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August 12, 2014.
PHILOSOPHICAL AESTHETICS
AT HOME WITH THE LORD

An Untimely Valedictory

Calvin Seerveld
"Why is a woman not safe?"

Dance by Gioia Gehrels

photo by Robert E. VanderVennen
PSALM 91

Whoever feels at home in the presence of the Most Glorious God shall be able to pass the night in the shadow of the Almighty One, for that person can say to the LORD God, “My sanctuary! My Place-to-stand! My God in whom I am trusting!”

The LORD God shall extricate you from the trap of the Hunter! God will save you from the sting of Death! The LORD shall cover you with God’s wings; under God’s wings you can run to hide. Do not be afraid of midnight terror or of sickness that stalks people in the daytime or of pain that creeps up (on one) in the twilight or of crippling disease that strikes while the sun shines: a thousand may collapse right next to you, ten thousand may be struck down; but you shall not perish—God’s truth shall protect you, fence you in, while letting you see with your own eyes how the godless are paid in full.

You have said, “The LORD God is my sanctuary!” You have taken the Most Glorious God as your At-home! Therefore Destruction cannot get you; disaster shall never enter (the door) where you are living: for God Almighty has made you a charge of God’s angels, ordering them to guard you in all that you do. They shall hold you up by their hands so that you do not even stub your foot against a stone, so that you can walk past roaring lions and poisonous snakes, so that you can step on and crush the lion and even . . . the Dragon!
“Because he or she has held fast to me, I shall save them!
Because she or he knows my name, I shall deliver them!
I will hear each one when that person cries out to me;
I will be with them in the terribly dark days,
free them from the Darkness, and bring them glory!
I will let him and her live peacefully on and on,
because I shall let them see my salvation!”

Translation by Calvin Seerveld, 1965

Whoever Shelters with the LORD

1 Whoever shelters with the LORD and lives with -
2 The faith - ful LORD will spare you death. God's wings will
3 Though thou - sands per - ish at your side, such pun - ish -
4 God gives his an - gels charge of you to guard from
5 "Be - cause you cleave to me in love and know my

in the Al - might - y's shade can say, "My God, in
cov - er you from harm. No ter - ror, sick - ness,
ment shall not touch you. Be - cause the LORD serves
those who per - se - cute. You shall not trip a -
name to call in need, I shall pro - tect and

whom I trust, your ref - uge makes me un - a - fraid!"
night or day, will ev - er cause you grave a - larm.
as your home, God's grace will al - ways see you through.
gainst a stone, but tram - ples ser - pents un - der - foot.
keep you safe with bless - ing, glo - ry, life in - deed.”
Philosophical Aesthetics at Home with the Lord

An untimely valedictory

If the title misled you to think these remarks would be like a serene posthumous letter from heaven, then Gioia's dance translation of Tracy Chapman's song "Why?" as introduction should have started to correct your expectations. My title is also not exactly playing off the discouraged prisoner, apostle Paul's remark to the Philippian believers that he'd rather be with Christ than teaching at 229 College Street west in Toronto, but it's better for you that I show up regularly with my backpack of books and muffins from Inès (cf. Philippians 1:12-26).

"Philosophical aesthetics at home with the Lord" has Psalm 91 for its orientation—a psalm the devil particularly hates and has memorized cold (Matthew 4:1-11), and a psalm which is the favourite of our saintly Ross Mortimer (to whom I dedicate the final song). Doing theoretical scholarship can be at home with the Lord even in a brutal world with the mass starvation of children, the elderly urban dweller in loneliness, the subtle terrorization of women, and the practice of Saussure's slipknot linguistics which holds that signifiers have no certain extra-lingual signified reality so that in our duplicit world "love is hate / war is peace / no is yes / and we're all free."

As an older sinful scholar saved by the resurrected Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the cross in history, I am gratefully at home with the merciful Lord here and now. And I should like to highlight certain things I understand obedient Christian scholarship to be amid the troubled historical sputtering of these last days, in order to give the next generation food for thought as they covenant with the LORD in our dürftige Zeit (to use Heidegger's phrase, "during our impoverished," not to say, with Adorno, "damaged-life times").

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Many evangelical Christians become homeless, cannot go home again once they have actually been faced with the rich power of current cultural diversity. And many secular disbelievers make a virtue out of being philosophical nomads, when really, I think, they are historical refugees, unable after the acid of Americanization to recapture the cloth of the European habit or the simple life of non-Western traditions. So let me try to describe theoretical study—its dynamic, prerequisites and criteria—which will be at home with the Lord in a ruthless secularized culture, and then focus down on the field of philosophical aesthetics.

My remarks are a valedictory of sorts, saying goodbye to the Institute for Christian Studies. I call them “untimely,” not because they are particularly “untimely ripped ... from the womb” (Shakespeare, in *Macbeth*, V,viii) although, since there is no end to the making of speeches as well as of books, in any event there is always a measure of premature unripeness to the figs one serves. Sparking off from Nietzsche’s *unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*—without Nietzsche’s affront to the intelligence of his audience—I recognize that my farewell remarks are not fashionable, do not fit in with the times, and might be considered out-of-step with the current drummers drumming. But “Why?” be on “the cutting edge” of scholarship—a terribly revealing, aggressive metaphor that masks Darwinian power one-upmanship.

Philosophical theory at home with the Lord might better offer a glass of fresh, unpolluted conceptual water to those whose throats are parched for knowledge, rather than adopt the conquistador ethic of cutting up new terrain.

Dynamic and the next generation of Reformational philosophical theory

I do not hear so much anymore about "scripturally-directed learning." Except for John Kok’s keen exposition of “Vollenhoven and ‘Scriptural Philosophy,’” (*Philosophia Reformata*, 53 [no. 2, 1988]: 101-42) the phrase seems to have faded into disuse.
behind other concerns, like whether you are “modern” or “postmodern.” But “scripturally-directed learning” always struck me as a key to the dynamic of Reformational Christian philosophy. Our theoretical thinking did not need a Cartesian methodological scepticism to cast about for an Archimedean point in the winds of change. The anchor of the Creator God in Jesus Christ reliably witnessed to by the Holy Spirited Bible held as a clear, invigorating starting point, and was “intrinsically related”—H. Evan Runner pounded it out from the beginning—to our theoretical, scientific grasping of reality. So one’s daily way of life in society, one’s committed vision of place and professional task in God’s world, and even those called to become philosophical scholars had rough contours provided apriori by the Word to which one was faith-convicted.

