

Playing the Sacred Harp: Mennonite Literature as Confession

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Borrowed hymnal in hand, I walk into the one-room white clapboard church that vibrates with loud singing, past dozens of onlookers and would-be participants hovering at the doors like honeybees. My daughter and her partner and their two-week-old baby, and a friend of theirs, follow me as we squeeze into the standing room at the back of the sanctuary next to a row of Old Order Mennonites. Sacred Harp music is sung a cappella and needs a body of singers to come to life in a corporeal act of worship, creating what an alternative healer might call a highly-charged energy field. One of my more worldly friends who is a Sacred Harp devotee describes it as a form of yoga, centered on breathing. Surrounded by the fierce organ of many voices, I have visions of seraphim and cherubim vibrating with the music of the spheres. Someone less inclined to ecstatic merger might recall Huck Finn's opinions of Aunt Polly's heaven – that if the saints were singing for eternity, he would rather spend his time elsewhere. We have chosen to stay for the day.

Sacred Harp singers travel. They come from many places, denominations, even faiths to gather at conventions or at singings in many parts of the country. They hold local sings and long-distance sings. The only rule is respect for the music and each other. The content of the songs, sung first by rural Southerners and then Midwestern pioneers during the nineteenth-century singing school movement, is profoundly religious, focusing on death and salvation. Now, at the rising of the twenty-first century, we gather on a Saturday to sing for hours and to share at noon a delectable potluck meal based on the bounty of summer's harvest.

Throughout the crowd people in coverings and suspenders stand shoulder to shoulder with those in July casual – tank tops and t-shirts, make-up, jewelry, and even nose rings. I notice a group of women in blue cotton dresses and nun-like headscarves in the same robin's egg hue, the clothing of a sect I can't place. My granddaughter, who loves heat and noise,

sleeps blissfully through it all in her plastic car seat with its basket handle. Beneath our varied costumes, we are all sweating – and most are singing the ornamented fourths of the four-part harmony lines at the top of their lungs with utmost concentration.

“Most” are singing, I say, because I cannot open my mouth. The music of the hive is so blended, so earnest, so engulfing that it moves me in some deep place to fear and trembling, to a kind of grief and ecstasy all at once. I cannot make a sound, because if I try I will release instead of music a shriek or a moan or uncontrollable sobbing. Somewhere deep in my bones the pain of my paternal grandparents’ shunning from the Amish Church, a vestigial ache I am rarely aware of carrying, awakes. A family systems therapist might describe it as a pattern on my genogram. Lines from poet Julia Kasdorf resonate in my ears, “Sins hidden so deep in our organs that they might damn us unawares.”¹ The mere fact that I can stand in a church, singing about salvation and death, about the end of time and the promise of resurrection, next to people who dress like my grandparents, even after they were told not to come back to their Amish church in Iowa, the one where they moved to get away from the shunning in Pennsylvania, seems like a divine miracle.

Perhaps I am, for a few moments, in heaven standing next to a variety of people who join voices from disparate bodies of belief to sing the essentials of faith. I let the sobs shake me. My daughter and her partner join in the singing and the sweet, resonant tenor of their friend Erich bodies forth the wisdom of generations of singers, making things whole. The songs themselves are a confession and absolution, a repentance and a reconciliation. And then I realize what is so moving for me about this moment. Sinners are welcome, to borrow the title of Mary Karr’s most recent book of poetry. Could we say as much for our Mennonite churches?

