Living on the Iceberg
"The Artist as Critic and Witness" 36 Years Later

Rudy Wiebe

For three weeks during this past summer I was part of a Geological Survey of Canada camp on the northeastern coast of Ellesmere Island, in one of the many areas in our giant country where no human beings have lived for at least a thousand years. From the gravel beaches of the Nares Strait, which at that point narrowly separates Canada from Greenland, I watched the winter sea ice gradually shatter into pans and drift south; often its flatness was studded by icebergs broken away from some immense glacier even farther north, that sailed imperceptibly by like white craggy islands lost forever to the ocean blazing blue in the niveous summer sun. But there was one iceberg, not discernibly larger than the rest and despite all the ice grinding past, which remained motionless in the middle of the channel; obviously, it was grounded. After some days I began to feel I wanted to stand there, on it. It was not until several months after I had returned to my home in Edmonton that my imagination penetrated what, beyond the cold facticity of ice, I had been looking at, and felt.

Much of the fiction I have written in the last four decades rests on facticity – or perhaps I had better say *hinges* ("rests" implies far too much fixedness – too grounded if you please), much of the fiction I write hinges on *facticity*: data such as exact dates, precise places quite accurately described, the actual acts that living people have (insofar as they can still be established) literally, historically, done. In fact (!), I have often found far more imaginative

---

Rudy Wiebe, twice recipient of the Governor General's Award, is the author of Peace Shall Destroy Many *(1962),* The Blue Mountains of China *(1970),* The Temptations of Big Bear *(1973),* A Discovery of Strangers *(1994),* River of Stone: Fictions and Memories *(1995),* Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman *(with Yvonne Johnson) (1998), and many other works of fiction and non-fiction. Professor Emeritus at the University of Alberta, he continues to live and write in Edmonton.*

stimulus in such historical, geographical data than in any fictional structure I might invent – though I do love inventiveness. My thinking often goes: why expend energy in concocting a world and people (as speculative fiction does, for example) when we actually live in such a marvelously evocative one already, one more dense with mystery and secrets and contradictions than anything most of us most of the time could possibly make up?

So, let me offer you a further, personal, fact (not a factoid): on the day I turned 28, October 4, 1962, I received in Winnipeg from my publisher McClelland and Stewart in Toronto, copies of my first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. Further copies appeared in Canadian bookstores at the same time, and after that many people asked me two questions:

1) "Why did you write a novel?"

2) "Is it true?"

That is one of the things I liked about the literary scholar Bill Smyth of Elora, Ontario: he never asked me those questions. Of course, Dr. Smyth was an intelligent and highly skilled reader from whom you might not expect such queries, but I can assure you that numerous literary scholars have asked me exactly those questions, albeit using somewhat longer words such as "autobiographical" or "historiographic meta-fictions." The fact is, Bill Smyth never asked me, personally, any question at all, and the first I heard of him was in a typically cryptic note of two sentences which John Howard Yoder wrote me from Notre Dame University on June 11, 1995. The first sentence (the second, and last, referred to a completely different matter) John wrote was: "Dear Rudy: Just met one T. W. Smyth who seems to have a good grasp of your work." Among other things, that is what I greatly admire about the scholar in whose honor this lectureship is established: it seems he read the novels with great intensity, and whatever they told him, that he dealt with; he did not contact me – as he easily might have – and expect me to give reasons for actions perpetrated perhaps thirty years ago which are often as inexplicable to me now as anything I might have imagined then. Indeed, if I answer at all now, I have to make it up – as I sometimes do, especially in quick media interviews. Smyth studied the text, as it stands, or as it falls – no matter – the novel text is what matters, not what the writer can elaborate about it half-a-lifetime after the fact. He did what I have at times advised scholars to do: "If you want to, write about what is published, but leave me personally out of it;

just pretend I'm dead."

Well, time inevitably, and certainly, teaches us our mortality. But in 1962 I was too young to think that way. Besides, a Mennonite novelist was such an oddity, especially to Mennonites themselves, that speaking personally was demanded, and though I resolutely kept silent for six months after publication, I did write a piece about writing my first novel for the weekly newspaper *The Canadian Mennonite* (April 11, 1963), though I prefaced my short comments with a careful:

> Any work of art worthy the name ... bears within itself its reason for existence and its own justification ... If (*Peace Shall Destroy Many*) does not say it [that is, explain *why* it exists], (then) why burden a dead matter with the appendage of an explanation?

