

Making Peace with Suicide: Reflections on Miriam Toews's *All My Puny Sorrows*

Grace Kehler

I remembered something I'd read, after my father's suicide, in Al Alvarez's book *The Savage God*. It had to do with some of the writers and artists who lived, and killed themselves, under Russia's totalitarian regime: 'And, as we bow in homage to their gifts and to their bright memory, we should bow compassionately before their suffering.'¹

To bring, make, or build peace requires a thoroughgoing engagement with violence, both in its manifest and more subtle forms. Genuine pacifism, as enacted by Christ and embraced by various followers, including a majority of the Anabaptist ancestors of the Mennonites, entails not a simple retreat from violence but an identification and address of it. The Anabaptists of the 16th century took a stand against the systemic coercions of state and church, the former assuming the right to kill as well as to compel citizens to bear arms on its behalf, and the latter arrogating to a select clerisy the right and obligation to define ethical, spiritual living. In declaring themselves nonviolent and committed to a communal, consensual practice of everyday spiritual care by the priesthood of all believers, Anabaptists bore dual witness to the possibility of an alternative life and to the violations of body and spirit that were occurring *within* Christianity. If the inconsistencies and outright failures that have troubled and continue to trouble an Anabaptist peace practice are many, arguably these all-too-human and communal pacifistic lapses have also galvanized contemporary Mennonites into making bold queries regarding the social locations of violence—including intra-communal violence—and the components of a nonviolent practice that fosters loving relationships in the quotidian.²

¹ Miriam Toews, *All My Puny Sorrows* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 91.

² I discuss intra-communal Mennonite violence and the work of writers in calling community *Global Mennonite Peacebuilding: Exploring Theology, Culture, and Practice*, ed. Jeremy M. Bergen, Paul C. Heidebrecht, and Reina C. Neufeldt, special issue, *The Conrad Grebel Review* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 338-347.

Nowhere is such inquiry more in evidence than in contemporary Mennonite writing in North America.³ Miriam Toews—whose *All My Puny Sorrows* I reflect on in this piece—avers in a recent *Granta* essay that the topic of pacifism itself has been “dangerous” within the Mennonite communities of which she has knowledge. She commends Rudy Wiebe’s “groundbreaking” and “revolutionary” first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962), as a text that stirred controversy because it spoke “honestly and philosophically about the conflicts that arise from non-conflict” in a purportedly pacifist community.⁴ As she notes in the article, Wiebe has afforded her a similar compliment during their joint book tour in Germany. Rebutting an audience member’s characterization of *A Complicated Kindness* as a “filthy” book that defamed Menno Simons, Wiebe instead lauded its “honest” appeal for change: it was, he attested, “asking us [Mennonites] to be self-critical, to accept reality, and to love better.”⁵

Toews, who identifies as a secular Mennonite and who exuberantly pillories narrow Mennonite moralism, does not share Wiebe’s explicit concern with the rehabilitation of Mennonite religious practices. She does, nonetheless, participate in a recognizable strategy within writing by Anabaptist descendants, that of calling community members to account for their acts of coercion, especially the shaming or silencing of those whose behaviors or beliefs deviate from those of the collective.⁶ Instead of

to account in Grace Kehler, “Heeding the Wounded Storyteller: Toews’ *A Complicated Kindness*,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 34 (2016): 37-59, and Grace Kehler, “Representations of Melancholic Martyrdom in Canadian Mennonite Literature,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 29 (2011): 153-71.

³ See, for example, the following writers on vigilant self-questioning as fundamental to naming and addressing violence: Harry Loewen, “The Mennonite Writer as Witness and Critic,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 2 (1984): 113-23; Magdalene Redekop, “Escape from the Bloody Theatre: The Making of Mennonite Stories,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 11 (1993): 9-22; Rudy Wiebe, “The Artist as a Critic and a Witness,” *A Voice in the Land: Essays by and about Rudy Wiebe*, ed. W.J. Keith (Edmonton: NeWest, 1981), 39-47; Di Brandt, *So this is the world & here i am in it* (Edmonton: NeWest, 2007), especially 105-32; Jesse Nathan, “Question, Answer,” in *After Identity: Mennonite Writing in North America*, ed. Robert Zacharias (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 2015), 175-93.

