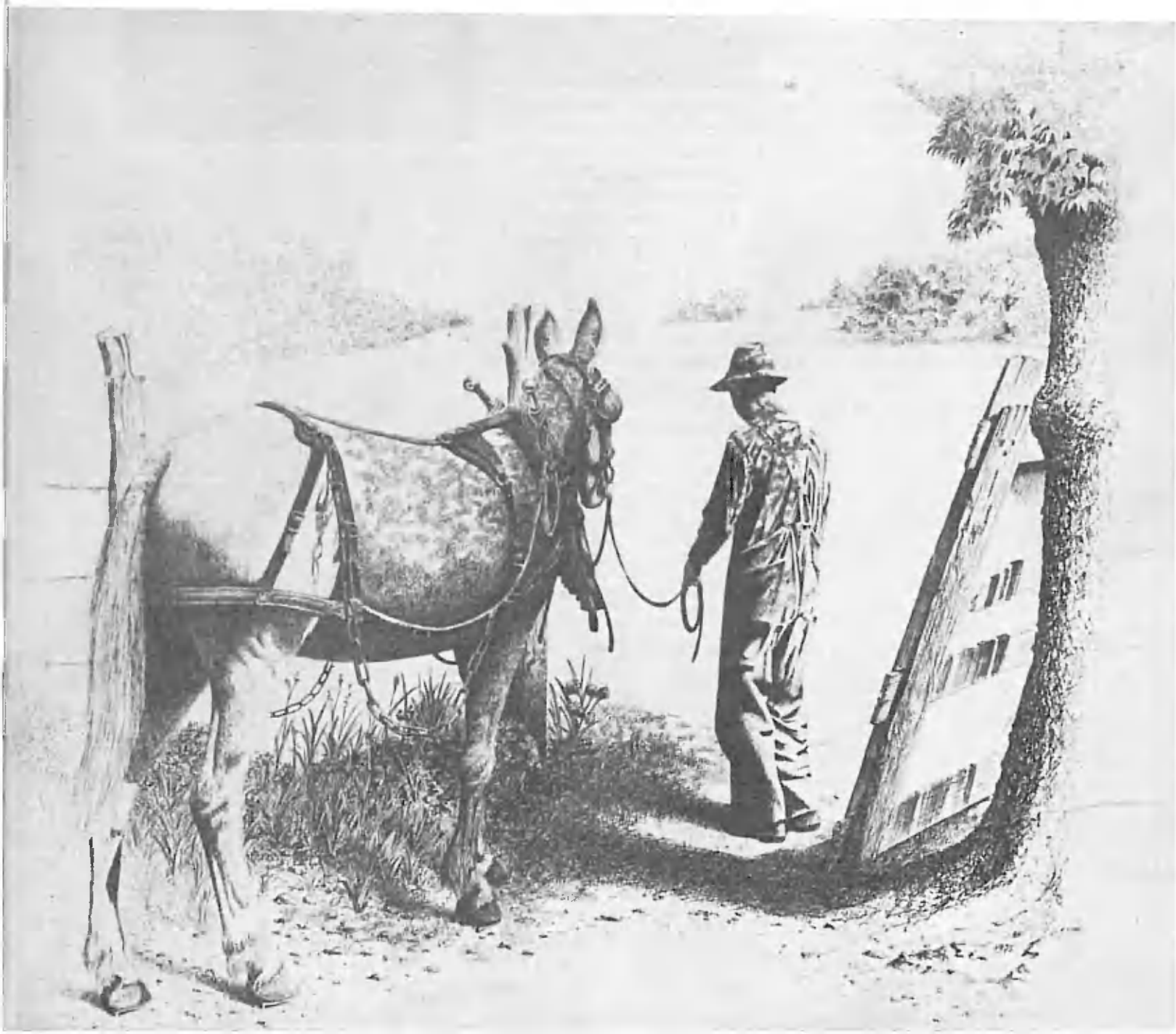
MENNONITE LIFE

MARCH 1977



IN THIS ISSUE

Never in over three decades of publication has *Mennonite Life* devoted an entire issue to a single author. We now break with that tradition. John Ruth's Menno Simons lectures, first presented at Bethel College in October, 1976, generated such an enthusiastic response that we decided to publish the completed text as soon as possible.

Ruth's insights and testimony touch something near the core of North American Mennonite self-understanding in the 1970s. Mennonites have an awakened interest in the arts. Seldom in our history has there been such an outpouring of popular productivity in original Mennonite drama, music, film and other art forms. But no one is sure what lies behind this flurry of activity, nor what there is of value or detriment, of wheat or chaff, in "Mennonite art."

Ruth's lectures represent the first sustained Mennonite effort clearly and systematically to understand the deeper meanings of our contemporary love-hate affair with the arts. Where are the stories that reveal who we are? What inhibitions alternately restrict and energize our aesthetic impulses? How can the Mennonite imagination be challenged to works that are existentially gripping and faithful to the core values of our community? Ruth offers not a simple rule of thumb for separating "good art" from "bad art," but rather a moving testimony of one person who is getting in touch with his tradition and with himself.

This issue includes the annual bibliography of Radical Reformation and Mennonite publications. The bibliography of Mennonite writings on the bicentennial has been deferred to the June issue.

John Ruth

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MENNONITE LIFE

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Mennonite Identity and Literary Art

I. Where is the Story?

Prologue

The following lectures derive less from a wish to "say something" publicly on my subject than from involuntary private ponderings on a calling I have felt, often obscurely, for several decades. They are colored by the special experience of a narrow ethnic enclave in eastern Pennsylvania. My approach, rather than attempting to be prescriptive or definitive, will be to offer reflections that may strike a spark here and there in thoughtful readers of any background, who are interested in the complex interplay of identity and literary expression. By speaking primarily of what I know in particular I hope to spare the reader grandiose and untestable generalizations, while contributing some minor clarifications to a large, and a largely abused, set of concerns.

I shall have little to say, except by implication, regarding "aesthetics" as an abstract category. Beginning concretely where I have been caught in existence, and with a persistently felt need for a sense of place, personality and thread of meaning, I shall respond to questions raised by the encounter of such needs with the equally human needs for "beauty" or "imagination" which give rise to art. I shall be offering no manifesto or program, but I will try to call attention to the inadequacy of some easily arrived—at attitudes regarding my topics.

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It seems appropriate to begin on the subject of identity. Speaking as one fascinated by the range, depth and liberating possibilities of the Western tradition of art, I confess also a need for some bearings, some sense of where I stand in this tradition, and why I stand where I do. The Latin root of the word I am employing—"identity"—derives from the concept of "the same," suggesting a continuity of experience made conscious by the repeatedness of recognition. Only with the link of sameness can I connect this moment, this place, this sensation, with another, and perceive them as related in a continuum. Only with sameness is there conscious coherence, whether that sameness is objectively in the objects of perception or conferred on them by some transcendental unity of apperception in my mind.

Stated otherwise, consciousness and personality are either continuous or incoherent. Both depend on at least some sameness perceived as a continuum. If a person has no memory, is unable to link the present moment with a previous one, he is an *idiot* —he has sameness, all right, but no conscious continuity with himself, based on free, imaginative and intelligent choices. In terms of what interests us as human, he has no personality, no identity. Since he has no memory, he has, in an important sense, no experiences.

Thus, while art may be the *form*, memory is the *stuff*, of identity. Although memory and imagination may cooperate to produce art, and there are such things as the shaping of the act of remembering and the art of rendering what is remembered, the work of memory can not be *replaced* by art. An authentic identity can not be manufactured by "aesthetics" uninformed by memory.

To have identity, we must have some access to our past, and if we are speaking of group-identity, we mean group-past. The inwardly felt urge for this ebbs and flows with the dialectic of social experience, as witness the recent phenomenon of the Black story *Roots* (signifying by its title the general human longing rather than the particular story it tells). This TV series anomalously convinced some Mennonites that one's past could be an important part of one's consciousness just after they had dismissed their own Anabaptist heritage as tiresome. Similarly, for some acculturating middle-class Mennonites it takes the sugar-coated Jewish *Fiddler on the Roof* to sweeten the word "tradition."

Access to a meaningful past is mediated via story —information connected in a pattern that snags our attention by narrative, has a focus, carries a theme, resonates atavistically with our depths. The cluster of stories by which a living tradition is carried leads individuals to a sense of who they are and where they have appeared in the life of the community. They place the individual in a context, they confront him with an identity which he must either do something about or shunt aside and allow to atrophy.

The Bible is, as much as anything else, the story of a people—their gathering, their suffering, their persistence, their deflections from their covenant,

their dialogue with their God. When the Bible is read not as the story it is, but in bits and pieces; when "principles" or "doctrines" are abstracted from the story, formulized and then "applied" as though they carried an intrinsic life, the results are not only distorting but often in ironic contrast to their contextual meanings.

For the Biblical people—Israel—the story is their identity. They may have lost their temple, their homeland, their political autonomy—but as long as they remember Zion, their songs—their "art"—will not become mere aesthetic experience for the secular, non-covenant audience in Babylon, They will remember who they are: their identity will hold while their memory operates.

With the passing of eras whose meaning is taken up by story tellers setting episodes in a narrative continuum, the understanding of God's unfolding redemption grows richer and clearer. (As the collected stories accumulate, they form a saga teaching morals and a world-view.) While scribes faithfully preserve and transmit what they only partially comprehend, prophets divine new dimensions to be unlocked in the story. And suddenly, when a scribe is initiated by Jesus into the Kingdom of Heaven, he received the exhilarating vision of the continuity of Israel's particular past with the New Testament of Christ's new, universal human order. Thus reoriented, he becomes able to bring out of the treasury of communal memory "things new and old." The story has become luminous. The memory, far from functioning as end, limitation or embarrassment, fructifies and ballasts his imagination. It is a part of his liberation. To be denied access to it would be to be blindfolded.

Christians in general and Mennonites in particular see themselves as part of that Hebrew story. They "identify with" it. An uneducated Amish minister, speaking in his traditional German, tells his roomful of listeners in a Pennsylvania farmhouse that the breath God breathed into Adam's nostrils, as described by the Jewish writer, is the same breath of life that sustains them at this moment. Or a Mennonite seminary professor discovers in the Old Testament the roots of the pacifism he practices. The continuum operates, conferring and enhancing identity.

To the extent that we value and feel ourselves part of a community, we try to keep it, interpret its meaning, and pass it on. We do not carelessly allow external forces to bleach out of our consciousnesses, or those of our children, the *raison d'etre* of the fellowship, or the symbols and narrations that preserve access to it. In my own community my Colonial Mennonite ancestors went to considerable pains, seven generations ago, to bring before the imaginations of their children the powerful European panorama of martyrdom and social alienation which ran like a crimson thread through their two-century-old memory. Writing to their wealthy Dutch colleagues, they mention "a great increase of young men who have grown up" in their recently established American community, and express their desire that this oncoming generation have opportunity via the immense Mennonite saga of Thielman van Braght, to "see the traces of these faithful witnesses who have walked in the way of truth and given up their lives for it." The act of sponsoring the enormous "educational" project of translating, printing and binding the *Martyrs' Mirror* in half-settled Pennsylvania has itself become a part of the story of the preservation of the Mennonite heritage. Its significance is underlined by the fact that it produced, physically speaking, the largest book to be issued in North America up to that time. And it was, essentially, a collection of Mennonite stories making up a story.

The "world," my ancestors recognized, will not tell our children our story as we alone can know and cherish it. "The world" may quite accurately, and even imaginatively, see "our" experience from any number of interesting points of view which will prove very valuable to our own self-understanding, but it cannot tell the story from that unique center of covenant-conviction where we stand.

Story-tellers needed

Therefore, we need story-tellers of our own. In my Swiss-Pennsylvania background, I do not find a satisfying record in this regard. True, Bishop Henry Funk, who had worked to get an American translation of the *Martyrs' Mirror* in the 1740's, had a great grandson, John F. Funk, who, as another language change loomed, published an English translation about 135 years later. He did this in the Midwest, whither he had had to emigrate to exercise the freedom to have so modern a thing as a Mennonite publishing house. His Pennsylvania Mennonite relatives, in their German-speaking cultural fixity, were suspicious of such sophisticated "helps" as English publications. Their conservatism, alas, was not conservative in its effects. While they themselves had access, by oral tradition, to their identity-carrying stories going back beyond the Atlantic migration, they made no provision for that story to overlap the unforeseen, wider cultural ocean of a new language fast replacing the idioms of the *Muttersproch* in their children's consciousness. Anecdotes can carry idioms across translation as few other vehicles, but, by and large, my conservative ancestors recorded for us no store of them. They were too busy ironically, preserving

their tradition and reaching out in evangelizing, to do what might most effectively have helped to mediate it to their descendants. Thus, while I encountered John Funk's edition of the *Martyrs' Mirror* during my teens, and the Horsch-Bender-Hershberger-Wenger Anabaptist Vision in my twenties, I did so in a kind of vacuum, as regards the post-migration story of the community in which I was trying to get my bearings.

