

Among theorists as well as ordinary folk who enjoy the arts the recurring question, “What is art for?” finds its way into conversations. This is a question about the value or the meaning of art and it plays into our pragmatic concerns. Two very different answers are given to this question. The first draws on the romantic tradition and perceives art as self-sufficient having no need for engagement with the common good or matters of moral concern – an art for art’s sake viewpoint. The second answer sees art as willingly engaged with a worthy purpose outside of itself. Art for example could be socially redemptive.

Many today hold the view that art is a luxury, not a necessity. And so we assume the best route is to simply forego the arts when more important matters call for our attention. This may foster a cavalier disregard for the arts and a failure to capture their significance for the human community and their important role in our social settings. It may well be folly to try to provide a case for the “necessity” of art but I am willing to make the effort by drawing on three ideas; one anthropological, one sociological and one theological. Too much for this short piece but I will aim for brevity.



New Zealand professor of art Denis Dutton in his book titled *The Art Instinct* makes a case for art, based in evolutionary science. The suggestion is that art is a universal phenomenon like language and tool making. It is one of the ways we share the feeling of recognition and communion with other human beings.

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John the Baptist, after Tver icon, 1425, paper collage and goldleaf, 17" x 21", 2010

Protestant Icons

This is one of a series that grows out of my fascination with Orthodox icons. The icon within this religious context is thought to be a kind of spiritual window that brings together the flesh of the saint with the eternal glory of God – who is represented by the gold ground.

In the icon the mystery of the word being made flesh is apparent. Orthodoxy holds that the human body is the vehicle through which the mystery of salvation was accomplished. The prominence of icons within this tradition can be understood as an extension of a worldview that places the enfleshment of God, the Incarnation, at the very heart of the Biblical story.

Since the Reformation, Protestants have critiqued, often with sabers waving, the practice of venerating Christ and the Saints through icons as a form of idolatry. In the reformed tradition, where the Bible as written word became the domain of the Protestant Imagination, this was translated into a rich literary tradition that, in the words of John Calvin, formed mental images far superior to the “perception of our eyes”. Of course, the line between icon and idolatry is one that can be crossed in any tradition. The “magical” quality some Protestant traditions assign to the words of scripture comes very close to bibliolatry.

These works explore this tension between icon and iconoclasm by re-writing the great icons of Orthodoxy as layers of biblical text and paper. Built, rather than written, with layers of paper, these icons replace the flesh of the saints with pages from an 18th century bible. The biblical pages, barely readable under a thick film of gauze and gold dust are also the deepest layer in these “icons”. These works fall somewhere between an outsider’s homage to a profound and mysterious spiritual tradition and a postmodern flirtation with the tension between icon and idolatry.

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Books

John Terpstra, *Skin Boat: Acts of Faith & Other Navigations*
Gaspereau Press 2009, pp. 155.

It's sensuous, it's earthy, it's a pleasure- and that's just this book's textured cover flap and rich paper. But the contents of the book only got richer and more rewarding as I went on voyage with John Terpstra in his *Skin Boat*.

Curragh and coracle were physical and spiritual skin boats for the 4th century Irish monks who spread the gospel throughout the modern United Kingdom & Ireland. The wind that filled the sail of the solitary sailor's coracle or a group's curragh was received as the Spirit's direction for travel and mission.

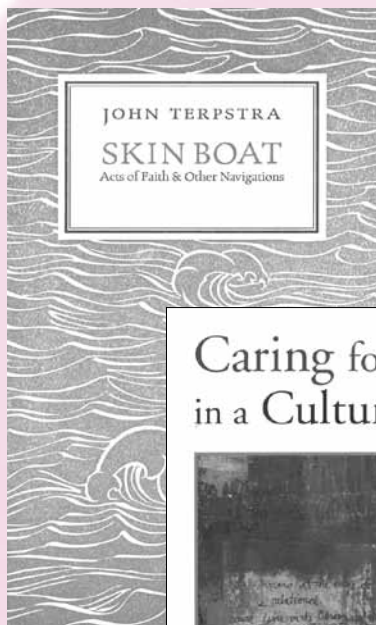
Terpstra takes this sailing metaphor into a deep, sometimes dark voyage into the reality of our common struggle with that which we experience as church. He's gentle, brutal, honest, reflective but loving in his reflections about being in the mess of church life.

Two friends of mine read it – him, a somewhat agnostic former evangelical and her, a thoughtful committed church person.

Unable to explore their different faith voyages, their marriage had a quiet hole in it. Until they both read *Skin Boat* and found a bridge for communication about what they truly felt about faith and life.

