

Working at an intersection carries its risks and dangers. The intersection at which I am engaged is where art and faith meet. It will be no surprise if I tell you that these two deeply human realities have not always been on friendly terms. Or perhaps more accurately the *world* of art and the *world* of faith have been at odds. The art world through much of the 20th century has sought to keep a safe distance from religion and its penchant for devotion. The world of religious faith (particularly that of conservative theological persuasion) has commonly operated with a deep suspicion of art – uncomfortable with its elusiveness and fearful of its power. A questions that emerges in this context is whether contemporary art can be devotional art. I want to briefly explore this question drawing on a chapter by the English theologian Ben Quash in the book *Contemporary Art and the Church*.*

Early in the essay Quash highlights the contrast between contemporary art and the community of faith, he writes; “So we are in quite a fractured condition, surrounded by art that unites people most effectively only when it entertains (fun) or pacifies (nature) and convinces people of its integrity most effectively only when it shocks or appalls.” There are few if any entry points for theological conversation when art follows these paths. And he asks: “...what place if any such art may have in churches - since churches are about loves, nurtured and shaped in common.”

Quash notes three alleged “oppositions” in contemporary art. The first is “eternal/slow versus up-to-date”. Ecclesial art is deemed

continued on page 2



Gerald Vaandering
Muskrat Falls Fish with Mercury
Medium: fish, mercury, epoxy. 27"×7"×2"
2019

This fish I received from an Innu hunter living in Labrador, is burned to a fragile charcoal state, encased in epoxy with drops of mercury added. In Labrador, downstream of the Churchill power plant they have built a second Hydro-electric Dam on sacred First Nations territory. Substantial research was done to show the profound negative impact this project would have on the food chain downstream. The people there still largely live off the land and now, contaminated with methyl mercury the food source is rendered unfit for consumption.

In preparing for this work, I read a lot on the issue especially the comprehensive research done by Trevor Bell about the expected fall out associated with methyl mercury contamination downstream. *Lake Melville: Our Environment our Health* was released by the Nunatsiavut Government in 2016 in St. John's. Lake Melville is an important subarctic estuary in central Labrador that is home to several Labrador Inuit communities. I also did an artist residency for a month, living in the small community of Northwest River Labrador, where I talked with many people about how they live on what they call “Country Food.” (Living off the land)

Artist Statement

Most often the work I do is my response to a culture that has used economics as a measure of our wellbeing. While culture is always economically driven, be that in a hunter gatherer mindset where the “economics” is immediately apparent at the end of the day, or in a western culture where my hunting and gathering is seen in my investment portfolio. These works are more focused on the environment and how a corporate mindset of capital gain is always the end game determinant. I am looking and saying, “Look at what my lifestyle has taken from the land.” Then wondering if I could live differently.

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free

Wendell Berry
from *New Collected Poems* (Counterpoint, 2012)