My parents' generation, as I have mentioned, were savoring the heady new wine of rural mission outreach, taking as their program a set of phrases and a way of using the Bible learned from "evangelical" American movements. Lowliness, humility, mutuality and obedience, inculcated immemorially in the sing-song sermons of the preachers of their parents' generation, were now replaced with an activist mood, chorales with Moody-Sankey songs, and youthful wild-oats-sowing with devotions and tract-distributing. This vigorous outreach—the first thing I woke up to in the church—elicited my enthusiasm and swept me into its currents. I encountered Christ in its terms. But a need it did not minister to was a hunger to know, in imaginative, concrete, narrative terms, the earlier stages of the stream I was swimming in.

The reason I heard no story (except in humorous or shamefaced recollections by my grandparents and local eccentrics), was that my parents' generation was at work at the task of forgetting. Shades of Will Herberg's thesis, with the Mennonite twist of doing things several generations later than ordinary society! I did not become particularly aware of this forgetting until my spiritual fellowship began to call on me to teach. Then I sought to draw on what I presumed would be a living memory-bank, as I sensed the pedagogical need for story. A specific moment presents itself to my memory. About ten years ago I was asked to land a preliminary discussion among some sixty prospective teachers of young people, on a "quarter" of Sunday School lessons for which a special curriculum on peace had been jointly prepared by "Old" and "General Conference" Mennonites. Since the "revengeless doctrine" of "defenselessness" had been central to Mennonite teaching since its inception over four centuries earlier, I assumed that it would be easy to discuss. I proposed to my roomfull of teachers that we share with each other those story-materials, anecodotes, even legends, whereby the teaching of nonresistant love had been mediated to us. To my considerable amazement, it became evident that there was stored in the pool of Mennonite minds not a single narrative relating to two and a half centuries of American experience. There was a smattering of information from the *Martyrs' Mirror*, but in terms of the post-Atlantic story there was near total amnesia. This was progress? This was consciousness?

Could it be that my parents' generation, capable as they were of the difficult gesture of putting on old-fashioned, non-conformed clothes, had been shamed out of what their grandparents still knew? Had they really forgotten our people's experience in the American Revolution (my great-grandmother, born in 1843, could tell stories of it), and had they really allowed me to form my impressions of it via Parson Weems' pious myth of George Washington and the cherry tree, or by singing "Yankee Doodle" and "O Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean" in our new consolidated school? What did they mean by faithfulness to our forefathers, when the only ones they could adduce were the Anabaptists of which the professors at Goshen wrote so much?

I discovered in myself the instincts of a story-teller, but found that I should have to do my own research. Fortunately, one did not have to begin from absolute scratch. In his own mid-twenties, two decades earlier, the Mennonite theology-student John C. Wenger had gleaned the data from the collection of an elderly turkey-farmer and amateur historian whose sharp eye had caught many an evanescant detail in a disappearing scenario. But even he had been already too late, as well as too parochial, to record many of the necessary stories.

One found more interest in the texture of our past, paradoxically, among assorted non-Mennonites who, as physical descendants of Mennonites, were intrigued as to what the story of their own ancestry might be. This fact was taken as support by the Mennonites arguing against the utility of history in our church life ("Once you have it written," one man asked, "what will you *do* with it?"). Such short-sightedness, of course, is realized for what it is only after it has become forever too late to listen to several generations of old people's stories. What those who minimized the role of story in our consciousness do not recognize is that their attitude was a worldly one. Because their current, progress-bound generation, busy trying out its new automobiles, radios, real-estate booms and college educations, did not see any story in the overtly eventless preservation of a defenseless Christian counter-culture, the Mennonites themselves finally didn't either. So they were being secularized from within while they fought off, with increasing codification of regulations, the temptation of worldliness from without.

When a Mennonite can not remember why his grandparents went "to meeting" rather than "to church," or why there was no steeple on the meetinghouse, or why they paid fines rather than join the army, or why they viewed commercial insurance

companies as a threat—when these scruples are explained to him from the point of view of a secular culture-historian rather than mediated to him via covenant-story—should we be surprised that he succumbs, all too often, to the blandishments of "personal salvation" on the one hand, or, on the other, salvationless humanism? If there is a vacuum where there ought to be a story, either of these alternatives may well seem more coherent.

When I found the 427 year-old Froschauer Bible of my wife's ancestors in a western Pennsylvania home, and learned that, though it had been carefully studied as late as three generations back, it had now become a curiosity, I asked myself, "Why doesn't the family know what it is? They know what happened on the other side of the world this morning; they can fill out an income tax return; they can hold an office job. How do the central things in life become lost to our minds?" I came to the unwelcome conclusion that we fail to know our own past, not because it has left no evidence, but because we prefer not to know it. If we became one-fourth as skilled at preserving access to our past as we take the trouble to become at skiing, playing the stock market, keeping our houses in repair, or staying abreast of current clothes-fashion, our story would surround us richly. The God of our fathers is not a God of the dead but of the living. It is not that the past is dead but that we, who have explained away our lethargy, are dead to the past. We have found other things to be more important than our own story, and thus closed our eyes and ears to it.

While scholars do the indispensable work of researching, defining and debating the meaning of historical events and trends, the covenant-oriented imagination of a people who "inherit," by faith, the special meanings of these events, will play upon these meanings in order to release them into an interpretation of present life. The failure of a people to find meanings—to see a meaningful story—in events that their ancestors considered archtypical for their community, may mean that later perspectives have emptied the formerly venerated stories of significance, or shown them to have been misinterpreted. It may also simply mean, however, that for a variety of "reasons" the potential inheritors of the meanings have suffered a loss of concern, or of the imaginative vigor to hold themselves open to these meanings.

To put the issue in terms of the title of this lecture, has the story disappeared or have we become inoculated against it? Where is the story of our people, if one is there, and from what point of view can it be seen? By way of an answer, I should like to suggest aspects of Anabaptist-Mennonite experience which impress me as dramatic, containing meanings that impinge forcibly on our present consciousness, if we become upon to them. Each of these events or processes derives its importance from its participation in the overarching Story of God's redemptive act of incarnation, in which the Kingdom is testified to either positively or, in men's failure to enter it, negatively and ironically. The act of regarding these events as significant story is already a confession of their carrying inescapable meaning.

The stories

(1) The experience, in the Europe of the 1520's-1550's, of a sense of God's righteous demands breaking in upon human consciousnesses that had been shaped in the traditional or "natural" religion of the era.

(2) The experience of disappointment of the territorial Christian Church, leading to swiftly surfacing criticism of the Constantinian marriage of church and political state.

(3) The rapid gathering of a minority fellowship impatient of social inertia.

(4) The massive response of repression from state-church authorities.

(5) The ruralization and social sequestering of Swiss Anabaptists; the success and acculturation of the Dutch.

(6) The anomaly of the radicals of the Reformation spawning the western world's most stubborn foot-draggers on the path of "progress."

(7) The forming of a "defenseless" society and life-style within an armed one, including ironically inconsistent behavior.

(8) The striking persistence and survival (with significant exceptions) of the teaching and practice of non-cooperation in war.

(9) The continuous Anabaptist-Mennonite love of the land, leading to continuous migrations which interwove economic and spiritual motifs.

(10) The Russian phase of Mennonite experience, with classic and powerful social confrontations, ironies, divergent impulses, personalities and social upheaval.

(11) The stubborn struggle, still practiced in parts of the American Mennonite fellowship, to maintain a simple life, in which social and technological developments are experienced as moral issues, the communal price of every change is assessed, innovations in the macroculture are questioned, and a "plain" ethos becomes a fact of North American history.

(12) The apparently inevitable Mennonite schismatic process.

(13) The emergence, through missions, of Mennonite fellowships in the Third World, some of which have their own "Martyrs' Mirror" stories.

(14) The multifarious North American process of acculturation, the individual or communal abandonment of our identity, the absorption of our story by another story, so that we have no story.

(15) The maintenance and reflorescence of the tradition.

This incomplete and arbitrary list should contain no surprises. While everyone's list would be different, each of the "events or processes" mentioned provides material, *depending on our point of view*, for the telling of a story. The question becomes less, "Is there a story there," than "Do we see a Story over-arching these stories?" "There are some subjects which speak to us and others which do not," acknowledged the master-novelist Henry James, "but he would be a clever man who should undertake to give a rule . . . by which the story and the no-story should be known apart." Any such general rule that dismissed *a priori* certain kinds of human behavior from the possibility of "story," James observes, would be "arbitrary": it would express the observer's attitude more than what is inherent in the object of his observation. There can be "dramas within dramas" in "a psychological reason" for some person's or group's behavior which might be dismissed from the possibility of story by someone applying an arbitrary rule, such as "whatever is not a part of the cultural mainstream is irrelevant," or "only violent and sudden events are interesting." Hopefully we can be as conscientious on behalf of the integrity of our covenant-identity as James was in the defense of the integrity of his art. For if as literary artists we find our own story too trivial or ancillary to ponder, preserve and tell, we may, as James shows, be proving less the emptiness of the story than our own failure to experience it at a level beyond sentimentality.

Most discussions of this topic begin by making impressive claims for the necessity of the autonomy of the artistic imagination, without proceeding through a strenuous examination of the unique possibilities of particular motifs in our Mennonite memory. This is because it is so much less difficult to manipulate artistic slogans currently in vogue than to seek out an actual encounter with a unique, unfashionable past, and to return from that experience with a vision for which one must find a new articulation. Nor is nostalgia of much meaning to the arduous quest for identity. "Easy is the descent," warned the Sybil of Cumae when Aeneas thought to visit and learn from the shades of his departed ancestors, "but to recall thy steps and issue to upper air, this is the task, this the burden." To have escaped the seductive atmosphere of the "real world" for a revisiting of his shadowy roots is only part of the literary artist's necessary interior journey. If his narrative is to engage the living soul of his people (the calling to which I am addressing these lectures), he must beat his own way back with his dread, liberating message to where his people live and move.

Many a siren's song will have to be ignored for the artist to learn to tell his story with the power of genuine idiosyncrasy. There is always the temptation to tell someone else's story, or to re-invent our own so that it fits the fashions of the macrocosm. There is the orbital pull of the political power-brokers. Not from them is the salvation-story to be learned. "I shut up Hezekiah like a bird in a cage," they imagine their history, leaving the anonymous Hebrew chronicler to place the besieged king's career in a perspective of Zion. Not from cultural embarrassment that pretends to be sophistication shall we get insight, psychological and theological, into the thread of cross-bearing identity by which our heritage was transmitted. Not from ideological negativism that presents itself as no-nonsense debunking of our forbears' "martyr complex" will we gain an entree into their world-view. And not from melodramatic narrative fragments excerpted from their context in the over-arching story of our people will we gain a meaningful encounter with our charter values. All these shallow options nevertheless offer constant opportunities to stray from our true strategies.

If the point I have been making so far—that we have a story but that this story will not disclose its depth meanings through shallow art—seems too obvious, let me respond to a related objection one frequently hears raised. Isn't it idolatrous, runs the thinking, to focus on our parochial story rather than on the universal human one, or at least experience that is culturally more representative?

My thesis is that such objections even to making the attempt to address our particular soul-issues with the full weight of an artist's narrative imagination are an expression more of rejecting the heritage than of respect for the role of the imagination. The tropistic turning away of our imagination toward worldly themes, and its inability to kindle in terms of non-worldly mode strike me as symptoms less of creativity and energy than conformity and exhaustion.

In any case, I would rather work at this task than theorize about it. I am confident that if there is no significant, no true story in our stories, that if God has not been revealing his will in its cross-bearing and trauma, its humility and obedience,

even its bizarre legalisms and piquant cultural absurdities—then the imagination will flee from the scene, and the essential emptiness of the story reveal itself soon enough. If, when scrutinized honestly, the story is found to lack depth, any artist would prefer that the clarification be made.

But in all our North American experience, how often has there been an aesthetically serious representation of our ethos in its classic issues—obedience, simplicity, humility, defenselessness, the questioning of progress, the maintenance of identity? How often have these ideas received aesthetic representation from a full-voiced artist, that did not veer into sentimental advocacy or irritable expose'? How many artists have come to the Swiss plain ethos on its own terms, taking the trouble to learn its language, feel its idioms, tast its nuances? (Readers of Russian Mennonite background do have, in Rudy Wiebe and the earlier Warren Kliewer, literary artists who have demonstrated the capacity for depth access to their own story.)

