

Coming Back: The Poetry and Life of Jane Rohrer

Julia Spicher Kasdorf, *Pennsylvania State University*

This essay draws attention to a neglected American writer of Mennonite origins, and continues work started by Ann Hostetler at least a decade ago when she gathered poems for the anthology published in 2003 by the University of Iowa Press, *A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry*. Like any anthology, Hostetler's made an implicit argument, one that Hostetler stated explicitly in an article that appeared around that time in *Mennonite Quarterly Review*: publication of poetry by Mennonites in the U.S. mainstream press started with women: Ruth Ediger Baehr, Jean Janzen, and Jane Rohrer.¹ Hostetler also revealed that as a young woman, she had met Jane Rohrer, an acquaintance of her parents, at a dinner party for artists in Philadelphia. (I suspect that in the 1970s, all artists with Mennonite backgrounds living in that city could fit into a single dining room.) Perhaps echoing that gesture, Hostetler took Canadian Mennonite poet Di Brandt and me to Jane's home for a meal – before a public reading to launch *A Cappella* – that Hostetler had arranged at Kelly Writer's House on the campus of The University of Pennsylvania in November 2004.



Figure 1. Jane Rohrer, Julia Spicher Kasdorf, and Ann Hostetler (left to right), November 3, 2004. (Photo credit: Di Brandt)

Hostetler appears on the right of this photo from that occasion, and I sit beside Jane; over her shoulder hangs the edge of one of her husband Warren's abstract paintings, probably "Yellow, Yellow" (125 centimeters on each side, dated 1992-3). I recall Warren saying in the early 1990s that yellow was the only colour he could see in every season in the farmer's field he'd been repeatedly painting in Lancaster County. In this photograph, I see tangible illustration of the intimate relationship between Jane's life and Warren's painting; it seems his art was always there, overshadowing and influencing both her life and her poetry. Indeed, her literary sensibility grew along with his development as a painter, as she learned to look at art and the world by his side.

Born in 1928 and 1927 respectively, Jane and Warren Rohrer belong to the first generation of Mennonites in the United States who turned from rural life to artistic exploration and work. Although Mennonites had been living in Pennsylvania since the 1680s, they did not migrate from farm communities in significant numbers until the Second World War, and then commonly chose involvement in the trades, business, or helping professions. With Jane's support, Warren became the only Mennonite to achieve a significant place in the visual art world during the twentieth century in the United States. His work belongs to permanent collections of important institutions such as the National Gallery in Washington D.C. and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The Philadelphia Art Museum celebrated his career with a

major retrospective in 2003, and he continues to be represented by a leading gallery in that city.²

And what of the poet? Like that of many women from her generation, Jane's career developed after the children left home when, with Warren's encouragement, she took a few college level poetry workshops, wrote poems, and read *The American Poetry Review* voraciously on her own. In 2002, Stanley Moss, editor of Sheep Meadow Press, collected and published her poems in a volume titled *Life after Death*.³ A single collection holds most of her opus, which at times explicitly chronicles Warren's artistic development and their life together, yet also challenges his idealized attachment to Mennonite place and tradition. Of interest to this special issue of *Journal of Mennonite Studies* is the fact that their lives and art were influenced by relocation: voluntary moves away from Mennonite farm communities in the 1940s, then a decision about twenty years later to purchase a farm and return to the country, which they eventually had to leave. These moves – ruptures, really – engendered an important elegiac energy that they both expressed in their art. Loss of the agricultural landscape and rural life – and attempts to transform nostalgia's backward glance into art – animate both Warren's painting and Jane's poetry. Both artists resist sentimentality, however, and in their own ways transform the loss of working relationships with the land and local life, a loss felt by many of us who live and work in the modern world.

