

Listening All the Way Home: Theme and Structure in Rudy Wiebe's *Sweeter Than All the World*

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In the introduction to *More Stories from Western Canada*, Rudy Wiebe explains that “a story can create a continuing consciousness . . . of a community”; it “can hold [us] in a living relationship to a past” and also help us “live in a present context of a physical and spiritual landscape.”¹ In *Sweeter Than All the World* (2001), Wiebe presents us with a story that deals specifically with a community and a family line that reaches back over four centuries. His novel deals with the relationship of the past to the present, the “physical and spiritual landscape” of the Mennonite beginnings in sixteenth-century Holland through the urban, postmodern landscape at the end of the twentieth century. At the center of the contemporary landscape is Dr. Adam Wiebe, whose restless quest for meaning leads him slowly towards a kind of home.

Both an historical novel and a contemporary one, *Sweeter Than All the World* follows two Mennonite family lines, the Wiebes and the Loewens, from 1527 to 1996. The multiple narratives, those of the contemporary family of Adam Wiebe and the historical/fictional Wiebe/Loewen family members, begin in Northern Alberta in 1942 and end in Danzig (Gdansk) in 1652.

In the first of three epigraphs Wiebe has chosen for this work, Russian poet Joseph Brodsky poses one of the central questions that will shape this fictional narrative of departure and return: “You’re coming home again. What does that mean?” Answering the question Brodsky poses is not so simple for the primary narrator of the novel’s contemporary story, Adam Wiebe. As readers we watch as he loses his childhood home, then finds a home with his wife and family, only to lose it again and embark on a long period of self-imposed wandering and exile. Rudy Wiebe the writer, by refusing to cast home merely as a physical or geographical place, productively complicates the issues he addresses in this work. The initial setting for this story is Waskahikan, a tiny town whose Cree name, appropriately enough, means simply “home”; but for the writer, the concept of “home” itself is resonant with much richer and more complex meanings, as the novel with its many stories of the Wiebe and Loewen forebears and relations demonstrates.

One answer to Brodsky's question about what it means to come home again is built into the reader's very experience of reading Wiebe's work. *Sweeter Than All the World* is structured on what M. M. Bakhtin designates as dialogic form. Michael Holquist, Bakhtin's editor and translator, defines dialogism as the "characteristic epistemological mode" in a multivoiced, multilingual world filled with competing ideological and philosophical systems. In this world, so familiar to those of us living in the twenty-first century, "everything means."² The "constant interaction between meanings all of which have the potential of conditioning others" forms the sort of rich dialogue Bakhtin has in mind.³ Of course, the idea of telling a story dialogically, that is through a multitude of voices, is not new to Rudy Wiebe's work. As he does in *The Blue Mountains of China* (1970), for example, the writer here "juxtaposes various narrational voices reflecting diverse points of view."⁴ In such a work, each chapter, as Penny Van Toorn has observed, has a single narrator who tells her/his story from "a particular position within" Mennonite history; together, these narrative voices form a "multi-voiced, historical narrative."⁵ This multiple historical narrative, in turn, serves as framework, mirror, and commentary for the principal story of Adam Wiebe and his family. The short narrative threads of individual lives (including the stories of Adam Wiebe and others) are woven into the long, tough perspective of historical experience.

Though dialogic form may appear fragmented, it is not; it depends for cohesion on structures that are iterative and recursive rather than linear. While such a polyvocal structure demands more active participation on the reader's part, it also allows the writer to mirror, as is the case here, the dominant theme of departure and return. In this novel, the story of Dr. Adam Wiebe and his family alternates with stories that reach as far back as four centuries. Thus, from chapter to chapter, the reader experiences a departure from and return to the familiar ground of the primary narrative, the reader's "home ground" so to speak, in a recognizable enough contemporary world.