Working at an intersection

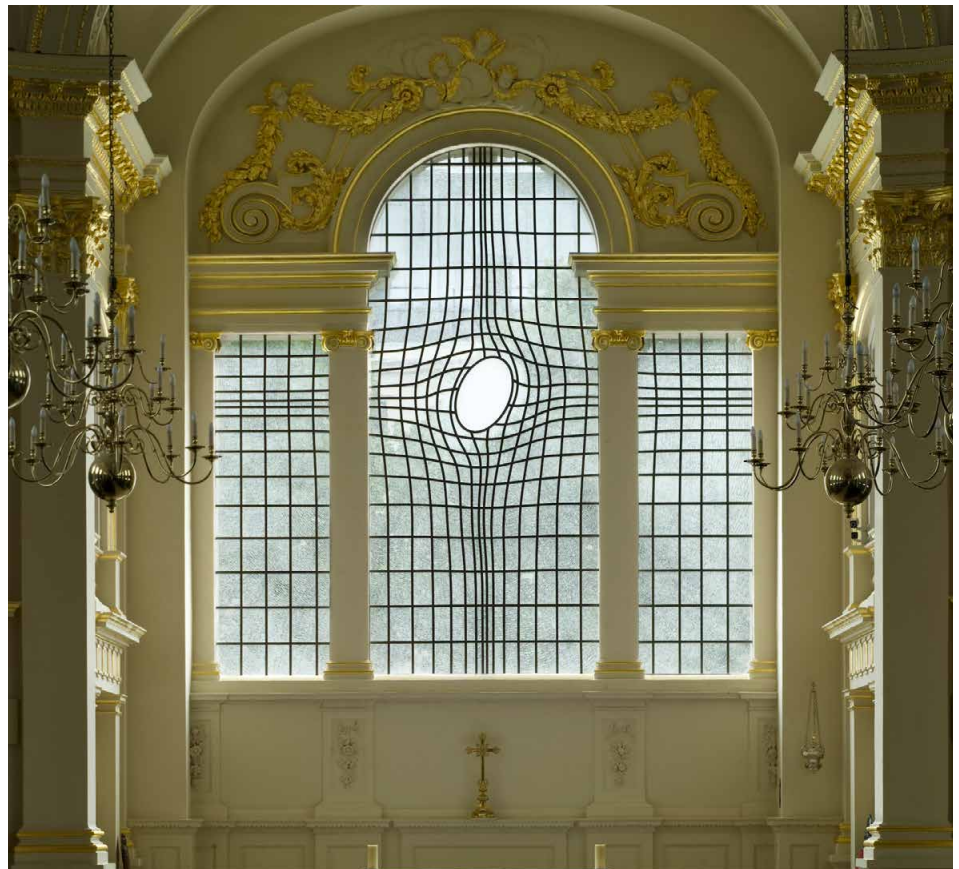
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to be intent on preserving its tradition and so resists current artistic expressions while the art world is committed to pushing the boundaries of artistic expression. Quash contends that this is a caricature of how the church actually operates noting its “art, devotional practices and theological interpretations ... are constantly adapting to serve new contexts.” The second alleged opposition is “sincere versus ironic/transgressive”. Though sincerity may be a virtue in some settings when it comes to making art sincerity may result in being preachy or simply safe where the creative edge is lost. The third opposition is that of “cultic or devotional art” and “exhibition art”. In this case context plays a determinative role. If an artwork is in a church we are predisposed to take it as “devotional art” if the art is in a gallery we are inclined to see it as “art for art’s sake”. However Quash makes the important observation that whatever differences there may be, these two options need not negate one another but may be considered in such a way that either option or interpretation is possible.

Quash discusses three church commissions of contemporary art one of which is the East Window of St. Martin – in the Fields by Iranian artist Shirazeh Houshiary. The image is abstract and so captures the Islamic prohibition against the figurative, the Jewish commitment not to image the divine and the Christian tradition of the ‘apophatic way’ where divine absence is the theme rather than divine presence. While the allusion to the cross is evident – one might see the oval in the centre of the work as a hint of the incarnation. This is a work that people may come to see for its aesthetic value and artistic innovation quite apart from its context in a church sanctuary or a focal point for Christian worship.

There is one further opposition Quash mentions “plenitudinous and exploratory art”. The earlier oppositions are questionable, for Quash this one seems essential. In worship and discipleship the faith community needs “moments of both recognition of what is

*Ben Quash, “Can Contemporary Art be Devotional Art?” in *Contemporary Art and the Church: A Conversation Between Two Worlds*, eds. David O Taylor, and Taylor Worley, IVP 2017.



Window by Shirazeh Houshiary

deeply known and encounter with what is surprising.” Art can be a lens through which we glimpse the familiar and the unexpected. Contemporary art in the church needs to be rich in meaning and open to several potential interpretations and it may have an exploratory quality drawing the viewer on to a new place.

The Crossings project that IMAGO is doing on Stations of the Cross for Lent of 2022 has moved me to consider the relationship between contemporary art and devotional art. To suggest there is a deep divide between these two echoes the idea of a sacred – secular split, a division Quash suggests may be an “unnecessary mistake.” A single work of art may simultaneously state a truth, nudge to action, ask a question, probe a mystery, help us to see the world or ourselves more clearly or challenge our predilections and re-orient our desires. Art may engage the human spirit or nurture the religious impulse. And what it may do is not something easily predictable. Quash concludes his chapter with reference to the first Art Stations of the Cross exhibition that took place in London in 2016. Of that exhibit he says that it invoked all the moods of speech

and was an act of mediation – “mediating between different spaces, different types of art but also different kinds of people.” This third way – this way of mediation is a hopeful option, freeing us from entrapment in the either/or of contemporary art versus devotional art.

Crossings 2022 should not be thought of simply as a religious exhibit – its reach is intended to go well beyond being a religious event. Though all the artwork will be done in response to a narrative central to the Christian faith the meaning and significance of the narrative and of the artwork touch on fundamental concerns of our humanity.

