

Mennonites in Crisis: Figures of Paradox in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*

J.D. Mininger

FOR GRANDPA

Eurethê moi hê entolê hê eis zôên, autê eis thanaton.
And the commandment, which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death.
(Romans 7:10)

Peace Shall Destroy Many opens with a “Prelude” scene in which two young boys by a stream pause to contemplate, among other things, “the water’s eternal refolding over the rocks” (10).¹ This figure of the timeless movement of nature continues in the form of rocks, as chapter one introduces Thom Wiens contemplating the amount of time and energy needed to clear a field of stones relative to the speed of the new technological machines of war performing training maneuvers overhead. Mennonite farmers such as he patiently work to mold the eternal, dynamic earth, and yet never truly subdue or bring the eternity of nature under human control, because, as Thom notes later in the story at the onset of the bitter-cold winter, “the whole cycle of seasons was an endless battle to retain existence” (199). Foremost in Thom’s mind as he works in the field is not the seemingly eternal nature of the heavy stones, but the fragile, finite character of human life. “There were no machines to pick rocks. But the machines for death were wind-swift. For a moment he felt he had discovered a great truth, veiled until now: the long growing of life and the quick irrevocableness of death” (12).

This fleeting insight into the interrelationship of time, life, and the rapidly changing and ever-closer world outside of the Mennonite community returns to Thom later in the story, but in the form of his confrontation with Elizabeth Block’s tragic death. Her death exposes a figure critical to the story, namely that her life had been stripped to what will be called, following Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, bare life (*vita nuda*).² This figure of bare life and its role in Mennonite life in Wapiti will lead this study, as it guides Thom to question the structure of law and sovereignty in the Wapiti

Mennonite community, the tenuous gaps separating the Mennonites from the world, and the crisis of faith that arises for Thom in the face of these lines of questioning.

Elizabeth's initial entry into the story comes by way of Thom's description, which characterizes her as unique among their community, particularly for a certain apparent lack of life:

Margret, slim in her white dress, came down the trail through the pines with Elizabeth Block. Looking up, Thom felt a somehow nameless sorrow push in him at Elizabeth's squandered womanhood. Not actually squandered, he thought, for she seemed never to really have lived it. Neglected, rather. Why had she never married? She was at least ten years older than Margret; she worked always: the hard drudging labour of men, yet work never seemed to interest her beyond the point of its immediate necessity. As far back as Thom could recall, she had appeared exactly as now, dumpy, uninvolved, oddly wasted. (25)

Elizabeth never lived a life that included "womanhood," but neither does she live the life of a man, though she indeed does the work normally assigned to men. Her life seems to hover in an indiscernible zone that belongs to neither traditional gender category, yet she belongs as much to the Mennonite community as any of the church members.

Perhaps the most striking picture of Elizabeth's life emerges from the poetic tropes of silence and pale colorlessness permeating chapters ten and eleven, which chronicle her sudden collapse, death from childbirth and hemorrhaging, and her funeral. Importantly, these tropes are linguistic repetitions that underscore lack – lack of sound and lack of color – and serve as markers of an existence void of otherwise normal modes and characteristics of life. Elizabeth's pallid, sickly complexion³ and her "colourless voice" are intensified by their contrast to Deacon Block's scar, which bursts with blood, the color of life *par excellence*, when he is told that Elizabeth is in childbirth. The frequent textual recurrences of the topos of silence are thrown into relief by the unabated, hammering din of the threshing crew working on the Block farm and the roar of trucks and tractors facilitating that work. At first this silence is merely the silence of awkward conversation between Thom and

Elizabeth: “He said, across the odd silence in the room, the cries of the men welling above the distant din of threshing, ‘Pretty hard, isn’t it?’” (135). Thom breaks this silence, appropriately enough, by asking Elizabeth what sounds she likes. She likes the reassurance of train whistles in the distance, but she says of those sounds, “it’s hard to hear them now” (135).