When the couple left the farm a second time and moved to the Mount Airy section of Philadelphia, they chose to live and work in a barn that had been outfitted as an artist's studio by early twentieth century illustrator Violet Oakley, best known for painting 43 colossal murals – inspired by pre-Raphaelite style and the story and values of William Penn – for the state capitol building in Harrisburg. Although she suffered a major stroke in June of 2015, Jane still resides on the edge of Philadelphia's 2,000-acre Fairmount Park in the barn which she and Warren converted into a studio home, and which Oakley called "lower Cogslea" (the estate named from a compilation of the initials of her pioneering female artist housemates: Henrietta Cozens, Elizabeth Shippen Green, and Jessie Willcox Smith).⁴

My Title, "Coming Back," refers both to Jane's and Warren's deliberate and effectual departures and returns to the agrarian landscape, as well as to the clinical term used to describe rehabilitation and recovery from the physical and cognitive challenges of having suffered a stroke. With the help of son Jon, daughter-in-law Prilla, and nurse aids, Jane continues to work

every day at “coming back,” that is, regaining strength and acuity in the left side of her body. When I asked what “coming back” might mean to her, Jane replied with characteristic candor – which seems to have become more pronounced since the stroke – “Coming back is the opposite of going away!” Her frustration with the stroke’s impairment, she believes, returns her to childhood because it “hooks into” the anger she felt as a young woman growing up within the constraints imposed by the church and her father. It also echoes the fury she now feels towards an authoritarian President. She has not written poems since the stroke, but occasionally sends me gracious notes on Modern art cards, written in perfect right-hand cursive. She continues to be involved in what she calls, “keeping up with Warren’s stuff,” that is, promoting his legacy and overseeing a household art collection and archive.

Growing up, Jane Rohrer (nee Martha Jane Turner) was the second of six children and the first daughter born on a large farm near the small town of Broadway in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. Her family belonged to the Zion Mennonite Church, part of the Virginia Mennonite Conference, during a conservative era. Her father came from what she described as non-Mennonite “hillbilly” ancestors who had herded cattle in the mountains on the border of Virginia and West Virginia. Grandfather Turner became a Mennonite and eventually a church deacon, but Jane’s father was a prosperous breeder of Tennessee walking horses, often at odds with church leaders. Jane’s more devout mother came from a Church of the Brethren background, and Jane describes her parents’ relationship as “sodomasochistic.” When her father detected his son’s homosexuality, he also treated Jane’s brother cruelly. “I think of that all with nothing but sadness,” she says, in part because she felt obliged to manage her mother’s unhappiness. Concerning her religious background, she said, “It didn’t do me much good. I’m awful mad about a lot of Mennonite stuff.” Pushed on the topic, she pointed to fundamentalist notions and legalistic church practices, concluding, “The only possibility for me was to get the hell out.”

Jane attended Eastern Mennonite High School and College (EMC), and there met Warren Rohrer during the summer of 1946, when she and her sister (who was dating Warren’s cousin), went to bid farewell to the young men who were headed for Poland to help restore cattle herds destroyed by the war. “I fell so hard,” she recalls, “and I was nuts about that man for 48 years.” Descended from early Swiss Mennonite settler families, Warren grew up on a poultry farm near Smoketown in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.



Figure 2. Jane Turner and Warren Rohrer married November 25, 1948.

His first year at EMC, he studied Bible in preparation for the ministry, but by year two, he had enrolled in design, composition, and crafts classes. The couple married in November 1948, wearing the plain suit and cape dress and covering regulated by the church in those days, and returned to Warren's home community, where he taught at a Mennonite school for the rest of the academic year. The following fall, they returned to Harrisonburg, and Jane's father purchased them a tiny house near the campus. With two years of course work, Jane dropped out of college to take a job in the Dean's office while Warren earned a BA in Bible from EMC, and a year later, a BS in art education at the nearby public college, James Madison. By then, according to Jane, the couple had snuck off to the cinema in Harrisonburg, visited the National Gallery in Washington, and determined to "gang up and run away."

During the early 1950s, the Rohrers lived in suburban Philadelphia. Warren taught high school to support the family, and during the summer they retreated to State College, in central Pennsylvania, where Warren participated in summer painting courses as part of an MA program in Art Education at Penn State. In 1959, he also taught in that program. Two sons were born, one in 1952 and the other in 1953, and Jane recalls the babies crawling on the dirty floors of rented student flats. Back in the city, Warren also took advantage of evening courses in painting and art history

at urban institutes and universities. He gained representation of an art dealer and gallery, and eventually obtained a faculty position at Philadelphia College of Art (now University of the Arts).

