"Adam, who are you?"
The Genealogy of Rudy Wiebe's Mennonite Protagonists

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Adam Peter Wiebe, the protagonist of Rudy Wiebe's latest novel, *Sweeter Than All the World*, has not fared well in many reviews of the book. Among the complaints about the novel's excessive number of themes,[1] lack of momentum, and a ragged, war-torn quilt of a plot,[2] comes the refrain: this Adam is a poor excuse for a central character, "a scarified creature of the 20th century, haunted by – just about everything."[3] Unimpressed reviewers account for Adam's vague, unconvincing personal struggles and "stilted dialogue"[4] by dismissing him as an awkward plot device designed to hold together "as much Mennonite history as the author can discover."[5] Because the non-Adam chapters of the novel come to us through unusually strong first-person voices – "I was born almost five hundred years ago"[6] begins the first of these narrators, and she maintains her certainty of self and of belief even in the face of the fire of martyrdom – Adam's pitiful, and pitiable, navel-gazing tends to provoke initial impatience and dismissal. In the words of Joe Wiebe of *The Brantford Expositor*, "when the modern man is lost and wandering in the wilderness, why does it have to go on for so long?"[7]

Adam does seem a Mennonite Prufrock, indecisive, cowardly, yet smart-alecky and too literate by half. He's too small, somehow, for this epic novel with its sweep of Mennonite history and its large philosophical questions. Although he wanders, Odysseus-like (Sirens and all), over the face of the earth, his existential angst is dwarfed by the sufferings of his ancestors. Besides, his initial impetus is flight, not quest. He is no Beowulf or Galahad, sent by his tribe or court to kill a threatening dragon or find a Holy Grail for the benefit of all. Even after Adam announces his intention of re-rooting himself on his father's homestead, it is hard not to visualize him as one who could still, with a shrug of his shoulders, mutter evasively, "That's not what I meant. That is not what I meant at all" (*STAW*, 106).

Although Adam Wiebe does share some traits with Eliot's Prufrock, I read him more as a Mennonite Everyman, who must negotiate the Anabaptist tightrope between the choosing self and the enabling constraints of the

believers' community.[8] Adam is the logical and theological descendant of Thom Wiens in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, John Reimer in *The Blue Mountains of China*, and James Dyck in *My Lovely Enemy.*[9] All of these men have provoked confused readings and derogatory labels from one camp or other. Non-Mennonite readers see them as existential wanderers, marginalized from their rigid communities. In that role, these protagonists become partially understandable, at least until near the end when Wiebe imposes a sentimental, or unfashionably monologic, ending.[10] Believing Mennonites, on the other hand, attempt to read the novels as stories of redemption, but often have difficulty forgiving Wiebe for the confusing multiplicity of voices and, above all, for making his objects of grace, especially the last two, such worthless, unrepentant human beings.

A more productive way to read all these protagonists, for both Mennonite and non-Mennonite readers, is to recognize that they do not function primarily as developing individuals, let alone heroes, despite their increasingly epic contexts. As was pointed out in an interview with Wiebe in India, Wiebe's novels resemble "Third World novels," the "kind of novel where community is more important than the individual. That is, there is a shift in the form itself from the individual consciousness to the consciousness of the community."[11] Yet his protagonists are not just the sites in which the "clash of communities, of world views" is played out.[12] They are also choosers – Anabaptist choosers evaluating several ways of being Mennonite in the world. The choices Wiebe affirms are made possible only by and within the community, choices that then also redefine the nature of that community. This dialectic tension between the need for individual responsibility and the importance of the supporting community is present in all four of Wiebe's "Mennonite" novels, but it is increasingly developed through metaphor rather than direct exposition.

Thom Wiens in *Peace Shall Destroy Many* chooses within a narrow range of possibilities and in relation to a distinctly separated Mennonite church community. The immediate time-line Wiebe allows Thom is only a year, and the historical frame of reference in which he functions is only the living memories of the aging leaders of the church. Even so, Thom has several models of being Mennonite to choose from, all of which appeal to him at some level, however briefly: Deacon Block offers him security through rigid

strength, unshakeable conviction, and unwavering reliance on tradition; Thom's mother and Pastor Lepp encourage gentle piety and love even in disagreement – a form of non-resistance that occasionally resembles the path of least resistance; Thom's brother David models the commitment and zeal of a missionary; and Joseph Dueck, who probes all tradition in the light of Scripture, dares to apply the biblical command to love others to the Métis living nearby, who have usually been ignored by the Mennonites. The didactic tone of the novel leaves no doubt that the first model (authoritarian tradition) is unacceptable, the second two (passive peace-keeping and evangelical zeal) deserve respect, and the last model (sacrificial love) receives authorial blessing. When Thom rebels against Deacon Block's ruthless exclusionary tactics with a frustrated "Why must we in Wapiti love only Mennonites?" (*PSDM*, 215), he merely makes explicit what has already been made very clear through the plot and through Joseph Dueck's persuasive letters.