That self-consciously *thetical* orientation holds enormous promise for fruitful, edifying and critical theoretical studies, because you communally have a headstart in knowledge (Proverbs 1:7, 9:10). You know the LORD’s *chesed* posits discoverable ordinances for all facets of creatural human life, and ontic structural limits for developing institutional powers in history which as divine love constraints, keeping human authority relative, are violated with cruel outcomes. You know ahead of time that physical, sensitive, technical and aesthetic affairs as well as analytic, political and economic matters are called to be holy, normed by the compassionate Rule of Jesus Christ acoming which affords joy in thinking, justice in feeling, truth in advertising, and peace-making speech. The educative fun comes in spelling out concretely what this biblically-directed vision means for us traditioning creatures today, and patiently unearthing our errors—*philosophia Christiana reformanda est.*

It’s been good fun for many years, as the variety of theses and dissertations I have been privileged to mentor show, not because the cross-generational research always got it right and was trouble-free, but because the work together was informed by the dynamic that this offering of theoretical analysis is for the Lord, for God’s supportive people, and any inquisitive neighbour, whether the stuff be the belaboured parataxic thought-
moves of Adorno, the incisive bright *Lehrstücke* of early Brecht, the wide-ranging humanist cultural theory of Ortega y Gasset, the fine-tuned notebooks and paintings of Paul Klee, the graphic cries of Käthe Kollwitz, Derrida’s painstaking rereading of Plato’s *Phaedrus*, or the lethal phantasmic world of Baudrillard.

The Reformational dynamic of being at home with the Lord in strange and sometimes fearsome academic places comes through best, I think, when someone who has Psalm 91 in the blood can pass it on imperceptibly, with corporeal presence, like mouth-to-mouth resuscitation or a holy kiss that takes two, three or more years of intimate struggle with material you want to understand, honour, exorcize, transform, bring captive to the Truth (2 Corinthians 10:3-5). That you do academic work in the grip of something more powerful than yourself becomes very real, if I may be personal for a minute, when your friends and colleagues are untimely taken away. But you know Howard Rienstra, Robert Carvill, Peter Steen, Stanley Wiersma, Bernard Zylstra—Destruction did not get them! (You’d say it in faith before the devil self!) So you continue the endeavour of scholarly obedience under a glorious host of witnesses.

The generation of Reformational scholars coming up do well to hear the passion. If you have not self undergone the hardship experienced by those founding the Association for Reformed Scientific Studies, or suffered the ridicule Gerald Vandzande and Harry Antonides originally did in charting policy for the Christian Labour Association of Canada; if you have never had to sing Luther’s song ad-libbing (as some of us colleagues could have done, earlier on) “let wife, goods and kindred go,” you might miss the genius of Reformational scholarship and cultural activity, and suppose it comes down to holding certain orthodox tenets. The dynamic of “scripturally-directed learning” is selflessly single-minded service (Philippians 1:9-11), has nothing to do with careers or fringe benefits, but comes with the high cost of communal struggle as sinful people to be obedient together in making a redemptive difference on the secular educational scene.
I felt confirmed on this point upon reading writings by Ignacio Ellacuria and Ignacio Martían-Bóró, Jesuit professors of the University of Central America, José Simeón Cañas (begun 1965, about the time of the Unionville Study Conference of our Association), who were murdered six years ago yesterday by a U.S.-trained elite army corps of El Salvadorean soldiers. "¿Es posible una universidad distinta?" "Is a different kind of university possible" which gives preference to the exploited poor majority of people in the country, asked Ellacuria ten years after its inception? And there are fascinating, unflinching reflections, about how university experience does not lead to democratic socialization but fosters societal differentiation (Martían-Bóró, 223). You don’t seem to serve the economically poor peasants in the land by admitting the intellectually poor as students to the university (Ellacuria, 198). How do you combat the undeniably bourgeois structure of the university—privileged, propertied, self-interested and get beyond importing foreign models, short-sighted pragmatism, and gradual acclimatation to what is (diabolically) "normal"? they asked (Ellacuria, 193-94, 218).

I make no judgment on how ICS is faring with respect to the pressures of assimilation to what is expected by our good neighbour secular peers, the pros and cons of being domesticated to the Learned Societies format of learning, or the temptation to be different because you make no difference. My initial point is that the dynamic of "scripturally-directed learning" is very precious, blowing where it lists. Now it is time for us older ones to encourage the younger ones: you may not need to reinvent the wheel which racked the body of legendary St. Catharine of Alexandria, but it is your turn now to be faithful, forgiven leaders in not being conformed to current fashions but to be metamorphosed by the radical renewal of your consciousness to discern more deeply what the good, satisfied will of God be for learning what and how and why (Romans 12:1-2).
Prerequisites: the structure of Christian scholarly knowledge

As to the prerequisites and criteria for thorough-going Christian scholarship which might give sight to the culturally blind and speech to those mute from disorientation in the world, let me be terse and incomplete, aware that my own mix of New York fishmonger sensibility and an embarrassment of European riches shape my predilections.

Prerequisites for giving scholarly body to a biblically shaped vision are at least (1) ingrained historical knowledge, (2) multilinguality, (3) encyclopedic purview, and (4) knowing what time it is on the streets.

First of all, scholarly learning takes time because it respects the fact that cultural knowledge did not begin when you as a person entered the world. An apprentice scholar goes prospecting for precious stones in the rubble of civilization, develops a detective sense for what is hidden and connected, and gradually becomes aware, like a connoisseur, of the location and dated environs formative upon what is discovered, the human travail embodied in artefacts and in only-once-upon-a-time events, good or bad. Christian scholarship is not in a hurry, does not jump to conclusions, but cherishes sifting the evidence, being open to insightful contributions by twisted people loose in God’s world. A result of such patient re-searching investigation of the complicated, convoluted, cumulative past of human accomplishments is a historical consciousness where you lose the prominence of your self in order to gain yourself in the context of the ages. So the scholar can come to perceive that there is nothing really new under the sun, except those offerings born again by the gospel of Jesus Christ; yet God’s grace shines down upon the unjust as well as upon the just cultivators of the earth (cf. Matthew 5:45); therefore, blanket historiographic judgments are wrong.