The highest praise I can offer for this book is that it is a bridge to communication. Beautifully written as a contemplative exploration of a similar conflict in his own marriage, Terpstra sails us into unexpected discoveries of grace and light in the darkness and uncertainty of life. Terpstra is funny, blunt, but always humble as one who learns and listens carefully to the tides and storms of life. *Skin Boat* is a rich reflection of hope that leaves the reader challenged to sail courageously and honestly in one's own faith context – but always with grace and love.

Review by Norm Allen,
Touchstone, Toronto



Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*
Eerdmans, 2009, pp 234.

Language serves to bind us into human community as it carries and communicates our values and beliefs. When those values and beliefs shift and change so does our language. There are plenty of signs of change – and our language appears to be in trouble. This little book provides an astute diagnosis and opens up a host of ways for us to preserve and strengthen our language. Written with a keen interest in how language carries our stories – including the story of faith, the author sounds a clear call for us to discern how language is being depleted through media and technology. The heart of the book is to call us back to the rich resource we have in language, its capacity for beauty, for expressing our loves and our hopes, for carrying our stories, bringing us joy and enjoyment, the vehicle for prayer, play and poetry. Every reader of this work will be encouraged, inspired and better informed about the unique gift of language that shapes our lives.

Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies



MARILYN CHANDLER McENTYRE

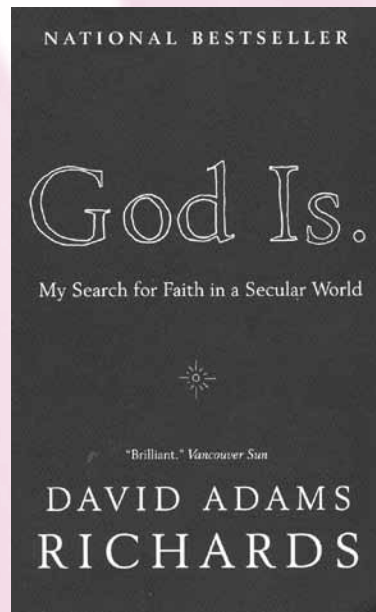
David Adams Richards, *God Is: My Search for Faith in a Secular World*
Anchor Canada, 2009 pp. 166.

This award winning Canadian author is best known for his fiction work, *The Friends of Meagre Fortune* and *Mercy Among the Children*. While questions of morality and faith show up in his fiction, in this book he tackles such questions head on in an autobiographical context. This insightful work is a foray into the recent debates about God and the realities of a religiously plural world. Informed, intelligent and beautifully crafted, the reader will be well rewarded by engaging the crisp insightful arguments of the author and by entering into the many stories from his own journey that he draws upon.

Susan Carson, ed., *A Truth Universally Acknowledged: 33 Writers on Why We Read Jane Austin*
Random House, 2009, pp. 277.

It is understandable that not everyone likes Jane Austin, but what is surprising is how many do. Of course I refer to her stories not the author herself. Jane Austin's novels have never been out of print in the two hundred years since their publication and well over a million copies sell annually. BBC television and Hollywood have taken up

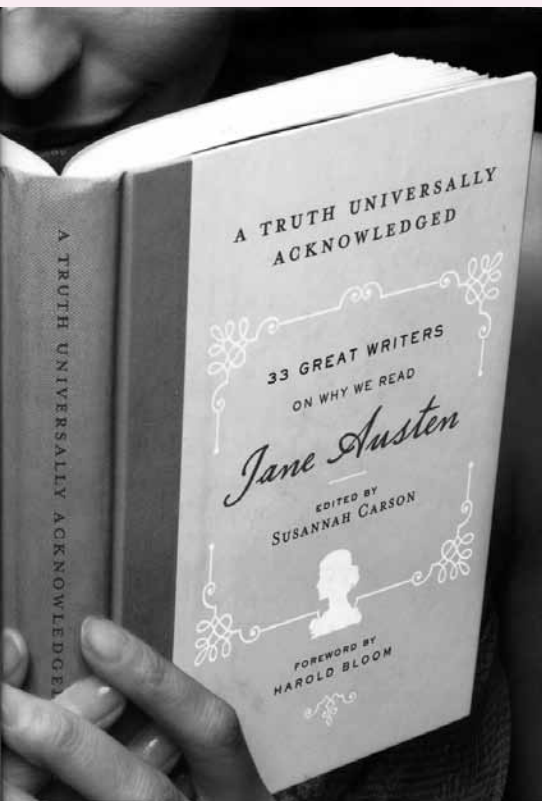
these stories to present to a wider public. Her novels have also been translated into other languages. What accounts for this popularity? While it is difficult to give a definitive answer, this collection of essays provides some possible answers. George Eliot a great author in her own right referred to Jane Austen as, "The greatest artist that has ever written...the most perfect master of the means to her end." The authors in this collection are from both past and present and include, C.S. Lewis, Somerset Maugham, J.B. Priestly, Virginia Woolf, A.S. Byatt, Harold Bloom and Jay McInerney. This book bears testimony to the power of story and to one of the most gifted of storytellers.