As we have proved that we can be good Americans or Canadians, we have taken agriculture, business, law, science, medicine seriously. We can produce operatic stars to trill and strut in grandiose or effectingly pathetic poses, as the musical tradition prescribes. We have lectured ourselves into accepting, for at least a generation now, the non-"practical" role of the artist. And yet we are still leaving the articulation and communication of our story—our identity—to administrators and curriculum-writers. Which means that we are in a state of confusion, or at best transition, as to who we are and how we feel about it.

Once again, what have I been saying?

I have not been calling for "Mennonite art" or "more art from Mennonites." What would be the point of such a generality other than the cultural invidiousness of an upwardly mobile group? I have rather tried to say, let us have respect for that chapter of God's salvation-story which it has been our lot to inherit. Let us remember that it was in terms of the story of a people that we learned about God's will in the first place. That salvation story is our identity. We must know how to hear and tell it, as it touches us to the quick. To have assumed its irrelevance is to have left our imagination untested, let alone the heritage.

If, however, the story is indeed so basic to our covenant-identity that we must take an interest in the narrative mode, which is after all a form of endeavor inseparable from aesthetic considerations, are we not going to fall afoul, inevitably, of the deeply ingrained inhibitions of the Anabaptist mentality, the distrust of "fictive things" which "wink as they will," regardless of our piety? This question must be dealt with, and so the following lecture will ask the question, Just what are these gloomy constraints of the Mennonite conscience that confuse aesthetic issues for us?

II. What are the Scruples?

The words "religion" and "obligation" share the Latin root concept of being "bound"—the involuntary yielding of respect or allegiance or obedience. To be religious means to experience certain circumscriptions of attitudes; one is not free to accord equal respect to any and all possible objects. Nor is one likely to find one's deepest convictions lightly changeable.

People of differing persuasions tend to view each other's moral reservations with suspicion or irreverence. I see your inhibitions (whose infrastructure is invisible) as hangups, whereas mine appear to be the fruit of intelligent distinctions. An artist friend with whom I share a common Mennonite background joshes me about my "obsession" with the Mennonite story, while he sees his own multi-staged absorption in painting abstractions of his ancestors' fields as a serious artistic quest. Again, when my family was touring Europe on the Anabaptist trail with Jan Gleysteen in the late sixties, my fifteen year-old son proposed one day that we lighten the tone of our pilgrimage by turning Jan's artesian supply of jokes in the direction of the Anabaptist martyrs. I demurred, stating that the subject meant too much to me to allow me to enjoy hearing it trivialized by ephemeral witticisms. Then, on the same tour Jan retailed a joke which derived its humor at the expense of the far-out, hairy hippies of those years. This my seventeen year old daughter found extremely tasteless. When I pressed the point, she called the joke "ignorant." She was not ready to laugh at the quest for freedom from the bourgeois mentality, because she identified with that quest herself.

What we feel inwardly bound to resist points

backward to our basic positive values. In a mosque in Samarkand I watched a local Moslem man indignantly scolding a group of Mennonites who had been singing to test the building's acoustics. "This isn't a theater," the man sputtered, and one felt his emotions rising from age-old convictions he had imbibed at the center of his consciousness. Just so, an 18th Century New England Baptist could be gravely disturbed by the religious practice of "promiscuous singing"—allowing everyone in the congregation to help in singing songs that expressed emotions appropriate only to the truly committed. The *Te Deum* would strike him as blasphemy, in its claim that "all on earth" joined to praise the Lord, while anyone could see that a large portion of the human race turned their backs on the Creator. Yet the Baptist could freely refer to the days of the week by the names of pagan Gods, a thing which his Quaker neighbor found idolatrous. The Puritan, in turn, seemed to have no inhibition sufficient to stop him from hanging the Quaker who insisted on street-preaching in Boston, regarding the Quaker's deeply felt pacifism as a baseless quirk. And in latter day America certain Mennonites are still agonizing over whether to put rubber tires on their buggies, while some of their Amish friends have inched their way forward on the path of progress only to the point of using rubber treads on their tractor wheels, without having inflated tires. All of which, viewed from the outside, is sad or amusing depending on the degree of our identification with the values being defended.

The Anabaptists were not the inventors of scruples, nor did they borrow the ones they had from English Puritans. They participated in the "Reformed" mentality that developed from the early 16th Century reaction to Catholic Renaissance *Pracht*. The Bible was reviewed with intense scholarly interest, and its New Testament model of simplicity was compared indignantly with the decadent, if artist-patronizing corpulence of the papal empire. And even without strictly religious considerations, the northern imagination had always been more restrained, pictorially, than the Mediterranean; the trans-Alpine reaction that produced the "Reformation" now developed certain elements of outright iconoclasm.

Mistrust or even condemnation of the role of "images" in our conceptions of spiritual reality had received recurrent expression in the Christian tradition since its beginnings, and this tradition, of course, had its roots in the ancient monotheism of the Hebrews. As their chroniclers pointed out, even good images—the brazen serpents symbolizing healing of poisonous snake-bites—eventually became the occasion for further sin, when the Israelites super-religiously "burned incense" to them. To escape the distorting, acculturating power of concrete symbols, which inevitably functioned to shape the image of Jahweh to local idolatrous models of divinity—this became Israel's special calling. Let the creative energy of the covenant family be expressed ethically rather than aesthetically. And yet—the tabernacle project itself called for an outpouring of art, for workers "filled with wisdom of heart, to work all manner of work, of the engraver, and of the cunning workman, and of the embroiderer, in blue, and in purple, in scarlet, and in fine linen . . . and of those that devise cunning work." There were golden cherubim, an elaborate candlestick, pillars, a veil, an altar, an ark. All the creative energy with which it was forbidden to image forth the transcendant God was scrupulously channeled into the shaping of his dwelling among the pilgrim people. For all their scruples, Israel's tabernacle as described in the closing chapters of Exodus pays lavish tribute to the delight of the senses and the aesthetic urge felt even in worship.

The classic Christian expression of caution lest enjoyment of beauty replace genuine worship is that of the Catholic St. Augustine. He is not able to resolve the tension easily in favor of one side or the other. Listening to the melodies to which the Psalms were sung, he experienced simultaneous "repose" for the soul and "contentment of the flesh," and was sometimes "more moved with the voice than the words sung." When that happened, he acknowledged, "I confess to have sinned penally, and then had rather not hear music." This reaction he sensibly recognized as "too great strictness," since music was after all one of the "delights of the ear" God had created. The author of the *Confessions* calls on those who have better control of their aesthetic impulses to weep for him, who could never resolve the issue experientially. Likewise with "the pleasure of these eyes of my flesh": they "love fair and varied forms, and bright and soft colors." While it is true that the "beautiful patterns which through men's souls are conveyed into their cunning hands" do ultimately come from "that Beauty which is above our souls," the drive to create these patterns —often runs uncontrollably into the production of "pictures . . . and divers-images . . . far exceeding all necessary and moderate use and all pious meaning." These works of art would presume to occupy, in the soul of the beholder, the very place of the soul's Creator. Thus, Augustine agonizes, "I am taken miserably" in their entanglement, "but Thou pluckest me out, O Lord, Thou pluckest me out."

Surely, such an intense conflict, with its noble

protagonists throughout Biblical, patristic and medieval times, can not be blamed on our Anabaptist heritage. It inheres in the basic dialectic of Western culture, and only if we have no spiritual identity, no position vis-a-vis this culture, can we, without wrestling with it ourselves, rhetorically flip the problem into someone else's theological bin.

When hasty young Conrad Grebel wrote to Thomas Müntzer his disapproval of continuing the "singing" or "chanting" at the Mass, he was only echoing sentiments he had imbibed from his mentor Ulrich Zwingli. The great preacher had silenced the organ in Zürich's Grossmünster when the images had been carted away or blanked out with whitewash. He did this even though he loved music and was himself a proficient practitioner of several instruments. Thus while the legalism of the radicals who had veered away from his circle was doubtless overdone (they soon began to use hymns), they had not invented their scruples out of thin air. And what reason would they have, after all, to venerate the music, the painting and the architecture of a Swiss Christian Church that had for centuries confessed no incongruity in the wedding of the Lamb of God, imaged on a thousand churchly altars, to the corruptions of politics and the slaughter of warfare?

Dutch Mennonite Art

If in the other great arena of Anabaptist emergence—the Low Countries—the early years were equally traumatic, the 17th Century saw a relatively swift rapprochement between Mennonites and the Dutch aesthetic world, particularly in literature and graphic art. The particulars of this story have been too often described to be rehearsed here. Let us only observe that for many American "Swiss" Mennonites the rise of aesthetic endeavor among their Dutch counterparts, rather than providing an inviting model, has served as a barometer of a sinking of their spiritual fervor, a symptom of acculturation and abandonment of key elements of their covenant soul. One need not fully agree with this assessment to see how easily it can be arrived at. If it is obvious that Dutch Mennonite theology per se did not function as a block to their aesthetic participation in the macroculture, it is also a fact that their children's rapidly gained eminence in the world of Dutch art did accompany the preliminary stages of their withdrawal from the minority mentality their forefathers had identified with the Gospel.

My own access to the memory of my martyr forbears was meditated, as I have noted, through the formulaic stories and vivid engravings of two Dutchmen, Thielman van Braght and Jan Luykens, whose heritage-preserving work had been gratefully accepted by the Swiss wing of my American Mennonite tradition. This tiny soul-community, though its leaders worked hard to preserve its nonworldly identity, periodically lost from its membership some of its most promising young people, whose ambitions oriented them toward the larger society. Little love was lost in return, and each side developed a caricature of the other. Those who had traded in their (and their children's) access to an intensely realized covenant community for the American dream of personal realization, viewed what they had left primarily in terms of its tendency to stifle their individuality. In turn, the guardians of the traditional community, watching the continual exodus of the "progressive," more individualistic element, concluded that the concerns of their traditional soul-enclave must indeed be incompatible with those of young people seeking success in terms of "the world."

Now, however, this same community which for centuries was willing to lose its artist-types if it could not make farmers of them, has accepted me in a role pretty much of my own formulation. They have said, write as you feel called. Because the communal obstacles have thus been removed, I must assess the interior considerations. Thus I should like, here, to take a friendly inventory of the Mennonite compunctions I have involuntarily internalized, and which now qualify my conscience and color my sensibility as a would-be literary artist. Who, specifically, are these invisible guardian angels or disguised incubi by whose influence my art is guided, blocked or trivialized?

Before making this list, let me argue that if I choose to release my own creative energies in the Reformed rather than, say, the Baroque tradition, it is because I have been taught not so much to suspect beauty as to fear pride, and those gestures by which, while claiming to "glorify God," we often impose on each other the aura of our own swaggering egos. If I prefer the eloquence of the spare to the rhetoric of splendiferous effects, it is because I have been taught to see human magnificence as insufficiently magnificent to satisfy my soul's taste. Perhaps, though I can be swept out of myself by the soaring vault of an 11th Century Cathedral, my rejecting of some architect's roofy, scaled-down imitation in favor of a modest meetinghouse is not mere anti-aestheticism. At least, at this point in the discussion, I should like to have the benefit of the doubt.

What are the specific issues, now, in respect of which the "Mennonite sensibility" has held back," has felt compunctions in relation to artistic endeavor? Are they originally ingrained in our

theological insights, or social in origin? Are they absolute or relative in their negative function? Are they enemies or friends of art?

Idolatry

(1) Basic, as I have observed, is the shunning of idolatry—the fear of substituting the creature for the Creator in our contemplations. Thus the Martyrs' Mirror reports that in Brabant the grocer Simon was burned at the stake by Catholic authorities after he had refused to bow to a religious object in a passing procession. Or, a year and a half before the first Anabaptist execution in Zurich, a hot-headed acquaintance of Conrad Grebel, the cobbler Claus Hottinger, had been jailed for tearing down a crucifix at a city gate. Conrad himself urged a radical reduction of the role of symbolism in the Lord's Supper, to avoid superstitious "adoration of the bread," and to prevent replacement of the "inward truth" by an outward sign. Symbolic aids, he argued (echoing sentiments he had learned from Ulrich Zwingli), led inevitably to "simulated devotion."

Extreme as the practical outworking of such reservations might become, they did not reach to the extent of the Quaker elimination of a physical supper of eating and drinking. There was at least some agreement with Luther's understanding that God does not stand naked before his creation. The abrogation of the use of symbolism was not absolute, even in church life. Nor were the later "plain" American descendants of these radical Anabaptists averse to claiming for their own old-fashioned clothing the role of symbolizing such values as nonconformity to the world, unity, humility and even reverence to God, as in the case of the slowly disappearing woman's cap. Not symbolism itself, then, but the values represented and the social implications of the symbolic process were at stake.