Confession has had a grim history among Plain People, as it is often connected with excommunication, shunning, ostracism. Instead of forgiveness and reconciliation, it has often brought hurt, stigma, a continued “othering” of the few among the many who share the same heritage and faith. In the 1930s, rather than confess for the deed that produced a child after seven months of marriage to her seminary student husband, poet Anna Ruth Ediger Baehr never returned to a Mennonite congregation. As a young

adolescent she had been forced by her father to attend a church meeting at which a young woman of the congregation had to stand alone in front of the gathered body and confess her sin. She determined that she would never place herself in a position of such humiliation, and conspired instead with her mother and sister to have her father, unaware of the pregnancy, marry her to her fiancé in a home wedding before they both left for Chicago and her husband's seminary career. But many years later, from her adult home in Long Island, New York, she wrote about a rich history of experiences with the Cheyenne and her Mennonite missionary parents, experiences that had indelibly shaped her. Anna Ruth Ediger Baehr, a poet whose work is represented in *A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry*, which I edited several years ago, considered herself a Mennonite all of her life. She lived her Mennonite life outside of the church partly because of geography but also because she did not feel welcome within the confines of the congregational life she had experienced. She did not live to see her work included in the virtual community of Mennonite poetry, but her family assured me that she would have been delighted to know it had found a home among the poems of other Mennonite writers.²

In editing *A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry*³ I tried to bring together the voices of the strongest Mennonite poets I could find at the time, with an emphasis on those who had received some sort of literary recognition. The poets in the anthology include those who were involved with congregations as well as those estranged or distanced from them. Since it was published a few years after the institutional merger of the MC and GC Mennonite families, I like to point out that the poets in the anthology are far more diverse than the new membership of the Mennonite Church USA. It includes Canadians, as well as those who have grown up Mennonite, those who have discovered Mennonites as adults, those whose imaginations have been deeply shaped by Mennonite faith and practice in many different ways.

Like a Sacred Harp singing, the anthology created a structure in which saints and sinners could commingle – sometimes even within the same poem. Also, like a Sacred Harp gathering, this anthology is a gathering at a particular place and time, but it is certainly not meant to be the only one. It is a pin on a map of the Mennonite literary landscape next to Hildi Froese

Tiessen's short fiction anthology, *Liars and Rascals*, and special issues of *New Quarterly* and *Prairie Fire* devoted to Mennonite writing; I hope the map will fill up with many others, such as the newly released *Half in the Sun*, edited by Elsie Neufeld, which gathers Canadian Mennonite writing from British Columbia.

A book is open to the heart of any reader willing to receive it. "Only connect" was the mantra of English novelist E.M. Forster. And the confessions we make in books, or dare to read about, are also offers for the reader to make a silent, sympathetic confession as well. These confessions are often far safer than the ones we might make in our own churches, for both the teller and the listener. This is less true, of course, for writers than for readers. And yet, though a writer may find her critics, she is also certain to find those who greet her confession with gratitude and a sense of connection. Books may transform us and our minds, but they will not shun us, ostracize us, scapegoat us to protect a sense of their own righteousness. They stand as testimony to our common humanity. Good fiction and poetry invites us to discover the particular situatedness of our own truths. A human reflection of the divine love for creation, such writing is rooted in a love of human beings in all of their bodily splendor and glaring blind spots. The confessions it invites prompt our laughter as well as our tears, till we lay down our own defensive shields of righteousness and acknowledge our membership in the community of confessed and forgiven sinners.

Once ritual confession was lost in England with the Reformation,⁴ the personal lyric flourished, perhaps as a substitute for confession. Rather than ritual confession, in which church members weekly acknowledge their failings, Mennonite congregations singled out certain sins and certain persons for public shame, which tended to mark the sinner in the community for life. And sometimes, as is human, the subject of the confession simply served as a distraction from a larger unconfessed sin, as the public strafing of Herman Paetkau and Madeline Moosomin in *Peace Shall Destroy Many* is a distraction from the larger unconfessed sin of that church – its prejudice against the aboriginal peoples of Canada who were their neighbors. In such a system, rather than confess, sinners hide their transgressions. Or leave the church.