The novel opens with an evocation of Adam's early childhood, in an image that embodies what Jacques Lacan calls *jouissance*, a brief moment of joy that reflects an experience of complete wholeness. It is an image of a young boy, Adam Wiebe, wandering out alone in the northern Alberta bush. Here,

summer or winter, “everything spoke to him: warm rocks, the flit of quick, small animals, a dart of birds, tree trunks, the great fires burning across the sky at night, summer fallow, the creek and squeaky snow.”⁶ Significantly, this multitude of voices is harmonious rather than competing, a choir rather than a cacophony. For this prelapsarian Adam, completely attuned to his world, “everything spoke and it spoke Low German. Like his mother” (1). The young Adam, like the original one, is completely at ease, comfortably integrated with the living earth and the heavenly lights of the aurora borealis, with a single language and a single family. This brief moment presents him as whole in all aspects: physically, psychologically, linguistically, and spiritually. But beyond the single common language that unites Adam with his world, there is something else that Adam experiences here: silence enough to be able to hear the voices that speak. Predominant among the voices, human and otherwise, that speak to him is the voice of his mother. For Adam, hers is the privileged voice, a loving and authoritative voice that seeks him, calling him to come home. But although he always returns to her, he also resists that voice. When she calls, though he hears, he does not answer her. This puzzles her, and compels her to ask a question that, like the question posed by Brodsky, will echo through the text: “Why don’t you answer?”

In the novel, the wholeness of which Lacan speaks – this *jouissance* – is almost immediately threatened by the prospect of a new language (English) and a new environment (school) which disrupt the young boy’s world. A frightening and much wider world intrudes upon his childhood: a world of wars and violence, in the form of jet fighters flying overhead. As figures identified with war, these fighters also serve as a reminder of the world out of which Adam’s parents have come. The community of immigrant Mennonites of which Adam’s family is a part fled Stalin’s Russia, bringing with them their faith, their culture, and their memories of suffering, pain, and loss. The culture of this immigrant community is portrayed in the novel in terms of constraint and mobility. That is, on the one hand these Mennonites’ beliefs and practices function, as Stephen Greenblatt would say, “as a pervasive technology of control.”⁷ On the other hand, those same beliefs and practices guarantee movement in the form of improvisation and exchange within the culture and without. We see this dynamic of constraint and mobility in the ethno-religious community that enfolds, nurtures, and protects its

members and, at the same time, imposes “the heaviest word in the world” (sin) on the young Adam (9).

Central to Brodsky’s question, and Rudy Wiebe’s handling of it, is the nature of “home.” As early as the opening chapter, the writer complicates the sense of what home might be to include a rich set of concepts: a geographic location, a close family, a powerful set of memories and stories, a voice calling/singing, a physical and spiritual community, a set of beliefs that threaten as well as shelter, and the spiritual destination spoken of in Adam’s mother’s “songs of home” (*Heimatlieder*). Certainly the young Adam discovers soon enough that the world stretches far beyond the intimate world that embraces him, and that the borders that delimit his community are less stable than they appear. In school he discovers books and the “human voices speaking from everywhere and every age.” And “he would listen” (7). In a very short space of time, he moves from a monoglossic (single language) world into a polyglossic world filled with many voices, and many stories, competing for his attention in two languages.

Of course, books are not Adam’s only source of stories. In church he hears diverse stories that are not only biblical but personal as well. And for members of Adam’s family, stories consist of the oral recounting of the history of Mennonite families who escaped or did not escape from Russia, of their suffering, and of the long lines of families who preceded them. At the Mennonite high school, Adam’s teacher introduces him to works like Horst Penner’s article on Wiebe genealogy, where Adam discovers an account of the first Adam Wiebe. Beyond the layers of family and community stories are the narratives of the early Mennonites, the “Defenseless Christians” whose testimonies of faith and whose deaths are chronicled in the *Martyrs Mirror*, the book that will become an obsession for the adult Adam. In the novel, Rudy Wiebe uses some of these stories in the alternating chapters that run in counterpoint to, and mirror, the life of the contemporary Wiebes.

Adam’s sense of being at home in a rugged but familiar landscape – a sense he experienced so briefly in the opening chapter – is evoked later in the novel, when, just before his wedding, Adam goes caribou hunting in the northern tundra with the Dene. There he has a remarkable experience. When the caribou he kills refuses to fall down, John L., one of the Dene hunters, remarks that “sometimes they’re dead on their feet but they won’t go down,

like, Hey this is my land, I live here, who are you?" (45) That is to say, Adam, the intruder, who hunts for sport rather than for food, has neither the authority nor the right to take this life. He is an interloper; he does not belong. Later on, listening to Napoleon and Kathy laugh at their family stories, he recognizes that what he is hearing is an echo of his childhood home. He is surely out of place in this landscape, but to his Dene companions, the long sweep of the open tundra, "where a person walking is always less than a mere speck," is, as the narrator remarks, "home" (49). Their stories of Moscow, so different from his parents' stories, make them all laugh, but Adam, witnessing these people at home in the land and in their stories, is nearly moved to tears. He has already begun to struggle with the sense of loss that will haunt him into his fifties.