What images Wiebe uses in the novel support the central argument for an inclusive community of love, without expanding or complicating the argument. Most prominent among these images is the bush that surrounds Wapiti – both a literal barrier between Mennonites and the world and symbolically, in Thom's dream of the burning bush, a patriarchal boundary that has to give way before change is possible. Another significant boundary foregrounded in the novel is the disintegrating fence that provokes difficulties between Thom and his nemesis, the fallen-away Mennonite, Herb Unger. The community, speaking in the voice of Block, wants the wooden rails replaced with the nastier and sturdier barbed wire. (That painful string will reappear in other novels.) Song, in contrast, transcends boundaries: Thom feels one with the congregation and with God when he sings the beloved Mennonite hymns, and is able to connect most fully with the Métis families when he brings in his friends to sing for them. Song comes closest to the language of love that Thom hopes can be learned (*PSDM*, 198).

The Blue Mountains of China likewise offers a choice among ways of being Mennonite, but the historical and geographical contexts have widened considerably. The single, authoritative voice of *Peace Shall Destroy Many* has been replaced by multiple centers of consciousness in multiple contexts. While John Reimer does function as a protagonist, or at least as link among the stories (and thus a precursor of Adam Wiebe), he is not so much chooser

himself as a representative of one of the ways of being Mennonite in the world among which the reader must choose. Except for John Reimer's sermon in the ditch, authorial control is most evident in the leitmotif of "nothing."

"Nothing" is the most powerful image in *The Blue Mountains of China*. Over and over again, characters utter variations on the practical Mennonite impulse to dismiss whatever "doesn't bring anything in."[13] "What is that to get ahead?" millionaire Dennis Williams/Willms asks the cross-carrying John Reimer, while his mother-in-law, Frieda Friesen, achieves a remarkable peace with "her nothing" (*BMC*, 241). The repeated "nothing" phrase highlights the self-sacrifice of individuals like David Epp, Sr., David Epp, Jr., and John Reimer, yet the only "nothing" actions that can be carried out in the novel are enabled by community support. David Epp, Sr. can leave his wife and child because his friend and the rest of the village will take care of them. Samuel Reimer cannot answer God's call to go to Vietnam because his community not only refuses to support him but actively prevents him from obeying God. In the end, Jakob Friesen IV, the one who "believes that he believes nothing" (*BMC*, 235), who complains bitterly that "the big trouble with Jesus is that he gives you nothing to hold in the hand" (*BMC*, 272), nevertheless utters a simple, sacramental statement more powerful than Reimer's sermon, "it is nothing for one to drink alone when there are two by the fire" (*BMC*, 263).

Both Thom Wiens and John Reimer function wholly within a Mennonite context. They both seek a way of incarnating belief that does not also separate them from community, although they are willing to bear the cost of separation, if necessary. Both are also confronted with the wholly Other (Métis, Russians, Indians) and with variations of the *aufjefollna Mennist* (fallen-away Mennonite). The Unger boys in *Peace Shall Destroy Many* are seen so completely through Thom Wiens's perspective that they arouse little sympathy from the reader, although some in the community attempt to reclaim them. In *The Blue Mountains of China*, the fallen away Mennonites, although more sympathetically portrayed, are even more prominent in their disruption of community. Serebro, of Mennonite descent, has become a Communist commissar; Escha, the Russian servant, likely the son of some straying Mennonite patriarch, provokes Jacob Friesen V into murder; Liesel Driediger grieves her father with her scorn of all things Mennonite and, in the final

chapter (now as the linguistics professor Elizabeth Cereno), tempts the young Irene with her selfish freedom. Yet one senses each one of these characters would believe if they could. These fallen away Mennonites are less "runners, hiders, and liars," in Muttachi Friesen's bitter phrase (*BMC*, 34), than those Mennonites in the novel who put their material wealth and religious security above the claims of genuine community. Muttachi's phrase actually applies even more aptly to the entire community in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, which has attempted to run away from the world for its own spiritual security and, incidentally, material profit. Such action undermines the possibility of community even in its insistence on conformity.