The human need for absolution persists, and contemporary

Mennonites have discovered, with the disappearance of confession in their churches, the grace of confession on the page. Such confession is still a risky business. We still know each other so well that literary confession among Mennonite writers is hardly an anonymous thing. Thus creative nonfiction is still a fledgling Mennonite genre. Swiss Mennonites, after all, are even reluctant to give testimonies. And literary confession is hard work. I well remember Paul West, one of my fiction writing professors, telling me that my stories' narrators were entirely too well-behaved. Nor am I suggesting that confessions truly tell all. They're more like a striptease, revealing some things while concealing others. But the fragments of truth they reveal may suggest a hidden whole. So while the publishing world at the moment is full of tell-all memoirs, and confessional poetry has become somewhat suspect among the worldly, Mennonite writers have only begun to confess in literature our faith, our shortcomings, our doubts, our flaws.

In her slender but generous book, *Elements of Faithful Writing*, which reminds us that the writer's terrain is as broad as the four elements – earth, water, wind, and fire – poet Jean Janzen quotes Garrison Keillor on confession: “True confession is extremely rare in poetry, as in life. When a poet pretends to confess, usually he does it in a pretty heroic manner.... You seldom hear someone cop to the real basic stuff, ‘Forgive me, Lord, for being this self-righteous prick and walking around with a mirror held up in front of my face.... I am of less real use in this world than any good cleaning lady.’ Scripture tells us to confess our sins to each other, and I wish that the poets I know would do this more often. They could use a little more humility, frankly. We humorists can’t do the whole job alone.”⁵ Garrison, let me introduce you to a few more Mennonite writers.

When I first put together *A Cappella*, it was my primary aim to gather a collection of poetry writers whom I had only recently discovered, and who had immeasurably enriched my own life as a Mennonite poet, so that students and other readers could benefit, too. But I also wanted, if at all possible, to find a niche within the American literary landscape for Mennonite writers who in the US, in contrast to Canada, are little known or recognized as an ethnic group whose literature might have broader interest. I was gratified that it was published by one of the university presses most widely known for its poetry publications, particularly its anthologies. And it was a great pleasure to do a series of readings with a number of the writers

represented in this book in college and university settings, literary settings, and in Mennonite congregations.

Now, after eight years of living in a Mennonite community and teaching at a Mennonite college, I am more concerned that poetry and fiction become better known among Mennonites as a resource for the church. We need writers who show us at our worst as well as at our best, who can probe the secrets we fear to confess, and can offer us the grace of lovingly portraying whole human beings in all of their mixed glory. Like the artistic structure offered by Sacred Harp singing, literature makes a place for diverse voices to resonate with each other. And like the network of Sacred Harp singing groups, Mennonite literature and its repeated conferences throughout the past decade and a half have created a virtual community that is far more flexible, tolerant, and open than the older models of community based on a rural agricultural patriarchy. Some of the writers who read with me at readings for *A Cappella* thanked me for giving them a Mennonite “home” – something they felt they had had to relinquish by the act of becoming a writer in the first place. But even though the energy of a gathering like this conference suggests otherwise, Mennonite literature is still too little known among Mennonites.

This fall I have had the privilege of teaching Mennonite literature for the first time, attempting to put my feet into the large footprints left behind by Ervin Beck upon his retirement from Goshen College. Frankly, in August of this year, I didn’t feel up to the task. But it has been a delight, and the seventeen students in my class have been the best part of the treat. All seventeen are Mennonite, few had read much Mennonite literature, but all are passionately drawn to the church in various ways.

These students have little in common with the childhoods of such writers as Di Brandt and Patrick Friesen; they have grown up amidst material abundance and benevolent pedagogy. They have been encouraged to ask questions and to use their voices. They are horrified and saddened by tales of Mennonites who were sanctioned for being involved in the arts, who were beaten into submission in a distortion of the biblical injunction to spare the rod and spoil the child. They are repulsed by the residue of patriarchy they see in literary representations of historic Mennonite communities. They love the churches that have nourished them, and in some cases have even chosen to embrace a Mennonite church which their families, for various

reasons, have left. Having learned to love the church through the embrace of a congregation, they are now learning to know it through texts – history, theology, and even literature. Some of these students had a tough choice to make this weekend – between attending this conference, required for my course, and attending the “church of my dreams” youth ministry conference at Hesston College.