Just as Adam resists answering his mother's call as a child, he also resists a chance to share the tundra home of his friends. When Napoleon suggests they walk out of camp to look at the animals and observe them in their home, Adam, rather than watching the herd of caribou quietly, as his friend Napoleon does, walks toward them until his aggressive presence threatens them and they scatter and run. Although Napoleon says nothing, Adam feels the inappropriateness of his behavior, which he cannot explain even to himself. His actions hint at the self-destructive tendencies that will later break up and scatter his family.

During Adam's relationship with his wife, Susannah, he comes to recognize home as a place where love is shared and expressed in a variety of ways. We first hear of the definition of love that shapes Adam and Susannah's life together in a conversation at a coffee shop. Love is "disposition, desire, delight" according to the *OED* and Adam's abridgment of it. But he seems not to hear very clearly Susannah's appendix to this litany: "Love is also a decision" (45). Decision demands conscientious and deliberate choice. In the terms of this relationship at least, a decision to love is a decision to accept constraints and boundaries not suggested in "disposition, desire, delight." The responsibilities and consequences that choice and commitment entail shape a much tougher, more grounded idea of love. Adam and Susannah's understanding of love re-frames the ideas of "home" already identified in the novel, to include elements that have not been considered before, and it reflects the conscious maturity of the one who makes the decision to love.

Notably, it is Susannah, not Adam, who insists on this idea of love as decision. If love includes decision, then it must also include conscious awareness. As they proceed with wedding arrangements, Susannah deliberately embraces Adam's parents, their dedication to their faith and to each other, and their spiritual strength. She asks them to sing a duet in German at the wedding, describing their voices as having the "steady, delicate sound . . . of medieval angels" (53). In doing so, she asks not just for the harmonious presence of two voices singing as one, but for the love and spiritual blessing of Adam's parents. This singing invokes for the reader the *Heimatlieder* that serve to draw the past into the present. Susannah's identification with this singing, so deeply embedded within the Mennonite community, reveals that she recognizes the fundamentally spiritual nature of love and its relationship to the idea of home. As the wedding demonstrates, home is a place that changes, that takes in new members (and their pasts and futures) and is finally and deliberately inclusive of all new members.

But Susannah's love and the family life they share do not satisfy Adam any more than his primary home and community did. In the twenty-five years that pass following that caribou hunt and their wedding, Adam – now self-identified as "*een auffjefollna Mennist*," a fallen-off Mennonite – practices medicine. He passes his days in the "standard, every-waking-hour oblivion" of a medical practice where, driven by his "obsessed . . . pile-up-the-money partners," he sees as many as sixty patients a day (107, 102). Predictably, he grows bored and restless and, mistaking the nature of his uneasiness, he seeks to alleviate it by having an affair with a young woman. But even a weekend spent combining sex with hunting and butchering beavers (sex and violence being the two most frequently prescribed pursuits that contemporary culture offers to cure dullness and lack of intensity) does not satisfy his restlessness. He does recognize the fundamental foolishness of attempting to escape into these pursuits, however. Alone with his girl, Jean, at a cabin belonging to his professional partner, he finds himself thinking, "*what have I done, just turned fifty and hiding in the bush with a woman I pass in a hall ten times a day, what an idiot. . .*" (107).

Adam has deluded himself into thinking that his affair has gone unnoticed and that it has nothing to do with his life with his wife and children. Although he still sees love as "disposition, desire and delight," he seems to

have forgotten the idea that love is also a “decision” (109). And, as Adam has made a decision to alter the nature of his commitment to Susannah, apparently without seriously considering what he is doing, Susannah makes a decision of her own. She points out to him that their twenty-five years of marriage is “a life sentence” (103). Although he still does not truly understand what is happening, he does understand that she has broached the subject of separation, of whether either of them wants to “serve a longer life sentence” with the other (103). In raising questions about their relationship, Susannah forces Adam out of his illusions of a private life apart from her, and presents him with the unspeakable: the loss of the shared life which the two of them have built. At the end of their confrontation on the matter of their relationship, Susannah begins their ritual definition of love, naming disposition, desire, and delight. The litany requires that Adam respond with “Love is also a decision” (109). But he does not. He is listening only to himself. Without the final element in the formula, the commitment of a love which is chosen is dissolved.