During the summer of 1961, the Rohrsers purchased a nineteenth-century farmhouse with a barn and land from a Mennonite farmer near Christiana, Pennsylvania, about 42 kilometers from where Warren had grown up. This farm would be the family home for 23 years, although the meaning of their return to the agriculturally altered landscape was no simple homecoming. Jane captured the paradoxical move in one sentence: "There was no looking back, and all he did was look back." Warren rented the fields to nearby Amish farmers and converted the barn into a painting studio; the barn served a different purpose, yet remained a site of worthy labour. "We were trying to do everything on those 12 acres in the best way possible." Jane explained. "The Amish were spraying everything to kingdom come, but we were trying to do it the best way. Warren would grow a cantaloupe, then take it into the studio and paint it, then sell that painting." Of the abstract landscape paintings that the Christiana countryside inspired, Jane recalled, "Warren always said, this is not a landscape, this is a painting." As for Jane, absorbed in domestic labour, she "worked like a dog, gardening, raising food, preserving food" because "that seemed the only sensible way to live."

"Back to the land" expressed a sentiment common to many Americans during the late 1960s and '70s. Even if they did not physically return, many rural and urban people, artists and ordinary folk, cultivated an enthusiasm for crafts and craft making, gardening, food preservation, and antiques. In 1971 the Whitney Museum in New York City mounted an exhibition titled "Abstract Design in American Quilts," which drew connections between the patterns of pieced quilts and abstraction in contemporary art. After Jane and Warren saw that exhibition, they began collecting Amish quilts themselves, and Warren created a series of paintings derived from quilt patterns, simply titled "Amish" followed by a numeral. The cultural moment was ready to welcome the work of a painter for whom "colour field" was not only an aesthetic idea but also an embodied experience, an artist who had grown up on a farm but who commuted from the country to an urban art school to teach, and who used the side of his pick-up truck as an easel.⁵

The time was also ripe for Jane's writing. In the early 1970s, as their sons left home, she began to study and write poems with intent, although she had written some poetry all along – in love letters to Warren, for instance. She took a class with Irish poet

Thomas Kinsella at Temple University, and audited a course at the University of the Arts with Steven Berg, a colleague of her husband. One day in class, when no other students would share their work, Jane offered hers. Berg plucked that poem, “Mennonite Funeral in the Shenandoah Valley” for *American Poetry Review*, which he edited. He continued to publish Jane’s work regularly thereafter, including an 11-poem supplement in 2013 one year before his death. Jane recalls, “I was writing by the seat of my pants. Personal narrative poems; that’s all I knew to write.” Of course, that was true of many women publishing in the 1970s, when Adrienne Rich and others recognized the cultural necessity and political power of life writing by women. Years later, Jane reflected on her writing as a kind of pragmatic and personal home-making. “Writing a poem is like building a paper house out of the life you have,” she explained. “You make a place for yourself to live.”

After Warren’s death, Berg asked Jane for copies of her poems, and passed a sheaf of about 75 of them along to a well-positioned art dealer, poet, and editor, Stanley Moss. The next day, Moss called Jane and told her he wanted to publish her book. He edited and ordered the volume of 60 poems, and invited Jane to his office on the Hudson River, where they spent a morning reviewing his edits. On the cover of the typescript, Jane noticed that he had scrawled, “Extraordinary, extraordinary, extraordinary.” No doubt, Moss heard in Jane’s work an authentic, colloquial voice that combines intimate observation of everyday life, insight, and carefully observed ekphrasis. Her poems not only gesture toward the origins of some of Warren’s paintings, but they also vividly describe individual works in such a way that the poems extend the meaning of the paintings. The volume also includes love poems and elegies written after Warren’s death. Yet, when the book appeared in print, its plain, searing red cover in no way served Jane’s visually clear and emotionally sensitive poetry. Nor does the Amazon book description—presumably supplied by the publisher—reflect the subtle resistances and irrepressible resilience of her writing. Possibly drawing on the distorted Emily Dickinson mystique – with all its implicit sexism – the description paints a portrait of an “innocent” and “tragic” voice that is at once hidden, “durable,” thwarted, and submissive: “This is a book where the fantasy of revolution never occurred.”⁶