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stations ~~X~~ of the cross

Crossings

A Journey to Easter Arts Exhibition

for the Toronto exhibit are all outdoors and will include a number of sites on the University of Toronto campus and five churches in the Yonge and St. Clair area. Sixteen artists are creating work in response to the fourteen Scriptural Stations of the Cross (different than the traditional Stations) as well as Triumphal Entry and Resurrection. The locations are set up so that people can do a “pilgrimage” of the sixteen locations in four to five hours

We want to invite you to go to www.crossingstoronto.com and register/sign-up to receive updates on the exhibition and news of resources and any events related to the exhibition.

Plans are progressing well for the Crossings Exhibition scheduled to take place in Toronto during Lent of 2022. This is an IMAGO initiative and is part of an international series that began in 2016. The locations



Marilyn McEntyre, *Speaking Peace in a Climate of Conflict*, Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2020. 180 pages

Tensions, oppositions and polarization seem to characterize our world and somehow find their way into our personal lives. How best to

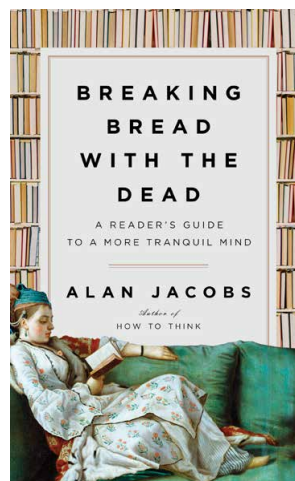
respond to these disruptive realities is not always evident. This timely book by Marilyn McEntyre once again takes up the theme of language and faith reminding us that words can be vehicles of grace. Exploring a variety of settings in which words carry significant influence McEntyre offers analysis and insight to invite us to care and be careful about what we say. She notes in the introduction our need to “adapt to chronic word and image overload”. This has resulted in a diminished vigilance when it comes to language. Sloppy linguistic habits serve to muddy communication and generate misunderstanding. While the failures of language attend the problem of civility that looms large in our culture.

The opening chapter cautions us against relying on the dictionary – as the meanings of words are malleable – subject to shifts and changes not least because in our world the social and cultural landscape is constantly on the move. In the second

chapter we are called to “unmask euphemisms”. Euphemisms can of course be useful “instruments of diplomacy” but they can also obscure hard truths that call for our attention. Terms like collateral damage, electronic persons, settlements, harvesting and humanitarian intervention are gently unmasked to reveal the uncomfortable truths behind these terms.

The well-known phrase of Emily Dickinson, “tell it slant” is the title for chapter five where the author wants to nudge us away from “flat-footed literalism” in favour or the indirect. There are brief discussions of a few who have been masters of slant-telling.

Mary Oliver, Toni Morrison and Leonard Cohen. Let me offer a brief quote from McEntyre on this influential Canadian poet – she writes, “His words were cryptic, prophetic, precisely aimed at contemporary sensibilities, but echoes of ancient myths, biblical material and history ironically remembered. ... His words last because they are adaptable, widely applicable without losing their specificity, rich and rueful in the humane, challenging way they mirror back for us experiences lodged in collective memory that we cannot afford to forget....”



The following chapter focuses on poetry which is slant by nature. She notes some poets are peacemakers, some healers, some “witnesses, reporters, even prophets who speak a hard and timely truth”. Perhaps in our “climate of conflict” we are in special need of poets whose words can bridge our differences and draw us to common ground. But not all is tranquil in this book – we are invited to “articulate our outrage” something common today and often found in the biblical narrative as well. For all the negative possibilities that can accompany “articulating our outrage” – it may also “fuel love of justice and mercy and finally a humility that survives humiliation”.

In later chapters we are invited to “complicate matters”. McEntyre observes that “the task of the good novelist or nonfiction writer is to complicate”. We are to move beyond sound bites or the idea that there are two sides to an argument. And we are told to laugh when you can. This is good advice as humour diffuses tensions and takes us to a shared place of our humanity. Laughter is an indicator that hope is still alive and well. The final chapter carries sage advice – “quit trying to win”. In a culture of competition peace is easily overlooked.

McEntyre takes the reader on a path of discovery providing opportunities to engage the familiar while discovering the unfamiliar. The various locations along this path provide insights and encourage practices that will foster a spirit of peace, encourage words of hope and embody gestures of grace.