In the airport departure lounge, we witness this family of four, “a small circle of people” whose “hands and arms reach around the person pressed closest to them for the next, trying to feel every bone in every individual body they know they love with the overwhelming conviction of their own fingers stretching to touch themselves” (110). There is a kind of urgency in this farewell. But Adam, the child who would not answer his mother’s call, remains aloof from this situation as well, resisting the unspoken call of his family, although he loves them. He is the only one who does not speak during these final moments, refusing to acknowledge that this is more than a temporary parting of the ways. Were we feeling charitable towards Adam, we might imagine that he is simply struck dumb by the impending loss of family and home. But his deliberate and stubborn reserve speaks to his refusal of responsibility, to his complicity in breaking up this group.

Although the circle of family is complete – mother, father, daughter, and son – the silence within the circle clearly indicates that something critical is missing. Adam’s son Joel puts his finger on what is lacking, literally and figuratively. “If Grandma was here,” he says, “she’d be saying a long prayer” (110). Joel’s observation invokes a connection to the past and the family history, and a heartfelt connection with the spiritual. His remark points

tellingly to what makes this farewell such a tense one. If that small circle of people who know they love each other still constitutes home, even at this moment of parting, then the personal stories, the communal history, and the faith that Grandma's prayer would embody – all of the elements that hold this little group in “living relationship to a past”⁸ and, more significantly, to a future – would be present. But these elements are not present, nor can anyone within that circle find a way to replace them and renew the bonds that might sustain the family. Facing inward, each person faces the terrible prospect of the loss of both a lived past and possible future together.

Thanks to the intervening chapters with stories of the Mennonite past, we readers already have an understanding of what that past – Adam's personal and family past – is. It is, first of all, a Mennonite past, a uniquely Russian Mennonite past that began not in the Czarist Russia that Adam's parents fled, but with the early Mennonite martyrs in sixteenth-century Holland. Adam's realization that his name, Adam Peter, does not follow either the Russian Mennonite tradition of naming or even their own traditional family names initiates his exploration of both his family and his Mennonite history. Adam's questions about his name lead back into the family stories, to the Orenberg Mennonite Colony from which his parents had fled the terrors of Stalin's regime. Moreover, they reveal a deeper mystery. He was not originally named Adam Peter, but Heinrich Abraham, first for his mother's brother, who became a Communist, and then for his father. Sorting out the family names and their accompanying stories will become an obsession for the adult Adam. He will hunt through family narratives in an attempt to alleviate his restless and uncomprehending sense of emptiness. His journey to find the stories and his ancestors centers not only on a reassessment of his own life and spiritual understanding (or lack thereof), but also on a reassessment of his Mennonite family's history of wandering in search of safety and shelter, of a context in which they might live as their Mennonite faith asks them to live.

The search the Wiebes have undertaken is not, though it may seem so, a search for any physical home, since, in the view expressed by Adam's parents, “on earth you are forever a stranger” (22) and a pilgrim whose “pilgrimage is not long” (53). Though the songs he and his family sing together in harmony are the *Heimatlieder*, songs of longing for home, the words speak of a home “blessed and perfect with God . . . where loved ones are already

waiting to greet you,” as Adam observes sarcastically (22). “Home,” in the context of their Mennonite community, carries a profound, spiritual resonance; but it is a part of his heritage that Adam has rejected.

