

## QUAKER PLAINING AS CRITICAL AESTHETIC\*

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### ABSTRACT

In the first part of this paper I explore the possibility of identifying a Quaker aesthetic through the concepts 'plain' and 'plaining'. I begin with an examination of the importance of 'the plain' as product and practice to seventeenth-century Friends and briefly outline its enduring importance to Quakers. Friends, however, were not the first group to adopt the plain style which is better understood when located in its broader historical context. For Quakers, the plain is ethic as well as aesthetic, partially grounding all Quaker testimonies. Given the well-documented aestheticization of contemporary life, I argue that the Quaker plain and plaining have a continuing relevance, representing a moral, aesthetic and religious critique of consumer culture, distinct from those which are economically and politically motivated.

### KEYWORDS

Aestheticization, aesthetics, consumerism, Quakerism, the plain, plaining

### **Quaker Plain as Product and Process**

The Quaker plain style has been an important means of establishing and maintaining the group's sense of identity and belonging. At one time this was achieved primarily by 'playing the vis-à-vis' with Anglicanism: the

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first Friends defined themselves in opposition to the Established Church. Despite this historical legacy it is probably true to say that today the movement generates its identity primarily from within. Even after the briefest examination of seventeenth-century Quakerism it soon becomes apparent that Friends dwell at length on the plain or simple (Braithwaite 1912; 1921; Ingle 1994; Lloyd 1950; Vann 1969). Meeting houses, dress, language, modes of greeting, form of worship, funerals, grave-stones: all are made 'plain'. Pacifism itself was justified in relation to the plain life by Anthony Benezet (Jones 1921: 160). Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, numerous and often highly detailed prescriptions and proscriptions, at once generating and codifying what constituted the plain, were sent down to local meetings. Many examples can be found in the *Epistles From the Yearly Meeting* (Yearly Meeting of Friends: 1818).

Brayshaw (1982: 188) reminds us that even when the fashionable was useful Friends often proscribed its adoption and he cites the rather comical case of umbrellas. Among eighteenth-century Friends appropriately cut coats and hats were plain, umbrellas an unnecessary embellishment or ornamentation and a testimony was established against their use. The minutes of preparative and monthly meetings indicate that Friends who chose to ignore these advices (relating to the broad testimony of plainness) were likely to feel increasing pressure to conform, to act in and see the world in a certain way (Braithwaite 1912: 144; 1921: 198; Morgan 1993: Ch. 7). However, early Friends were not disowned until it was clear to their monthly meeting that they had little or no intention of upholding one or more of the testimonies (Braithwaite 1921: 25).

It might be said that Quakers no longer maintain the plain style to the extent that they once did. 'Plain language', for instance the use of 'thee' and 'thou', is no longer in common usage in Britain, and Quakers have long since cast aside the 'plain grey' uniform that became their typical mode of dress in the eighteenth century. However, texts such as the following persuade me that the plain remains central to Quaker faith and practice:

The heart of Quaker ethics is summed up in the word 'simplicity'. Simplicity is forgetfulness of self and remembrance of our humble status as waiting servants of God. Outwardly, simplicity is shunning superfluities of dress, speech, behaviour, and possessions, which tend to obscure our vision of reality. Inwardly, simplicity is spiritual detachment from the things of this world as part of the effort to fulfil the first commandment:

to love God with all of the heart and mind and strength (*Quaker Faith and Practice* 1995: 20.27, extracted from *Faith and Practice*, North Carolina Yearly Meeting [Conservative]).