Five months later, however, I was a professor of English at Goshen College, Indiana, an institution sponsored by the Mennonite Church, and so, more than ever, I was expected to speak professionally, or as it were, "professingly," about what I wrote; I tried to do that, in an arm's-length, third person kind of way, in an invited lecture first given in November, 1963 at Tabor College, Kansas (a college sponsored by a different branch of Mennonite church), entitled "The Christian as Novelist." In the following year this talk metamorphosed itself variously and was finally published in 1965 under the more encompassing title of "The Artist as a Critic and a Witness" (*Christian Living*, Scottdale, Pa., March, 1965; an earlier, and lengthier, incarnation appeared somewhat later in print, in *The Journal of Church and Society*, Fresno, Calif., v. 1, n. 2, Fall, 1965). To judge from his footnotes, Dr. Smyth used the *Christian Living* form of this essay as a certain basis in reading my novels, and, when considering this lecture, I thought it might be interesting to look at the essay again after all these decades.

If I may quote myself from an unpublished lecture called "Words to the End of the World" (1982):

> In his essay, "The Wind at Djemila," Albert Camus writes:
>
> > A man lives with a few familiar ideas, two or three at the most, and here and there, in contact with the world and men, they are polished, shaped, changed. It takes years for a man to evolve an idea he can call his own, one he can speak of with authority.
>
> I take the term "a few familiar ideas" to refer to large concepts, the

great bones and spinal cord that hold an individual's human shape erect in the factual and ideological confusion of contemporary life.

So now, if Camus is right, can I in 1999, beginning with ideas first expressed in 1963, can I see any imaginative evolvement of "a few familiar ideas" in the hundreds of thousands of fictional words I have since written?

(As a predictive aside: if no discernible imaginative change has taken place in my thinking and writing since 1963, then we are all wasting our time, me writing, you reading.)

The piece "The Artist as a Critic and a Witness" tries to explicate three fundamental principles about art:

1) that the work itself, not the artist as a person or a personality, is the crucial matter in artistic creation;

2) that there is no one, single "meaning" to a complex artistic work. "Its meaning depends upon the interaction between the work and beholder";

3) that there is an inherent moral quality in all art. "Literature is never amoral; it is either moral or immoral. Bad art is inevitably immoral."

It seems to me that in 1963 I had a much clearer concept of both morality and meaning in art than I have now; certainly a much more dogmatic one. I went on to speak specifically about the novel (the art form I am still struggling with), and asserted that the novelist was not a teacher of anything because the medium (that is, the art form itself) did not allow it, and that in order for the novelist to be a critic of and a witness to society, he must *allow the novel to be a novel*, that is, not try to make it a propagandizing or sermonic instrument but rather let it speak:

1) through the metaphor of story;

2) by showing life as it truly is. That meant, showing us man (I meant all human beings of course) both as he is and as he may be. "The artist must have the guts to look at everything man can do, in his best moments as well as his worst. He cannot allow himself to be stared down by life."

This is a hasty summary of what I said in 1963, and it still rings basically true. What seems clear now is that, after publishing one novel, I had learned at least one irreducible fact.

The controversy *Peace Shall Destroy Many* created in the Mennonite community taught me once and for all that, to a very large extent, *every reader reads their own novel*. If you can imagine the writer as an organ-

master playing a concert on the pipe-organ consciousness of the reader, then not even the greatest of masters – Tolstoi or Faulkner or Dickens, or take your pick – ever plays exactly the same concert twice: every pipe-organ-reader is simply too drastically different to sound the same.

But, however prescient these principles in that 1963 talk were, I did not understand their implications for trying to live a writer's life. However separated writer and fictional text may be, the writer's personality is nevertheless absolutely crucial to the text: every text begins (as creative writing instructors always underline) with "what the writer knows," *but* that is simply the beginning. What I understand from over forty years of writing fiction is that the best texts go on into what the writer does not, indeed cannot, know when beginning to write. To speak personally, the fiction must move into worlds that perhaps I don't like, that I wouldn't ever want to explore, perhaps could not even have imagined existed until fiction itself forced them into visibility. In other words, "Write what you know" is barely a doorstep into the house of fiction – better we should say "mansion of fiction" or "skyscraper," because certainly fiction at its most magnificent is always a building complex and immense beyond any of our known conceptions, and that includes the writer.

Oddly enough, it was the book which I wrote together with Yvonne Johnson, *Stolen Life: the Journey of a Cree Woman* (1998), which forced me to realize this most clearly. The book is called nonfiction because it tells the facts Yvonne remembers of her literal life, and also the facts of my searching it out with her, an overwhelming and wrenching life which, truly, I would not, could not have imagined on my own. And oddly, in a similar way, I realized that the fiction I have tried to write all my adult life is also that: though I always began with "what I knew," or at least thought I knew, as each particular fiction developed, I always at some point found myself trying to write what for me was, in the first place, unknown and therefore, through ignorance, essentially unimaginable. The act of making fiction made the knowledge for the imagining unavoidable.

In that sense, writing *Peace Shall Destroy Many* gave me small experience for writing any subsequent fiction. Following the concept of "write what you know," I wrote the last chapter of that novel first; then, knowing the end, I backed up just far enough until I had a beginning from which I could get the whole story in to explain the ending I had already made. Simple, eh? That

– and inexperience, of course – was why I could write it so fast: I began in July, 1959 and by March, 1960 it was finished. At one point I re-wrote a complete draft in 2 1/2 months.