This historical consciousness constitutive for Christian scholarship keeps one cautious but enables one to make fine,
critical distinctions, with feelers (Gereformeerde voelhorens/Reformational antennae) which notice subliminally where things are coming from and where they are going. The historically aware Christian scholar will be saved from the anachronistic mistake, for example, of reading Thomas Aquinas’ \textit{ratio humana} as if it be the narrow-minded post-Cartesian \textit{cogito} of Rationalism, equally dismissible by us post-Enlightenment figures. And a would-be scholar errs, says Gertrude Himmelfarb, if you jettison centuries of philosophical reflection because of its dead-white-male bias, proudly missing untold knowledge (151-55). It is fairly clear you cannot fault Aristotle for not reading his Foucault, and we should not badger Kant for omitting Kristeva. But the shallowness of the homo-up-to-datum intellectual who lacks historical consciousness turns ugly when it comes to giving leadership, because intellectual enablement without a fortified historical humbledness—if one is thrust into power without historiographic seasoning—the outcomes are normally, I’m afraid, arbitrary, reflecting special interests rather than a discerning wisdom.

Second, a blessing in God’s judgment upon the Babel of Bible times (Genesis 11:1-9) is the prismatic richness of varied mother tongues. To hear modern Greek, Polish or Chinese spoken to your face, which you do not understand, deeply confronts you with a neighbour who is “other” than yourself. It is a mark of scholarship, I contend, to realize that human language is the soul of story-telling and literature of a specific people’s culture; and foreign languages are \textit{not} capricious games or snags which need a fix-it, but are invitations to leave behind one’s parochiality and to enter into fantastic new worlds that help provide the sharpness of depth-vision. Facility in several languages has always been good for renewing scholarly precision: Humanist Lorenzo Valla (1405-57) showed that the neo-Platonist Greek texts of Dionysius revered as canonical by a millennium of Latin-reading Christians was \textit{not} the Areopagite brought to Christ by the apostle Paul (Acts 17:32-34); reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546) changed a church’s perception of \textit{Busse}, distinguishing “repentance and conversion” from
“penance,” because he could probe behind the Vulgate into the original biblical languages.\(^6\)

I am not promoting the old humanist trust in the power of languages to save Western civilization as Matthew Arnold (Greek) and Alfred North Whitehead (Latin) did.\(^7\) Technological expertise with directions in American-English has become practically the lingua franca of worldwide culture anyhow. But I hear the frustrated cry of Ojibway Basil H. Johnson who says to earnest liberal white academics, “If you want to understand us ‘Indians,’ learn our languages! Then you might not translate the raven as a ‘trickster,’ and treat our sacred myths like Walt Disney ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ nursery tales.”\(^8\) And Johnson’s plea holds true for anyone willing to meet diverse ethnic cultural traditions deserving respect around the globe, whether it be Dutch, Russian, Venda, Swahili or Arabic. Scholarship gives one the time it takes for a person to learn to navigate in languages foreign to one’s mother tongue but not strange to God’s ear. That’s why scholarly knowledge can have the bouquet of vintage wine rather than the monolingual fizz of a diet coke.

Third, scholarly knowledge, as I understand it, has durance, the interconnected, systematic settledness which is there for the long haul. Even when the study concerns something very definite, there will be a philosophical, encyclopedic overview present which situates the knowledge genially. It is the nature of bona fide scholarship not to be single-issue oriented, not to play the power moves of centering and marginalizing, politicizing knowledge; but like a good basketball player the scholarly investigator develops peripheral vision which is universe-wide and cross-culturally primed during any focused examination.

Such an integrative perspective is considered totalitarian by many current theorists prone to “fragmatics,” as my colleague Bob Sweetman has called it.\(^9\) And the very pressured hurry to life with which our information-ridden society formats knowledge tends to force one to petits récits, says Bob Goudzwaard in his most recent writing, since you only have time to worry about saving your own skin (29) with the cutback of
your job rather than to worry about a “world” of misery and the burgeoning national debt out there.

Whoever is tempted in graduate studies to follow the tune of piecemeal, topical issues must be prepared to pay the pipers Stanley Fish, Haydon White and others who have repudiated, in my judgment—while living off it!—scholarship that assumes reliable wholeness and eschatonic continuity because of the sovereign provident LORD who will be returning in Jesus Christ to see what we sinful and redeemed humans have made of God’s good creation.

Fourth, what distinguishes the specialized kind of theoretical research which results in scholarly knowledge from pedantry is that scholarship breathes the pulse of concrete experience and aches to put the pellmell rush of daily life into perspective.10 William Butler Yeats excoriates the old, learned, respectable pedantic annotators of lines—

All shuffle there; all cough in ink ...
All think what other people think....
Lord, what would they say
Did their Catullus walk that way.

But Nietzsche’s philosophy has verve and passion. Johan Huizinga’s Herfstij der Middeleeuwen (1919) has details laden with blood and fire and insight. George Steiner scholarship exhaustively probes the matter of “translation” (in After Babel, 1975) until you see how the very quality of life depends upon it. Kwame Anthony Appiah’s in-depth analysis of Africa in the philosophy of culture (In my Father’s House, 1992) wrestles through to contested theoretical conclusions that convict the reader that we stand at a crossroad in our philosophical scholarship.