The trope of silence shifts away from simple silence and pleasant sounds, to the silence her father, regarding her, attaches to her life: “The long years she had silently spent on the farm abruptly tumble over him” (137). Even when Elizabeth gathers all of her energy in what is to be her final, desperate attempt to speak out from her life that is void of life, she can initially only whisper to Thom, saying, “Thom – go away from here.” She manages a passionate voice as she implores Thom, “God in Heaven! Can’t you see what’s happening to me,” but moments later she “crumbled *soundlessly* to the ground” [my emphasis] (141). This fall takes her, of course, to the final silence of death. It is significant, then, that her funeral begins and ends with the arrival and departure of the notably *silent* congregation – a noble tribute, and perhaps the only fitting eulogy, for a woman who essentially had no voice in her community.

Elizabeth’s lack of voice, with the important exception of her desperate plea to Thom, underlines the apparent lack of life that characterizes her from her initial entrance into the story. This apparent lack of life, however, is not a *lack* of life *per se*. Rather, in the figure of Elizabeth can be seen a fitting example of naked life, or bare life; and what appears to be lack of life is in fact her bare life beginning to coincide with her political life, a category belonging to the collective way of life in the Mennonite community. In other words, every aspect of her identity is beginning to be completely taken over, manipulated, and dominated by the social structures set up by her Mennonite community. There is no aspect of her life not conditioned by the community’s rules. Following Giorgio Agamben’s theorization in *Homo Sacer*, what he calls naked life, or bare life, corresponds to what in Greek is called *zōê*.⁴ The English word “life” subsumes both terms for life used by the Greeks: *zōê* and *bios*. *Zōê* designates bare life, that life which expresses the simple fact of being unto death, as shared collectively by all living things. *Bios*, alternately, characterizes politicized life, that is, the mode or way of being of an individual or group.⁵ This distinction between bare life (*zōê*) and a qualified, particular

life (*bios*) can be seen in Thom's thoughts at the funeral, as he considers Elizabeth's life and her final words to him:

He was the last person she had talked to on earth, and that knowledge gave her words an eternal significance. She had said he must get away from Wapiti to learn other ways; he would be ruined otherwise. And that last impassioned outburst, as if torn from her being, "Can't you see what's happened to me!" Almost as if she knew she was speaking her last word. Elizabeth, only vaguely pitied before, had that last day branded him forever with her personal being. In that moment when her eyes held his, the colourless woman had vanished and the human stood, naked, starved. He could not forget that. As he carried her body in the coffin down the church steps, that look reached after him and he knew himself eternally committed to something. Stepping to the ground in the sullen afternoon, he did not know what. (154-5)

Thom recognizes Elizabeth's *bios*, her "personal being" that seared itself into him, to have been awful and unpleasant. She lived a life of prostration to her father's work and her father's rules, lived through a mode of being in which she could not even fit a discernible traditional gender role, which, if understood positively, would at the very least have fitted her to expected work and rules. For this life, Thom could finally pity her. But at the moment he gauges the truth of her *bios*, he is simultaneously confronted not by the vision of her corresponding political, qualified life, but rather her bare life, "naked, starved." The fact of her "starved" bare life reveals that her entire being (*zoê*) had been given over to her toil-filled, neglected life (*bios*). The mental, physical, and spiritual duress of her qualified way of being had infected and wilted the core of her being – the simple fact of life itself. Thus, not only was her gender identity fighting indistinction, but her bare life had been politicized, and her bare life and the life of the community – which is to say, her father's life and rules—were reaching a zone of irreducible indistinction. She could no longer define herself as an individual whose life had meaning outside of her relationship to her work, family, and religious community. Her individual identity was being swallowed up completely by the conditions of life in the Mennonite community and the dictates of her father.

But the question is not whether in this fictional Mennonite context, in the modern and “real” Mennonite context, or even in the larger secular context, these forms of life can be theoretically de-linked.⁶ Rather, the question must be posed as to how and why to distinguish them in their co-mingled existence, while acknowledging their incapacity for separation. In other words, it is not a question of whether we can claim an individual or singular existence outside of the social structures that condition our identities, such as our work, friends, communities, and religious beliefs. Even if such a singular aspect to our lives exists, Elizabeth’s story shows us that as Mennonites adjusted to the encroachment of the modern world on their lives, these two forms of life melded into one form, dominated by the social and political distinctions of *bios*. The answers to how and why it is important to distinguish these two forms of life in spite of their inseparability lie in Elizabeth’s father, Deacon Peter Block, whose figure reveals the workings and logic of sovereignty and law within the Wapiti Mennonite community.

