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James Vanden Bosch
Dordt College

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In Defense of Mediocrity

Addicted to Mediocrity: Twentieth Century Christians and the Arts,
by Franky Schaeffer.

Westchester, Illinois: Cornerstone Books, 1981. 127 pp.

Reviewed by James Vanden Bosch,
Assistant Professor of English.

Are Christians truly addicted to mediocrity in the arts, habitually bypassing the genuine and significant for the fifth-rate, the ephemeral, the meretricious? If so, how did such an evil state of affairs develop, and how can Christians reform their aesthetic lives? These questions have perplexed Christians for generations, and because the concerns behind these questions are so urgent, books which provide insight into aesthetic standards within the Christian community are sorely needed. And if Christians are addicted to mediocrity, such a judgment needs to be made, explicitly and forcefully.

But the discerning reader will quickly discover that in *Addicted to Mediocrity* Franky Schaeffer has not made anything like such a judgment. Instead of an aesthetic jeremiad, Schaeffer has produced an ironic masterpiece: like the authors of *In Praise of Folly*, *Candide*, *A Modest Proposal*, and *The Dunciad*, Schaeffer appears to support a position which the wary reader quickly discovers is not his position at all. In so doing, Schaeffer has announced his affiliation with a very great tradition, and his bold book has made irony once again available to Christians as a legitimate mode of discourse, freeing it from the suspicion that it is an uncharitable strategy, freeing it for reforming service.

What is it that Schaeffer has done? He has made the strongest possible case for mediocrity in the arts, and for the appropriateness of a Christian's addiction to it. In a sense, Schaeffer is the G. Harold Carswell of Christian aestheticians: he realizes that mediocrity needs not only to be represented (it being preferred, after all, by the majority), but also to be defended, the preference never having had an adequate spokesman. Schaeffer wisely neglects an outright defense of the word "mediocrity": for him to have made such a defense would have been to break with the ironic mode. But surely mediocrity can be defended, if only on the basis of semantics and etymology. "Mediocrity" belongs to a family of words descended from the Indo-European "ak-." When seen in the company of such relatives as "acerbic," "acme," "acrobat," "acute," "edge," "paragon," "paroxysm," and "sharp," "mediocrity" has to take on new, positive connotations. The literal meaning of the word is "halfway up the mountain," hence "well-poised," or "moderate." More praise than blame should attach to a word which represents this sort of assiduous avoidance of extremes. It is a noble word; it should no longer be assigned an unequivocally pejorative meaning. Schaeffer's defense of mediocrity is based implicitly upon such

an informed understanding of this much-maligned word.

How does Schaeffer accomplish such a defense? How does the reader know that the book is not to be taken seriously at the literal level? The clues are many, but a cursory description of his major satirical or ironic devices will leave the pleasure of a full appreciation of this masterpiece to whatever readers it may yet attract to itself.

Schaeffer's primary strategy is to undercut his own literal meaning by presenting the reader with a text whose distressed surface suggests that no editing, rewriting, or thinking went into the production of the book. The general tactic operates on every level, and throughout the book. For example, Schaeffer methodically uses the wrong word or the illogical construction wherever possible, if that word or construction will frustrate clear sense. Consider the following examples:

The church's effectiveness in the world around it is directly attuned to the degree to which these blind spots prevent it from doing the job that it should be doing (p. 15).

When one looks heavenward and sees the complexity of the reaches of space above us, the mind boggles at the creativity of our God (p. 17).

First, Christians must free themselves from the misnomer of more than a century that everything must be measured in useful utilitarian terms, even in utilitarian terms as far as usefulness to the cause of Christianity (p. 40).

In the real world, you run head-on into reality if you try to fly in its face (p. 44).

There are no acceptable excuses for accepting this rubbish (p. 45).

The present trend of so-called Christian television is scandalous in its abandon of quality (p. 46).

Schaeffer's mastery of these particular devices should not blind the reader to his use of other, equally effective methods. He employs a dazzling array of errors in grammar and usage: subject-verb disagreement, awkward sentences, non-parallel structures, split infinitives, shifts in pronoun cases, comma splices, and redundancies. For his compendium of error, Schaeffer uses nearly every available resource in what can only be described as a bravura demonstration of his linguistic abilities. Every kind of demanding solecism seems to flow effortlessly from his pen. But he is also capable of historical pablum, of the garbled sentence, the foolish assertion, and the critical vapidty. A superficial survey provides this admittedly limited sample:

In the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, something happened within the church which constitutes the first theological point I mentioned. A strange truncated unscriptural view of spirituality grew up (p. 27).

The results were obvious. Creative people in this framework either had to bow and abandon their God-given talent in favor of a man-made theology, or fly for their creative lives. Many did so, and the vacuum left by the disappearance of creative people within the Christian community has been deeply felt by our lack of ability to communicate to the world around us, and the gray sterility of the Christian world (p. 29).

That this was all that remained of the full Christian life we were redeemed to and that these sad standards were used to measure all Christian endeavor for its utilitarian usefulness to the church left many things in deep water (p. 31).

This is why we face this torrent of mediocre media-artistic propaganda endeavor (p. 41).

In addition, there are a number of fine craftsmen, such as furniture makers (e.g., Jon Ording, a friend and Christian, being perhaps the best alive today in the United States), and poets (pp. 74, 75).

Fellini is the film-maker's film-maker. He uses the medium to its limits. He is a good example of that great gift and cousin to creativity, *imagination* (p. 76).

Film is a great, diverse, human medium. Still in its infancy, cinema is only at its very beginning (p. 77).

In the secular world, this usually simply does not wash, or it will not work and not sell. While the marketplace is a sad standard if it is the only one as it is often now in the secular world, it is nevertheless better than none, or worse a double standard (p. 93).

It should be clear that Schaeffer's use of language forcefully demonstrates that clarity and precision of expression are as little to be valued as are mastery and excellence in the other arts. He could not have chosen a better means of showing the extent to which he values mediocrity of expression in general. He cherishes mediocrity, he strives for its leveling touch.

For the discerning reader, the implication should be obvious: mediocrity in the arts is the best that many Christians (artists and consumers) can legitimately hope for, given their native gifts, inclinations, and education, and the power of inertia (Coleridge once described himself as "indolence capable of energies": most people fall far short even of this dismal assessment of human potential). By extension, Schaeffer speaks to an emotion which nearly everyone experiences from time to time, namely, resentment toward greatness, toward great thinkers and artists, toward great art works and monuments of the intellect. Nearly everyone experiences this resentment because very few are able to rise to the heights of achievement in thought and art. And this resentment is appropriate within democratic societies, which exist to lessen the pain of unjust inequality. Mediocrity thus satisfies a basic human need, the need for a sense of achievement *and* of full equality.

After such a defense of mediocrity, no Christian aesthete will dare to approach the topic of the arts without first of all coming to terms with Schaeffer. From now on, it will be a brave, perhaps even a foolish Christian thinker who will find it possible to endorse excellence in any human enterprise. With his ironic tour de force, Franky Schaeffer has effected a Copernican revolution in the judgment of the arts.