In *My Lovely Enemy*, the *aufjefollna Mennist*, this time a definite "runner, hider, and liar," becomes the protagonist, signaling a marked shift in Wiebe's focus and technique. James Dyck, history professor, adulterer, and urbanite, has some kinship with Thom Wiens, having lived under the watchful eye of Old Hildebrandt, an updated Deacon Block, James's "father's final ultimate and immovable authority," who "always knew right and wrong" (*MLE*, 123). Unlike Thom, however, James flees from his Mennonite home town at the first opportunity. He is no prophet, prepared to advocate change. In fact, although his education and his photographic memory give him access to textual models of faith from the Bible to John Donne to Broken Arm, James does not choose so much as submit to being chosen. He is a recipient of a grace that he scarcely begins to understand and a participant in a community that can only be described in the language of magic realism. Thus Wiebe takes the reader even further on the journey of discovering that traditional ways of thinking alone do not work – not for reading texts and not for incarnating Christ's love. Even more than in *The Blue Mountains of China*, the main work of understanding is granted to the reader, partly through the very erudite web of allusions and partly through the central conceit of divine love as passionate romance.

The dominant image of sexual love in *My Lovely Enemy* concerns the loss of self, as the image of "nothing" did in *The Blue Mountains of China*, but Wiebe's choice of the "small death" of sexual intercourse to explore that loss of self has led to much misinterpretation and outrage (including mine, at first) and not only in Mennonite readers. T.W. Smyth, in his excellent article on *My Lovely Enemy*, quotes Wiebe's assertion that "in one sense [the novel]

is nothing more than a long, drawn-out metaphor consistently and artistically worked out to its logical summation."[14] Smyth then concludes, "*My Lovely Enemy* in that sense is a working out of the parable of Hosea. [. . .]. [Its] essential focus and the measure of its significance is not the eroticism that leads to adultery but agapic love, particularly love as exhibited in the vicissitudes of marriage."[15] The vision of community has thus moved away from the church, a social construction that ethnic Mennonites can simply acquiesce to rather than choose, to marriage, in which love must be chosen and continually chosen, even as the self is subsumed by that choice into an entity that is larger than itself.

James has fled from the rigid rules of his community of origin, disdaining its rejection of the body with its sexual desires, yet he still thinks in dichotomies of flesh and spirit, seeking possession rather than giving. Although the completely undeserved and unsought ecstasy Gillian offers him becomes also a "possible temptation of the personal Jesus" (*MLE*, 169), James never fully recognizes the positive models of love in his wife, Liv, and his mother, Liese, although he receives their forgiveness. Liese, in particular, is another model of "nothing" actions (although Wiebe doesn't use that term here), first in her choice to serve a demanding husband until death, and then as she sits, blind and deaf, praying, singing, and knitting "for far-away children."[16]

In *Sweeter Than All the World*, Wiebe returns to the narrative method of *The Blue Mountains of China*: the widened historical context, a protagonist who pulls the narrative strands together, the multiplicity of voices – this time all strong first-person voices who, I think, speak directly to the listening protagonist as much as to the reader. In *Sweeter Than All the World*, however, the ultimate argument for community voluntarily surrendered to is developed entirely through metaphor. No sermonizing here. Adam Wiebe is another *aufjefollna Mennist*, who, having perfected running and hiding to a fine art, stands in stark contrast to the other strong Mennonite characters who refuse to hide or run, whether it be from persecuting authorities or small-minded fellow Mennonites. Adam's flight from we're not sure what – perhaps his rigid background, more fundamentalist than Mennonite – turns into deliberate pursuit as he seeks out the stories of his ancestors, thereby uncovering even more ways of being Mennonite than the reader could discover in *The Blue*

Mountains of China. He then searches for his daughter, who has likewise become a runner and a hider. Adam thus functions both as runner from his family obligations and past and as runnee – the one from whom his daughter has fled. Adam is thus forced into acknowledging the pain resulting from both positions, a pain that pierces him into reclaiming what he has run from.

In *Sweeter Than All the World* a whole cluster of images – songs, threads, and knives – each of which functions as the single motif of "nothing" did in *The Blue Mountains of China* to oppose selfish running and hiding, raises echoes of previous novels, particularly of *My Lovely Enemy*. Just as James's mother had often sung *Heimatlieder*, and Gillian had spoken of her joy in love-making as "singing, but not just one voice, a whole orchestra, being yourself and a whole orchestra, together" (*MLE*, 176), so Adam's parents sing together, "their voices floating like lovers hand in hand" (*STAW*, 19), and the "overwhelming choir of twenty-six Peter Wiebe descendants" in Germany finds "hours of harmonies in a tiny apartment, their heads filling endlessly with identical words and running notes, their bodies leaning together like one body" (*STAW*, 19). Adam himself significantly cannot sing. Unlike Thom of *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, he cannot experience the oneness of corporate song.