I am not advocating that scholarly knowledge be the most important kind of knowledge. To be street-smart and know the Manchester stride (which I have taught my Junior Members, to avoid being mugged on city streets walking between art galleries),11 or to have the split-second presence of mind to answer
redemptively, as a Citizens for Public Justice representative answers a journalist's wrong-headed question, can be at times much more valuable than the slow, reflective scholarly knowledge which can back-up one's stance in the world. But Christian scholarship does not happen in a vacuum just because it is done in a basement study or library carrel: scholarship, if it is right, has existentiality, is circumstantially aware of what time it is. I do not mean the time on your watch, or even the time on the *Toronto Star* headlines. I mean the time of profound scepticism in the streets, the deteriorating pragmatist stage of our cultural tuberculosis—the consumptive North American time—the delusionary time in academe that we are post-ideologies. (What time one thinks it is, deeply affects the character of your scholarship.) Christian scholarship, I believe, does not become like the times it inhabits, but spends its honest-to-God identity winsomely, like a fool, weeping and laughing as needed with those in the times which are passing away (cf. 1 John 2:15-19).

**Criteria: the Septuagintal norm for an institution geared to Christian theoretical learning**

The criteria for theoretical study at home with the LORD in our rapacious, parasitic day can be put succinctly: let there be a Septuagintal community of field-specific scholars consecrated to the LORD in faithfully edifying the rising generation.

That may sound old-fashioned and homespun to some, but it is incredibly radical for an academic institution today to be a university rather than a collection of fiefdoms in power struggle for money and pride of place (Said, 140-43): an actual street address where specialized scholarly work is conceived to be wedded to the colleague's scholarly work so that interdisciplinary rigour is normal, exciting, not just for the apprentice scholars but for the mentors themselves. "Septuagint" is my metaphor for having seventy or ten scholars united for the slow, difficult task of translating a biblical vision and Christian thought-tradition with a corpus of sources into new languages.
so that a living past of fallible, sanctified scholarly witnesses known veritably in your blood comes to fructify present and coming generations with wisdom, while we augment, correct, and serve it to both friends and enemies.

I posit Septuagintal criteria as norm for a Christian institution doing theory, not as a utopian ideal, just as I meant to describe the structure of Christian scholarly knowledge, not sketch a possible scenario. Septuagintal translation as guiding norm for Christian theoretical study can, of course, be debated, defaulted on, as well as enjoyed. I firmly believe, from within the inheritance of the historical Reformation, the Septuagintal calling is a light yoke and a great gift made possible only by the presence of the Holy Spirit, since each of us all-too-human creatures is continually tempted to prefer the Holy Spirit’s absence.

A Septuagintal community for doing theory means the music of philosophical jargon will fill the air, because it takes more than a shared worldview to mediate disciplinarily honed scholarship: it takes a common, operative philosophical systematics. I know, “geneticistic interactionary monism” and “anticipatory analogical aesthetic functions” sound like glossolalia to the uninitiated, but technical philosophical terms embody as precise and fearsome a necessary shorthand as the medical vocabulary of retinitus pigmentosa and embolism. In-house jargon, whether it be Vollenhovian or Derridean, betrays the speaker’s affiliation, communicates to the faithful, and builds up a universe of discourse which allows a community of scholars to explore intricate realities (or get lost in a scholastic labyrinth of words).

What keeps a Christian Septuagintal philosophical scholarly endeavour in touch with the world of pain and insight is that the fine-tuned, intellectual exorcism which is essential to Christian scholarship is not done as Pharisaic putdown, but aims to restore wholeness to what is damaged and give good direction to what has been mistaken or unjustly suppressed. The Christian Septuagintal agenda is at heart passionately redemptive, intent upon giving flesh and blood to Christ’s gentle Rule upon con-
cepts, images, arguments, sensations (cf. Philippians 1:9-11!), hunches, which can kill people or bring life even before the ideas grow legs. And it is that aura of restoring creatural praise of God and a perception that the ungainly theoretical results are a sweet-smelling offering to the LORD through all the jargon smoke, that rallies around the Septuagintal community of irregular scholars the watershed of folk who follow the Christ, including that endangered species called de kleine luyden

Whoever spends a lifetime in scholarly work which meets the criteria of a Septuagintal community knows what Psalm 91 means about being at home with the LORD. That peace always needs to be troubled, however, by Kwame Appiah’s remark that “the real battle is not being fought in the academy” (179). I think the real power struggles of sin are being fought in institutions of theoretical learning, too, but Appiah means that conceptual warfare is not the only battle in town, so scholars need to remember with modesty that they and their books are not Shelley’s “legislators of the world”; “intellectuals” should not assume the role of a secular clergy.

That said I am still impressed with the role played among God’s people, as well as in the Egyptland of the pharaohs, Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon, and political cabinets today, by the educated hakamim (wise men and women, counsellors for leaders), especially when prophets, priests and royal rulers become corrupt. So, in our highly diversified society there is a good place waiting for professional scholars humbly driven by the biblical Reformational dynamic and chastened by the Septuagintal norm, to give away wise untimely counsel to those caught in our cultural times of disarray and inscrutable, wildcat harassment.

Pledges of Jubilee (Eerdmans, 1995) is an example of philosophical aesthetics at home with the Lord. Everything I have enunciated today is there: a steady, unobtrusive Reformational dynamic wrapped in love, scholarly professionalism with historiographic depth, different lingual universes, encyclopedic reach, and awareness of racist monuments, proverb poetry, psaltery, pop-rock, cinematic, and technotronic artistry. I find
an amazing concordance in the variety of what the eighteen women and men have written (and I know it would also be there for the shadowy figures who did not make the publishing deadline). I have not yet read everything, but I have read enough to know it reaches out gloriously beyond anything I may have sparked, and to my surprise and joy fulfills the hope of my inaugural for a turnabout in aesthetics to understanding, with intimations of doxology Pledges of Jubilee takes a load off my shoulders: I do not have to weigh myself in the balance as to whether I have come through on my task commissioned by the curatorium and Association twenty-three years ago. Thank God! Here is a quiver full (Psalm 127) of evidence for what almost always remains invisible—that intimate, inter-generational transfer of a focused vision, which now seems to sparkle fresh like grass in the sun after a spring rain (cf. 2 Samuel 23:3-4).

From my vantage point of making an institutional exit, I will not sketch out my ten year work program taking shape, if God is merciful. But I should like to end by noting five problems I think will need attention, if not priority, in the field of philosophical aesthetics by you Jubilee-oriented generation.