Mercifully, Jon and Prilla Rohrer, professional designers who work from the loft of the Cogslea barn house, created a gorgeous alternative paper jacket for *Life After Death* that incorporates an old family snapshot and respectful blurbs by esteemed American

poets, such as Theodore Weiss: “Original, wonderful combination of simple direct language and subtle surreal turns of mind...a full-fledged poet...where has she been all this time?” But that jacket is not generally available to readers who purchase the book on-line, so let us soon see a new edition that employs that cover!



Figure 3. Dust jacket from Jane Rohrer's *Life after Death*.

Many of the poems in *Life after Death* are spoken in a fresh voice as it discovers meaning through the imaginative consideration of particular tasks and places on the Rohrer's Christiana farmstead: the upper field, the pond, the lower field, the orchard. In "Making Hay," for example, we see the speaker literally holding up a large canvas while "he" (the painter) photographs it on a day that is opportune for both picture-taking and baling hay. The alignment of these labours prompts a revelation: "things come into focus," in the speaker's mind's eye, as she realizes that the neighbor's baler works windrows "in the lockstep rhythm/ of an old poem" (14). Farmer, painter, and poet fall together in the analogous and painstaking work of making lines and turning rows. This metaphor alludes to the etymology of the word "verse:" *verso*, from the Latin for "turn of the plow." It also suggests the more esoteric term, "boustrophedon," a very early kind of writing in which the text read left to right and right to left, and which Warren referred to in the title of one of his later paintings, "Back and Forth."⁷ In addition to the linear and

repetitive movement of the plow and the brush, Warren was also traveling back and forth between the farmer's field and painter's studio at that time. The title of Jane's poem brings to mind the idiom "make hay while the sun shines," a country person's *carpe diem*: seize the moment for the purpose of pleasure or work, for soon the sun will set.

Some of Jane's poems mourn the loss of the rural place, along with Warren's death, and she thereby joins the long tradition of pastoral elegy, which I will explore further at the conclusion of this essay. (The book also includes some beautiful poems of temporary dislocation – that is, travel – but they are beyond the scope of this inquiry.) I would like to describe briefly three additional poems, in hopes that readers will be compelled to read *Life After Death* and study it further, so that this book can take its rightful place in the Mennonite/s Writing canon.

Among many of Jane's shorter lyrics is the long narrative, "Tracking the Amish Quilt," which follows the speaker's pursuit and awkward purchase of an old quilt. The poem turns on a critical tension in the speaker's perspective. She initially imagines the quilt as a functional object her Amish neighbors and their children sleep under, yet she calls it a "naïve Rothko," (38) seeing in the faded colour a reminder of the great abstract expressionist's subtle shading. She recognizes situational irony when the Amish women patch the coveted antique with new fabric (thereby ruining its value to sophisticated collectors) before offering it for sale. In the end, the speaker recognizes that she resembles the quilt herself because she belongs to "both worlds," which is to say, she can read the quilt both ways, but with a certain amount of cognitive dissonance. She cannot help but condemn the traditional attitudes toward the discipline of children she observes during her visit, because she once suffered them herself.

"The high price of being innocent / is innocence," (37) she says. But what is the price of this speaker's experience? Knowledge: expulsion from the garden, another kind of labour, and the accompanying burdens of consciousness and truth-telling. The belief that truth can be known and must be spoken may be an imperative from Jane's Mennonite faith heritage, even as that value runs counter to her place as a woman who grew up in that tradition. In this poem's final stanza, she imagines "the small facts," or art-i-facts, of her own life scattered, if not "left out in the meadow" like the biblical lost lamb. Or, perhaps they will be altogether abandoned in the "mind," that is, forgotten by communal memory (38).