Worldly sophistication

(2) Just as serious was a mistrust of worldly sophistication, the "style" characteristic of the urban centers of culture and power. Here the tone was set by the politicians and *die Gelehrter*, (the learned ones), as the Anabaptists ironically nicknamed them. The sarcasm referred to their capacity, for all their education, to thoroughly misread the teachings of the Sermon of the Mount so that they did not have to be carried out in daily life. As late as the 1660's the Dutch Mennonites were expressing their amazement "that so many high gifted, and understanding and excellent men" could not see the truth that Christ's Church was not to be defended by the carnal sword. From the point of view of the persecuted little flock, such learning was more than useless; it was dysfunctional. After the state-backed Catholic or Reformed Churches had systematically exterminated their first, university-trained teachers, what reason did the rustic Bernese Anabaptists have to respect their official culture? It would be a long time before a German Catholic bishop would observe (as Hans Küng recently) that during the Reformation "the Church probably slew more martyrs than it produced," and that such a record "is incomprehensible to the modern Christian."

Yet here again, all through the centuries it has taken Swiss Mennonites to recover from the shock of those years, the writings of the very first Anabaptists which they still treasure as seminal have been the words of educated men, trained in the centers of learning to articulate exegetical or ethical nuances. The movement itself began in towns rather than in the countryside to which retreated. It seems clear that had the Mennonite scruples against traffic with the elaborations of "culture" been allowed to operate in a less tyrannical ecclesio-political scene, they may well have been less sweeping.

Individualism

(3) In a fellowship welded together from the first by the practice of *Gelassenheit* (mutual yieldedness), one of the prime enemies will be any spirit of individualism or personal egoism. Hutterite society today provides a striking example of the suppression of such impulses, and the Amish have likewise preserved an almost sacred use of the terms *Gehorsamkeit* (obedience), *Niedrichkeit* (lowliness), and *Demuth* (humility). Personal innovation or deviations from carefully defined group norms, which have the effect of highlighting the individual, are unwelcome. This is the key to the evil of "ornament": it calls special attention to a person, sets him apart, and thus invites competition from others who also crave attention. It panders to the pride of life, the taking of egoistic rather than general satisfaction in God's creation and our life in its midst. It is linked to selfishness, injustice and war. Since the individual ego is the cause of so much trouble, it must be severely controlled, humbled, and made to play a supportive rather than a central role.

Obviously, while a community with such views may far outstrip "the world" in its ability to cohere and provide identity, it will also tend to be inhospitable soil for the growth of the incorrigibly unclassifiable genius of artistic insight and expression. What does not minister directly to the traditional dynamics of the family is unlikely to be understood sympathetically. Why can't young Joe or Mary fit in and do something more (con-

structive, practical, recognizable, humble, traditional)? Most models for artistic expression seem to be generated in the proud, spiritually alien world. Why must they intrude into our covenant life of mutual, humble discipleship?

I find these objections rather powerful, but the solutions offered generally a good deal less satisfactory. The capacities for delicacy, powerful play of the imagination, inventiveness, curiosity or strenuous response to beauty seem to me marks of God's nature visible in man, rather than signs of depravity, and to force them to atrophy because they are also dangerous is, as it were, to live in unheated caves because fire can get out of control. It is even, sadly, a kind of handing God's gifts back unused. It is working so hard at certain points on our moral agenda that we forget others.

The point here, however, is less to argue that Mennonite fear of pride has stunted our aesthetic sense, or to express our dissatisfaction with this situation, than to reflect on some exceptions, breaches or inconsistencies which reveal flexibility in our instincts after all. As in the Jewish or Calvinistic traditions, our condemnation of self-assertion seems seldom if ever to have diminished our drive to farm well, to succeed in business or professional life, or, in general, to do right whatsoever our hand found to do. We have not felt it creditable to be crude, sloppy, formless, apathetic, once we had allowed ourselves to take up an activity. Selfish satisfaction in our activities or in the flattering attention of an approving "world" could be pretty well subsumed within the traditional community dynamics as long as certain very visible marks of nonconformity kept the margins of the group distinct. At least we can say that the person who happened to enjoy farming was not taught to deprecate that enjoyment. In the worldly sense, he was cordially allowed to be "personally fulfilled" in his calling. What was not allowed was for the tail of his personal satisfaction to wag the dog of the communal spiritual purpose. Such beauty and even ornament as could be contained within the narrow rhythms of the folk community without playing havoc with the delicate consensus of tradition were not only allowed but encouraged to thrive. Thus appeared the exquisite Habaner Fayence, "Mennonite fine" linen in Germantown, the endlessly varying fraktur of both Pennsylvania and Russian communities, or the startling colorfulness of the dress of Amish girls in Lancaster County. (Not to speak of the elaborate symmetry of the produce-displays in the old Kitchener Farmers' Market.) A *joie de vivre* of a sort is latent, and keeps surfacing in the midst of a tradition often characterized by

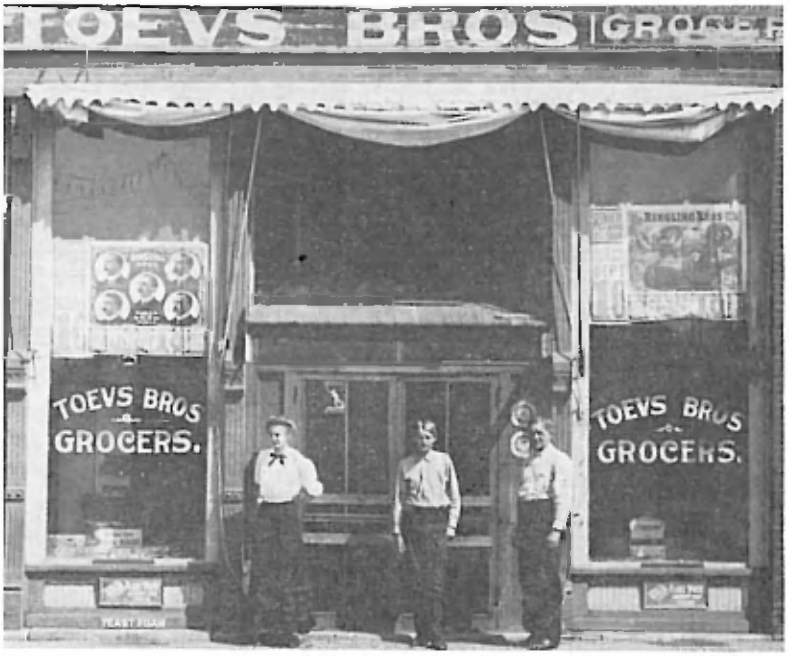
(4) asceticism. From late medieval Catholic trends, and perhaps particulary from Erasmus, observes Kenneth Davis, Anabaptists took over a tendency of *contemptus mundi*. Those god-like faculties which were meant to have been our glory have come under the domination of "the flesh," which was therefore, as Paul wrote, to be "mortified." From the earliest Anabaptist preachers we hear a call to personal holiness, renunciation of profane entertainments, moderation and frugality, and, in general, withdrawal from the fleshly pursuits of "this present evil world." Little wonder that some observers have interpreted the Anabaptist movement as a kind of laicised monastery life. From such an emphasis one expected and got little artistic expression of the sensuous, the physical. The plain, dark clothing hid rather than accentuated the body. Sex, as in other Puritanical traditions, could hardly be represented plainly in public discourse.

But here too the exceptions as well as the proscriptions are revealing. Has any people cherished the land—the base of our physicality—with greater affection than these "other-worldly" Mennonites? Have our forefathers, or rather mothers, ever been accused of taking a dim view of food, or of suppressing rather than exploiting its latent savors? Can we really be charged with contempt for the world in its concrete aspects? Clearly, not in an absolute perspective. Even when the cabalistic German Baptists who issued the first American *Martyrs' Mirror* had shrouded themselves in virginal white, excluded meat from their diets, and denied the flesh its quota of sleep, what did they do but compose and sing hymns of elaborate, seven-fold harmony that, according to contemporaneous testimony, made listeners think they were in heaven? After which they embellished their hand-written copies of these hymns with convolute calligraphic flowers that still appeal to the aesthetic taste of collectors.

Art as artifice

(5) A people simple-hearted enough to avoid taking oaths because Jesus had pronounced them superfluous, who consider honesty to consist in saying what they mean and meaning what they say, may well object to "art" because they see it in terms of "artifice." Drama may be criticized as a kind of pretending or counterfeiting; abstract art is "not clear"; hyperbole and irony are irreverent; satire is sarcasm; humor is sacreligious; symbolism is for the intellectual. Why don't you come right out and say what you mean? Let your yea be yea and your nay nay. In these reactions a kind of reverence, or fear of irreverence is the dominant motif.

Were this an air-tight position, it would be in-



"Where is the story" in the Toevs Brothers Grocery at 212 Main Street, Newton, Kansas, in 1910? Who are these people who advertize soap, pencils, yeast, cigars, and Ringling Bros Circus? What opportunity here "for the literary artist to become involved in the very soul-drama of his covenant-community?"

comprehensible that "probably the most widely read book by a Mennonite ever published" is the Dutch *Wandering Soul* (1635), a set of imaginary dialogues between an "earnest Christian" and Adam, Noah and Simon Cleophas. The mythical framework itself is not viewed as unfriendly to the devout message: the inculcation of a Christian view of history which will impart a pilgrim mentality. Nor have Mennonites ever objected to Jesus' speaking in parables, though they have occasionally misread them. As for the artifice of the repetitive verbal formulae of Van Braght's martyr narratives, they have been accorded a veneration second only to scripture. Once again, the reservations have more to do with being ill at ease with social complexity than with a substantive position.

Practicality

(6) Is it practicality, then, that nags at the Mennonite conscience? Must art be minor rather than central in our efforts, so that we can dedicate our time to activities that are important because they are "useful"? Because they minister to humanity's "real" needs? Citizens of implacably neat and industrious Pennsylvania Dutch communities, who could hardly conceive of using tax money to commission a work of art, would pity the people of an impoverished Mexican town which had expended public funds for the creation of a gorgeous mural. Such cultural differences do, indeed, lead to mutual mis-interpretation. "The Dutch under-live, and are thereby enabled to underwork and under-sell the English," observed Benjamin Franklin (who, it was reported, lost the *Martyrs' Mirror* printing job to the abstemious Ephrata monks). Though this may well have disgusted the English "extreamly," as Franklin reported, there was certainly no German conspiracy to "under-live" anybody; it was their natural way. The trait lingers among present day rural Mennonites.

Once again, the austere Amish home laughs amid flowers whose "use" is certainly other than "practical"; its quilt designs are gathered into a colorful exhibition in a New York museum; a Mennonite farmer-preacher advises his congregation that they should make their new meetinghouse "simple, substantial and beautiful." We may thus conclude that the fear of waste and conspicuous consumption is not in itself a condemnation of the creative or aesthetic impulse.

Concern for edification

(7) Finally, is an overriding concern for edification compatible with the vigorous exercise of the free artistic imagination? Isn't this perhaps the greatest threat of all? Our strong tradition of personal piety, of a devout, loving attitude, along with a concern to nurture our children on noble sentiments and to teach them only "whatsoever things are pure"—these have functioned not only to fumigate our history, but to leave us with impossibly holy heroes and bland propaganda in the place of art. After I had written what I felt was a rather mild and favorable narrative of Conrad Grebel's short, unhappy life, I was surprised to find some readers responding as though I had tried to discredit him. Such reactions, I concluded, are the result of our having been weaned on the roughage-free died of someone's uplifting version of history. While I am certainly not calling for Christians to be as preoccupied with salacious or otherwise entertaining negations as those writers who move from one sensational expose to another, I can not imagine that we should be any less interested than anyone else in whatever unpleasant facts are *significantly* interwoven with our covenant story. Such squeamishness is alien to the Biblical narratives, and should have no place among a people supposedly as tough-minded as the descendants of Anabaptist martyrs.

It is amusing to see that some of the earthy expressions reported in the original *Martyrs' Mirror* are elided or replaced with euphemisms in the 1870

English translation. Imagining that we have matured, we confess to being frightened of letting our children read the word "piss" in our holy book, as if anything could transfix their little minds more threateningly than the vivid descriptions of 700 atrocious executions.

Our forefathers' willingness to depict the gory details (though to be sure they edited out of the record some of the defections of the unfaithful non-martyrs) can stand as a corrective to our tendency to accept only evangelically bowdlerized, "upbeat" versions of reality via "Christian art."