First, if trust in scientific reason supposedly deteriorates further—I am not convinced this will be so, inside or outside the academy—and if Jacques Ellul’s word more and more succumbs to McLuhan’s electronic media image, then stock in imaginativity will soar, and there will be jobs galore for aestheticians! Lyotard typically transmogrifies Kant’s conception of the sublime into a handy paralogical device which makes truth-knowing essentially a matter of incommensurable discourses (1984:77-79; 1988:19, 48-50, 168-69, 179-80). So an aestheticism may try to fill the vacuum left by scientism and legitimate as ethical whatever hangs fire, so long as it be imaginative.

Philosophical aestheticians at home with the LORD will need to state clearly the peculiar (modally preverbal, cogitative, I happen to think) valid knowledge of nuanced reality objective to the imagining personal subject, and show that the aesthetic faceting of truth has its own glory, though it is neither discursive nor intrinsically revelational. Maybe the idea of “allusivity” as
core orientation and my current study on “wicked beauty,” along with Estrada’s emphasis on “ugliness” (675-737), may help define aesthetics phenomenologically as a particular discipline in a flexible way that will support Zuidervaart’s fashioning a normative aesthetics which aims to hold disturbing final truth in many-splendoured tension with actual historical art.  

Second, given a penchant for artistic event over art object in the last few generations, and a trend to recess art products behind artistic process, there is even some urgency for theorists to face the problem again whether artistry, which has modulated its character for centuries, has a nature. I am not talking here about whether arts like music, theatre and sculpture are ever “prime” or not: I am talking about whether a chamber orchestra concert, a theatre troupe presenting Brecht’s Mutter Courage, and a bronze woman mould cast by Henry Moore, have a constructed structure distinct from noise, a good discussion and smelted ore—a constructed structure appealing to an ontic kind of entity/event that is historically artistic in nature.  

Milan Kundera reports how Ionesco’s Bald Soprano and The Lesson liberated Czech society in the 1960s from experiencing theatre as an educational, moral, and political instrument (260): it took an “absurd” piece like Rhinoceros to free theatre to be theatre-as-such, an exhilarating, imaginative wonder that sideswiped totalitarian rule and bureaucratic doublespeak without moving a political muscle. Such bonafide artistic reality deserves ontological backup, I think, to forestall colonialization by semiotics, media studies, or to have artistry get lost in the shuffle of important non-artistic affairs like gender, nationality and technological innovation, which do indeed impinge upon art.

Sorting out this foundational matter of defining artistry in a changing world is practically hopeless, I think, if an artistic event/artwork is conceived conventionally and only in terms of its functions. Precisely because there are now so many more professional Christian artists who have questions about their task, it behooves aestheticians at home with the LORD in God’s
world to come through with supportive rationale and wisdom for the artist’s specific, multifaceted calling.

Third, it has been my privilege as philosophical aesthetician to work in an aesthetics lab for twenty years: at Patmos with Willem Hart, Mary Steenland and a few others, 1969-79, where the vision of Christ’s Rule in art hit the rocky road of having actual, manual graphic artists before your face whose lives were dislocated in and by society; and a decade on a committee with Bert Polman, Emily Brink, and nine others who became intimates in forging a new Psalter Hymnal for the Christian Reformed Church, 1977-87, where the principle of aesthetic integrity and liturgical appropriateness was not theoretical, but came down to concrete decisions on selecting this or that melody, and which versified texts. (The Psalter Hymnal may be the single most important cultural thing I will have done in my lifetime.)

Since the assignment a few months ago to think through the necessity of Christian public artistry, I have discovered for myself a way to bring “aesthetic lab” concerns, along with aesthetic life at large, and especially “popular culture and art”—artistry incapsulated within the enlarging social complex of bona fide entertainment—more forcefully to the fore for critical appreciation and examination.16

Because non-artistic institutions like business, state, church, “first-nation” bonds, municipalities, media and schools will need to act if the art world can be reshaped for integration in society, there are genuine philosophical aesthetic problems which need sorting out. In a generation where all kinds of boundaries are being erased, it would be good to demonstrate how careful theoretical distinctions—cultural work, aesthetic events, art-as-such, incapsulated art—can build bridges rather than throw up fences.17 As Václav Havel says: the public dominant culture is decisive in a land (134-35). So public culture is territory which Christian aesthetics must hold in steady view in order to have its voice heard there.

Fourth, most fraught is the writing of art history, because both a connective narrative and the focus of an artistic/literary
canon are hotly contested. Artistry and literature are always inextricably intertwined with the changing societal cultural life extant, and themselves come of age variously, like mutants from cultic rites, artisanry, oral story-telling, decorative engraving, work chants, and what not. So the difficulty for history-keeping is to decide what kind of opossum it is you are trying to catch in order to detail its pedigree and lineage, physiognomy, habitat, working contribution, prospects and issue. There are multiple, legitimate stories for one to tell and write down like maps for later visitors to ponder as they retrace the trails, for example, of frescoes, the "novel," European painting, cinematic art, the oeuvre of Picasso, Inuit carving.

Because neo-idealist "art histories" like the keen, minute studies of cultural schematicist Erwin Panofsky dissolve art into a sign-language for zeitgeistig approximations of "intrinsic meaning ... essential to human mind," such iconographic arthistory writing has been unable, I think, to correct the neo-Positivist evolutionistic determinism of geneticist Riegl who did make an important advance in proposing that art history deal with peculiarly artform matters. Today the very task of detecting a story line has been so discredited by earlier, facile teleologistic scenarios with millennial endings (Hegel, Arnold Hauser) that certain serious investigators doubt standard art history writing can be anything other than a celebrative reifying, fictional ploy of panoptic ideologues (Bryson, Preziosi, Carrier).

An aesthetics at-home with the LORD, however, knows that the reality of an eschatonic fabric to change provides a non-logical, turbulent but connected story line of fruit and waste for human endeavour, including the committed material works and events of artists’ hands. It is so that artworks have an implacable, affective nature which must be noted in keeping their history, and the disruptive innovations which take place between successive generations busy in the same artistic field are critical for art history-telling; but to tell a history of something one needs horizons beyond the stark art object/artistic event present, horizons of spirited vision which palpably
enfold the very human artistry and literary narrative pieces one is examining in sequence.