As both a poet and a person, Jane consistently refuses sentimentality, or any kind of false feeling. She has observed that Warren – and his high school classmate and friend, Mennonite author and historian John Ruth – had a “romantic idea” about the country that “frightens” her. I can only imagine that her refusal to idealize the landscape of traditional Mennonite farm life reflects unhappy memories of her own home, of the time she spent in Lancaster as a new bride, and the oppressive burden of “nonconformity,” grace, and domestic labour that is unequally borne by women in that traditional culture. In the poem “Auction,” the speaker, likely the author, accompanies a nostalgic partner, likely Warren, to a farm sale on his family’s land. He is “comfortably clothed/ in a long warm genealogy.” Unprotected by her husband’s tribal lineage and nine-generation attachment to the earth of Lancaster County, she is “chilly,” yet her outsider position affords a clear vision of the situation. “Why have we come here?” she demands, knowing the antique heirlooms are long gone, the fields sub-divided and sold to sprout “wart-like houses on the land.” She finds no charm in country uncles wearing “great-uncle suits” who sentimentally bid a few dollars for old shovels, or their wives with “tightly fettered hair.” Refusing her partner’s melancholic attachment to tradition, she is “not buying any of this.” She will neither purchase nor appreciate what’s worthless or offensive to her soul, concluding, “These little final piles of things – /their truth is the truth of funerals.”

In 1979, Warren was diagnosed with leukemia. The couple sold their farm in 1981, and three years later moved into Cogslea, having renovated the studio barn to create both a residence and painting workspace. Perhaps as compensation for that final dislocation, between 1987 and 1993 Warren documented an adopted field near Churchtown in Caernarvon Township, northeastern Lancaster County, with sketches and photographs that inspired the final abstract paintings that would secure his reputation. As he sketched and painted from images of the same field over time, corn stubble became language-like marks on the canvas; even as Jane described his paintings in her poetry, he ended up painting text.

The speaker in “Fields in Snow” addresses the painter who has returned to the farmer’s field in the winter countryside. The line between life and art have become indistinguishable: between writing, painting, or corn stalks; between a thin wash of pigment or the scrim of snow; between this world and the next. Poet and painter remain connected yet temporarily separated for the time being, located in the parallel planes delineated in the painting. The

speaker of this poem calls the canvas or snowy field “samsara,” the Sanskrit term for “wandering or flowing on,” which refers to the cycle of life, death, and rebirth in both Hindu and Buddhist traditions.

Fields in Snow

You have obviously been here
 since my last visit
 and I like what you’ve done.
 But is it landscape
 or is it art?
 It’s all so confusing
 with you coming from the other side.

Calligraphy, there on the contours of the field,
 scribbling in stalks and stacks
 left from the fall,
 is visible in the distant upper levels
 of the canvas.
 if it is a canvas.
 But, it’s the wash of thin white,
 just a sift of snow,
 or is it white,
 that erases the visual samsara
 and beckons me to you beyond the pale.

We’ve been split like a schist.
 Here I am and there you are,
 parallel. (74)

One needn’t look as far as East Asia to find the promise of resurrection in the wintery landscape. In a study of the English elegy, Peter Sacks traces the form – from the Greek *elegos*, lament – to the third century BCE, when Theocritus abandoned the sheep fields of Sicily or Crete for the city of Alexandria, only to write poetry about an idealized countryside and mourn the death of a young shepherd.⁸ The pastoral elegy, Sacks shows, is rooted in ancient funerary rites and beliefs that connect human death with seasonal change and resurrection: Adonis or Osiris, the pagan prefigures of Christ. Elegiac rites were public events that enabled the community to mourn a death or to anticipate the return of spring; therefore the English elegy, even into the modern era, makes a collective gesture. In an epilogue to the book, Sacks notes that the American elegy as demonstrated in the work of Dickinson, Whitman, and their followers, is far more individualized and displaced. The grieving speaker often stands alone, apart, as the

speaker in “Fields in Snow,” who appears to return to the field (or painting) to confront the dead beloved alone.