We have already witnessed the spiritual ordeals suffered by Adam’s family (and Susannah’s too, as it turns out), beginning with those suffered more than five hundred years earlier. The first of these is the story of Weynken Claes, burned at the stake because she would not renounce her Mennist beliefs.⁹ Her story, told by her daughter, Trijntjen, introduces us to the historical and spiritual foundations of the Mennonite faith. It also contains many elements of the writer’s construction of home which we have already seen. At the center is a profound and compelling belief in a spiritual home for those who hold to the tenets of their faith, and a voice calling, demanding that the listener hear. The second of the stories taken from the *Martyrs Mirror* is the story of three sisters, Maeyken Wens, Mariken and Lijsken Lievens, and of their friend, Janneken van Munstdorp, who were imprisoned together. Maeyken, pregnant at the time, was held until her child, Jan Adam Wens, was born. All four women were later burned at the stake in Antwerp. Their story is told by Jan Adam and his wife Janneken, the daughter of Janneken van Munstdorp. The lives of the children of those Mennonite women martyred for their faith are bound together by belief, by faith, by decision, by song, by the stories of shared deaths and shared lives, and by an enduring love that shelters and fosters the lives of generations to come.

Not all of the stories that punctuate the story of Adam’s history are stories of martyrdom, however. Some indicate clearly the anguish and hardships that Mennonites suffered not at the hands of their persecutors but through the strict enforcement of the restrictions of their own communities. Especially vulnerable to these controls were those whose abilities and inclinations drew them away from practical work and into art. In the story of the Seeman family, for example, a family of engineers and dike-builders in Chapter Eight, we find a “left-handed woman,” Triena Wiebe Seemann, who dares to imagine that her husband “need not be a farmer . . . but a preacher. . . and an artist” and that her eldest son, Enoch, “could be dedicated to God and art,” and that he could study abroad in Italy as well (116). But Enoch’s education and ability, and the money he earns from his work, arouse suspicion

and jealousy among some of the men in his Mennonite church. Before long, hypocritical members of his congregation impose the church's strict ban on him. Seemann, whose work provides the livelihood for his family, is forced to shred and burn his canvases and eventually to go into self-imposed exile in order to continue painting. Three generations of the family leave their home and emigrate to London, cut off from church and community, isolated by their language, but still at home in belief, love, faith, family, and work.

The chapters of this novel that alternate with chapters focused on the protagonist Adam Wiebe do not serve only as counterpoint and commentary to the stories of the contemporary Adam; nor is their purpose merely structural. They also tell the stories that help create for the reader a sense of that "continuing consciousness . . . of a community" mentioned earlier.¹⁰ They serve to give us a long perspective on the problems of the contemporary Wiebe family. For example, following the narrative of the breakup of Adam's family, we find his ancestor Anna Wiebe's story of the Mennonite migration into rural Russia, away from the civilized cities of northern Germany and their settled lives and professions – a migration meant to save the young men of the community from being impressed into the Prussian army. Anna, the eldest daughter of a family now motherless, speaks through her journal entries. She details the long trek from West Prussia, a journey in which illness, bad weather, misfortune, poverty, unfriendly and untrustworthy townspeople, and the loss of children to death figure prominently. Anna's future as wife and mother is sacrificed to the imperatives of their faith, as are her brothers' educational opportunities. Many events in this chapter foreshadow actions in the primary narrative, as the Adam Wiebe family, now in self-imposed (though comfortable) exile, begin their own late twentieth-century wanderings – though the contrast between their wanderings in the world and their ancestors' trek into Russia is notable.

The questions of where home is and what it would mean to come home become critical when Adam once more seeks to anchor himself in an affair, this time with Karen, a married woman. As readers, we begin to hear the voices he is hearing now: Karen's scholarly voice, endlessly explaining Franz Kafka; Adam's own voice explicating the *Martyrs Mirror*; the voice of the old woman in the cemetery who tells them that finding Kafka's grave (his final home) is as useless and absurd a quest as finding the houses where

he lived (all destroyed but one). The quest for Franz Kafka (Karen's fixation) mirrors Adam's own growing obsession with his personal and collective Mennonite past. But the writer does not suggest that it is Adam's quest itself that is absurd; it is the direction he takes on this pilgrimage that is untenable.

This is clear when, in a foolish overestimation of his physical strength, he finds himself hanging from a rafter, high above the ground, without the strength to save himself from falling. Adam, driven by yet another unarticulated impulse, has climbed as high as he could into the bell tower of an old church. When he realizes "with a jolt of supreme terror" what he has done, he is overtaken by a fatalistic calm (177). But as he rests "in freefall . . . or possibly prayer," the words of one of his mother's hymns, those "songs of home," come to him, along with the memory of the song his parents sang for his wedding (177). Hanging onto the beam, Adam realizes that "the words between Karen and himself, even the simplest . . . never quite find them at home" (178). Although still caught in the intellectual and sexual excitement of his affair, Adam, it is clear, knows he will have to change direction.