Deacon Block’s decisions determine the relationship that his community has to the outside world, and an examination of the logic of sovereignty shows how his decisions lead to the incapacity for separating bare life (*zoê*) from the social/political form of life (*bios*). Sovereign is he, according to political theorist Carl Schmitt, who, if given this power by the juridical order, decides the exception.⁷ In the case of a crisis or state of exception (*Ausnahmezustand*), Schmitt claims there can be no division of power. By definition, such situations fall out of the competence of the existing, positive legal order; and thus a kind of heroic – or demonic – single figure must step in, in order to take control over a paralyzed, divided, and undecided situation. By this logic of sovereignty, the sovereign is both inside and outside the juridical order. The sovereign guarantees the law in the decision as to when or if to suspend the law, yet places himself simultaneously outside the law precisely by (being capable of) suspending it. Though Peter Block is Deacon of the Mennonite community, he is not technically its sovereign. What is truly striking, however, is just how accurately Block’s actions mimic those of a sovereign.

Thom comments that “[church] policy originated almost exclusively with Block” (68), though that in itself does not entirely denote sovereignty. But in the wake of Block’s having had the final word on whether or not

English may be spoken in a church service – even if it is a children’s service with non-German speaking non-Mennonites present – Thom begins to sense (if only through that particular context) the structure of Block’s sovereignty. In conversation with Pastor Lepp regarding Block’s leadership, Thom incisively argues, “we are never to do anything that has not been done before, *in the church*; yet for his farm he buys a tractor, and everyone agrees it’s very fine” (88). Tractors are a step in a worldly direction, and Block decides, in this case, when the exception to the Mennonite mode of separation can be made. In this same vein, when Block is called upon to confront Herb Unger about his broken fence and the damage caused to the Wiens’ oats by Herb’s cows, Block gives a loan to Herb, who is not a church member, to fix the fence. While this example is not completely efficacious due to the possibility that this act falls under the category of loving one’s neighbor, Block’s sovereign position can be highlighted all the more clearly in the example of his buying out the Moosomins. In contrasting the cases of Herb and the instance of coercing the “breeds” to move away, Block tells Thom:

Herb’s had a hard youth and hasn’t been handled too well. Basically, he’s rebelling against his Christian home. But he still goes there and I’m convinced he will some day become a Christian and then we’ll welcome him into the church. But to have breeds members of our church? Can you imagine it? They’re not the stuff. (205)

Only more shocking than Block’s biological racist vision of his Mennonite community is his sovereign power to realize such a vision by deciding on the exception, in terms not only of who enters the church, but of those whose mere presence as geographical neighbors might infect the church through their *potential* to ask to join it. The structure of sovereign power here is formidable indeed, but can be seen most tellingly in Block’s decisions regarding his daughter’s life.

When Herman Paetkau, a “half-biological Mennonite” born out of wedlock, orphaned, and raised in a Mennonite home by his mother’s sister’s family, asked to marry Elizabeth, Block’s sovereign power emerged. Block refused to let a hard-working and clean-living Mennonite marry his daughter because Herman is a bastard, and the biological son of a non-Mennonite

man. Block here stands firmly inside and outside the rules of the community. He guarantees the rules with the force of his decision and simultaneously suspends the definition of a church member from outside the rules themselves by determining Herman to be unfit to marry his daughter, regardless of Herman's faithful adherence to the Mennonite faith and the community's rules. The paradox of Block's sovereignty, being simultaneously outside and inside, allows him the power to erase any part of Elizabeth's identity not already conditioned by his rules; his sovereignty produces the act of including Elizabeth's bare life in her political, qualified life. By definition her *bios* is produced by the community's rules, in this specific instance, by her father's power to allow or forbid her marriage. But based on the context of Herman's conception, Deacon Block's decisions completely control Herman's identity – the very conditions of his mere existence have been politicized. Elizabeth seems to intuit this originary, if hidden, activity of sovereignty to control and manipulate the lives and identities of those under that sovereign rule. And, importantly, she seems also to see the impotence of fighting this act of sovereign power and still remaining a member of the Mennonite community. Her quasi-revenge on her father in the form of a sexual liaison with Louis bears this out, because it mimics the conditions of Herman's birth.