⁴ Miriam Toews, “Peace Shall Destroy Many,” *Granta*, no. 137, November 23, 2016, granta.com.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ See footnotes 2 and 3.

countering the hegemonic with compassionate and consensually negotiated practices, Mennonites resort at times to rigid, formulaic definitions of right conduct, turning non-conformist practice into an instrument of violent imposition of conformity within community. Equally galled by the moral stigmatization of the persistent questioner and of the mentally ill—a recurrent topic in Toews—she, like Wiebe, indicates that a caring peace witness exists only insofar as it remains self-critically alive to the suasions of power, notably to the alacrity with which a desire for the good converts into a tyrannous impulse for a highly particular instantiation of this good. Pacifism, both writers imply, must take form as an advent, as an ongoing practice of uncovering collective and individual complicity with violence and of learning to “love better” in a manner that places the other before the self.⁷ That peace-making, that learning to love, necessarily extends to the person who despairs of life, as Toews repeatedly demonstrates.

In her autobiographically informed Manitoba trilogy—*Swing Low* (2000), *A Complicated Kindness* (2004), and *All My Puny Sorrows* (2014)—Toews places in apposition the Mennonite church with the medical establishment in regard to their damaging treatment of profoundly depressed individuals.⁸ Both institutions pride themselves on refraining from harm, yet their creeds do not translate into lived, compassionate relations. Rather, church figures and medical authorities (often middle-aged men) disparage her agonized, ultimately suicidal family members, reducing them to incomprehensible figures whose words and actions have no truth to tell but that of madness itself: the spiritual madness of sinners who reject grace or the medical madness of the morbid who refuse or do not respond to therapy.⁹ In *All My Puny Sorrows*, Yolandi (Yoli) Von Riesen, the narrator who bears more than a passing resemblance to Toews, depicts church authorities as bullies who “put the fist in pacifist.” These are “men . . . with tight collars and bulging necks” who “go around terrorizing people and making them

⁷ On nonviolent love as “a commitment to the advent and nurturing of difference,” see Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2001), 20.

⁸ Miriam Toews, *Swing Low: A Life* (Toronto: Vintage, 2005); Miriam Toews, *A Complicated Kindness* (Toronto: Vintage, 2004); Toews, *All My Puny Sorrows*.

⁹ Toews frequently draws on hyperbole and caricature to call attention to the extreme psychic damage authority figures inflict on the vulnerable. See Kehler, “Heeding the Wounded Storyteller,” 44-45.

feel small and shitty and then call them *evil* when they destroy themselves.”¹⁰ Correspondingly, psychiatric professionals use shaming tactics against those who find life unbearable, imputing to them a lack of “decency” and integrity.¹¹ The primary figure against whom the ire of church and medicine is directed in this novel is Yoli’s elder sister Elfrieda (Elf), who attempts suicide several times before dying. Perceived alternately as willful or weak-willed, Elf causes affront because she cannot desire her life, a fundamental good of Western (Christian) society and medicine, and, in the perverse logic of authority figures, comes to symbolize the antithesis of goodness: a figure of evil or indecency who must be sanctioned or re-educated into conformist behavior.

Toews consistently pushes back against such stigmatization in her texts, in part by bearing witness to the complex subjectivities of her lost loved ones and, thus, by placing their substantial lives back into circulation with their traumatic deaths. Of equal import, she calls on professionals and community members alike to reconceive of the psychosomatically afflicted as exemplars of pained, not botched, humanity. The citation from Goethe she offers in *All My Puny Sorrows* epitomizes her radical vision: “suicide is an event of human nature, which, whatever may be said and done with respect to it, demands the sympathy of every [hu]man, and in every epoch must be discussed anew.”¹² Whereas hegemonic culture tends to position suicidal persons as individual problems to be managed, Toews (via Goethe) shifts the emphasis to the responsiveness and the responsibility of witnesses.¹³ Suicide, “an event of *human* nature,” tasks those who do not find life unbearable to enact an ethical subjectivity that extends care to those whose suffering remains “incomprehensible.”¹⁴ Precisely because we cannot recognize ourselves in their actions or desires, we must vigilantly guard against an impulse to oppress otherness. What’s at issue is an affirmation of the humanity not only of the sufferers but of the witnesses. As affect theorist Kelly Oliver points

¹⁰ Toews, *All My Puny Sorrows*, 34, 181.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹² Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, quoted in Toews, *All My Puny Sorrows*, 278.