Pacific Theatre, Vancouver, May 20 to June 18, 2011. *The Great Divorce*: Adapted by George Drance & The Magis Theatre from the novel by C.S. Lewis.

Hell resembles nothing so much as a dreary industrial city in the north of England, its denizens free to leave whenever they like – aboard a bus bound for heaven that is like nothing you have ever imagined. A theologically dazzling journey studied by memorable characters, mind-spinning dialogue and images of human folly and sublime hope that will forever change the way you see eternity.



Ins Choi, actor, playwright, has appeared in *2000 Candles* (The Arts Engine), *Double Bill* (Soulpepper), *Hamlet* (Stratford), *From the manger to the cross* (spoken word artist). His first full-length play, *Kim's Convenience*, won the 2011 Toronto Fringe Best New Play contest. It opens July 6, at the Bathurst Street Theatre as part of the Toronto Fringe Festival.

Kim's Convenience is the comedic story of a Korean family struggling with the future of their convenience store amidst the echoes of their bitter past. Loosely based on the prodigal son story, it's a play about debts and reconciliation. Performances are at the Bathurst Street Theatre, 736 Bathurst St., Wed July 6, 6:30pm, Fri July 8, 10:30pm, Sun July 10, 1:15pm, Mon July 11, 8:15pm, Tue July 12, 1pm, Fri July 15, 5:15pm, Sun July 17, 7pm. Tickets are \$11 and are available by visiting www.kimsconvenience.com or www.fringetoronto.com.

*Fiction writing is very seldom
a matter of saying things: it is a
matter of showing things.*

Flannery O'Connor

Richard Wilbur, poet, b. March 1, 1921

Now at 90 years of age in his latest volume of poems *Anterooms*, Wilbur takes time to reflect on human mortality. The following excerpt is taken from an article by Canadian scholar David Lyle Jeffrey in the current issue of *First Things* (June/July 2011). *First Things* is a journal of cultural comment shaped by orthodox Catholic faith – though like Jeffrey many of its contributors are from the Protestant tradition.

“It is characteristic of the gentle but unmistakably Christian character of Wilbur’s poetry that he should include in his latest volume a “Psalm” of gratitude for life, both its joys and its sorrows. . . .

The balance of advantage and disadvantage in living long is tilted toward the good, most Christians have tended to think, when one has lived well, not clinging to some version or other of a desperate immortalism. The wisdom, expressed variously in other Christian poets such as T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden and Wendell Berry, has emerged in Wilbur as a deep contentment pervading with convincing seamlessness the whole of his poetry, almost from the beginning. The very peaceableness of so much of his verse reminds us that Richard Wilbur has always been a wisdom poet. . . .

His little poem, *The Proof*, ...tactfully expresses in four couplets his gratitude for God’s patience with him.

*Shall I love God for causing me to be?
I was mere utterance; shall these words love me?*

*Yet when I caused his work to jar and stammer,
And one free subject loosened all his grammar,*

*I love him that he did not in a rage
Once and forever rule me off the page,*

*But, thinking I might come to please him yet,
Crossed out delete and wrote his patient stet.*

No one who is not a mature and contented poet, quite unashamedly indebted, personally and poetically, to the gift of Scripture and its tradition, could write such a whimsical self-effacement and gratitude all in the same breath.

More than any American poet of our time, Richard Wilbur teaches us to open ourselves to wonder. In this he has been a prophet and more than a prophet; for those with eyes to see and ears to hear he has been and, pray God, will long hereafter be, a bearer of comforting words. . . .”

Is art necessary? *continued from page 1*

The inclination to imagine scenarios, make fictions, craft images, perform rituals and the attendant capacity to enjoy these things is rooted in the “art instinct”. That instinct was at work 17,000 years ago in the artisans of Lascaux who decorated the walls of the caves with images which move us still today. On this view art is not an option for humanity – though it may be for any given individual – it is a necessity. Art flows from a deeply embedded instinct that is part of what it means to be human. At its origins art may have been associated with magic – with the desire to master an unknown world. But with the fading presence of magic in our more sophisticated scientific world art now sheds light on the natural and social order and provides hints for reordering or at least for fresh understanding.

