

Literary Refractions

On the morning of November 7, 1999 Rudy Wiebe preached a sermon about hope at St. John's [Anglican] Church in Elora, Ontario. Faith and love protect the heart, he said, but hope protects the mind, the head. Later the same day, also at St. John's, Wiebe delivered the second annual T.W. Smyth Memorial Lecture. He was introduced by T.W. (Bill) Smyth's eldest son, who spoke of his father's intense interest, during the last years of his life, in the writings of Rudy Wiebe. T.W. Smyth had completed his PhD dissertation, "Rudy Wiebe as Novelist: Witness and Critic Without Apology," in the spring of 1997, shortly before his sudden death. Smyth had taken the title for his thesis from Wiebe's article, "The Artist as a Critic and a Witness," published in *Christian Living* in 1965.¹ In his Smyth Memorial Lecture, published here, Rudy Wiebe uses that same article as a point of departure, and he speaks here, as he did in 1965, to issues concerning the role of the writer and the nature and function of his art.

In the past Wiebe has used images such as the great "steel lines" of the railroad to express the vast scope and weight of fiction. Here he suggests that fiction is like an iceberg, not as grounded (in fact) as it might at first appear to be. Like an iceberg, fiction inevitably "breaks loose at last from its stolid grounding." What the writer knows, Wiebe observes here, can carry him only to the doorstep of the great house of fiction, but the writer must move beyond the door, into territories he might not ever have wished to explore, "perhaps could not even have imagined existed until fiction itself forced them into visibility."

Wiebe's 1965 essay "The Artist as a Critic and a Witness" was directed at a Mennonite audience, some members of which had expressed outrage in response to the publication of Wiebe's first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, which had appeared three years before.² In that work of fiction, with its redemptive Christian vision, Wiebe had dared to address matters that members of his community had tacitly agreed should not be spoken of in public: most notably, the inevitable hypocrisy and destructive momentum of an unrestrained patriarchy.

At the heart of his Smyth lecture, Wiebe included a story that once more addresses a subject about which there has been mostly silence in the Mennonite community: the "sexual victimization" of women – especially during

what has come to be called the Great Trek of the Mennonites who fled Ukraine with retreating German armies in the closing years of the Second World War. On that late fall Sunday afternoon, Rudy Wiebe, framed by the wood and brass of pulpit and pipe organ, read what he called “a short piece of a novel I am trying to write,” and, while he read, the afternoon autumn light, refracted through the stained glass windows of the church, gradually faded. By the time the story was over, the dominant light in the sanctuary shone only on Wiebe’s script, and Wiebe’s audience sat rapt, in silence. The story Wiebe read that afternoon, still a work in progress and hence not available for publication here, is absent from this “literary refraction,” except for its evocative title, “Woman, You Come.”

Rudy Wiebe remarks, in the piece that follows here, that his story “Woman, You Come” is rooted in his own memory, during a time when, as a teenager, he overheard two men in church wondering, with reference to three post-war refugee women newly arrived in their congregation, what these women would have “had to do to make it through the war.” Here, Wiebe provides a context for his first public reading of that story. But he does much more. He explains why he refuses, as a creature of God, to remain wordless in the face of evil. And he provides his readers with another valuable “statement about the theoretical foundations of his art.”³

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Notes

¹ This article is reprinted in *A Voice in the Land: Essays By and About Rudy Wiebe*, ed. W.J. Keith (Edmonton, AB: NeWest, 1981), 39-47.

² For Wiebe’s retrospective reflections on the hostile reception his first novel received from members of the Mennonite community, see his essay “The Skull in the Swamp.” The essay appeared first in *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 5 (1987), 8-20 and was more recently reprinted in Rudy Wiebe, *River of Stone: Fictions and Memories* (Toronto, ON: Vintage, 1995), pp. 249-273.

³ W.J. Keith’s introduction to Wiebe’s 1965 *Christian Living* essay in *A Voice in the Land* speaks of that work as “a valuable early statement about the theoretical foundations of his art” (p.39).