¹³ For in-depth discussions of ethical subjectivity as based on address and response, see Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), and Oliver, *Witnessing*.

¹⁴ In the quotation from *All My Puny Sorrows*, the emphasis is mine. The injunction to bear witness to the “incomprehensible” comes from Oliver, *Witnessing*, 106.

out, our desires for the familiar and our fear of the unlike frequently lead to domination or exclusion, relations that deform the acting subjects as surely as those they subordinate. She elaborates: “If we . . . conceive of identity as opposed to difference, and we conceive of anything or anyone outside of the boundaries of [our desires] as different, then we will conceive of anything or anyone outside of ourselves as a threat to our own identity. Identity will be pitted against difference. Relations will be hostile. Hostile relations will lead to hostile actions, and the result will be war, domination, and torture.”¹⁵

As in the earlier Manitoba texts, Toews’s *All My Puny Sorrows* connects the antagonisms and micro-aggressions towards death-driven individuals with larger social structures of violence. Yet, discerningly, this most recent work also poses meta-reflexive questions about the conflicts and affective divisions within intensely *loving* familial relationships when a member craves release from life. Toews fictionalizes her profound connection with her sister Marjorie through the characters of Yoli and Elf, who, like the historical sisters, share the trauma of their father’s “acres of existential sadness” and his eventual suicide,¹⁶ but who find themselves in the impossibly paradoxical position of sister “enemies who love each another” when it comes to Elf’s/Marj’s suicide attempts.¹⁷ What does it mean to refrain from harm, or to enact a nonviolent love, when one family member desires to die and the other wishes her to live? How does one even begin to assess where violence resides when a person begs to be at peace from inner tortures and wishes to be accompanied to Switzerland where assisted suicide is legal, and the other feels that she in turn is being killed by her sister’s need to die? When they are loving sister-enemies, who is killing whom? When does care itself take on aspects of the oppressive?

What I have come to admire about Toews is her abiding attention to the incoherences of ourselves as we grapple with the fact that we don’t know how to care for, and dwell with, those whose desires are inexplicable to us. Especially when we love them, we want them to identify with our version of the good, and, if they become seriously ill or vulnerable, to accept that we can choose the good for them. We prod them to resist death with all

¹⁵ Oliver, *Witnessing*, 2-3.

¹⁶ Toews, *All My Puny Sorrows*, 162.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 37-38.

their might, engaging in ordinary activities like eating dinner with family and sharing wine instead of starving themselves, as Elf does in one attempt to escape embodiment, or drinking bleach, as she does in another. We want them to bind wounds, not self-inflict them. We beg them to take a regimen of drugs in titrated doses as a means of survival, not downing them in a search for oblivion (Elf's second attempt). We want a narrative arc that affirms livability, even if it explores the abyss of psychosomatic pain. We want things to make sense. Toews wants things to make sense. But she models the urgency of witnessing what is beyond rational recognition, of getting beyond a calculated assessment of what constitutes a good life and what counts as livable versus unlivable pain.¹⁸ This is a terrifying going-beyond-the-self to linger with another's melancholia or desperation that may not admit of a cure. As Toews illustrates, the witness must endure the multiplied agonies of accepting the beloved other as constitutive of the self (and, hence, of one's identity) *and* as unassimilable in her difference.

All My Puny Sorrows immediately signals its agonistic interrelational aesthetic in its title. Elf, in her teenage years, takes the acronym "AMPS" as her signature for her graffiti art in the town of East Village—the fictional analogue for Steinbach, Manitoba. The phrase derives from a Samuel Taylor Coleridge poem that commemorates his elder sister Ann, a poem Yoli discovers years later during one of Elf's psychiatric hospitalizations. In "To a Friend, Together With an Unfinished Poem," Coleridge laments,

I too a SISTER had, an only Sister –
She lov'd me dearly, and I doted on her!
To her I pour'd forth all my puny sorrows
(As a sick Patient in a Nurse's arms,)
And of the heart those hidden maladies
That shrink asham'd from even Friendship's eye.
O! I have woke at midnight, and have wept
Because SHE WAS NOT! . . .¹⁹

Elf's chosen melancholic forerunner of the British Romantic era, Coleridge wrote exquisitely about his not so puny devastations—including

¹⁸ The concept of witnessing beyond recognition derives from Oliver, *Witnessing*, 8-16.