The passage is complex, pointing up the theological, political and ethical as well as the aesthetic potential of the plain. It is interesting that this piece was written as recently as 1983. More relevant still is the fact that it is included in the 1995 edition of *Quaker Faith and Practice: The Book of Discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain*—a text made available to all Friends in Britain. Quakers continue to wrap themselves plainly (Hendry 1993). That is not to say that every member and attender of the Society in Britain today lives out the testimonies to plainness in the same way that the first generation of Friends did. Indeed, there has always been a considerable variation in Friends' understanding of the plain (Isichei 1970: 152-53). Clearly 'the simple life' is a relative term. Did wealthy Quaker capitalists consider their relatively luxurious lifestyle simple? (See Walvin 1997; Boyson 1970.) Nevertheless, it is the case that the plain remains a focus of Quaker faith and practice, in the Book of Discipline and, crucially, in the form of Quaker worship. These two facets of contemporary Quakerism are critically important insofar as they contribute to a 'behavioural creed' which is the one thing that binds Friends together (Dandelion 1996: 100-103). Whenever and wherever Quakers meet the discourse of plaining remains prominent, though not always consciously. For instance, the topic frequently becomes a thread of Quaker email lists. Recently, a Friend posted this message:

When I was at the Mount (a Quaker girls' school) there was a story of a Victorian pupil who was told off for having a gaudy ribbon round her bonnet. She replied 'We were told that our bonnets must be trimmed with Christian simplicity. I went round all the haberdashers asking for three yards of Christian simplicity but none of them could sell me any'.

Further examples might be cited from editions of the British Quaker weekly publication *The Friend* (see, for example, letters regarding 'simple food', 7 January and 4 February 2000). In what follows, I want to avoid essentializing the plain. My argument does not collapse, or the discourse evaporate, at the point when a Friend appears in a colourful jumper or orders a cocktail or some other 'fancy' drink at the bar. If an important product of the Quaker testimonies is the plain, then we may call the process plaining. Plaining is primarily a way of seeing, a socially learned cognitive achievement: anything can be plainned (Collins 1996). During

the last 350 years, Quakers have established a material culture, an ideological system, codified in texts such as *Quaker Faith and Practice*, and a liturgy which Quakers and others represent as epitomizing the plain. But what kind of practice is plaining?

### Aesthetics, Ethics and the Plain

Plaining is an aesthetic practice, if we accept that the aesthetic cannot be restricted to the 'work of art'. During the early part of the twentieth century artists such as Marcel Duchamp brought into eclipse the distinction between art and life. Lyas (1997) argues that we can apply aesthetic principles to *all that is made*. He divides the world into that which is made and that which is not (i.e. nature), to which aesthetic judgments cannot be made because nature is not given to express anything. Lyas argues that all made things are more or less expressive, can legitimately be called 'art' and are therefore susceptible to aesthetic judgments. We should also note that while the aesthetic illuminates more of the world than merely the art object, the art object may invoke a broader perspective than is defined by the aesthetic—one need think only of Picasso's *Guernica* to understand the extent to which art can also be moral and political, for instance (for further discussion of this issue see Welsch 1997: 92-98).

If we accept the argument, implicit in Kant and common currency in contemporary sociology, that the world is entirely a social construction, then everything that we can experience is made and therefore contingent. While this may be easy to understand in relation to social life, it may seem confusing to imagine how we might 'make' nature. Consider, then, the way in which the Lake District, having been a wild, dangerous and largely unregarded place before 1700, suddenly becomes a picturesque idyll, beloved of millions of sojourners thereafter! The Lakes were reconstructed through the vision of Gilpin, Wordsworth and other eighteenth-century Romantics. I agree with Lyas that it might be analytically advantageous to include everything we experience as amenable to aesthetic judgment. This conclusion chimes with my earlier claim that anything can be plain and suggests, furthermore, that plaining is indeed an aesthetic enterprise.

The term 'aesthetics' does not mean one thing but contains a plurality of meanings. Welsch identifies a number of criteria of aesthetic experience, including the sensuous (pleasure), perception (form and proportion),