It remains that Block's power of sovereign decision is granted – that is, suffered, understood in its multiple valences⁸ – by the community. He is, after all, not a sovereign in the most technical sense. The key point, however, is that, having presented himself the opportunity, Block indeed acts for all intents and purposes as the sovereign of the Mennonite community. But the question still remains *why* he acts as the sovereign, that unique figure of the community who simultaneously stands inside and outside of the rules.

Block actively takes on the role of sovereign for precisely the same underpinning reason that he moved to Wapiti and molded the community himself, and the same reason that buttresses the vast majority of sovereign decisions he makes: fear of the world. His lack of understanding of the basic structure of the relationship between Mennonites and the world betrays the deep-seated nature of this fear. The "teachings of the fathers," as Thom so frequently refers to them, developed from very different historical necessities and possibilities of separation from the world than the context conditioning the Wapiti Mennonites, namely, the inevitable infiltration of the world into

their community. This inevitable infiltration is played out in various forms throughout the novel: narrative strategies such as the frequent interruption of fragmented radio reports; plot twists like the arrival of the non-Mennonite teacher; the struggles of a polylingual setting in which the youth are separated from their elders by their knowledge of English; and, most obviously, the incendiary predicament of the Mennonites' simply relating to their non-Mennonite neighbors, let alone teaching them, as Thom and Joseph do. Block cannot be completely unaware of how radically the conditions of life in Wapiti differ from the historical circumstances informing the "teachings of the fathers." But what he does not seem to understand is the basic structure of Mennonites' relationship to the world, which has not changed, and which Block continually and seemingly unknowingly reinforces.

This basic structure is none other than that devastating and historical-traditional tool of church discipline, the ban. The ban, like the sovereign, is a paradoxical figure. The banished person is abandoned by the community to which the person was previously a member, thus becoming the excepted (non)member. The community maintains identity and form precisely due to this negational abandonment and excepting of the banned figure. Thus, in a manner of speaking, the community *includes* the banned figure in its own logic of self-identification in the very moment of *exclusion*. This logic guides the relationship between Mennonites and the world, even and especially as it exists in the theoretical birth of "Mennoniteness." To be separate from the world necessitates an originary abandonment and exclusion of that world, which simultaneously reinscribes the world into the mechanism of Mennonites' self-definition. Thus, in a metaphorical manner of speaking, the world was the first banned Mennonite, and is in a theoretical sense a vital – if veiled – structure of Mennonite life.

Block, in seemingly not understanding that the world has always been a force hidden at the core of Mennonite decisions, does everything he can – "he does so for everyone's good" (88) – to keep the world out. At one point he seems on the cusp of grasping the importance of this hidden relationship of Mennonites to the world, but it is not to be: "The irony of Peter Block's existence was, though he would rather have suffered death than participate in war, the World Wars of his time had shaped his life. He recognized this, yet, but for one stumble, the fact had never overcome him" (125). The

significance of Block's lack of understanding of this hidden relationship between Mennonites and the world lies in his firmly rooted fear of the world and the ways in which that fear guides his sovereign decisions. If Block better understood that relationship, perhaps this draconian figure would give way to a leadership style more adaptable to the world-historical context that bears on Wapiti. It seems that only Joseph truly understood the structure of the relationship between Mennonites and the world, and their often unacknowledged adherence in one another: "When he thought of it, Joseph felt a pang, almost of happiness that he was going out. Ha! he was thinking like them already: of going outside. Outside what?" (71). Joseph knew that the outside world was already inside the Mennonite community in Wapiti, and that they effectively adhered in one another.