¹⁹ Toews, *All My Puny Sorrows*, 237.

psychic and somatic illnesses, creative and interpersonal struggles of communication, lost ideals, and the deaths of kin—forging a poetics from his personal experiences of pain. Elf, who becomes a world-class pianist after her stint as a town graffiti artist, similarly communicates from within a position of woundedness. Yet the particular poem cited by Toews pre-empts any one-to-one correspondence between Elf and Coleridge. The “I” and the “my” prove flexible rather than precise referents, allowing for changes in the sisters’ relations as well as for simultaneity. If Elf, six years older than Yoli, nurtures her sibling by providing the means to query the narrow morality of their town during their girlhood, in adulthood both sisters function as nurse and patient (to borrow Coleridge’s terms), ministering compassion to one another and asking for care of the heart’s individual maladies. “AMPS” functions as a double signature in the novel, as Toews reworks the Coleridgean poetic that prioritizes a singular perspective on pain and uses “AMPS” to indicate a practice of mutual responsiveness.²⁰ The nurse may become the patient and vice versa. More radically still, the patient might attend to the caregiver’s hurts (much like the wounded artist who continues to generate imaginative visions of the world), erasing absolute distinctions between supplicants and alleviators.

At the same time, “AMPS” registers a crisis within the intimacy of the sisters, referencing the sorrows that divide them and the limits of mutuality. Toews is at her most profound in depicting the sisters as wracked with complicated yet excruciatingly individual pains, each appealing to the other to attend to her wounded state. Yoli needs Elf to remain a central, sustaining presence in her life, a nurse for and in the everyday, while Elf needs a sister-nurse to affirm that ending her pain comprises a human event worthy of care.²¹ When still frantic to keep Elf alive, Yoli feels possessed by acute fear, grief, and rage that she attempts to channel into protective, life-saving measures. Yet so intense is her attachment to her sister that she inadvertently

²⁰ See in particular one of the exchanges between the sisters that results in mutual consolation. Elf, again in the hospital, puts “her arms up like a baby waking up from nap time and wanting to be held,” and Yoli falls into those arms and bawls. *Ibid.*, 246. I thank Olivia Polk for drawing my attention to this example.

²¹ Toews provides an example of a nurse who facilitates a wanted death. Lottie, the sisters’ mother who trained as a nurse, decides to let her father “go” after he has endured nine long years of hospitalization. *Ibid.*, 245. See page 161 for one of the sisters’ arguments about “need.”

resorts to emotional “tortur[e]”: she accuses Elf of a narcissistic inability to comprehend either the goodness of her life or the suffering she inflicts on her family, who feel as if they are dying along with Elf.²² Indeed, like the very institutions Yoli deplors, she finds herself quantifying suffering—Elf’s should be more livable than her own, given Elf’s successes—and advocating conformist narratives of the decent and the good, narratives in which the patient enters into life-sustaining practices through an exertion of reason and will—or becomes the enemy. She interrogates Elf: “How do you think Nic [your husband] feels? . . . Does it make you happy to think of Nic or mom finding your dead body?”²³ In her all-consuming desire for her sister to desire what she and other family members desire, Yoli realizes that her love has become a form of aggression, a vehement imposition of her needs onto Elf.

That Yoli continues to struggle with an impulse to aggression after Elf’s death attests to the extraordinary difficulty of making peace with suicide. If, like Coleridge, she finds herself awake and lamenting her sister at and long after midnight, her mourning, at least in its early stages, harbors an ongoing grievance with the sibling-enemy she loves. Making nightly harassing calls to the hospital that discharged Elf on the day she ended her life—attempting to “haunt the hospital,” in her mother’s apt words—Yoli arguably wants most of all to harangue and haunt Elf.²⁴ Yoli overtly blames the medical community (and the Mennonites) for their inadequate care of the wounded. Still, her rage-filled grief suggests equally that she grapples to come to terms with Elf’s desires to be released from the hospital and from an agonized existence. The ghost, a figure of unfinished business, makes claims on the living through haunting.²⁵ Yoli, who is not done arguing with her sister, seeks to make claims on, and to haunt, the dead with her accumulating, unredressed sorrows. Yet this antagonistic form of sorrowing that implicitly calls for recognizing her own subjectivity also does violence to Yoli, who ultimately feels compelled to undertake the bewildering labor

²² Ibid., 148, 162.