But he can listen, especially toward the end of the novel, and singing and breath (both speaking and listening closely) are now also connected. The wind has blown occasionally in the first two novels, most notably over the company in the ditch near Calgary in *The Blue Mountains of China*. In *My Lovely Enemy*, the wind has become more explicitly spirit-like: as the voice of Maskepetoon explains, "[our ancestors] taught us that we must rise before dawn and listen very carefully for the voice of the wind; it sounds like two people singing the same song together" (158). In *Sweeter Than All the World*, the very breath of God is present as people speak to each other, often directly into the listening ear. What is heard is not sermons – Adam cannot remember a single one of the thousands he has heard – but songs and stories, both of which are threads that knit community.

Repeatedly, song is connected with the image of thread and knitting. Adam's mother's singing is a "sweet sound" that "threads brightness," "never [breaking] because of anger, unforgiveness, or even hatred" (*STAW*, 22). Most often, Adam's mother sings as she knits. In *The Blue Mountains of China*,

old Muttachi Friesen had kept spinning wool that she "had already spun a dozen or perhaps three thousand times" (35), a useless and hopeless action, but in *My Lovely Enemy*, James's mother knits "vests and stockings for third world children" (244) as she sings and prays for her own children (245). In *Sweeter Than All the World*, many women knit, making sweaters for their families "thick enough," Wybe Adams observes, "for any of God's storms on his endless ocean" (80). Both the knitting and the singing, in the context of the rich harmonies of those who sing together, evoke – in all of Wiebe's novels – the protection afforded by family and community.

Those strings that weave together a genuine, loving community are also threads of stories, sometimes followed, sometimes avoided, sometimes left unspoken in sympathetic silence. Adam initially doesn't understand much about his parents' past, though he remembers them "sitting there, suspending the thin thread of their songs across the marshes and bitter rivers of their past" (*STAW*, 26). As Adam begins, at age 19, to question them, "what they do is tell him small, personal, contradictory, denied, avoided details of their lives that explain very little; that are, as it seems, less facts than momentary needles tugging at a string of wool, knitting mittens to protect some hand they will never know; less facts than thin images of poles sticking up out of sinking ground, and holding up cables made possible" (*STAW*, 27). And thus the strings of songs, the threads of stories, and the wool for the knitting are combined with the ropes of Wybe Adam's first cable cars. All are strung for communal protection.

None of these strings, however, is held in place without needles, poles, and then knives. Already in *My Lovely Enemy*, James had winced as "a needle of [his] Vulcan past [slid] deep into [him]" (16). And those needles soon become daggers as James is "pinioned by [Jesus'] black eyes, nose long and Semitic like a dagger" (*MLE*, 138). Thus the tentative link among threads and songs and knives already has redemptive possibilities in *My Lovely Enemy*. When James protests to Jesus that it's "pretty hard to live, hanging by threads," Jesus replies, "it's really humanity's most natural position" (*MLE*, 135). That that isn't a Damocletian threat Gillian makes clear later when she describes her love-making, "I was strung by every nerve I have from all the stars and planets" (*MLE*, 153).

In *Sweeter Than All the World*, the stringing is more painful. The references to knives and needles and daggers multiply, particularly in connection with the violence and hurt that Mennonites, brothers, inflict on each other. Adam's mother finally speaks aloud the story of her two brothers, one a prisoner on a "long island shaped like a knife" (*STAW*, 213), the other a Communist, a General in the Soviet army, who "brought a knife" when he visited, "And stabbed his brother. *Spetje:* pricked. Like a possible needle wandering through wool" (*STAW*, 206). Knives are also made of words. As Jans Adriaenz says, "We ourselves have learned to make the immense teachings of Jesus into small, sharp knives to slice ourselves apart" (*STAW*, 85). Whenever the individual's conception of God is not balanced by a careful listening to others, the decisions result in the pain of separation.

At the same time, the needles continue to tug at the thread, and poles support the cables. What Adam needs to realize before he can begin to move toward wholeness is that the suffering itself – the needles, the knives, the betrayals and separations – is an inevitable part of the threads that hold together community (most often defined as family in this novel). As the scenes at the funeral of Adam's oldest sister make clear, the ones who escape suffering or otherwise remain impervious to it, covering it up with bland assurance in a private God (such as the braying Pastor Bill and Adam's insensitive, and deaf, older brother John) are the ones who become insufferable. Adam himself, as long as he refuses to suffer the pain of connection, is disdained, even by his son Joel. He becomes a much more sympathetic character after his daughter disappears and he begins to mourn her absence and cease to brush aside the pain of the break-up of his marriage. Only then does he cease fleeing. Early in the novel, when his typical response was ironic evasion or flippant wit, he reacts to Susannah's seeming distance with a decision to "push her, out of or into what or where he is not thinking" and reacts "quick and deep as a kitchen knife turning" (*STAW*, 100). By the end of the novel, when he has been given the grace of suffering – his own and, vicariously, that of his extended family – Adam can accept the knowledge "like a knife in his heart" that he and Susannah "will never stop loving each other" (*STAW*, 373). He can even override his anger at his brother John's callous bragging about God's goodness to him by choosing to tell stories of relatives he has discovered, stories that have more suffering in them than he can stand but less enmity than he had