In contemporary verse, the elegy serves as an emotional form that often follows this progression: the grief is announced and the loss described, so readers can fully understand its depth, and then by the poem’s conclusion, the speaker reaches some sense of resolution and acceptance. The irony of this form as it currently functions, however, is that in working through the loss of a person or place, the poems typically depict and preserve an image of what or who got lost, even as they seek to “let go.” They enable the speaker (and reader) to reckon with the loss, to mourn, and eventually return to the world of the living, carrying a memory of the lost beloved.

Jane’s poems and Warren’s paintings, I believe, perform an elegiac function for all of us who recognize a loss of connection to the agricultural life that produces the food that sustains our own bodies. Warren’s fields are not land, but paintings, he would remind us, and yet they compel us to regard the agriculturally altered landscape in new ways, in relation to our own lives, and to consider them possibly endangered. (I can no longer drive past a field of corn stubble in the middle of the winter, as I often do here where I live in Central Pennsylvania, without thinking of Warren’s paintings and the surplus of meaning they carry: farms, rural culture, labour in relation to the land.) Moreover, *Life After Death*, the title of Jane’s collection, reiterates the idea of departure and return, pointing to the most profound dislocation any living creature can anticipate.

Notes

- ¹ Ann Hostetler, ed. *A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry*, (Iowa City: U Iowa Press, 2003); Ann Hostetler. “Coming into Voice: Three Mennonite Women Poets and the Beginning of Mennonite Poetry in the United States.” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 77:4 (Oct. 2003): 521-46.
- ² For more on Rohrer’s career, please see *Warren Rohrer*, the 2017 catalogue published by Allentown Art Museum of the Lehigh Valley and Locks Art Publications, Locks Gallery, Philadelphia, PA. For paintings, see the Gallery web site: www.locksgallery.com/artists/warren-rohrer. An interview of Warren Rohrer conducted 1989 March 9-June 1, by Marina Pacini, for the Archives of American Art Philadelphia Project can be found on the Archives of American Art, the Smithsonian Institute: www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-warren-rohrer-12993
- ³ Jane Rohrer, *Life After Death* (Riverdale-on-Hudson, NY: The Sheep Meadow Press, 2002)

- ⁴ I met Jane and Warren when we took part in a qualitative study of Mennonite marginal identity, trauma, and creativity conducted by Lois Frey Gray in the early 1990s. Over a span of three years, a small group of individuals from conservative Mennonite backgrounds who had made contributions in a range of artistic and scholarly fields met for six day-long conversations guided by Lois. One of the last meetings took place in the Locks Gallery in Philadelphia, as Warren approached death. The conversations were recorded in fifteen cassette tapes, which Philip Ruth and I plan to digitize and deposit in an appropriate archive. An article describing Lois's findings, "Creativity: From Victim to Reconstructor" was published in the final (#7, Spring 1996) issue of *MennoNot* : <http://www.keybridgeltd.com/mennonot/Issue7.pdf>. For this article, I conducted additional interviews with Jane Rohrer in her home on 27 December 2016 and 10 July 2017; interview notes in possession of the author.
- ⁵ For a discussion of Warren's painting and the rise of the Amish quilt as an emblem of American craft, see Janneken Smucker, *Amish Quilts: Crafting an American Icon* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), pp. 81-83.
- ⁶ <https://www.amazon.com/Life-After-Death-Jane-Rohrer>
- ⁷ I heard Warren use the term "boustorphadon" as he discussed the 1993 exhibit at the Locks Gallery, and subsequently wrote a sestina by that title, which appears in *Eve's Striptease* (Pittsburgh; U. Pitt, 1998), 80. I mailed the poem to Warren, and he replied with a kind note and careful map of the poem's formal structure, which intrigued him. The concept is also discussed in an essay by David Currier that accompanied a catalogue of that exhibit, *Warren Rohrer, New Paintings, October 13-November 10, 1993* (Philadelphia: Locks Gallery, 1993).
- ⁸ Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1985. See also Robert Hass, *A Little Book On Form: An Exploration into the formal Imagination of Poetry* New York: Harper Collins, 2017, 293-299.