Alan Jacobs, *Breaking Bread with the Dead: A Reader's Guide to a More Tranquil Mind*, New York: Penguin Press, 2020. 151 pages

The title of this book comes from an observation of poet W.H. Auden who wrote, “... art is our chief means of breaking bread with the dead”. Jacobs is engaged in a push against the pervasive presentism of our culture. We find it hard to resist the ‘gravitational pull of the moment’. Being cocooned in a very limited environment engaged primarily with technology, plagued by information overload, pervasive algorithms, and relentless marketing, seems to generate a nagging desire to escape. But if we are “locked” into the present we have nowhere

continued on page 4

Be with me Madam Jazz I urge you now
 Riff in me so I can conjure how
 You breathe in us more than we dare allow
 In words and hues and tones, please Madam, blow,
 Play in me the grace I need to know
 How in your complex glory we let go.
 Show how an open hand is worry-free,
 Spark again your love's economy,
 Your generous first words spoken, "Let there be."
 Enhance our trust in hard-earned betterment
 Humbler world we may in turn augment
 In long adagios of increment.
 While marvelling at your choreography,
 Stars and quarks beyond our mastery,
 We still explore to praise your mystery.
 Although each sacred book's a lip-read score,
 Improvising there is always more;
 You jazz on what's our own and our rapport.
 Each solo and ensemble of a piece
 Grooves and tempos shifting without cease,
 We flourish in a syncopated peace....
 In all our imperfections we advance
 Trusting in creation's free-willed chance,
 Sweet Madam Jazz in you we are the dance,

Micheal O'Siadhail

Breaking Bread with the Dead

continued from page 3

to go – except perhaps on an adventure desiring yet another experience.

Reading literature of the past is one good way to "increase temporal bandwidth" as Jacobs calls it. This refers to the breadth of your "now" what is its temporal reach, what of the past or of the imagined future is informing your life? The author is convinced that "temporal bandwidth" is a key element in personal "density". The more we are trapped in the moment the more weightless we become. Life then has a diminished stability and is easily tossed to and fro.

Intentional engagement with literature of the past allows us the opportunity to "practice encountering difference" and to do so in a non-threatening context. There is no intent to idealize the past but only allow it to be a laboratory in which we are able to discover something about our social and cultural heritage and about ourselves

and how we relate to one another. We find a certain continuity in the human condition and as someone has noted – "the more things change the more they stay the same."

When one turns to read "old books" it is important to remember that you are invited to their table not them to your table. We are to go in a receptive posture, open and ready to learn and to discover. We need to know more than just "our own moment in history. We live thinly in our instant and don't know what we don't know."

This is a challenging book – challenging in its call to cultivate a "tranquil mind" in these frenetic times. It is also challenging in the way the author draws on a rich and extensive literature to convey his case for "old books". But I think it worth the effort to gain the insights and be nudged toward the humanizing resource of literature of the past. "Breaking bread with the dead is not a scholarly task to be completed but a permanent banquet, to which all who hunger are invited." ■

Non-order

This poem by Micheal O'Siadhail brought to mind a book I read some years ago. *Jubilate: Theology in Praise* – Daniel W. Hardy and David F. Ford. Perhaps the connection is because O'Siadhail and David Ford have been life-long friends. It is common to think about the world in a binary way – discerning order and disorder. As we survey our world we are inclined to put world events and our experiences into one of these categories. The controversial author Jordan Peterson works with a binary model of order and chaos focusing particularly on the individual. A key theme I recalled from the Hardy/Ford book was their advocacy for a third option. The book is about "praise" and they see praise as the human attempt to cope with the abundance of divine love manifest in the world. To be clear they are not offering a triumphalist view that blithely ignores the darkness of our world. They are fully aware of its intrusive presence.

What interests me is their proposal for a third category that breaks the binary model of how we humans operate. For them there is not just order and disorder but also "non-order" characterized by a logic of overflow and abundance. It calls to mind the term "plenitudinous" mentioned near the end of the first article in this newsletter. They note an ancient account of what it is to be human – "a human is a rational animal who laughs". The rational is about order but laughter cannot be reduced to disorder. Sociologist Peter Berger a long time ago observed that humour is a "signal of transcendence". If we feel that life is an imprisonment – and we are able to laugh we are suggesting that "the imprisonment is not final but will be overcome." The logic of laughter is akin to that of play, poetry and praise. It breaks out of the confining barriers of ordinary existence and overflows those boundaries generating delight and hope.

Hardy and Ford observe that "Dictators fear laughter and good jokes as much as guns. Non-order thrives in the arts too, particularly in our century (20th) It has constantly been under attack because of its threat to order – for example abstract and other forms of modern art. Most creativity has an element of non-order, without which it is impossible to transcend the old ordering and produce something new." (pp. 96-97) Non-order is that unexpected happening that disrupts the "normal" flow of things and carries the promise of something new. Resurrection!