At the end of the novel Thom encounters a crisis generated by his confrontation with the paradoxical figures surrounding him: Elizabeth's politicized bare life, Block's role as sovereign, and the corresponding attempts to stave off (by means of the ban) a world that has always informed Mennonite life. The crisis takes the shape of the question as to how to remain dedicated to Mennonite tenets of faith and peace while actively engaging the advancing world that is at war, where others fight for his privilege to stay home and claim C.O. status. The Draft could bring Thom's call any day. The damaging repression and denial of things and people non-Mennonite by Sovereign Block has caused ruptures in the community in the form of arguments over children's services and even his own daughter's death. And the world itself, including the new teacher and her healthy libido, has also ruptured the community. These dynamics converge to place Thom in this crisis of faith. True crisis can be seen as being totally absorbed in something, like love – or, in this case, like the Mennonite faith – and not lacking the courage to risk *everything*. Thus, the question at the core of Thom's crisis asks: Is he willing and able to risk the security of his role within the community to live out the new understandings of and possibilities for faith that his crisis generates?

Whether or not Thom makes a particular movement of faith – either an animation of faith through service that projects the movement outwards toward others or a spiritual choice and personal commitment directed inwards (or both) – lies literally beyond the pages of the novel, and is also a task of

speculation beyond the scope of this study. But he is nevertheless in a position to make such a movement. What remains of interest here is the decision-making process involved in making a movement of faith in the face of such a crisis. This process proves valuable for contemporary reflection, for surely the tension and distinction between Mennonite and world, human law and God's commandments, is ever the more difficult to discern, now that the Mennonite ban-dictated separation from the world exists (more or less) only in history books. Thom's crisis of how and if to adapt his Mennonite *bios* to ever-changing modern conditions is indeed a paradigm still worth our consideration today.

For Thom, addressing the crisis begins with re-considering Elizabeth's life, which is to say, in this case, the circumstances of her death. When Thom hounds his mother to reveal to him the true details of Elizabeth's death, he comprehends in a sudden flash that "somehow Elizabeth was vital for unsnarling his confusion" (217).⁹ The importance of Elizabeth for him seems to have something to do with a realization of the importance of temporality for Christian life, in the form of eternity, that non-worldly time. These concerns with eternity are related to Thom's recognition of bare life, *zoê*, which is that structural, ahistorical register of being shared commonly with all living things. When ruminating at Elizabeth's funeral, Thom says that her last words – "Can't you see what's happening to me" – have an eternal significance for him. He also, in the same moment that he sees her naked life in his mind's eye, knows "himself eternally committed to something" (155). As the world slowly leaks into Wapiti, and as Block's attempts to keep it out create such devastating situations as Elizabeth's tragic death, Thom seems to tacitly understand that Mennonites' private, separate space in the world is rapidly shrinking. Perhaps Mennonite life must displace its emphasis of uniqueness partially onto distinctions of time, hence onto more and different thoughts of eternity and the vital importance of confronting Elizabeth's death. But how should this occur?

In a letter penned to Thom by Joseph, which Thom rereads after returning home from the funeral, Joseph writes that "according to Christ's teaching, peace is not a circumstance but a state of being" (162). Inherent in the movement of this sentence, from historically grounded *circumstance* to the ahistorical category of a *state of being*, is the displacement of space and

linear time by the category of the ahistorical, which is marked by the moment (*Augenblick*). The ahistorical is not unhistorical. It is simply not interested in linear time and history, which diagrams the flow of temporal time by chronicling its traces on the present. The ahistorical is a singularity, as denoted in the overdetermination of the term “a” itself. And while the ahistorical does not correspond to eternity, it might be said that the ahistorical is an atom of eternity. And thus peace as an ahistorical state of being implicates a renewal at every second through an act of faith. This is why Joseph describes it as internal incommensurability with the temporal and historical outside world. “He [Jesus] brought no outward quiet and comfort such as we are ever praying for. Rather, he brought inward peace that is in no way affected by outward war but quietly overcomes it on life’s real battlefield: the soul of man” (162-63). The constantly renewed movement of faith necessary to achieve this ahistorical peace requires intense passion. Passion (*lidenskab*) is the word Kierkegaard wields to reference the motor of the continual leap into an existence of faith. This passion is not an affect. Rather, it is pure spiritual movement, unmediated by reflective thought.¹⁰ Thom, in dedicating himself to such a state of peaceful being, will need such passion in the face of his crisis.

