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Rainbows for the Fallen World and Art in Action (Book Reviews)

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Book Reviews

by Russell Maatman

Rainbows for the Fallen World, by Calvin Seerveld. Downsville, Ontario: Toronto Tuppence Press, 1980. 254 pp. \$9.95.

Art in Action, by Nicholas Wolterstorff. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980. 240 pp. \$9.95. Reviewed by James Vanden Bosch, Associate Professor of English.

The appearance of these two books within the Reformed academic community signals a growing maturity of reflection in the area of the arts. There is so little real reflection by Reformed Christians in this area that any serious work is welcome, but these two books are more than a welcome relief—they may very well make the kind of contribution which will be the basis for further work in aesthetics, for a better understanding of how Christians can relate to the arts, as artists, consumers, teachers, and critics.

Their work may provide such a basis because the two writers share so many fundamental assumptions. Wolterstorff himself has called attention to a number of these shared assumptions in one of a pair of articles which he and Seerveld wrote in *Vanguard*.^{*} In summary form, these are the areas of agreement: (1) both "place art in the context of the Christian confession of God as creator"; (2) both are convinced that "aesthetics is not merely a matter of taste. . . . There are esthetic responsibilities which belong to us as creatures"; (3) but "art is more than a matter of responsibility. Art is given to us for our joy and delight"; (4) both want art "to enter richly and deeply into the lives of all God's people, not just into the lives of the elite among us. . . . We both wish to break the association between art and the elite"; (5) "we agree that behind every work of art there is a world, consisting of the artist's goals, intentions, purposes, convictions; and that the work is an expression of this world behind the work. Characteristically the

religion of the artist has central place in that world behind the work"; and (6) both agree that "twentieth-century art represents on many fronts a positive esthetic contribution. It's not true that everything in the art of the twentieth century is degradation. Of degradation there is plenty. But also there is advance."

There are two other assumptions held in common, not mentioned in Wolterstorff's summary, and these are assumptions which make up part of an advance in Reformed thinking about the arts. First, both find that "beauty" is an idea or norm which is of little real service for aesthetics. Modern aesthetics has for some time now done its work without reference to that notoriously unstable element; it is encouraging to see that both writers do not depend upon the concept for their own work. A second advance is this: they agree that art must be judged by aesthetic criteria distinct from theological and philosophical criteria. Judgments made on the theological or philosophical characteristics of a work of art may be useful judgments to make, but they are not a substitute for aesthetic judgment. These two assumptions, when added to the six already listed, provide a solid foundation upon which further work in aesthetics can be based. Although none is unchallengeable, together they make up a convincing and coherent whole.

Starting from such premises, each writer goes his own way. The principal difference between them concerns

^{*}*Vanguard*, Nov.-Dec., 1980, pp. 4, 5, 18, 19. See also the Jan.-Feb., 1981 issue, for a letter from Seerveld (p. 13), in which he supplies a passage inadvertently omitted from the previous issue.

their understanding of the function of art in the modern world. It is Seerveld's contention that art has properly come to be valued almost entirely for the sole purpose of aesthetic contemplation. Wolterstorff, while recognizing this as the predominant modern approach to art, laments this development. Rather than allow art to fulfill the many functions that it has fulfilled in history, modern criticism and theory specifies that aesthetic contemplation is the only legitimate one. Wolterstorff makes a strong case against what he calls the "institution of high art"; he reminds us that man may properly perform many other actions with art: art can be the instrument, object, accompaniment, or background of a great many human actions. To be the object of aesthetic contemplation is one possible use of art, but it certainly does not account for all, or even most, of art's uses.

Each book deserves readers who will follow the author through to the conclusion of his argument; assuming such readers, I will not summarize further. However, I would like to indicate several limitations that I encountered in the two books. Seerveld is to be commended for the evangelical fervor that his book transmits, but his work has been done a great disservice by the careless editing which characterizes it. Whether viewed as an aesthetic, economic, juridical, or pedagogical matter, editing which allows for more than fifty spelling and typographical errors in 240 pages of text shows very little respect for the readers or the author. In addition, the documentation is inconsistent and often difficult to follow, there are errors in pronoun usage, and the text displays what I can only guess is an international style of spelling. Although each individual error is not considerable, the accumulation of them in this book constitutes an offense which will cause many readers, Christian and non-Christian, to treat the book with less serious attention than it deserves.

One other area deserves comment: Seerveld's treatment of "normative historical developments in the arts." The idea of normative historical developments is immensely attractive, in some ways, but claims for such developments cannot be made without considerable question-begging. Seerveld's assumptions in this matter color both his discussion of culture and Christian culture, and his call to "work reformingly" within a historical inheritance.

Both writers encounter a problem peculiar to the tradition of aesthetics: how to deal with literature, especially the novel and other long literary works, as an art form. Seerveld, after analyzing other art forms in terms of style or representation, judges literature in terms of idea, or thesis. Wolterstorff limits the aesthetic to the look and sound of a thing, and tends to eliminate as aesthetic many other features of a novel or a drama. Although he includes a novel's "truth to actuality" as something that we may value in a novel, he prefers not to consider such a feature to be aesthetic. And even if we could restrict our aesthetic judgment of a novel or short story to its look and sound, that strategy seems to

be a high price to pay for aesthetic purity of judgment. With such critical specifications, an aesthetic judgment of a novel would seem to be almost beside the point, and this can scarcely be what Wolterstorff (or anyone who values novels) intends.

Two other problems with the novel are implied in Wolterstorff's discussion of a work of art. The first is his concept of a "canonical presentation" of an art work. According to Wolterstorff, such a canonical presentation is determined "by reference to how the object sounds or looks when contemplated in the way intended by maker or distributor." When faced by "divergent intentions," says Wolterstorff, we simply distinguish between the competing views and "leave the matter there." Even this minor concession to the complex reality of artistic intention cannot change the fact that intention is very difficult to specify, and, even if specified, of questionable use in making aesthetic judgments. The second problem is related to the previous ones: Wolterstorff seems to assume that a novel is presented to its readers primarily for aesthetic contemplation. Again, the history of the novel argues against such an assumption: the novel has never been so simple or single-minded. It has many intentions, including all those that Wolterstorff has listed as the various actions performed by art; it may be part of the aesthetic dimension of a given novel that it refuses to consent to such a limited use of itself.

Henry Zylstra used to insist that the novel be understood not as one of the fine arts, but as belonging to the humane letters. His *Testament of Vision* gives eloquent expression to that insistence. The argument about the proper designation for literature is an old one, but it is instructive to note that the argument acknowledges at least two properties of literature: it is an art, but it is also a body of knowledge which is to be studied as such. And what is true of the novel is similarly true of poetry and drama—literature, as a verbal art, appeals to much more than look and sound. If that makes aesthetic judgment more difficult, one possible implication is that our definition of what constitutes the aesthetic needs to be broadened.

One final remark: it is notable that the work of both Seerveld and Wolterstorff can finally be placed within the pragmatic theory of art, broadly conceived. Within this orientation, art is defined and judged in reference to its effects, real or intended, upon the audience which encounters it. We have all come to distrust certain versions of this orientation, especially those versions which defend censorship or judge excellence by popularity. But Sidney and Milton found room for understanding their work within this tradition, and, with their insistence upon the legitimate roles of art and the responsibilities of the audience, they were not committed to a theory of art which would destroy what they were working for. Wolterstorff and Seerveld may well be contributing to a reassessment and a recovery of the pragmatic orientation—and it has many features to be appropriated.