I may still think “cultural periods” conceived as conflicting, contemporary, eventful happenings which inhabit historians as well as artists of diverse traditions, spiriting the direction of their contributions, will help order the googolplex of factors one needs to sift through in a remembering that will do justice to the committed artistic footprints of strangers. But it’s true, the best art historiographic vessels for loving the neighbour while toasting the Lord will be chalices of alabaster.21

Fifth, somehow there needs to come a realignment, I believe, in the mentality as well as terminology of those who advocate a “theological aesthetics” and a “theology of the arts,” because “theological aesthetics” short-sheets the very genuine desire to have human artistry praise God and serve the neighbour in all of life. My complaint goes back to biblical basics: the doctrine of a good creation precedes and grounds the doctrine of redemption from sin; so you do need a Christian philosophy of culture before you think about a missiology of culture. How can we in the Reformational Christian tradition make convincing that doing justice in the city of Jerusalem should not be reduced to worship in the temple at the hub of the city activity? How can we make convincing that the Basileia tou theou is the biblically mandated, primal horizon for the body of Christ on earth, and such primordial context calls us to the ministry of reconciliation (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17-19), and is not in competition with or subservience to the ekklesia, its mother?22

Perhaps the difficulty for even Christians to conceive the radicality of the biblical gospel for full-time diaconal aesthetic and artistic service outside the church walls lies in the fact that many Christian thought traditions have only domesticated the Graeco-Roman inheritance and then hewn out a transcendent “theological” realm for theory and the arts which would go an additional, special extra mile of “grace,” rather than be driven to instigate an in-principle conversion by the Hebraic-Christian revelation of the Graeco-Roman impulse we Western Christians have inherited. As the plethora of non-European ethnic
cultures cry out for justice, maybe the time is opportune for God's people in the West (or East) to challenge both Athens and Babylon at their very rootage in vanity, and go biblically simple, with a historical feasting in post-resurrection creaturehood that also comprises the rigour of exorcizing prayer and fasting (cf. Mark 9:14-29, Isaiah 25:6-9).

After this tumble of words, do you know what it all comes down to, asked Qohelet (Ecclesiastes 12:11-14)? It's as simple as that a mother and father are called to give their daughters and sons bread, and not a stone (cf. Matthew 7:1-12).

It is the responsibility before God of each generation toward the next following generation, whatever its appointed tasks be, to know the difference and to bake good bread.

Lambert Zuidervaart, Henry Luttikhuizen, Barbara Carvill, William David Romanowski (whom I privately think of as the Jubilee Gang-of-Four): Pledges of Jubilee has been an uncommon blessing to me, not only the excellent, traditioning book (to use Bill Rowe's phraseology), but also the generating conception: raising up a kind of stele to mark an end with new beginnings. A teacher with students who lovingly, critically carry on one's work can "graduate" in peace.

Gratefulness to God wells up in me too for the young men and women in whose lives of reflection I have been a living part. A good number are bodily present or in spirit here tonight as dedicated professors, college administrators, reliable curators/designers/novelists/artists/figures in the art world, "independent scholars" (the euphenism for those still not gainfully employed), and many from varied walks of life. A person has only one lifetime. So far, because of you students and Junior Members—I still have a couple!—at both Trinity (Chicago) and the Institute (Toronto), my professional lifelines have indeed fallen "in (very) pleasant places" (Psalm 16). Inès and I say, "Thank you all dearly."

Senators, Trustees, President Fernhout and administrators, indefatigueable staff of the Institute for Christian Studies, with the whole Gideon band of Institute supporters in Canada, the USA, and around the world: The trust you gave me back in
1972 and the prayers attached to money you have offered up to God for me, my family, and the little working community of scholars in Toronto, is quietly overwhelming. The miracle of the Institute’s existence has rested on the LORD’s blessing-response to the heartfelt desires of mostly you few Dutch immigrants, slowly augmented by those who caught the Reformation vision for university-level education, who have rowed with incredible persistence against the secularist stream.

It has been a wonderful trust for me to be freed for the task of translating that goodly heritage—sometimes discovering for the first time its educational bread for the world—translate that heritage into the precarious field of aesthetics. God will judge the faithfulness, and I know it is unfinished. But there are pockets of artists, theorists and young educators throughout the world—Australia, South Africa, Indonesia, Greece, Spain, England, as well as the USA and Canada—who have been stirred with hope to give their aesthetic life and imaginative thought to the Lord as a sweet-smelling offering.

If there be any guests present for whom this all sounds strange, I hope you will test the spirit of the ICS, and join this crazy group of Chaucerian pilgrims telling jokes and stories of troubles together on the turbulent, earthy road to the new Jerusalem.

Inner circle of colleagues: The last few years at ICS have been at times difficult, as we all know. I respect each one’s Christian faith-guts very much, and I am deeply grateful for pristine acts of love I have experienced from you over the years. I am also struck and deeply saddened by how fragile communion can be. I’ve sometimes thought amid the struggles to wield power that we were all individually rephrasing Augustine’s agonized prayer to God: “Da mihi castitatem et continentiam (et humilitatem), sed noli modo” (Confessiones, 8,vii,17).

I am glad to say goodbye now while I still have life and health to give away my imaginativity perhaps in other ways and places, although Bob Sweetman has put a restraining arm on my sleeve, so I will sit in on his Vollenhoven seminar this winter, per diem pro Deo. So I take my leave now from you, Henk, Jim,
George, Paul in absentia, Bob, Ken, Brian and Sylvia, Marcille, with a phrygian melody Genevan psalm, a poem I once overheard Luci Shaw speak at Oxford, a Bach chorale, and a twelfth-century plainsong with a second advent text to be sung by all those festively gathered here—all together a sort of hopeful, untimely answer from the thesaurus of our living past to the Tracy Chapman “Why” song danced at the beginning.

Notes

1. Heidegger uses the phrase in “Hölderlin und das Wesen der Dichtung” (1936), for example, to describe somewhat portentously that time “im Nichtmehr der entflohenen Götter und im Nochnicht des Kommenden.” Adorno’s subtitle to Minima Moralia is “Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben” (1951).