initially surmised. Though he cannot sing, he can begin to knit oneness with stories, appropriately enough, over the grave of his beloved oldest sister.

The end of the novel foregrounds one other motif that deserves a fuller examination than can be given here – earth as a bastion of protection, as a source of growth (such as the turnips and potatoes of Wybe Adams in the last chapter), as the medium in which sins can be forgiven and forgotten. As David Loewen's mother in Paraguay recognizes, "On earth, if God is good, you can sometimes forgive a few things long enough so you don't have to drag them after you all the way into heaven before the Throne of Grace" (*STAW*, 330). She can let the name of the man who killed her son "rest in the sand, there's enough sand for all of us here" (330). It is also the enclosing earth that finally reconciles Trish to her own identity and intimates the possibility of her forgiving her family for the pain inflicted on her. The poles that suspend the cables are rooted in the ground.

Perhaps Adam is an epic hero; in his quest for meaning in his initially too-easy life, he has stumbled into something much larger than himself. He does not discover his identity so much as he is surrounded by a crowd of witnesses that claims him as one of their own. Adam is certainly no Prufrock who would drown rather than accept reality with its responsibilities. Adam chooses rather to root himself in the earth, which, as a symbol of forgiveness that protects, enables him to welcome that "irrefutable needle of longing" (*STAW*, 244) and belonging.

Notes

[1] Joe Wiebe, "Too many themes burden book." Review of *Sweeter Than All the World*, by Rudy Wiebe, *Brantford Expositor* 12 August 2001, Books & Heritage: D8.
[2] Mark Sinnett, review of *Sweeter Than All the World*, by Rudy Wiebe, *Globe and Mail* 27 October 2001.
[3] Margaret Sweatman, "Exploration of Mennonite Suffering." Review of *Sweeter Than All the World*, by Rudy Wiebe, *Ottawa Citizen* 14 October 2001, The Citizen's Weekly: C9.
[4] Nancy Schiefer, "Drowning in Too Much Detail." Review of *Sweeter Than All the World*, by Rudy Wiebe, *London Free Press* 24 November 2001. D7.
[5] Sinnet.
[6] Rudy Wiebe, *Sweeter Than All the World* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2001), 29 (hereafter cited in the text as *STAW*).

[7] Joe Wiebe.
[8] For a fuller explanation of the Anabaptist theology of the choosing self within the believing community, see Robert Friedmann, "On Mennonite Historiography and On Individualism and Brotherhood," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 18 (April 1944): 117-22; Edna Froese, "To Write or To Belong: The Dilemma of Canadian Mennonite StoryTellers" (PhD diss., University of Saskatchewan, 1996), 12-44.
[9] Rudy Wiebe, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962; repr., Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1972), hereafter cited in the text as *PSDM*; Rudy Wiebe, *The Blue Mountains of China* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1970), hereafter cited in the text as *BMC*; Rudy Wiebe, *My Lovely Enemy* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1983), hereafter cited in the text as *MLE*.
[10] Bronwyn Drainie, "History repeats." Review of *Sweeter Than All the World*, by Rudy Wiebe, *Quill and Quire* October 2001; Penny Van Toorn, "Dialogizing the Scriptures: A Bakhtinian Reading of the Novels of Rudy Wiebe," *Literature and Theology: An International Journal of Theory, Criticism, and Culture* 9. 4 (December 1995): 439-48.
[11] Om P. Juneja, M.F. Salat, and Chandra Mohan, "'Looking at our Particular World': An Interview with Rudy Wiebe," *World Literature Written in English* 31.2 (Autumn 1991): 10.
[12] *Ibid.*
[13] A direct translation of the Low German phrase "doat bringt nuscht en."
[14] Rudy Wiebe, "The Artist as a Critic and Witness," in *A Voice in the Land: Essays By and About Rudy Wiebe*, ed. W.J. Keith (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1981), 44.
[15] T.W. Smyth, "*My Lovely Enemy* Revisited," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 63 (Spring 1998): 130.
[16] Smyth, 131.