Limitations of sensibility

From the other side of the question: Mennonite novelists who find their manuscripts rejected because their publishing houses find their language too tart, their topics to controversial or their theses too subversive, may be quick to locate the problem in the head-on conflict between a current view of art as autonomous—setting its own rules and creating its own ethos—and the lumpish inertia of the uncreative pieties of our readership. This is a genuine issue, and is obviously not limited to Mennonite experience. But we must beware of reducing the problem to someone's unwillingness to publish books containing words like "ass" or "screw." The more serious limitations are far more likely to be found in the sensibility of the artist. Do we really imagine, for instance, that Hawthorne would have written more insightfully had he had a subject less narrow than his ancestral Puritan culture? That *Moby-Dick* would have been somehow deeper if a grateful government had allowed it to be written on a comfortable pension, or that Henry James' novels would have been rendered more profound had he only been able, having escaped Victorian mores, to lead us frontally into his protagonists' private rooms and allowed his delicate imagination to detail for us an illicit copulation? If anything, did these cultural "limitations" not function to shape and focus the immense talent of these writers?

Further, were not their own internalizations of these social inhibitions—their personal scruples—an integral part of the complex process of creation? To give authentic "life" to an artistic making called for the intense fusing of "unlike things," wrote Melville:

> A flame to melt—a wind to freeze;
> Sad patience—joyous energies;
> Humility—yet pride and scorn;
> Instinct and study; love and hate;
> Audacity—reverence. These must mate,
> And fuse with Jacob's mystic heart,
> To wrestle with the angel—Art.

This life and death struggle is energized, in part, precisely by the scruples that made it taut. To *wrestle through* the issues in the artist's personal encounter with a special tradition—that is the challenge. It is far easier to walk away from that struggle, to overlook the opportunities inherent in the *polarities* and *relativities* of our tradition's scruples, and then to blame the scruples themselves for our own lack of vision. "The last soft-mindedness" of the artist, Robert Penn Warren once commented, is his "taking his historical situation as alibi."

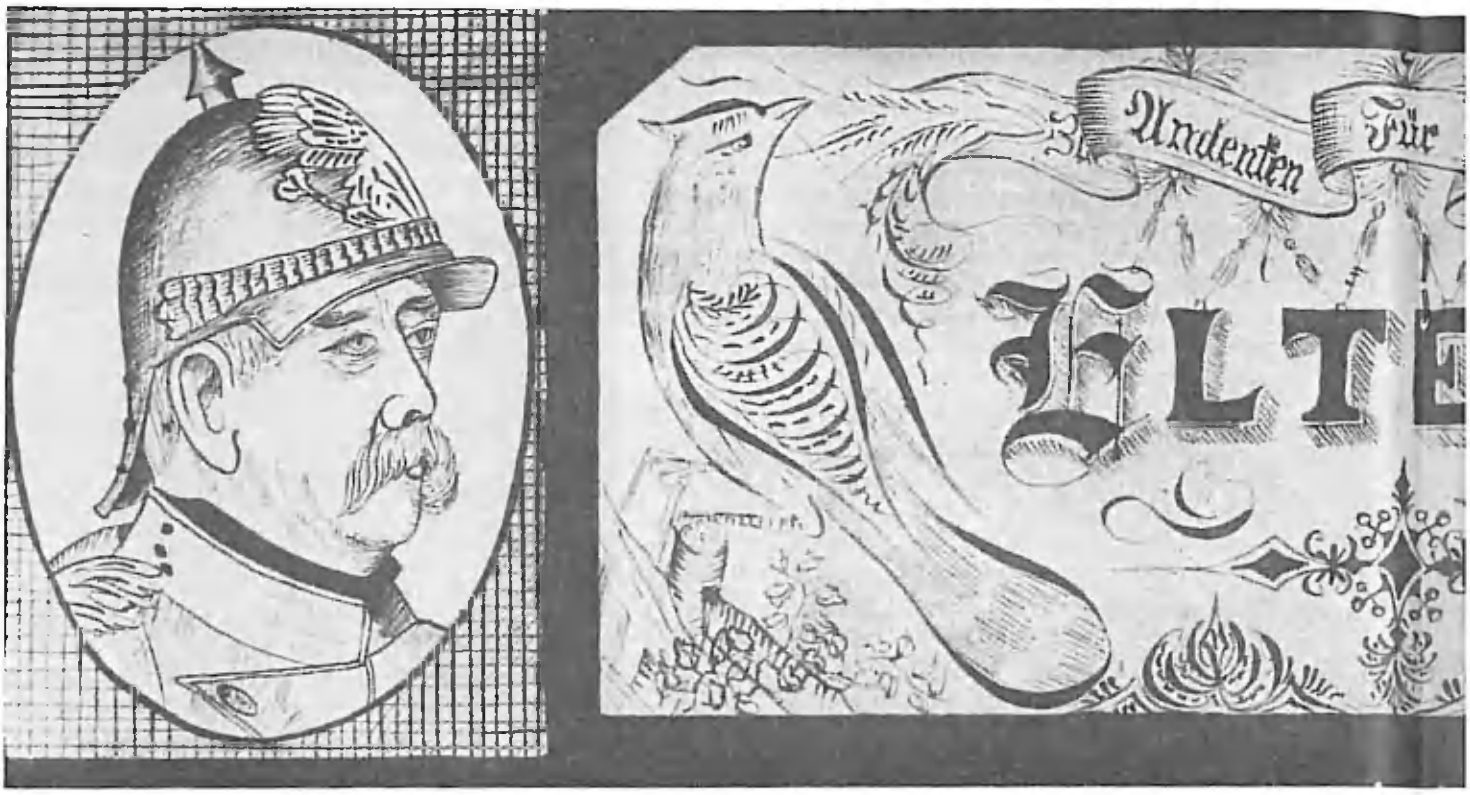
"Renunciation" as "gift"

Has not "renunciation"—the mode of the Reformed tradition—itself functioned as a "gift," as in 17th Century Dutch genre and landscape painting? Are there no potentially fruitful complexities, no nuances, no aesthetic ramifications in our "plain" tradition, our ethos of humility? Is it empty of subtle interest? Are there no interesting possibilities for a "plain" rhetoric? Is not the style itself sometimes the message, as when the Messiah rode a donkey? Is a plain aesthetic not preferable to essentially envious and center-less eclecticism, and is there not less to fear in exploring it than in surrendering to the gaucheries of mail-order evangelical decor?

Transfigure the scruples

An ideal of "lowliness" can of course be invoked to excuse crudeness by people who have no sense of the sacred responsibilities of an artist. I am addressing my thoughts not to them but to potential artists themselves, who can see beyond such superficial thinking. It is their calling to transfigure rather than merely debunk the scruples which make up the integrity of the soul of their tradition, to test them and to see what they point to, and to separate the real scruples from the moral cowardice or class prejudice which ooze, like Baalim, into their people's religion. I have tried to show that there is room in our scruples for an artist to operate, that the values they support have dignity, that our tradition is not, in its essence, contemptuous of the giveness, the concreteness of creation. Ultimately it is not our true scruples that paralyze our art. They are the guides which help us to imitate God in his redemptivity, as, by our art, we mirror his creativity. They help us to do what we must, as followers of Christ: obey God's will.

But this transfiguration involves more than obedience: it requires imagination.



"Memorial for my Parents" Detail from a fraktur drawing by the youthful H. O. Kruse of Halstead, Kansas, upon the silver wed to "a carefully drawn glorification of the helmeted bust of Bismark, a reminder of the temptation to surround the Bride of Christ w

III. The Role of the Imagination

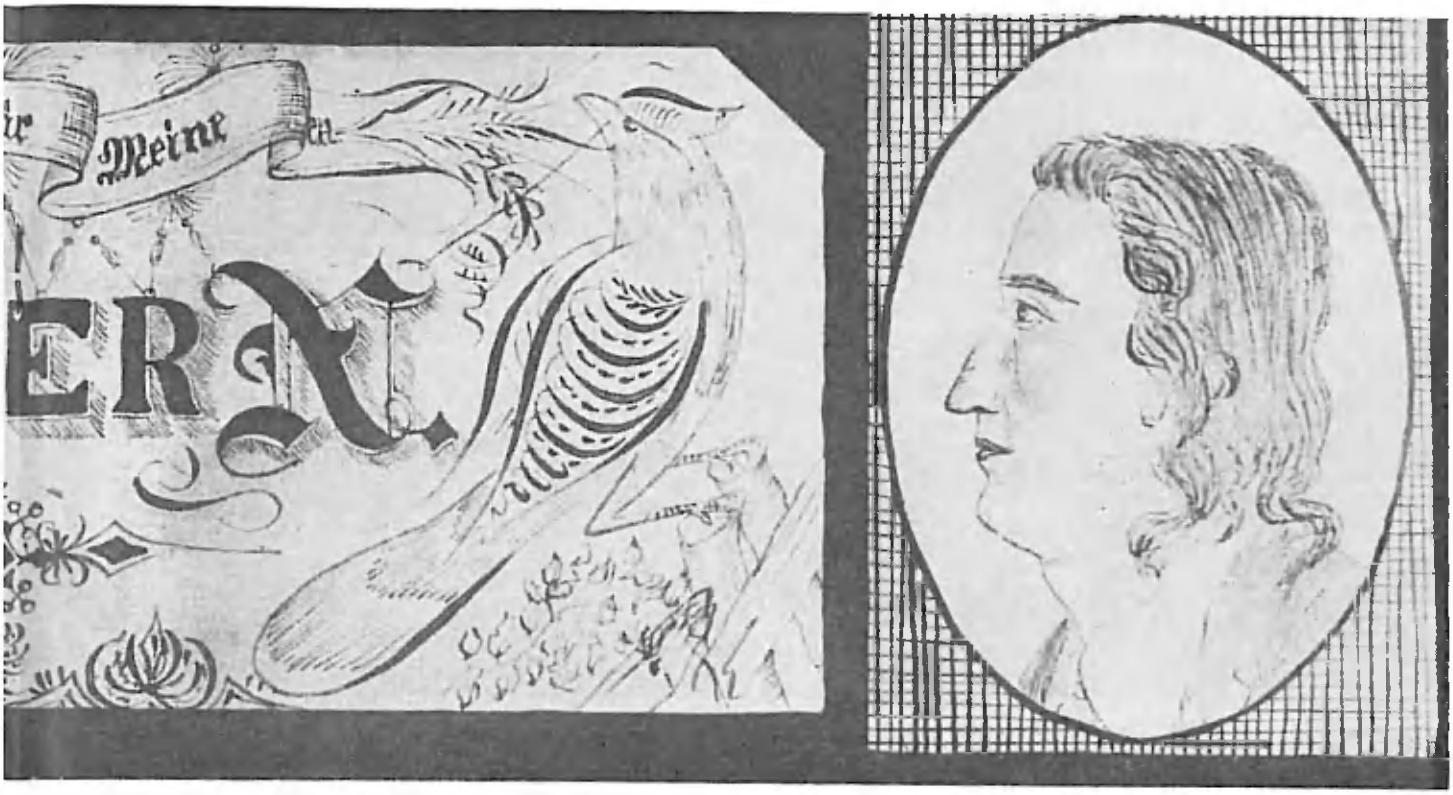
An exquisite pattern: something to catch the eye, to elicit the pleasure of rhythm. A light trapezoid on a dark background, with four-tiered frame: first a narrow dark strip, next eight close-crowded rows of light dots, then three rows of larger light blobs, and finally a thin light border, all very neatly done.

An abstract painting? Not exactly. An Amish wheatfield, with the farmer and his boys progressively girdling the shrinking center stand of grain with a horse-drawn binder, and shocking the neat rows of sheaves, working in from the outside of the field. Are they artists, since we have perceived their work as an aesthetic design? Again, no, unless we broaden our conception of art to include the serendipitous patterns produced by the symmetry of industrious neatness.

An ordinary, field-side perspective would not have revealed this design. It was a helicopter-borne reporter for a Lancaster newspaper whose eye caught the evolving visual drama on the floor of farms beneath his magic carpet. He had found an angle from which mundane data became beautiful, told a story, suggested meaning. As the field slipped by he held a camera down to it, waited until he was at a suitable focal length, "composed" the picture, and perhaps returned to make versions from several other angles.

Having developed and cropped the photograph, he shows it to his editor, who sets it, with explanatory comment, on the paper's front page. An old man clips it for his scrapbook, and at an auction when he breaks up housekeeping I buy the scrapbook and now contemplate the picture. I show it to a neighbor who finds in it anachronistic amusement. Another waxes sentimental as it reminds him of his own pre-industrial youth. Still another expresses delight in the design. I am thinking of the Amishmen's orderly life and his love of the soil which he has unconsciously festooned.