2. Cf. William Rowe’s careful conclusion to “Society after the Subject, Philosophy after the Worldview,” in Stained Glass (1989): “What finally validates rules—especially the rule of postmodern research—is the promise of paralogy: not merely new theories but new logics, and therefore the promise of endless alternative paradigms. This is science gone to market in a big way—that is, as an industry—bent on satisfying if possible the infinite, mass desire for the new and for seeing things in a new way: philosophy as vision quest, research as hallucinogen. It is difficult to distinguish this industry from entertainment. And one fails to see what is so post-modern about research conducted in the ‘columbian’ spirit of exploration, fuelled, as always, by the desire not for justice (as Lyotard claims), but for colonization of the unknown” (180).

3. Herman Dooyeweerd’s brief for an Archimedean Point as inescapable prerequisite for the philosophical task is not unusual. Descartes in “Meditation II” (1641) stated: “Archimède, pour tirer le globe terrestre de sa place et le transporter en un autre lieu, ne demandait rien qu’un point qui fût ferme et immobile; ainsi j’aurai droit de concevoir de hautes espérances si je suis assez heureux pour trouver seulement une chose qui soit certaine et indubitable.”
Martin Heidegger stated in 1943: "Wenn daher schon nach der Wahrheit gefragt werden muss, dann verlangt man die Antwort auf die Frage, wo wir heute stehen (CS: my italics = pou sto). Man will wissen, wie es heute mit uns steht. Man ruft nach dem Ziel, das dem Menschen in seiner Geschichte und für diese gesetzt werden soll. Man will die wirkliche 'Wahrheit.' Also doch Wahrheit!" (Vom Wesen der Wahrheit [Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1967], p.6).

Special about Dooyeweerd's argument is his Augustinian—inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te (cf. WdW/NCTT [hereafter Wijsbegeerte de Wetsidee/New Critique of Theoretical Thought] 1:14-15/1:11-12)—slant that the choice of one's pou sto underlying philosophical thinking must be pre-philosophical, and is an uncontestable religious decision in the face of the Arché of all meaning, namely, God (WdW/NCTT 1:8-25/1:7-21). Cf. C.A. van Peursen on Dooyeweerd, "Dooyeweerd en de wetenschappelijke discussie" (1994) translated by John Kok, "Dooyeweerd and the Discussion About Science," in Pro Rege 24 (no. 1, September 1995): 11-17, especially pp. 16-17.

5. It is instructive to notice how Scriven needs to modify John Howard Yoder's rather absolute position on designating non-violence to be the crux of the Anabaptist attitude and practice, in order to avoid an unbiblical legalism on Anabaptist identification (188-90).
6. In the 1518 commentary on his 95 Wittenburg theses, Luther points out the error of reading the Latin Vulgate translation of the Greek metanoeite (be converted, be at heart turned around, e.g., Matthew 4:17, Romans 12:2) poenitentiam agite, as meaning "do penance": ... ex ipso verbo Graeco Metanoite, id est, poenitentiam agite, quod rigidissime transferri potest transmentamini, id est, mentem et sensum alium induite, resipiscite, transitum mentis et phase spiritus agite, ut scilicet nunc celestia sapiatis, qui hucusque terrena sapuistis (Conclusio I.1). There-
fore, said Luther, the church prescription of penance as a sacrament earning indulgence, thanks to the intervention of clerics, is not Scriptural. "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said poenitentiam agite, he willed the whole life of believers to be one of repentance" (Conclvsio I).

In a prefatory letter to John Staupitz, with the hope that Staupitz will submit the commentary to Pope Leo X, Luther credits his old professor (Staupitz) with first giving him the idea that poenitentia meant "a change of heart God induces" rather than endless "rites of contrition" exacted of people. From being the most bitter word in the Bible, nunc nihil dulcius aut gratius mihi sonet, quam poenitentia (Letter to Staupitz, 30 May 1518, 1:17).


10. The section on "scholarship" in the Institute for Christian Studies' founding educational creed says we confess that "The task of the scholar is to give a scientific account of the structure of creation and thereby promote a more effective ordering of the everyday experience of the entire community" (c. 1965).

11. This burly walk was taught me by Martin Evans, a former director of the Greenbelt Festival in England, in 1982.

12. "De kleine luyden" is a Dutch phrase, "the little fellows," which refer to ho laos ("the lay people"), to use Jesus Christ's term of endearment, the uneducated folk who lived close to the Bible whom Abraham Kuyper led to support the formation of a Christian political party, a Christian university (Free from
state and church), a Christian newspaper (*Trouw*), and other cultural endeavours in the Netherlands during the 1880s.


14. I need to think through Jim Leach’s incisive judgment in *Pledges of Jubilee* that “Seerveld overestimates the irreducibility of each art-kind” (44), because “the distinctive character of an art-kind often importantly involves extra-aesthetic facets” (49). Leach is correct, it seems to me, that one’s ontological ordering needs the flex to meet historical actualities as they develop (50). Whether “there are no ‘prime’ arts,” as he contends (52), is for me still moot.

15. Granted that entitary kinds evolve historically in ways that irreducible modal orderings for creatural existence do not—and we must avoid a Platonic doctrine of *eide* for entities—can we not discern sorts of typical cultural configurations such that they constitute an ontic kind able to harbour important “phaenotypical” (Dooyeweerd, *WdW* 3:53-64/*NCTT* 3:76-98) differences, comparable to the fairly fixed, typical nature throughout history of families, of political governance, of cities, of commercial institutions? Jim Leach is again correct, I think, to ask us to distinguish ontic “aesthetic analogues” from a “spectrum of the arts” (*Pledges of Jubilee*, 52), but the playful historical clutter to constellations of arts in God’s world is not wholly arbitrary, would be my hunch.

