly ordered rows.
Not God, but peace and quiet are the goals.

There is a plea here to us to own up to hypocrisy and to the fadedness of faith, a plea that yet ends in voicing hope and affirmation. These poems are clearly written to us, the Quaker community, and as clearly they issue from a loving albeit critical identification with that community. They bespeak a kind of symbiotic relationship between this artist and his community. It needs his prophetic voice, but his artistry seems also to depend on the maintenance of that identification. His forms are not the forms of individual searching but of prophetic witness.