What follows this incident is an account, in Chapter Twelve, of another absurd and wrongheaded quest: the long trek which a group of Russian Mennonite families take into the deserts of Turkestan, to Samarkand, and beyond. They are led by Claus Epp, who is pursuing his personal vision of the second coming of Christ. Epp, another of the historical figures whose stories Wiebe recounts, believes that the Mennonites are "the chosen Community of the Bride" and that they must leave everything and "search by faith for months stretching into years" to find the desert place where Christ will reappear to claim his Bride and "Lift them All into Heaven" (186). The madness of that visionary journey counterpoised against Adam's quest serves as an implicit commentary on the consequences of such self-deluded blundering. But it also serves to suggest that even such confusion can prefigure a reordering to come.

Claus Epp's story is told by Abraham Loewen to his grandson, who now calls himself Bud Lyons. Lyons has grown up under the oppression of the Claus Epp stories – stories that recount what he regards as a senseless and costly desert trek. Yet Lyons has become a wanderer himself, much like Adam Wiebe, his son-in-law. Both men are notably silent, living within themselves, but for different reasons. Bud Lyons, who witnessed the aftermath

of the Dresden firebombing in World War II, has seen too much. Adam Wiebe, man and boy, deliberately stays quiet in order to maintain an exaggerated sense of his own independence. At times his wordlessness gives the impression of an almost childish stubbornness and defiance. Whereas Claus Epp, in his insistence on the literal rightness of his vision, deliberately turned inward, Adam has deliberately turned outward, away from the voices of his ancestors, the spiritual rootedness of his parents, the home of his childhood, to his own rather shallow vision of his life.

Still, it seems there is hope for both Bud Lyons and Adam Wiebe in Abraham Loewen's words to his grandson. "All good Mennonites wander," he observes (183). His remark sheds light also on Adam's equally wandering daughter, Trish. The wandering of these contemporary Wiebes, like that of their Mennonite forebears, is part of a spiritual ordeal; wandering Mennonites are not like "hunters following animals" (183). Rather, they follow the voice of God who speaks, as He spoke to Abraham, and they go. However, Adam, roaming around the European homelands of his ancestors, is unwilling or unable to admit that his ceaseless traveling arises from a fundamentally spiritual motive; like Claus Epp, he continues blundering through the trackless wasteland of his life. Wandering seems to have become an end in itself.

But when it becomes clear that his daughter Trish has disappeared, Adam's wandering takes on a very specific direction and a renewed urgency. He hunts for her everywhere and grows ever more frantic. When he has a bewildering meeting with a phantom photographer, he cannot recognize the nature of the encounter. Perhaps he is going mad too, like the desert visionary Epp, searching for the woman of Revelation, clothed in the sun. When, for all his efforts, he can find no trace of Trish, he is unable to sustain hope for her or for himself. Without her, he realizes, there is no possibility of restoring "his unacceptably broken life" (341).

The next time Adam appears, he has made a "blank move" which has taken him to a solitary hotel room in Toronto (303). Alone in that space, he is surrounded by disembodied voices: the long, detailed TV discussion of the assassination of John F. Kennedy; the voices in the books from a rummage sale; a romance novel; Graham Greene's sad, dark characters; the autopsy reports on Hitler from the Soviet files; a biography of Norman Bethune. Each of these speaks of detailed obsessions, the politics of extremes and

incompetency, and the tangles of desperation. But, having deliberately gathered these voices at a used book sale earlier in the day, Adam can find nothing here that can anchor his attention. Drifting off laterally, he adds to these the seductive voice of his own sexual fantasy, anything “to avoid the worst . . . [and] find the void” (307). But the voices persist, and not until he mutes the television and sets the books aside, and stands alone in the silence of the room overlooking the “unending light” of the city, does he feel “safe . . . and he thinks oh, I’m home” (309). But, he realizes soon enough, he is not there yet.