the subjective (personal preference), harmony, beauty, design, conformity to aesthetic theory, sensitivity, the aestheticistic (a heightened aesthetic in which one's life is totally absorbed by the aesthetic) and virtuality (Welsch 1997: 9-15; see also Adorno 1973; Davies 1991; Hanfling 1992; Lyas 1997: Ch. 4; Rader 1973; and Weitz 1959). Given that plaining is grounded in the testimonies, we should certainly add 'the ethical' to Welsch's list. Aesthetics is not easily disentangled from ethical considerations (Bontekoe and Crooks 1992), a theme that runs through plain discourse from the outset. We might say, following Kant, that to focus attention on the aesthetically worthwhile leads to reflection on the morally good because attention to the aesthetic is disinterested (in the sense of an absence of self-interest), as we expect moral action to be (cf. Lyas 1997: Ch. 1; Collinson 1992: 134-44; Maquet 1986: 25-34). Furthermore, the aesthetic celebrates freedom, a prerequisite for moral action. Quaker plaining brings communal moral concerns into the realm of the aesthetic. These concerns were made concrete, as it were, in the meeting where I carried out ethnographic fieldwork in the early 1990s. Participants supported the development of a 'wild garden', introduced low energy 'green' lighting, redesigned the building to improve disabled access, enforced a no-smoking and no-drinking rule on the premises, and so on. Discussions surrounding these improvements (for this is how the changes were perceived) were both moral and aesthetic—in the traditional sense of these terms—relating simultaneously to the good and the beautiful.

But if plaining is moral it is also expressive. Like Kant, Croce (1995) argues that we know the world through the representations of it that we ourselves create. He goes one step further, however, in proposing that these representations are also expressions. For Croce, art as expression is at the root of the way we make sense of the world. Expression is neither rule-governed nor reducible to recipes; expression, for the artist, is a result of successfully achieving what he or she set out to achieve. Expression is a form of self-understanding in which an individual is able to say 'that's how I feel' or even 'that's how I am'. It is a matter of seeing the world from the standpoint of the work which, in this context, might for example be a meeting house, the act of worship or a peace vigil. The work provides a way of seeing. Meeting for worship is a metonym of the world and, furthermore, it recreates and expresses a world characterized by the aesthetic and moral values represented by the Quaker tradition. I use the term 'tradition' because the aesthetic work

cannot only be judged through the intentions of its authors: the representation (of worship) is not erased or materially changed if one person is sitting as though merely waiting for the bus.

Can we say that Quaker plaining *is* similarly a life made aesthetic, a means of expressing *just* what Friends ought and need to say? This is indeed what we are often given to believe to be the object of Quakerism. Works that we consider outstanding, in the sense of being perfect or beautiful, are not merely exemplary in their deployment of the techniques of art (or craft, or 'right assembling') but are also works standing for the attitudes to which Quakers give assent, that is, all that justifies the plain. If we were only interested in the external features, the superficial covering of the work, then we might exclude consideration of the rightness and/or wrongness of the views it articulates. However, we are interested in far more than that, we are interested in the intentions of those who produced it, intentions which Friends take to have a moral (and probably spiritual) foundation. Meeting houses are an important example of such works, along with the Book of Discipline and form of worship: they are exemplars, expressions of a way of seeing the world and also of living in it, with which all Quakers are familiar and which prompt them to perceive and act in the world in a particular way. Like aesthetics, plaining is a complex, polysemic term, which describes one strand of a complex discourse which has remained important in the West at least since the days of early Greek philosophy. Throughout history, the plain makes sense only in relation to its opposite—the grand or embellished. In what follows I shall explore the broader historical trajectory of this discourse in order to avoid a limiting parochialism, to understand better the way it is manifested specifically among Quakers, and in order to help us judge the relevance of the discourse today.

### **Plain/Grand Discourse in Historical Perspective**

The plain was extant as an influential discourse long before George Fox and his contemporaries adopted it in the mid-seventeenth century. Focusing particularly on language, Peter Auksi (1995) shows that the oppositional discourse of the plain and grand styles has its roots deep in the Classical tradition of rhetoric. The plaining of Quakers is a part of this larger, more complex discourse, involving an unending tension between plaining and, for want of a better word, embellishment. By thus contextualizing the Quaker plain style I believe that we can better appreciate its pervasive ambiguity, paradox and contradiction, as well as

its potential as ethically informed critical aesthetic. For instance, being simple is no simple matter. Even in the seventeenth century Friends complained that simplicity had become affectation. It is worth briefly reconsidering Margaret Fell/Fox's trenchant views on the matter:

We are now coming into that which Christ cried woe against, minding altogether outward things, neglecting the inward work of Almighty God in our hearts... (*Quaker Faith and Practice* 1995: 20.31, extracted from Portfolio 25/66, Library of the Society of Friends, London)

Here, Fell/Fox is not so much criticizing Friends for choosing to live plainly as chastising them for adopting the plain style merely as an ornamentation. Far from helping Friends to see the essence of things uncluttered by external embellishment, some Friends had, in their enthusiasm for exclusivity, overstepped the mark. As Auksi points out during his discussion of Pauline simplicity:

If the devotee of Christian plainness in artistic expression has one central premise, it is this: the more lowly, artless, ineloquent, unadorned, and 'earthen' the outward vessel or covering garment of its style is, the more God-given and divinely persuasive appears the excellency of the matter to be conveyed or covered (Auksi 1995: 91).

Fell/Fox is reminding Friends how misguided this assumption is. To pay too much attention to the form or style, the 'outward covering' is to turn attention away from what is truly important—content, the kernel, the seed. However, to cultivate the artless is to be artful, and that is to deny the Light Within. In any case, Fell/Fox's opinion went largely unheeded at the time and the rules and regulations, glossed as 'discipline', accumulated throughout most of the eighteenth century (see Vann 1969). It is worthwhile to consider in more detail the discourse of which this is just one example.

In the first place, plain is to grand as spirit is to flesh and it is on this correspondence that the moral purchase of the plain rests. According to the Apostle Paul and many others, the plain generally emphasizes the internal over the external, content over form: the latter taken as superficial and inherently of lesser worth (Auksi 1995: Ch. 4 *passim*). Paul attempted to distance the new religious awareness from the old, separating the dry ritualism of the old guard from the freedom and intensity that come from the promptings of the inward spirit. He spoke with the assistance not of men but of God: his rhetorical ideals are moral ideals which agree perfectly with the Sermon on the Mount. The Scriptural

distinction between the kernel and the husk, between that which comes from God and that which men and women invest to give the kernel a fleshly, rhetorical ornamentation, became a key metaphor in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There are numerous references to Paul's epistles in the writings of early Friends and particularly in Fox (Pickvance 1989). Throughout the ages, the plain has been made to stand for the spiritual, the otherworldly, whereas its opposite, the grand, has implied 'urbanity and elegance' or more basically the material world (Auksi 1995: 40). But insofar as the plain may encase and therefore obscure, rather than reveal the Spirit, the claim to moral superiority by the plain must remain a site of contestation.

The plain is open to aesthetic judgment and is therefore subjective. Like the grand, the plain can be thought of as elegant, fashionable and therefore fleeting. A contemporary example is the trend towards minimalism which characterizes interior design, as well as some modern painting and music. Plato, in his *Republic*, concludes 'beauty of style and harmony and grace and good rhythm depend on simplicity' (quoted in Anksi 1995: 44)—establishing that the plain is an aesthetic ideal to which all the liberal arts ought to conform. Cicero was fully aware of the importance of the 'careful negligence' (1995: 56) resulting from a lack of ornament. He compares the plain style to the cosmetic adornment of women who can please even when unembellished. On the other hand, the plain has on occasion been characterized as crude, ugly and less than pleasing. While Jerome cautions that clothes may be overadorned he adds, 'an affected shabbiness does not become a Christian' (1995: 152). But then Jerome also admits that in his own translations of Scripture, 'the art was to hide the art' (1995: 168). There is nothing that is *essentially* plain, then.