Thom’s crisis reaches its most feverish pitch as he drives home from the Christmas program after the debacle in the barn, having just punched another person. The moment has come for Thom to confront what he earlier in the story described as “the dreadful responsibility of being a man and being morally required to make a choice, either this way or that” (197). Mulling it all over, he first clearly dismisses two options – two ways of being, the world’s and Block’s: “Not the paths of conscienceless violence or one man’s misguided interpretation of tradition.” His chosen path is “God’s revelation” (237). He sets himself the task of clearing away the dust and muck of tradition and history that have covered over and imbued Christ’s teachings with particular meanings relevant to their particular historical contexts. For Thom’s thinking in the face of his particular crisis, he takes recourse to precisely the ahistorical peace as a state of being that Joseph led him to understand. At this point he recalls some of Joseph’s words from the letter: “We are spared war duty and possible death on the battlefield only because we are to be so much the better witnesses for Christ here at home”

(238). It can be assumed that for Thom being “so much the better witness” involves teaching the Bible to non-Mennonites. Whether this overtly evangelical call to action is truly morally and spiritually the task of a “better witness” must be debated outside of these pages. Most important and germane to this study is the process of Thom’s decision in the face of crisis: he engages the world with the inner confidence of having a peaceful state of being at his spiritual core, regardless of its potential incommensurability with the outside world.

In this movement of faith, Thom joins the other figures from the book in existing somewhat paradoxically: as a Christian and Mennonite, he can live *in and with* the world and yet remain simultaneously *without* the world. Thom is learning to be singular plural. However, unlike the other paradoxical figures in the novel, Thom’s paradoxical existence is won through reflection upon precisely that condition of paradox he encounters around him. Elizabeth’s tragic death teaches him the danger of losing the simultaneity of two forms of life (*zoê* and *bios*) to the universal identity of the rules of the community. Block’s sovereign power shows him the dubious and manipulative power that paradox can wield if not contested. And, by recognizing that paradox has always inhered in the logic of Mennonite self-identification, he learns that to accept aspects of the quickly changing and ever closer modern world would not foreclose the possibility of remaining Mennonite. By striving towards the paradoxical and ahistorical aspect of Christian faith, he takes a step towards dissolving the long-standing Mennonite ban on the world. Thom understands something of his paradoxical being, inherent in his reaction in suddenly comprehending the power of Joseph’s words: “he realized that two wars did not confront him; only one’s own two faces. And he was felled before both” (238). One face reflects life in the world and the creation of a common history with the community. The other face reflects the search for God’s peace, grasping for eternity one timeless moment after the next. And perhaps the passion inherent in being felled before both of these faces will steel him to the task of joyfully embracing the paradox of Mennonite life in the world.

Notes

¹ All in-text page citations refer to: Rudy Wiebe, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1962).

² Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998 [1995]).

³ “She *blanched* suddenly as he proffered the meat-platter,” [my emphasis] (Wiebe, 134).

⁴ In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben traces the concept of bare life and its inclusion in the political realm to “the original – if concealed – nucleus of sovereign power” (6); that is, the politicization of bare life as the decisive event marking modernity.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶ The classical Greek model actually separates the two forms of life: the natural, bare life (*zōē*) is excluded from the *polis*, which marks *bios*. Cf. *Homo Sacer*, 2.

⁷ Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie: Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität*, siebente Auflage (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1996 [1922]), 13.

⁸ The word *suffer* contains a subtle and important two-fold meaning: it means “to allow/to permit,” an active passivity; but it also bears the sense of “to endure,” a passive activity. The contradictory nature of the term “to suffer” mirrors the contradictory power of the sovereign, and helps to explain how the response to sovereign power can be as riddled with paradox as the wielding of that power.

⁹ It is perversely fitting that in this scene in which the mother reveals to Thom Elizabeth’s secret pregnancy, she is baking buns in the oven.

¹⁰ This conception of passion (*lidenskab*) is found throughout Kierkegaard’s work. For its fullest treatment and realization as a philosophical concept, see Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments Vol. I and II*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). For a beautiful and brilliant, albeit less direct treatment of passion, see Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).