If home, as was pointed out earlier, can be found in a voice calling him, then Adam must also nurture the conditions necessary to hear it. The writer has made it clear that silence and solitude are essential to hearing, and that means Adam must, as Trish later will, silence the multitude of voices, with their contending versions of reality, that surround him. Battered by myriad authoritative voices, all competing continuously for his attention, he has learned *not* to listen. He can no longer hear the voice that speaks in silence. Nor can he shut out the clamor around him because he no longer even recognizes it as intrusive; it is the casually accepted, polyglossic, twenty-four-hour-a-day noise of the urban, turn-of-the-millennium society. But in this quiet hotel room where the life of the city lies far below him, he reaches a turning point in his lonely journey.

Silence and utter solitude are necessary for Adam to begin to apprehend who he is and where he belongs. Adam’s wandering daughter Trish, like her father, finds that this necessary silence has also eluded her. And like her mother, Trish makes a decision. Like her grandfather Bud Lyons, who changes his name (Abraham Loewen, like his grandfather) during his wanderings, Trish adopts the anonymous neutrality of another name, Ann Wilson. Using a few simple travel precautions, she successfully disappears, cutting her ties with her family, her hereditary languages (English and German), her northern European and Canadian geography, and her personal and historical past. Christmas Day 1995 finds her alone in another noisy city, Santiago, Chile, armed with a new language. But almost immediately she slips from Spanish back into German to protect herself from the pleas of a Chilean woman who has been jilted by an American. Her ties to her past, though apparently severed,

remain active. When she walks into a cathedral to escape the crowded streets, she finds “a high amazing silence” (391). As she looks at the image of Mary holding the baby Jesus, Trish speaks to her directly: “pray for what until now I have never yet known or acknowledged I need” (392). That prayer echoes her father’s words in the Toronto hotel room: “Blessed are those who know their need for God” (309). But the “unrelenting tin racket” of Bach’s music suddenly floods the church and drives Trish back out to the street and to the “essential airport,” and she is on the move again (392).

She chooses a destination and disembarks to find only the voices of unfamiliar insects at her destination. Here is a profound “silence . . . the sky is unrecognizable” (394). The following morning, Christmas Day, she joins a bus tour into the Atacama desert. That evening she watches the line of volcanoes on the horizon which she thinks of as “like altars . . . No, like rising prayers. If only” (398). Her longing for a connection to the spiritual is unmistakable. The following day she takes her pack and walks deeper into the desert. The only human presence she encounters are two shepherds with their small flock and their dogs. Still deeper into the wilderness she comes upon a tiny “church, set in wide and completely empty space” alone in the wilderness (399).

When Trish pulls on the church’s bell-rope, the echoes reverberate against the distant rocks and she suddenly and quite clearly hears her name spoken in the high desert air: “Trish Wiebe” (399). Her immediate response, reminiscent of her father’s, is rejection: “Ann Wilson, do you hear, Ann Wilson” (399). But she knows she has been called, this call a response to the earlier summons of the bell’s voice which she herself initiated. She has called and been answered by a call in return. The initial resistance in her response seems to indicate that she takes the words she hears as a command to return to her original identity. But “Trish Wiebe” can also be read as a statement of fact, the statement of a true identity that she has never had the power to declare null and void.

Turning her back, Trish hikes higher and higher up along the twisting trail until the church disappears from view. In the high rocky valley amid the ruins of ancient fortresses, she catches a glimpse of something white caught in a narrow crevasse in the rocks. And again the call comes silently, in her head: “*look here, look for me here*” (400). She works herself into the narrow

opening, deeper and deeper, literally entombing herself in the rock in order to touch the ancient skeleton she has seen. Her fingers stretched to their limits, she touches a rib bone, and remembers the biblical “bone of my bone” and a conversation she had with her father, who once called her his “lovely bone of my bone” (401). Lying there held firmly in the layers of rock, she acknowledges the truth of the voice that has spoken her name: “I am, I will always be, a double daughter” (401). In acknowledging this, she also makes her decision to return, to accept, and to forgive; in short, to return home in all the senses of the word Rudy Wiebe has suggested.