The plain is an effect, a construct, no matter how strong or sincere one's convictions. Among some eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Friends it led to quaintness. Classical rhetoricians such as Demosthenes manifest a major paradox: they praise simplicity, but as an effect, as an explicitly constructed artefact. It was this paradox that Fell/Fox sought to expose. We might argue that plaining becomes authentic only when it is utterly habitual or 'second nature'. But whether authentic or not, the plain can be well or poorly constructed, that is, it has aesthetic qualities. Quintillian fiercely criticizes the extreme use of common vulgarisms in the name of a sincere and unostentatious simplicity because they miss the crucial point that 'naturalism' is itself an artistic



construct (Auksi 1995: 40). For Symon Patrick, the seventeenth-century pamphleteer, the plain style is a human achievement for those who have submitted to reason, humane learning and civilised order rather than an inspired gift, presented to the chosen few (1995: 277-78). Apart from Quaker texts, seventeenth-century handbooks of homiletics broaden the ideal of rhetorical plainness including advice on right living, liturgy, manners, dress and so on (1995: 290). The preacher is pressed to conceal his art and artifice and any mode of artistic expression, plain or not, as representing a formal technical skill. Of course, in concealing his art he reaffirms it. The plain is rarely artless, it is generally a construction, a more or less conscious means of eschewing embellishment.

A further important theme within plain/grand discourse is that truth needs no ornamentation. The following derives from London Yearly Meeting of 1691:

It is our tender and Christian advice that Friends take care to keep to truth and plainness, in language, habit, deportment and behaviour; that the simplicity of truth in these things may not wear out nor be lost in our days, nor in our posterity's; and to avoid pride and immodesty in apparel, and all vain superfluous fashions of the world (*Quaker Faith and Practice* 1995: 20.28).

The truth is plain, the corollary being that embellishment leads to falsity. Plato complains that the grand style can confuse, obscure or manipulate the truth. But then *Gorgias*, the Socratic dialogue attributed to Plato, is full of subtle rhetorical devices (Auksi 1995: 43). Demetrius argues that ornateness slaps of insincerity, agreeing with Aeschylus, 'Simple are the words of truth' (1995: 46-49). The Desert Fathers contributed substantially to this position. Basil, for instance, consistently noted the limitation of Classical art and rhetoric (1995: 157-58). Quakers pursue the same claim regarding the liturgy. They stripped bare the Anglican ritual in order that the Truth (Christ, the Spirit) might be known directly (Barclay 1841: 9).

Among those who might be taken as the immediate forebears of Quakerism, Calvin is scathing of pagan orators and of embellishment in religion more generally, and is stridently critical of the Catholic Church for that reason (Auksi 1995: 216-28). Zwinglian liturgy goes still further, denying the world and its art altogether. What remains of Zwingli's starkly reduced and bare mode of worship is the word. To try and represent God is to misrepresent God's very nature—so it is not the product but the intention that is wrong. Spirit is ineffable and cannot be

properly known by words, images and materials that misrepresent its very nature. Taken to its logical extreme, the spiritualist argument would imply the final inadequacy of all words before God. In driving towards stillness, silence and the plain, Zwingli helped make possible many other experiments in negation and abstraction—including Quakerism. He believes that God cannot be represented but the paradox is that the absence of representation itself is made to represent God (Auksi 1995: 228-31).

Both plain and grand styles derive primarily from the agent, not the act: they each result from the author's disposition. Aristotle, while agreeing that rhetoric is an important art, argues that it is the moral character of the orator which is essential to his ability to persuade. This is a distinction later upheld by Augustine who holds that the life of the speaker has greater weight in determining whether he is obediently heard than any grandness of eloquence. The mediaeval theologian Peter Damian wrote: 'A clear life is of more value as an example than eloquence or precise elegance in words'. His model is John: 'Let the simplicity of Christ instruct me'. The plain is a way of life, not just a manner of speaking (Auksi 1995: 189). As Fell/Fox noted, it is not sufficient merely to change one's clothes, one needs to change one's life. The plain is held up as a religious ideal, as one that individuals might aspire to.