16. “The Joys Are Simply Told” by William D. Romanowski in *Pledges of Jubilee* (31, 35-36) very charitably credits the idea of “aesthetic life” in my *Rainbows for the Fallen World* (1980) with the goods to avoid the elitism associated with certain Christian communities and with various secular art theories which have not taken the “popular arts” seriously. Indeed, the watershed of ordinary playfulness (I spent an academic year on “Theory of Play” in a graduate seminar at ICS, 1981-82), imaginativity (“Imaginativity” in *Faith and Philosophy* 4 [no. 1, 1987]: 43-58), “taste” (“Both more and less than a matter of taste,” in *Acta Academica* 25 [no. 4, 1993]:1-12) and “style” I consider basic realities needing analysis by theoretical aesthetics. Romanowski
is also certainly correct to note that the problem of evaluating "commercial art," as he himself has incisively done in Dancing in the Dark: Youth, Popular Culture and the Electronic Media (coordinated by Quentin Schultze, edited by Roy Anker [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991]), goes beyond any exclusive "aesthetic criterion" (Pledges of Jubilee, 33).


18. In Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science (1989) Donald Preziosi states that "the art of art history is inextricably grounded in a logocentric paradigm of signification" (16); so the very idea of a "disciplinary" art history writing must be put in question (17-20). Preziosi reads the diversity and (politicizing) conflict of "guiding metaphors in art historical practice" to demonstrate "the ironic status of the discipline of art history as a form of institutionalized knowledge" (157).

In his conclusion to Principles of Art History Writing (1991) David Carrier states that "traditional narrative strategies no longer seem effective" (240). "... I have argued that traditional art history ends when art historians recognize the inescapably rhetorical character of their narratives" (242).


19. Lorenz Dittmann seems to me to offer an exemplar for art history writing, which meets Henry Luttikhuizen's important demand to "look for the visual strategies employed, which were produced to persuade a particular audience to accept certain beliefs as their own" (Pledges of Jubilee, 96), in Dittmann's painstaking analysis of how colour showed up in the changing figures and times of European painterly art; cf. Farbgestaltung und Farbtheorie in der abendländischen Malerei, Eine
Einführung (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1987).

20. "... the historical is to be found in what a new generation makes of its inheritance. The crux to be noted by an historian of art is not so much what is given as what is taken. The historical connection is the unpredictable innovative modification made across the break in continuity" (my "Vollenhoven’s Legacy for Art Historiography," in Philosophia Reformata 58 [no. 1, 1993]: 64-65). Kurt Badt’s judgment on “Der kunstgeschichtliche Zusammenhang” (1966-67) hints in this direction; cf. Kunsttheoretische Versuche (Köln: Verlag M. DuMont Schauberg, 1968), pp. 148, 167-68.

21. As a practising art historian Henry Luttikhuizen finds that “Periodization has lost its legitimacy in art history, for it has proven to be impossible to keep periods distinct from one other” (Pledges of Jubilee, 91), and details various evils to which the cartographic methodology may be prone. I agree that art-historical rigour is never neat, but I would argue that actual art-historical writing like “Telltale Statues in Watteau’s Paintings” (Eighteenth-Century Studies 14 [no. 2, Winter 1980-81]: 151-80) is never meant to be an instantiation of an art historiographic theory; yet one’s operative art-historiographic methodology normally enframes (or de-frames!) and provides the horizons for what the historian of art finds, describes, and exposit. Cf. Henry Luttikhuizen’s forthright critique in “Serving Vintage Wisdom: Art Historiography in the Neo-Calvinian Tradition,” Pledges of Jubilee, pp. 87-92, 104.

I am at a loss at how to argue that promotion of a general spiritualization of art, or a liturgical cast to art, or an evangelizing requirement for art, as the most Christian task misses, I think, the grounding biblical insight that art as normal creatural service can be a restored and redemptive, holy act, so artistry does not need an "extra," theologically explicit insignia to be truly full-fledged service by Christ's body-at-large.

23. There is a recent formation of a Christian Studies Centre in Melbourne, Australia, by an incorporated Association for Christian Higher Education in Australia (1995), under the leadership of Keith Sewell and Bruce Wearne.

A Christian Worldview Network in South Africa (since 1991) has published a Manifesto on Christians and the Arts in South Africa (1993), holds national conferences, and puts out a Many to Many (M2M) newsletter, originally spearheaded by Craig Bartholomew; and there is a (1994) Christian Action Research Project (CARP) at the Department of Philosophy of the University of the Orange Free State, led by Gideon Strauss and Gerrit du Preez, with an e-journal, NUANCES, on the WorldWideWeb.

Iskandar Saher carries on as chaplain to the General (philosophy) Studies faculty at the Christian university of Satya Wacana in Indonesia. A Union of Greek Christian Artists, predominantly professional musicians, has been incorporated in Thessaloniki/Athens, Greece, presided over by Phedon Kaloterakis. There is a loose relationship of mostly graphic, media and performance artists in Barcelona united by Joyce and Jim Phillips, with David Estrada Herrero as mentor.

Peter Smith (Surrey), Kate and Martin Rose (Sheffield), and Paul Martin (Rugby) keep a tenuous connection going in the practice and reflection on their artwork since they were caught by the vision of the late Hans Rookmaaker.
Genevan Psalm 141 (1562)

I am crying, LORD, please come quickly!
Did you not hear my spoken prayer?
I deeply yearn to know You care.
My lifted hands still bring thanksgiving—

Guard my lips from mouthing words twisted.
Stop my enjoying sin as sweet.
LORD, strip my deeds of sly deceit.
Keep my poor heart from turning wicked.

When a trusted person corrects me,
I know the hurt brings healing grace.
how sad when judgment is not faced
until one's crooked life is wasted.

Your concern and power amaze me:
Lord, do not empty out my life!
Frustrate each wily tempter's vice—
let me walk past their traps in safety.

Versified by Calvin Seerveld, 1989
Judas, Peter

because we are all
betrayors, taking
silver and eating
body and blood and asking
(guilty) is it I and hearing
him say yes
it would be simple for us all
to rush out
and hang ourselves

but if we find grace
to cry and wait
after the voice of morning
has crowed in our ears
clearly enough
to break our heart
she will be there
to ask us each again
do you love me?

Bibliography


Blowing bubbles on graduated time, 1996

photo by Bert Witvoet