What fascinates me most in all this is the process by which the Amishman's work has been rendered first into design and, as I continue to reflect on it, symbol. The paths he and his boys

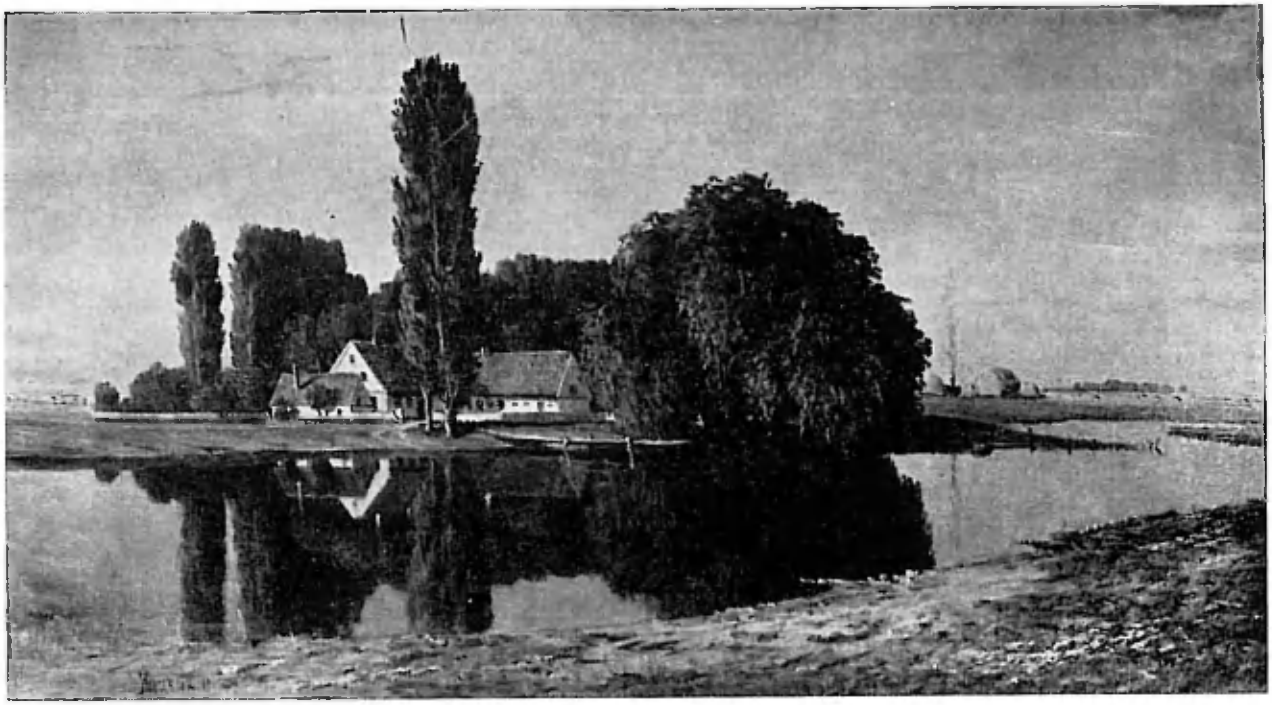


r wedding anniversary of his parents in 1884. Kruse later taught at Bethel College from 1898 to 1902. See p. 25 below for reference ist with the arms of the state." Credit Kauffman Museum.

have taken within time, space and human custom may not have "meant" anything more to them than their "work"; yet a phenomenon we call imagination, operating in the photographer, has realized and communicated to an audience a latent story in that work. It reminds me of an anecdote former President Howard Lowry of Wooster College once told. He had been walking the rural Ohio countryside in the company of Arnold Toynbee, when the two scholars had suddenly been greeted by the appearance, over a hill, of several white-capped Amish girls. This unexpected visual stimulus triggered in the famous historian, reported Lowry, a spectacular, flooding monologue in which he traced this American spiritual phenomenon back to its Alpine sources in Reformation days. He had the capacity to recognize and feelingly respond to a story in what for many, including probably the Amish girls, was storyless.

My point in this lecture is that what will enable us as Mennonites to see our story, let alone tell it, will be neither the scruples which give us ballast (but not vision) nor the defiance of those scruples, which gives us centrifugal motion (without aim). It will take something more substantive: a vital imagination. This is our only protection against being zapped from two opposite directions. If, on the one hand, our practical, provincial piety, fearful of the risks of art, has drowned our story in obscurantist inarticulateness, a "liberation," on the other hand, that results in an easy abandoning of the story only substitutes another, more ironic shallowness: ignorance of who one is. A positive, life-affirming energy must drive the delicate craft of our art between the Scylla of the legalistic negations of a narrow communal mind, and the Charybdis of a soul-forsaking shopping about in the macrocultural marketplace for themes and styles.

The operation of such a "positive energy" occurs in the faculty I am calling imagination. No community, no artist, lives without it. Though the Biblical picture of man was one in which "every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually," it is not true that the only thing we can imagine is a vain thing, nor that the heathen who rage idolatrously are the only people who think and communicate and even worship in terms of images. The "play of imagination" of which we sometimes speak is as much a part of our genuine worship as it is of our temptations to do evil. We are speaking here of the joining of thought, feeling, memory and anticipation that drives us above and beneath the obvious, the present, the routine, the



"Has any people cherished the land . . . with greater affection than these other-worldly Mennonites?" (below, p. 13) Painting by Johann H. Janzen (1886-1917), "Peace on the Molotschna."

practical, the predictable, the explainable. It is the faculty we have been given to enable us to escape entrapment in the past, the present, or the future, and by which, on the other hand, we freely contemplate these dimensions of our experience.

Further, imagination is the means by which, with the help of memory, we gain access to and are given the courage to claim our heritage—our story. Because we are given eyes and ears for the dialectic of our covenant past, we can not be so quickly shamed out of its significance by the looming surrounding presence of non-covenant "realities." We have in our particular past, as I have tried to show in my first lecture, themes of major human interest, worthy of major imaginations. But the Mennonite artist who is not characterized by covenant "inner-directedness," who cannot be grasped by the dignity of his own story, and who has not in some way or other felt that story on his pulses, will not be able to tell it with the concerted conviction of the ensemble of his senses and mind. Too often the resulting tepidness will be interpreted as evidence that there was no significant story to tell. It is fatally easy to blame our communal scruples for what is actually the fault of a weak imagination.

By this faculty we may alter the literal chronology of our story in order to compress its significance within the terms of the artistic medium we have employed. We may telescope the meaning of long processes into the space of a novelistic moment. Through the artist's creative imagination we are allowed a sudden turning back to sight along the foreshortened profile of a generation or centuries-long continuum. Its meaning grips us with involuntary recognition. The artist has conferred on us his capacity to apprehend depth meanings in the miscellaneous welter of a communal memory. He shares with us his sense of the myth of an ethos. He directs our attention to its drama: what it has done, what has happened—and what that has meant.

The artist's version of the story is not always welcome. To a conventional mind, committed to an order of this world, its apparently anarchical "destruction of order for the sake of reordering" (Robert Penn Warren) may seem blasphemous, as Jesus' or Stephen's view of the temple did. Since life can never be completely contained within tradition, deep story tests the received opinions of a community, and deals with the problematic as well as the agreed-upon.

The questioning of tradition does not in itself amount to art, any more than the tradition does. Art is always more than rhetoric, positive or negative, which William Butler Yeats defined as "the will trying to do the work of the imagination." Imagination can not be penned within, though it may accept the outlines of, inherited forms. The fact that I have written an ode does not guarantee

that I have produced a poem. Immediately upon birth of the United States a group of patriotic Connecticut poets decided that the nascent nation, no less than the ancient Roman or Greek peoples, needed a national epic. Forthwith they manufactured several—nine day's wonders that strutted briefly in the literary limelight before suffocating in their own immature pomposity. Rhetoric had not been able to do the work of imagination. A few years later, Washington Irving flattered American readers by presenting them with a version of their workday world which was framed European imagery and sentimental nostalgia. He was lionized by a circle of grateful, culture-envious readers eager to see their American scene glamorized by the framework of European literary attitudes, but he was eventually recognized as a voice that did not speak out of the depth of the American soul. His contemporary, James Fenimore Cooper, imitating first Jane Austen's drawing room novels and then Walter Scott's border romances, used their modes to depict a roughly drawn, mythic noble savage, and the gradual incursion of civilized "law" on the unspoiled American frontier. He too was widely read as living proof that an American could succeed in terms of a Europe-invented genre. Yet neither Irving nor Cooper effectively transcended their situation as Americans, tending to be either obsequiously deferential to European culture or defensively critical of it. Their temperaments were too thin, their moral vision too absolute, their aesthetic models too brittle to probe the depths. It remained for the complex, bittersweet reflections of two Americans from the next generation—Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville—to get closer to the moral heart of "Young America," and thus to the contemplation of themes which a world readership has recognized as universal. From the most unprepossessing materials they distilled the grave beauty of The Scarlet Letter and Moby-Dick. This art did more than justify or condemn the culture that produced it. Hawthorn's and Melville's powerful imaginations triumphed over genre and milieu to penetrate to the heart of issues in American character, and thus they performed the noble role of the necessary questioning of public righteousness which results in clarifying basic moral problems.

Simply taking on the trappings, imitating the rhetoric or borrowing the topics of such great art will not, of course, confer similar depths on what we produce. In fact, our particular story may not be tellable in terms of the stylistic cadences of the stories currently in vogue. Our imagination must be our own, and its limitations must not be blamed on external factors. The depth of our art does not depend on the ability to employ some one particular mode that our age has pronounced correct—or salable. It does not consist in a shrewd avoidance of the didactic voice (where would that have left Tolstoy?), in escaping one's narrow past (Hawthorne?), in academically acquired erudition (Emily Dickinson?), in physical melodrama (Henry James?), or in the depiction of important, noble people (Melville, Faulkner?). These cultural accidents are not the limits (though they may be the topics) of our imagination. The crudeness of the ore is less crucial than the effectiveness of the extraction. The question is: are we in touch, have we wrestled, with the angel of our covenant-identity? Do we know, have we felt, its soul-issues? Are our dreams, our personal memories, our impulsive confessions, our involuntary historicising—in short, our imaginative life—organically intertwined with the dialectic of our covenant-soul?

Or is our imagination like the radio tuners people install in their cars, which restlessly roam the frequencies to find and lock on to whatever local signal happens to be strongest? If so, the portentous, omniscient voice of the network newscaster presumes to interpret for us what is happening. One will learn, from this generalizing, anonymous voice, nothing of one's particular spiritual identity. As in the historical analyses of the Cliometricians, the criterion of importance will be quantifiability. In their secular objectivity, these historians will discover over and over that our "Anabaptist Movement" was "statistically insignificant" in European life. One could, of course, have assumed this "fact" from the beginning, with the support of the historians who took a state-church perspective. Without an *imagination inspired by covenant-commitment*, it is indeed almost impossible to take seriously a unique heritage surrounded by a general history under the domination of secular interpreters. Although the covenant-historian dare never superciliously dismiss the findings of the secular quantifiers, his imagination must serve as a counter-force to the escape mechanisms they may provide.

If the artist's work of a vivid representation of the holy meaning of our identity is not done, the sociologist stands ready to dissolve that meaning by his tables and graphs, the ecumenical preacher to find rhetoric to make it appear selfish in its particularity, and its only remaining defenders, the parochial obscurantists, to reduce it to the level of tribal ethnocentrism. As the sense of covenant-identity wanes, intelligent church politicians will view their assignment as the wise dismantling of a no longer functional sense of uniqueness, and the judicious assistance of the process of getting rid of a denominational messianic complex. It is all quite predictable, ingrained in the non-

covenant logic of sect-to-church evolution. Only imaginative risks offer escape from the inexorableness of this oft-proved logic.

The task of articulating the unique blend of obedience, mutuality, humility and defenselessness that constitutes our heritage can not be done by administrators of denominational machinery, scientists whose interest is efficient technique, or ideologues of right or left. Until earlier in this century, this heritage had been transmitted primarily via oral and familial strategies. As I grew up I discovered little if any access to it that was literally imagined in terms that could be called aesthetic. This mode of access was doubtless considered unnecessary to the survival of the heritage. But the repetition of increasingly outworn defenses could not do the work of the imagination: to bring out of the heritage things old and new. Now, with the rapid homogenization of society in the electronic age, one wonders if a new order of crystallization of our identity is not absolutely mandatory if it is to speak in the changed social arena.

Again, not every response to this emergency will be genuine. On this journey to the sources there will be many tourists for every pilgrim. One does not respond in depth to the *noblesse oblige* of a spiritual heritage merely by becoming, so to speak, a connoisseur of its antiques. They will be carefully collected and museumed, at any rate, by the children of millionaires whose own particular religious heritage no longer grasps them covenantally, existentially. Nor will the mortal challenges of secularism or patriotic pietism be checked by the appearance of a Mennonite Fiddler on the Roof which will allow its viewers at long last to "feel good about themselves." The plain people, their 19th Century "regulations" having collapsed with the onslaught of television into their living rooms, may spend a decade or two being entertained by aesthetic novelties for which the role of innovation will be claimed, but unless their fundamental soul-issues are imaginatively experienced in a dialogue of depth, the process will be simply an episode in their acculturation.