The plain style serves as a metonym for the person. Among the most ardent champions of the plain style were the Stoics, who maintained a rational, one might say 'puritan', plainness in speech, dress and lifestyle, scorning arts such as cooking, painting, sculpture, architecture. For the Stoics, pleasure was a vice. The leading Stoic, Seneca, regarded style as a moral index, as an ethical reflector of character and society. His central premise was that an individual's soul or spirit shapes their abilities: a person's speech just like their life. He argued that while metaphor has its place, speech which deals with the truth should be unadorned—an argument developed by several Renaissance Christian humanists (Auksi 1995: 36). Cicero quipped that the Stoics would teach us all to fall silent: Stoicism *ad absurdum* or Quaker worship? (1995: 64).

As a result of this slight detour it is possible to see that the plain/grand, as discourse, has a long and complex history. The plain has, for more than 2000 years, been locked into a dialogue with the grand. It has remained a site of profound aesthetic, spiritual and moral contestation. No sphere of society has escaped—economics, the arts, religion, leisure, politics—in all of these spheres, the discourse of the plain has been,

above all, a critical endeavour. This is largely because the grand has generally remained in the ascendancy, has garnered for itself greater resources and has remained the more powerful ideology. The plain has most often been invoked in order to 'curb the excesses' of the influential, the dominant, the powerful. The plain has remained, for the most part, a levelling tendency—marking distinction without hierarchy. With this in mind, I return to the question posed at the start of this essay: What relevance, if any, does Quaker plaining have today?

### **The Aestheticization of Late Capitalism and Quaker Plaining as Social Critique**

While a great deal has been written about the characteristics of late capitalism one feature is often taken as central: the related growth of commodification and consumption (Baudrillard 1998; Bocoock 1993; Cross 1993; Featherstone 1991; Lash and Urry 1994; Slater 1997). We hear, often enough, that we live in a consumer society, but what does that mean? Bauman argues that nowadays it is consumption or consumer behaviour rather than work or production that is 'the cognitive and moral focus of life, integrative bond of the society, and the focus of systematic management' (Bauman 1989: 46, quoted in Smart 1993: 64). According to Smart, the pursuit of pleasure through the consumption of commodities and services is the norm, replacing the modernist tendency to self-denial. 'A corollary of which is that complex and subtle forms of seduction have assumed increasing significance in processes of systemic reproduction and social reproduction' (Smart 1993: 64). The argument that aesthetics refers to more than merely 'the art object' has already been considered and I return to this issue here, approaching from a slightly different direction.

A corollary of the growth of consumerism is the aestheticization of everyday life. Featherstone identifies three aspects: the first relates to art movements, such as Dada, which erase the line between art and everyday life. The second involves the tendency among some bourgeois groups and individuals to transform their own lives into works of art, transfused, that is, with the aesthetic attitude—the Bloomsbury Group, Oscar Wilde, Balzac and Baudelaire, twentieth-century philosophers such as G.E. Moore, Richard Rorty, Michel Foucault, and so forth. Third, we are confronted at every turn by 'the rapid flow of signs and images' which pervade our day-to-day lives, issuing forth from shop

windows and street corner hoardings, newspapers, magazines, the television and computer screen, junk mail and the wrappings of commodities which companies try harder and harder to make distinctive (Featherstone 1991: 66-68 [67]). Our attention is increasingly drawn to the surface of things, to the packaging of commodities, to the elaborate though often very subtle coding which enables one manufacturer to differentiate their product from the next. The process, commodity fetishism, involves the eclipse of use-value by exchange-value and was noted by Marx in *Capital*. It obscures and may hide altogether a variety of important human relationships, between the consumer and those involved in the productive process, for example.

In relation to this overwhelming trend, then, the Quaker plain style represents a significant alternative. Quakers, having emphasized the plain for more than three centuries, have the cultural resources to free themselves and possibly others from the current hegemony of 'consumer culture'. Even to make a preliminary first step by making ourselves and others more aware of the situation and its dangers would be worthwhile. Perhaps the availability of such an alternative has never been more important than it is today. For Baudrillard, 'Consumer culture is effectively a postmodern culture, a depthless culture in which all values have become transvalued and art triumphed over reality' (quoted in Featherstone 1991: 85). The plain style, as noted above, emphasizes spirit over and above 'flesh' (the material world). It might be argued that the plain is well positioned to bring to mind a reality over and above that suggested by commodification and consumerism. Although there is no space here to discuss the ways in which Quakers might be led further to consider their testimony to the plain, we should at least note its importance as a pedagogical strategy. Early Friends were at pains to ensure that the justification and purpose of the plain life was made clear to adepts, newcomers and their children alike (for examples from the *Advices and Queries*, *Quaker Faith and Practice* 1995: paras. 101-102, see Stagg 1961).