Far away from the desert, Adam, Trish’s father, has reached a similar decision, reclaiming and collecting first for himself, and then for all his family, the scattered stories of their pasts. At his sister Helen’s funeral, he gives an impromptu eulogy, and in doing so speaks powerfully against the trivial voices and easy sentiments of the conventional funeral service. He becomes a quiet voice calling the whole family home to the memories of the sister, wife, mother, and grandmother whom they loved, binding together their past, present, and future. He buys the old homestead where he was born, and passes along, to his son and his fiancé, the stories and memories that will become part of their home as well. When Susannah arrives to tell them all that Trish is on her way home, “her face shines as if she were speaking out of a blazing fire,” her faith in Trish’s return echoing the triumphant faith of the martyrs who were burned at the stake and the terrible joy of the woman of Revelation clothed in the sun (417).

In the homecoming scene at the airport, the writer uses much of the same language he had used earlier for the family’s departure scene. The great panels of the airport echo and multiply the noise around them, and this time there are five, not four, people in the tight circle. The quiet around them is no longer a “film,” a thin, protective coating that settles over them like dust. This time “a globe of quiet” surrounds and encloses them, protecting, sheltering and separating them from the demands of the echoing voices of other concerns. Here, at last, is home: a small circle of people whose “hearts beat the conviction of their enduring love for each other” (420). It is, once again, a moment of *jouissance*. This scene should not be read as an easy, Hollywood happy ending. All the members of the family still have serious issues to resolve, and in the echoing world outside of that circle, all kinds of

threats hang over them. Adam and Susannah, although they love each other, lead separate lives; Joel and Alison are about to form their own family; Trish, although reunited with her family, clearly has many issues with which to deal. Beyond individual difficulties lie the old enemies of war and violence, arrogance, hypocrisy, greed, indifference, and the pressing clamor of the contending voices of contemporary life. The writer deliberately leaves the respective futures of these individuals in question. They are reunited, momentarily beyond their differences; and, whatever each one of them will have to face, they are once again a family, people who love and help each other.

There is a suggestion of hope for all of them too, in the final chapter, where we return to the first Adam, Wybe Adams von Harlingen, who, now very old, knows it will not be long before he goes home for good. But for this afternoon he shares his work in the garden, digging potatoes with his little granddaughter, Trientje. She, we readers know, will become the Left-Handed Woman, wife and mother and grandmother of artists. Outside of that garden in Danzig, the threat of imminent war hangs in the air. But in the garden, beyond threat or censure for the moment, old Adam and little Trientje share slices of raw potato, the fruit of the earth (brought from the New World). It is almost as if they were sharing communion bread, the past and the future joined together in a feast of love and potatoes. For a moment there is peace, there is *jouissance*, and we can hope that in his home in Alberta, the narrator, Adam, will also live to share such a moment with a grandchild, perhaps in his circular garden of trees.

So, to return to Joseph Brodsky's question in the epigraph, for Rudy Wiebe coming home would seem to mean not just a simple return to a place one once knew. It means coming to accept and acknowledge all of the others in that small circle of people who love each other profoundly, remembering and honoring the long line of lives that fostered that present circle. Coming home means returning to a physical and psychological construct that (like that "globe of quiet") at once shelters, delimits, and provides room for growth. It means recognition of a human need for God and of a spiritual home that encompasses past, present, and future. Coming home means returning to a place where stories are told and honored; stories that create and maintain a sense of family, community, and history, that root us in the past and provide

us with a consciousness that makes it possible for us to live in the raucous and comfortable wilderness of contemporary life. Coming home means understanding who we are beyond the names we wear or the languages we speak or the places we live. It means a voice, calling or speaking or singing, and silence enough to hear it in. Coming home means answering the call, in speech or thought, song or story, deed or prayer.

Notes

¹ Rudy Wiebe, *More Stories from Western Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1980), vii.

² M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 426.

³ *Ibid.*, 426.

⁴ Penny Van Toorn, *Rudy Wiebe and the Historicity of the Word* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1992), 67.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁶ Rudy Wiebe, *Sweeter Than All the World* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2001), 1. All further references are taken from this edition of the text.

⁷ Stephen Greenblatt, "Culture," *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 225.

⁸ Rudy Wiebe, *More Stories from Western Canada*, vii.

⁹ Theileman van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1950), 422-24.

¹⁰ Rudy Wiebe, *More Stories from Western Canada*, vii.