It was interesting to listen in to the discussion in our church papers, a year or two ago, regarding the role of our covenant-memory in our present life. One heard many objections to the very idea of looking backward, and relatively few expressions of curiosity as to why the original Anabaptists came to their positions. People tended to "respect" the Anabaptists for their willingness to pay the price of martyrdom for their beliefs, but very few, whether "conservative" or "acculturated," were having much of an encounter with the original story in its disturbing concreteness. Very few seemed to want one. The most often heard comment, perhaps, was, "We must live now, rather than in the past. We must go forward with Christ."

These are, certainly, truths no one can gainsay, but they also serve as evidence of catatonic imaginations that evade certain basic questions: Who are we? How did we join the discussion? Where are we? How did the questions we are answering become formulated? Where did we join the discussion? Where are we going? What *is* the past we are pronouncing irrelevant? Have we ever made imaginative contact with it?

Vietnam War era fuzziness

The fact the Mennonites were already quite fuzzy-minded on such questions became starkly evident in the melancholy Vietnam War era. Some of our young people had so little sense of our long tradition, though they carried its name, that they had no basis for understanding why we weren't simple anti-war activists. I heard and watched young men claim the aegis of a Mennonite heritage at the huge 1969 anti-war Moratorium in Washington, D.C., while raising clenched fists and spitting obscenities as they called for guerilla-type bombings by Mennonites to "stop this f------ war." The irony to me lay in their thinking that they were somehow invoking their Mennonite tradition, when in fact the ancient Zealot tendency to violence, resurfacing in the American counter-culture, had made them into Mennonite versions of models from worldly sources. But on the other hand one found in many Mennonite communities parents of these youthful conformists who were conformed to the world in the opposite direction. They were so deeply committed to the politico-economic structures about them that they had lost their Christian freedom to question these structures by the standards of the Sermon on the Mount. They too had so little sense of their Anabaptist heritage that they could not understand why Mennonites did not talk like military-minded Fundamentalists. And ironically these worldly Christians agreed with the worldly radicals in being willing to rest their case on violence—the one to express, and the other to curb, dissent. Neither of these kinds of Mennonites transcended, by touching their home base, the worldly options of their society. They did not know where home base was. A once well-known heritage no longer impinged on their consciousnesses, and guided their response. A Spanish-speaking, first-generation Mennonite from the Bronx was, in fact, the one clear voice I heard at the Moratorium, calling the Mennonites there to their true heritage.

Another example: in my own Pennsylvania com-

munity we have largely lost access to the depth meanings of our once basic stress on "humility." We conceive of it less as a key element in our psyche than as a kind of cultural and emotional cliche, a hangover from an age when people apparently didn't like themselves and were ashamed of being "assertive." A vital imagination would help us to recognize that a virtue once considered fundamentaly important must have tied into reality somewhere. It could not have become a cliche unless what it pointed to had deep meaning. But without imagination, when social change comes thick and fast, our adolescent dissatisfactions seem sufficient to justify denying the claims of a long-cherished heritage. It is of course a similar lack of imagination, operating in the guardians of tradition who *rule by authority* rather than *charm by story* that makes their fostering of inherited values crabbed and joyless.

We do have values worth preserving, a witness to give, a story to tell. Our covenant-experience gives us insight that others recognize as valuable, as when a John Howard Yoder writes a *Politics of Jesus*. A powerful imagination, in this case theological rather than aesthetic, releases the depth-meaning of what to some is an outworn traditional testimony. There is plenty of other evidence that we lack neither intelligence nor wit; what remains to be seen is whether there is sufficient imagination. Parts of the work of Warren Kliewer and Rudy Wiebe point to the aesthetic possibilities, though they also raise effective doubts about the authenticity of the identity explored.

I have wondered, from time to time, what the effect might have been in my Swiss-Pennsylvania Mennonite consciousness if those sensitive spirits who shared it would have expressed the beauty rather than deplored the narrowness of the plain tradition. In my contacts with my grandparents' generation, or with Amish and Old Order Mennonite friends, I certainly have run across no artists engaging them in any serious dialogue. Borrowing images, yes, but fellowshiping in terms of covenant loyalties, no. It would be too threatening for the liberated artist to open himself again to the incarnation of his past represented in the amazing phenomenon of the plain people, who according to the logic of progress, should not be able to survive.

"Black is beautiful," our black brothers and sisters have learned to say. Who can deny it? But do we ever hear, "Plain is beautiful?" Hardly, outside the pages of the Amish magazine, *Family Life*. We hear, instead, "Plain is narrow, plain is ugly, plain is heartless." Unfortunately, the depth of this discernment is evidenced in tastes that reveal the apparent belief that "Gaudy is beautiful,"

Communion pitcher from a church in an extinct Mennonite community—Danzig, West Prussia—bespeaking a "lost fatherland," and a dearly held faith.

and present us with "sanctuaries" that appear to have been selected from the same catalogue as the churches down the street. Perhaps it is only logical that a Mennonite church furniture firm which has ironically begun to make fonts for infant baptism, and stocks images of Christ and Mary for churches of appropriate denominations, also offered to the ecclesiastical public the option, in 1976, of having its church pews upholstered in red, white and blue.

What would a prophet say in such a situation? Listen to one: "Go through the gates, prepare ye the way of the people." Go before them and lead them in the adventure of returning upon their covenant-sources. Revisit your Bethels. "Cast up the highway": make is possible for them to travel through this *terra incognita* of the souls. "Gather out the stones": remove the obstacles to self-knowledge, the sentimentalities, the false images, the confusions in our identity. Show them who, in the story of God's salvation, they are. Use your God-given imagination un-awed by the important-sounding claims and counter-claims of a miscellaneous secular culture, to "'Lift up a standard among the people."

IV. Accepting, Rejecting and Transcending

Persons formed in small groups that view the larger society around them as something separate and thus "forbidden" to them in some respects, will be tempted to stand in a relation to that society of either narrow rejection or fascinated attraction. This tension will always be a feature of their emotional outlook. To be sure, we are repeatedly told nowadays that if one starts out fresh in life on the basis that "I'm OK," a lot of what has been troubling us will turn out to be the moral agenda of an up-tight era that is passing away. Unfortunately, this approach often assumes that it's more important to feel OK than to take seriously the issues involved in the social causes of our tensions. Christ's statement that he came not to bring peace but a sword seems to make such doggedly positive thinking less than a whole philosophy.

Yet it is true that *something* must be done with the unresolved tensions in our personalities. Neither extreme—fascinated attraction to the larger society nor narrow rejection of it—seems likely to yield wisdom, or allow the free play of the imagination by which the artist works. Neither constitutes a stable identity. Each may serve as an adolescent stage, but both must eventually be subsumed into adult understanding which uses their polar energy and unites the two points of view into a mature, three-dimensional vision. An observer from another American minority, the Jews, has commented on one version of the failure to make such a resolution: a "self-hatred" which is symptomized by a cultural "lust for otherness" (Robert Alter). The cultural grass is made to seem always greener outside of the heritage. At the opposite, equally narrow extreme are those who can ascribe no dignity or humane interest to alternatives to their own cultic outlook. In either case, the artistic imagination is paralyzed.

Beyond being a minority identity, the Mennonite world-view has traditionally been inculcated in children by strategies which appear, when viewed out of the context of the communal consensus that gave them efficacy, like sternly oppressive mechanisms. Parents were not unwilling to "break the will" of their little children, or to subject them to what might be called in a freer society "informational deprivation": narrowing the range of social experience so that in the vacuum of stimuli the parents' voices might resound with world-defining authority. When a system such as this which functions satisfactorily in culturally isolated communities is suddenly challenged by the arrival of the world in its midst, a volatile, potentially creative moment emerges for the children involved. I and my children developed our outlooks in such a moment. The normal struggle by which children establish the autonomy of their individual personalities is suddenly enlarged or confused by new factors. The oedipal resentment generated by the passage out of their parent's daily monitoring now receives larger justification, since the macroculture tends to portray the parents as unreasonably strict. The unique aspects of a minority tradition are now seen as "extra requirements" to the assignment of growing up "normally." There is less reason than ever to respect the parents' traditionally oriented interpretations of life. What served the parents as an ideological home now may become, for the children, a prison. Some will surrender and settle down in it, and others may spend their lives proving that they have escaped. The issues are real, and cannot be dissolved by love-ins or "learning communications skills." Any indoctrination worth its ideological salt," writes Erik Erikson, "also harbors dangers, which bring about the unmaking of some and the supreme transcendence of others."

While I should rejoice to see "supreme" artistic accomplishments by Mennonite artists, I am addressing myself to the more modest possibility of their escaping an arrested emotional development in favor of a transcendence that will allow whatever artistic gifts they do have to function, and to function positively in relation to our covenant identity. Facile affirmation, to be sure, is not what we mean by being imaginative, is not a transcendence of the issues of one's culture. But on the other hand, in the recent words of Irving Howe, "A sense of natural piety toward one's origins can live side by side with a spirit of critical detachment." It will even, I would add, keep that

critical detachment from pretending to be an end in itself.

To achieve a creative balance between critique and advocacy, to bring the first wisdom of infantile trust and the later zeal of youthful indignation into a life-enhancing wisdom, to be a whole person, and then to speak from the core of a tradition which gave me the priceless gift of identification with the Kingdom of God—these are the desires by which I, for one, am driven as I consider attempting the art of fiction. To feel myself free from a compulsion to prove by token profanities that I am untrammeled by parental pieties. To be equally untempted by the lure of the sentimentality that pervades our pageant with self-congratulation.

Is it possible, though, with such a basically "friendly" attitude, to see clearly into the issues of our heritage? Wouldn't our vision be sharpened if it were animated by an honest anger, a skeptical bias, a stance of questioning rather than affirmation?

Quite possibly, yes—on certain topics and some strategic purposes. It may be someone's calling. But I have been testifying, in these lectures, to my feeling that what I can affirm about my heritage, in these days, is more interesting and more valuable, even to a general audience, than what I can discredit. It is ultimately more important to me that my heritage reached me at all, than that it had to reach me through manifold distortions. It seems to me that a greater artistic challenge lies in the call to *penetrate and articulate* the unique values of our ethos than in the possibility of exposing our frequent betrayal of those values. Not Judas but Jesus is the center of the story, though Judas' treachery must be included in the telling. We must deal vigorously with whatever is *there* But whose story are we telling and for what fundamental purpose? For me a concentration on the negative distortions is, at this cultural moment, the easier, less imaginative act, because the audience that matters is already convinced that there is inauthenticity in every heritage. (It is far less aware of the naivete of its own attitude toward its past.) It is so commonly and incessantly asserted, in fiction today, that much human behavior that seems pure is inwardly rotten, that inherited ideals involve necessary hypocrisy, or that, to take a Mennonite example, our practice of nonresistance has contained many examples of ironic inconsistency, that to make this the burden of my approach would be for me a kind of conformity to worldly models. I certainly am unenthusiastic about providing one more example of an artist's preoccupation with moral ambiguities, while the larger work of making the seminal values of my covenant-ethos concretely "experienceable" attracts only conscientious journalists.

Whose version of the truth of a group's experience is most valid? The version of the person who has become disgusted with the tradition's shortcomings, and found it a threat to his self-realization? Will he give us the most accurate reading? Possibly, but what of others of like sensitivity who find it an unintimidating and coherent spiritual home, for all its idiosyncratic imperfections? Is their version not also to the point? Are we likely to be given authentic insight into our heritage from interpretations by suburban, socially and professionally upward-mobile Mennonites who find the peculiarities of their tradition embarrassing—"negative identity fragments," as Erikson calls them? From graduates of Fundamentalist seminaries whose criterions of orthodoxy do not focus on issues the Schleitheim Confession found basic? From political leaders who view minority groups primarily as potential elements in voting blocs?

For my part, I should like to hear my heritage expressed by voices, "artistic" or otherwise, who speak from a center of conviction and commitment to that heritage. Such voices have something to say that comes from no other source; they have accents that no one else can simulate. They must be as free as the skeptics, of course, to narrate the negative elements in the story. That is the Biblical example. Their eyes must be as sharp, their wit as keen and their language as mordant, on occasion, as any artist's. But I expect from them the ability to explore the positive mystery, as well as the fallacies, of my heritage. I am already profoundly convinced of the sham, the depravity, the heartlessness of much in my society that parades as virtue, and of the fact that my covenant group is not exempt from their presence. An eloquent chorus of modern artists, for whose insight I am very grateful, has long ago convinced me that the Biblical vision of man's evil is not overdrawn.