The German philosopher Wolfgang Iser, like Featherstone, perceives a growing tendency towards the aestheticization of everyday life but discovers in the process something more profound. Iser notes that the increasingly intense commodification of the world has generated a tremendous upsurge in aesthetics and in so doing has identified perhaps the latest, and in some ways most fundamental, manifestation of the plain/grand struggle. Reality itself is coming to count increasingly as an aesthetic construction (Iser 1977: 85).

Aestheticization, according to Welsch, describes a process operating at two significant levels. The most superficial is a surface aestheticization—the application of an aesthetic patina to reality (for example public places such as shopping malls and railway stations) and to products: take the marketing of cigarettes, confectionery and automobiles as three obvious examples. This is not just a matter of extending aesthetics beyond art; daily life is being painted over, artfully, with art. The most superficial aesthetic values dominate: desire, amusement, enjoyment; each emphasizing the dressing up or ‘cosmetics of reality’ (Welsch 1997: 3). Once again, then, the embellishment generated by the grand has come into the ascendancy. This is the stimulation of aesthetics as an entirely economic strategy, representing the triumph of form over function. Furthermore, aesthetics is no longer merely the vehicle but the essence. Training shoes, not necessarily purchased in order to take part in sports, provide an example of aestheticization as a means of achieving an almost frenzied degree of product differentiation (1997: 2–4). This level coincides more or less with the three aspects identified by Featherstone considered above.

Welsch further identifies a less explicit process, ‘deep-seated aestheticization’. Aesthetics is now not merely central to the product but to production itself; it is central to the design process. Reality is increasingly constituted through media, for example computer and video games—virtual reality (Welsch 1997: 4–7). If surface-level aestheticization governs our perception of separate bits of reality, deep-seated aestheticization determines the manner of reality’s being and our conception of it. Welsch underlines the extent to which aesthetic judgments are being applied during all stages of the production process itself, primarily through computer-aided design. The current aestheticization attains its consummation in individuals and particularly to individual bodies, but also in our relations with others. The body has become an increasingly important site for aestheticization in relation to dressing, modification and so forth, though this is a complex phenomenon (see also Featherstone 1982).

Insofar as everything is not made uniformly better in the aestheticization process, how can we judge good from bad? We would generally look to judge according to criteria of morality, truth or aesthetics. Ethics has itself become increasingly bound up with aesthetics; our discussion of plain/grand discourse suggests that this was always the case. The criterion of truth has been diminished as scientific rationality itself has

increasingly become an aesthetic category (Welsch 1997: 20-24). The process of epistemological aestheticization has been under way for more than two centuries. Körner points out that 'It is a fundamental axiom of the Kantian philosophy that our thinking depends for its objects on perception' (Körner 1990: 45). In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant argued that we impose a sense of order on the world and come to know the world, *a priori*, by categorizing it in terms of time and space. It is through this process that things in the world exist for us in the first place: reality extends just so far as do these facilities. This is an intrinsically aesthetic adventure insofar as these categories exist as forms of intuition and imagination and is fundamental to our knowledge of the world (see also Collinson 1992: 134-44). Reality is a mutable construct which human beings generate through forms of intuition, projections, illusions, fantasies, and on, and such knowledge implies an aesthetic perspective (Welsch 1997: 46-47).