²³ Ibid., 148.

²⁴ Ibid., 313.

²⁵ On ghosts that call attention to the unfinished hurts of history, see Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997). Toews, by contrast, suggests that the living Yoli’s haunting might perpetuate violence.

of bearing witness beyond rational recognition. Her responsibility is not, as she imagined, “the finite task of comprehending” another (as Kelly Oliver writes in another context), but rather “the infinite task” of opening herself up to loving connections in spite of losses that strike at the core of her identity.²⁶

To learn to love the other ethically and nonviolently, first in her desperation and then in her absence, requires the witness to perform the nearly impossible. Such love involves “bow[ing] down before” the sufferer “with compassion” precisely in her difference from the self;²⁷ it involves getting beyond blame, unresolvable arguments, or a demand for reciprocity. An especially striking example of such peacemaking occurs at the end of novel where Yoli imagines a feat that neither she nor the historical Toews could bear to undertake: accompanying the suicidal sister to a permitted, planned death in Switzerland. No mere compensatory fantasy, this vision suggests that an ethical relationship of address and response is not confined to the realm of the living, and that the affective touches of the dead may prove as transformative as those from the physically present community. Yoli, in the aftermath of the traumatic and traumatizing death of her sister, strives to respond to Elf’s pleas to be seen as fully human and to envision anew a caring, nonjudgmental practice of witness to suicide. Yoli did not want her sister to die. Toews did not want her sister to die. But character and autobiographical author alike resolutely work to rid themselves of the enmity that deforms love.

In a 2014 interview, Toews discusses her continuing address of the relationship between the suicide and the survivor: “There’s this great line by Václav Havel,” she says. “I just read it recently— otherwise I probably would have tried to find a place to throw it in [the novel]. ‘Sometimes I wonder if suicides aren’t in fact sad guardians of the meaning of life.’ I just love it. I don’t know exactly what it means or what I even think it means, but I think about it a lot. . . . I don’t know. It’s open-ended.”²⁸ Taking my prompts from *All My Puny Sorrows*, I propose that the suicide guards the meaning of life

²⁶ Oliver, *Witnessing*, 90.

²⁷ Toews, *All My Puny Sorrows*, 246. See also 91.

²⁸ Mark Medley, “Complicated kindness: Miriam Toews grapples with the sister who asked her to help end her life,” *National Post*, April 11, 2014, news.nationalpost.com/arts/books/complicated-kindness-miriam-toews-grapples-with-the-sister-who-asked-her-to-help-end-her-life, accessed May 26, 2016.

by reintroducing the living to the “great mysteries” of “earth’s sorrows and joys” that simultaneously bind and divide us.²⁹ The suicide reminds us of the urgency of learning to dwell with those whose feelings we may neither comprehend nor alleviate, lest we turn tyrannical in our demands for what passes as reasonable or acceptable. If in our mourning we turn towards rather than away from those we have lost to non-accidental death, we may find ourselves confronted with the coercive predilections within the self and confounded by the questions of good and evil. Divested of our certainties, our grief might be mingled with gratitude for our spirit’s continued growth under the tutelage of the dead. “Violence,” Toews asserts, “is eternal.”³⁰ So, too, must peace-making be.

Grace Kehler is Associate Professor of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario.

²⁹ I have excerpted phrases from Rainer Maria Rilke’s “Duino Elegies: The First Elegy,” *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. and trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage, 1989), 155.

In the end, those who were carried off early no longer need us:
they are weaned from earth’s sorrows and joys, as gently as children
outgrow the soft breasts of their mothers. But we, who do need
such great mysteries, we for whom grief is so often
the source of our spirit’s growth—: could we exist without *them*?

³⁰ Toews, *All My Puny Sorrows*, 251.