Well, may the Creator be praised, writing novels is not a stopwatch competition with Donovan Bailey. It is not speed but nerve that counts, the courage of your imagination in exploring the black, mysterious, mostly opaque room of the house of fiction that opens before you, a room, you gradually realize, which cannot and will never exist in any human imagination unless *you and you alone* go in there and explore it.

The other implication of the writer principles I could not quite comprehend in 1963 was the one about not letting life stare you down. Again, trying to put Yvonne's life into words proved to me, in my soul as in my digestion, how grotesquely difficult that can be. You will understand if I mention one of the most unbearable human events of this century: how do you write about the holocaust? The ancient Jewish tradition that speaking about evil may in itself evoke that very evil, so great is the power of language – well, what if you write about it? Not only hear the words, but hold them in black and white before your eyes, make an indelible record which can be looked at and *contemplated* again and again? Should one actually remember, look into the very face of such absolute evil? Is writing about it not dignifying it? The "better" you write, is it not possible you will so much the more awaken, stir, that very spirit of inexpressible evil within yourself, and within your reader? Therefore, must you – as so many survivors have found it necessary – must everyone remain silent?

Thousands of European refugees came to Canada after the war, and around 1950 in the prairie town of my teens I remember that, among many others, three Mennonite refugee sisters arrived with some seven or eight children between them; but no husbands. The oldest boys were my age, their fathers had been destroyed by the war, and their mothers as I saw them were beautiful women. They came to Canada sponsored by our church, and there was a time when I heard one male church member say to another about those three: "I wonder what they did to make it through the war."

I do not know, now, whether it was an older or a younger man speaking; or if perhaps he said, "I wonder what they had to do to make it through the

war." But no matter, his meaning was in his tone, that tone makes those words indelible still, a half century later.

I once asked my friend Harry Loewen if his mother had ever talked about what happened to her, personally, on their trek in 1943 from the Ukraine with the retreating German armies, of being overrun by the Red Army, of their years in hiding and the eventual refugee camps. He told me essentially what he wrote in a book he edited called *Road to Freedom* (to be published in September, 2000):

> "Mennonite women were willing and able to describe vividly many aspects of the terror they experienced, except for their sexual victimization. I know my mother knew much about this horrific aspect of the war, but she never spoke about it even when I asked her directly to tell me."

So, nothing remains except to say, with Hamlet, "The rest is silence"?

But – human beings are animals that talk; for me, language is what makes us as god-like as we can conceive of God to be; in *Genesis* Elohim creates our entire world by his spoken Word. For human beings to remain wordless in the face of the greatest evil that humanity can perpetrate upon itself is to deny humanity its greatest gift: the very image of God in us. As a writer, a human being who all his life has tried to make things with words, I *must* dare to explore my greatest terror, even as it may prove to be my greatest ignorance. I may well make a grotesque mess of it – but I must try, or indeed, as Jesus himself told us, the very stones will cry out against me.

So, by way of illustrating what I mean by my title, "Living on the Iceberg," I want to read a short piece of a novel I am trying to write. This part is set in the midst of horrifying war, which I have never personally experienced, and is told from the point of view of a person named Elizabeth Katerina Wiebe.

I dedicate the first reading of this story in progress
to the memory of Bill Smyth:
Woman, You Come

*

When I left Ellesmere Island on July 17, 1999, all the pack-ice of the Nares Strait had streamed south, but the solitary iceberg remained in its spot, grounded. I had tried to persuade our helicopter pilot to fly me there; I had never, I told him, touched an iceberg. But he refused.

"Any weight on it, it could shift, roll, and you're sliding hell-and-gone for ice water."

"So hover, I'll stand with one leg on a pontoon."

He laughed; like every pilot I've met, he knew himself to be in absolute control of his particular mechanical world, and he did not bother answering me. But late one afternoon, after the helicopter had been repaired for a malfunction and he was testing it with the mechanic aboard, he roared away low over the strait and landed on the iceberg; when they returned, he had a jug of water collected from its surface pools: perfect, clear water, totally empty of taste in its niveous purity. I found it hard to forgive him.

Could one live on an iceberg the way a writer lives on fiction?

Purely; obsessively; trying to speak the hitherto unspeakable, to inscribe the hitherto unfaceable until both become the writer's and reader's unknowable but nevertheless determining mystery, as the genetic codes in our every cell determine our ancestry even as they focus our imagination? The ineffable joy of being a writer even as the iceberg of fiction breaks loose at last from its stolid grounding in sea-bottom mud and moves out between landmasses into the immense waters that girdle the earth, even as it sails on into its slow, inevitable, and human, dissolution.