According to Welsch, then, there has been an immensely significant 'aesthetic turn' during the last 250 years. The Enlightenment reality can no longer be seen as independent of cognition, but only as the result of a process of social construction—and this is equally true of science and hermeneutics (Welsch 1997: 22-23). If in the past we thought of aesthetics as concerned only with secondary, supplementary 'outward' realities, then today we must recognize that aesthetics (or 'proto-aesthetics') is intimately, even inseparably, bound up with knowledge and reality: this is correctly identified by Welsch as a major legacy of modernity. I would add that, together, these deep-rooted processes represent an important contemporary manifestation of embellishment, of 'grand' discourse.

Welsch suggests that there is no single rational argument which is able to engage effectively with this aestheticization. All thinkable objections will themselves be subject to it, insofar as our view of the world has become thoroughly aestheticized. This epistemological or transcendental aestheticization is the driving force behind the more manifest processes. In assuming this manner of constructing reality we become aesthetic to our core and it is this cognitive preparation that facilitates our everyday participation in the mundane processes of 'surface' and 'deep-seated' aestheticization. And if aestheticization means that the unaesthetic is made, or understood, to be aesthetic, how can we critique artefacts of the aestheticization process, given the unavailability of ethics and reason for this purpose? Having discounted the criteria of truth and morality, we

are left with aesthetic criteria which, Welsch claims, do enable us to distinguish between the accomplished and the unaccomplished, better or worse, exemplary and digressive (1997: 24-25). It would certainly seem appropriate to emphasize aesthetic criteria in this age of global aestheticization.

Maquet compares the aesthetic point of view with contemplation (Maquet 1986: 51-58). Similarly Welsch argues that aesthetics teaches us that we need respite from the bombardment to which modern culture subjects our senses—we require ‘delays, quiet areas and interruption’. Total aestheticization inevitably generates its antithesis: where everything is presented as beautiful nothing is beautiful. What is more, continued stimulation leads to torpor and a sense of powerlessness, or ‘anaestheticization’, along with a growing inability to discriminate between the good, the bad and the ugly (Welsch 1997: 83). Aesthetics alone facilitates a calm assessment of the jumble that aestheticization produces. Critical progress within the context of gross commodification currently depends not upon an exaggerated or ‘hyper-aestheticization’ of culture but, instead, the development of a ‘blind spot culture’. To perceive something is necessarily to overlook something else: vision is impossible without a blind-spot. Developed sensibility, an example of which is plaining, is attentive to this and faces the consequences, not only in relation to form and design, traditionally defined, but also in daily life. An aesthetically reflective awareness helps illuminate and clarify issues which arise in our daily lives and marks the impact of difference and exclusion. Welsch makes great claims for an ‘aesthetically sensitised awareness’ which he argues is allergic to injustice and encourages us to defend the rights of the oppressed. As such, aesthetics is able to contribute at least indirectly to the micro-politics that infuse our worldview. If we shrink from merely sanctioning every aspect of the aestheticization process then it is from the standpoint of aesthetics that critique must come (Welsch 1997: 25-27).

And so it is possible to see why plaining conceived *as aesthetic* is so important. It is as morally and spiritually informed aesthetic that the Quaker plain can enable us to become conscious of and therefore critique an ideology that finds its apogee in the prevailing consumer culture. While the Quaker plain style provides an antidote to the surface aestheticization of everyday life, plaining represents an alternative to the deep aestheticization which has come to dominate our understanding of the world.

One's manner of living can be many things, including an aesthetic, as Tolstoy (1969) and, most recently, Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze have commented (Goodchild 1996). Plaining, a more or less self-conscious process which has constituted an ethic as well as an aesthetic, has been at the core of a Quaker way of life since the mid-seventeenth century. The testimonies are most obviously constitutive of a moral code; even the apparently trivial prescriptions and proscriptions (the 'peculiarities') were undergirded by Scriptural (and therefore, moral) authority. How this was to be done, unless by example, is less clear. It is possible that Quaker plaining, as an ethically, spiritually and politically inspired aesthetic, could prove a valuable asset in helping us see and consequently see through the damaging aestheticization processes identified by Welsh, Featherstone and others. And it is the continuing relevance and potentially liberating force of the plain and plaining, a dynamic and critical aesthetic, morally and theologically informed, that I have sought to highlight in this essay.

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