My Mennonite training itself corroborated this view. But even more importantly, the quality of its testimony to the presence of the Kingdom of God in human life genuinely intrigued me as offering alternatives to, deliverance from, some of the worldly behavioral options that some of my non-covenant friends considered ineluctable features of the human condition. Some of the implications of my heritage raised questions that were basic indeed. What style of psyche would be able to follow Jesus' instruction to live without hatred? To yield and yet be free? To find an abundant rather than morbid fulfillment under the sign of the cross? Is the injunction to love our enemies a rhetorical command without practicable referents? Have the practitioners of this ideal been

optical illusions, hallucinations of pious myth-makers? Can the "mind of Christ" be expressed in a communal, as well as an individual soul? How did it come to be that in the midst of a jingoistic American landscape my culturally narrow parents entertained an alien vision of the Kingdom of God?

My late adolescent search for absolutes that would order chaotic youthful emotions led me toward whatever guideposts were then visible. The local bastions of churchly order that were taking a last stand for the folk-tradition were already being beaten down by influences from the radio and newspaper. Soon television would swing the gates wide open. At such a moment, when I asked, "Who am I?" the public schools said, "You are an American," giving me stories to read and songs to sing that proved it. The Army said, "You are a defender of the national borders." The economy said, "You are a consumer and a producer." Some of my academic peers said, "You are a potential scholar." But John Horsch's book, Mennonites in Europe, oversimplified and chauvinistic as my later reading showed it to be, also caught my attention, saying, "You are a Mennonite, a son of a covenant." Cautiously, I began to weave connections between my childish trust in my parents' values and the historical precedents of my covenant-society which I was discovering. I began to feel that I was part of a story.

I had friends and acquaintances who said, in effect, "That may have been the story of my ancestors, but it's not going to be mine." Some of them had what seemed to be plausible reasons for their opinions. Few if any, though, gave any evidence of having had a palpable encounter with the sources of their tradition. I felt I had to look somewhere else than to their views for perspective. Instinctively, I could not regard the Oedipal resentment they felt as a substantive position, or as the answer to the questions I was asking. Their fathers' iron-handedness, the black-marketing practices of a Sunday School teacher, boredom with home-grown farmer-preachers—all these were most understandable as irritations, but they were not able in themselves to blank out of my mind a sense that the basic choices in this matter were meaningless outside the context of some concrete access to the story of my heritage. I wished for something half as effective, half as specific as the abundant novelist entree one had to the "world's" conception of history and society. Instead one had to make do with tracts that had a story-line.

So now I expect to work at this task myself. As I look over the stories from which I shall draw my story, *deus volens*, I see evil interwoven with the good. There are gestures of greed and incidents of faithlessness as well as moments of trust and trends of love. There are incidents involving marriage, work, accident, competition, suicide, schism, mutual aid—a teeming canvas of vignettes. Over-arching them are communal processes—war and peace, economic depression, emigration, spiritual rejuvenation, mission, the creeping of lethargy, the march of progress, the dialogue with growth. And through it all, there is covenant-memory. There is identity.

What models shall I employ? Shall I take my cue from the taste in current fictional protagonists? There he is, waiting impatiently in the wings for his Mennonite incarnation: the sentimentally conceived schlemiel of a thousand current novels, poised for his agonized quest of authentic being that will drive him through a series of colorful trysts with Mennonite coeds, conveniently sharing his eagerness to be disburdened of moribund inhibitions. Thus will they exorcise, if they are true to their best-selling precedents, the falsely ascetic, intolerable myth of the *Martyrs' Mirror*, sequel by sequel outperforming their honest profanity and compulsive lubricity while they pursue an increasingly aimless war against hypocrisy.

No. Mennonites don't need such evidence that we, too, can be packaged and sold in the marketplace of literary sensation. We don't need the equivalent of an *Ebony* magazine to show us ourselves in expensive clothes and staggeringly overpowered automobiles, so that we can feel real, while hucksters persuade us, figuratively speaking, to buy hair-oil to straighten out our cultural kinks and make us normal Americans. The Mennonite writer has much more interesting possibilities than proving that he too can dissolve his covenant-identity in that kind of success. He can tell his story.

But only if he is free to see what it is, to learn it. There will be no two identical versions of this quest. After several years as a graduate student of English at an eastern university, a former Amishman looked over the attitudes he had found in the academic world and decided he had not left all narrowness of spirit back in his Kansas community. "Man's freedom," he concluded, "is inseparably bound up with acceptance of his cultural heritage." This stands in contrast to the view of a former Mennonite who testified that the day he left his ancestral religion was, at least in aesthetic terms, the day he was "born again." One sympathizes with the sense of liberation from unimaginative bondage expressed here, but such a conception refers to only a part of the realities with which I am involved as a whole person. For I find that there is also a kind of new birth when one can begin to claim as one's personal experience the insight, the directives, the inner drama of

one's tradition. Having neither carelessly repudiated nor idolatrously absolutized the historic sources of one's identity, one can examine rather than defend its inadequacies. One can learn that one must, in Erikson's phrasing, transcend the imagery of one's traditional resources rather than deny them. Such, in fact, was the experience, doubtless more than he knew, of the artist who needed to make his departure from his youthful tradition in order to be "born."

Throughout these lectures I have been referring to the Swiss-American Mennonite story which is the background and the material for whatever fictional work I may produce. Let me close by invoking our memories of the Prussian-Russian Mennonite experience. What a saga, how replete with incident! How monitory, how paradigmatic of difficult issues in the Mennonite soul, with its lessons of apocalyptic extremism, territorial religion, class conflict, schism, patience, persecution, faith! When I read the stories in the pages of *Mennonite Life*, or Rudy Wiebe's *Blue Mountains of China*, I am deeply stirred by a recognition of struggles cognate with my own people's experience. A few months ago Cornelius Krahn showed me, in the archives of Bethel College, a collection of mementoes: congregational record books charred by fire, their notations broken off with the advent of invading armies; communion cups from churches in extinct Mennonite communities; fraktur-decorated arithmetic books—all bespeaking a "lost fatherland," and a dearly held faith. But there was also a carefully drawn glorification of the helmeted bust of Bismark, a reminder of the persistent temptation to surround the Bride of Christ with the arms of the state.

Were this my own particular background, I should probably wish to participate in telling its stories, but my work is in a neighboring field, the Swiss-American. Yet for both bodies of meaning, I feel, the basic challenge to the artist who has the imagination to see the story is the same: to bring together in that imagination both the sadness and the victory of the covenant-experience, both the failures and the faith, in such a way the over-arching Salvation-story in which it participates may be grasped. I have had little wisdom to offer regarding aesthetic techniques—the plotting, the tonal shading, the rhetoric—that constitute the storytellers' mystery, his craft. What I have dwelt on is another kind of qualification: the imaginative courage for the literary artist to become involved in the very soul-drama of his covenant-community. I have offered a view of what his opportunities (specifically as a Mennonite) are—and his temptations. I have tried to show the dignity of his calling.

"Congregational record books charred by fire, their notations broken off with the advent of invading armies . . ."

And now, finally, to circle back to home base in this meditation on identity and its relation to literary art. We are human beings shaped in the image of an unimaginable Creator. We learn to know and love this unnamable One in communities extending across space and time. The record of this learning, these communities, is a concrete story. And at a particular point in its unfolding, a particular person at a particular place—Jesus of Nazareth—lived, died and rose again. His story and the supporting story of his people have become the Story of which ours is a particular chapter. Any story that is told with reference to that over-arching Story of God's salvation is important. It is possible, experience shows, to lose that Story in our stories, as it is possible to lose life in the living of it. Our imagination may be too weak to see how our story—the Mennonite story—fits into the Story. But the artists who are sons and daughters of Zion will not strum the harp or indite a song for aesthetic effect only. But not forgetting Jerusalem, they will remember who they are, and they will write of what they remember. They will open their mouths in parables, and utter dark sayings of old which they have heard and known. They will not hide the works of the Lord from the generation to come.

Radical Reformation and Mennonite Bibliography 1975-1976

By Cornelius Krahn, Assisted by Marianne Harms and Sharon Klingelsmith

It is the policy of *Mennonite Life* to list all significant books, Ph.D. dissertations, and M.A. theses dealing with Anabaptist-Mennonite related subjects that have been published or written during the preceding year. This report has as a rule appeared in the April issue of *Mennonite Life*. Starting in 1973 it is being published in the March issue. Another helpful aid in locating information is the author and subject index which can be found in the January issues of *Mennonite Life* as follows: 1956, 1961, 1966, 1971, and March 1976.

New rich bibliographical information is found in *Doopsgezinde Bijdragen* published since 1975 annually, and *Documenta Anabaptistica Neerlandica*. Information and subscriptions can be sent to Doopsgezinde Historische Kring, Singel 454, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

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A GHOST

I fought with time
and lost. Without my tail,
sensitive to the wind,
I've lost my sense of place,
no longer know the wind's direction.
A ghost, I dream of other ghosts:
Santa Fe, Chisholm, Oregon trails,
buffalo, antelope, elk, prairie chickens,
tepees, wigwams and houses, dugouts,
covered wagons.

Once I
harnessed south wind to pump
pure cold water out of unspoiled
earth. Now I lift a face
of broken bones into the sky
hunting for healing winds.

Elmer F. Suderman

Books in Review

Kingdom Cross and Community edited by J. R. Burkholder and Calvin Redekop (Herald Press, Scottdale, 1976, 323 pp.; $12.95)

The seventeen essays in this volume, in spite of its inferior binding, are a well-deserved tribute to the man who contributed so much in this quiet and careful way to interpreting twentieth-century Mennonite life. His contribution is especially creative in bringing into focus a Mennonite position on the questions of peace and social justice.

I remember Guy F. Hershberger in the days I shared an office with him at Goshen as one who never let the ambiguities or compromises of life and ethics lower his sights or standards. There was an idealism and integrity about him that gave his writings consistency and also made him vulnerable to criticism from social and political activists.

I find no way for this review to do justice to all seventeen essays. Each one stands alone although their cumulative effect is to illuminate the wide-ranging contribution of Guy F. Hershberger as an American churchman who kept focusing on and updating a Mennonite ethic for our time. Perhaps the most valuable fringe benefit that might result from these essays is to spur further examination and self-understanding by American Mennonites. Robert Kreider tempts the reader with the unfinished agenda yet to be tackled. Previously, Mennonite scholars had engaged largely in 16th century studies. The need of Mennonite people today is for an understanding of 20th century history. Do Mennonites know, for example, Kreider asks, why the years 1890 to 1917 were such a pivotal period for the Mennonite Church?

The essays of Theron Schlabach and Robert Kreider interpret Hershberger as both a product and discerner of the times. Schlabach explains what spurred him to focus on questions of peace and social justice. Kreider suggests that his "legacy may . . . be that of discerner of the times, a navigator-guide to critical moral issues . . . always moving forward with his people in pilgrimage . . . always in friendly conversation, never breaking relationships."

As one would expect, the volume focuses on a particular people, the Mennonites, and one Mennonite in particular, Guy F. Hershberger. And yet some of the essays, such as Harold Bauman's and Calvin Redekop's, transcend these sectarian boundaries; others stand in judgment of their limitations. Perhaps the hardest question of any of the contributors is posed by J. Lawrence Burkholder when he asks if Hershberger's strictly nonresistant stance (vis á vis various forms of nonviolent resistance to evil) is adequate for our times or does such strict nonresistance produce a psychological type that "by exalting the absence of conflict rather than the peaceful resolution of conflict, encourages passivity."

One is impressed throughout the essays with the way Guy F. stayed in communication with all sectors of the church. His high seriousness toward the Biblical record meant he could not be discounted by the Christian right, center, or left. And one notes his willingness to concede minor points (such as the wearing of the straight coat) in order to be in full communication with people of such conviction on issues that mattered much more.

Discernment, faithfulness and gentleness, these three, stand in this *Festschrift*. They are not often the combination of gifts to be found to such an extent in any one person.

Harold J. Schultz
Bethel College

SPRING

Each morning
the nimble air said:
"Winter is over,
no budding wood
or blooming gardens
here on the prairie:
only throbbing spring,
its light restlessness
playfully roaming
across the rolling country,
impulsive like a big puppydog,
stopping to sniff burning grass,
to listen to a woodpecker
hammer away at a crooked elm,
and then trot on
until, at the horizon,
spring meets sky, pale sunshine
swift clouds—
A big puppy pawing you
then lying down to be petted."

Elmer F. Suderman