Countless numbers of people read books, listen to music, go to the theatre, visit galleries or watch film. Why is this so? There appears to be a world-hungry longing within us that reaches out beyond the confines of our own small selves. We want to break free of our isolation and connect with the natural world and with others in the human community. We are by nature (and by biblical mandate) culture makers. Artistic activity is all around us and serves as a tangible expression of the culture in which it exists and of the inner life of some of its members. The Romantics looked to the transcendental power of poetry as a source of hope. Utopians and Marxists felt confident that the arts would serve the cause of social change while today many wonder if art is at all relevant in our troubled world. I for one do not doubt the relevance of art for our troubled world. It is a resource for both comfort and insight, for hope and a vision for a way forward. Art is capable of exposing our failures and of motivating us toward the good. I am thinking of those smaller worlds in which we participate, not the troubles of our global community though art could certainly have something to say there as well. Tolstoy has argued for the necessity of art as a source for social coherence and as indispensable in moving humanity toward well-being.



Image from Caves of Lascaux.

The third idea affirming the necessity of art is one that links art and theology. What I have in mind is the connection between artistry and the Holy Spirit. I have been intrigued for some time about this connection. We speak readily about creation and art and about incarnation and art – but are largely silent on the work of the Spirit and art.

Jonathan Edwards the eighteenth century New England theologian was much occupied with the subject of beauty. He suggested that it is the Spirit that is the harmony and beauty of the Trinity and who has the function of communicating beauty and harmony in the world. It has been argued that what enables human

artwork to become expressive of divine radiance is the human will responding freely to the movement of the Holy Spirit. And further, that the purpose of all art is to participate in the disclosure of God’s glory. So here again it appears there is an inevitability about human artistic activity. It rides on the expressive energy that is found in the Trinity and which we in a small way express as those who bear the “imago” of God.

The presence of good art, grounded in the biblical narrative, is an urgent need for our fragmented world. Art will not save us but it has the potential to awaken us and assist us in seeing more clearly. Nicholas Wolterstorff has observed; “works of art are objects and instruments of action.... whereby we carry out our intentions with respect to the world, our fellows, ourselves and our gods” (Art in Action). Art that speaks the truth and unmasks the deceptions of contemporary culture is essential to stabilize a world out of kilter. Art shaped by a Christian understanding of things – rooted in the big story of the biblical narrative is one place where we will find light to dispel the darkness and hope to dispel the despair.

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Visit Imago on Facebook.

Kingdom Poets

D.S. Martin, an award winning Canadian poet, has developed a blog featuring poets from Canada and beyond. It is a place to discover poets familiar and unfamiliar. Informative and an excellent resource for introductions to the life and work of poets past and present.

The Kingdom Poets blog is a resource of poets of the Christian faith, regardless of background; there is no attempt made to assess orthodoxy, but simply to present poets who speak profoundly of faith in God. kingdompoets.blogspot.com
Contact: don@dsmartin.ca

The Reverend Dr. Harry Robinson

March 30, 1927 to April 4, 2011

We wish to note the passing of Rev. Harry Robinson former Rector of Little Trinity in Toronto and St. John’s Shaughnessy in Vancouver. Harry was a friend of Wilber Sutherland, a founding member of Imago in 1972 and served on the Imago Board in the 1970’s sharing the vision for an organization that would carry a Christian influence on Canadian cultural life.

Events

IMAGO Evening

Thursday June 9, 2011, 7:30pm at the Enoch Turner Schoolhouse, 6 Trinity St., Toronto (one block east of Parliament, south of King).

Featuring: Isobelle Gunn music (Leanna Zeyl, Jeremy Zeyl and Lara Schat-Zeyl), Miranda Stone, singer/songwriter, Shannon Blake, The Bench Theatre Initiative, Joel Ivany, Against the Grain Theatre, and visual artist, Gerard Pas.

IMAGO and IMAGE present

An Evening of Celebration of the Arts,
Wednesday June 15, 2011, 7:30pm at the Registry Theatre, 122 Fredrick St., Kitchener.

Featuring: Heidi Brannan, visual artist, Mike Janzen, jazz piano, Dale Nikkel, singer/songwriter, Kevin Ramessar, guitar, and Kathleen Sheehy, Lost and Found Theatre.

www.imago-arts.on.ca/events/artseries.html