Some of the students at first recoiled from the criticism of Mennonites they sensed in the fiction and poetry of Mennonite writers. But when we began, through deeper reading and discussion to discover, in the dilemmas of a Thom Wiens or a young Di Brandt, reflections of their own choices, they began to sense the connections of our humanity that runs like deep water beneath the boundaries erected by time, place, and ideology. We have begun to understand together the Peter Blocks and Katya Vogts trapped by secret sins they have been unwilling to confess – the sins hidden so deep they might damn us unawares. For much of Mennonite literature, especially fiction, has been about the perils of a life lived out in a rigid righteousness inspired by the need to cover an unconfessed sin. This theme occurs so often in Mennonite literature, from Rudy Wiebe’s *Peace Shall Destroy Many* to Sandra Birdsell’s *The Russländer* to Miriam Toews’s *A Complicated Kindness*. It informs the plot of an independent film, *Pearl Diver*, made by a recent Goshen College graduate, Sidney King. This fear of falling is echoed in a recent play, *Fear/Falling*, just premiered in Goshen, by Mennonite playwright Michelle Milne.

In fact, the fear of falling, the perils of confession, and the inner violence of a peace-loving community have obsessed North American Mennonite literature far more than the peace position, a much-needed witness in our own times. Yorifumi Yaguchi, who visited Goshen College and my Mennonite literature class this week, asked my students, what is Mennonite literature? They were stumped. Into their silence, he slipped a seed. “If it is Mennonite literature, it should be about one thing: peace,” said this Japanese Mennonite convert who survived Hiroshima. Especially now. Especially in the time of unjust wars in which we have not even been conscripted to fight.

But in North America, literary work has more often addressed the inner violence of a people of peace, the sins we hide from each other in order to maintain an appearance of righteousness. I believe that such

repentance and exploration of our own humanity is a necessary step in the creation of Mennonite literature which is leading to a renewed interest in speaking to issues of peace and justice, as demonstrated by so many of our writers who have extended the scope of their work to the environment, the conflict in the Middle East, the war in Iraq – Di Brandt’s Gaza and Windsor, Julia Kasdorf’s Western Pennsylvania coal mines, Rudy Wiebe’s aboriginal Canada, David Bergen’s Vietnam – as well as by those who focus on conflict closer to home, between parent and child, husband and wife, neighbor and neighbor.

Excommunications in my family and in my husband’s family have cleared the way for cultural transition, enabling the development of artists and writers, theologians and pastors, anthropologists, psychologists, musicians, historians, and teachers. But they have also irrevocably divided parts of our family from each other for several generations. At our wedding we served the food cafeteria style, so that my Amish relatives would not have to fear the embarrassment of being seated at a table with my husband’s shunned grandmother. But when I mentioned my grandfather’s excommunication from the Amish in my father’s obituary, I offended some of these relatives deeply for even naming the situation more than sixty years after it had occurred.

Over and over, Mennonites, and the Amish, the people of peace, have been scarred by such internal divisions – divisions that look rather silly when viewed from a distance. The Amish I know in Indiana laugh when I tell them that my Amish relatives belong to the one-suspender Amish in Big Valley. How do they keep their pants up if the one suspender breaks, they ask. Our obsession with identity boundaries is also, at this time in our country’s history, a sinful distraction from the larger issues of peace and justice that call out for a witness from a Mennonite people of peace.

Perhaps we should read Jeff Gundy’s “Cookie” poem regularly in our Sunday morning worship services, a poem in which the Cookies of the Amish Division commingle with cookies from Nairobi, Djakarta, Winnipeg, Goshen ... in the mouth of a giant cookie monster God.⁶ For the metaphor of this poem to work, the cookies must be individual enough to be recognizable, but broken enough to commingle. And most certainly we should take a lesson from Jean Janzen’s father, who in her poem, “Learning to Sing in Parts,” teaches peace by teaching singing – training students to hear their

own voices amidst the sounds of other pitches. “This is the world’s secret, he confides/ to enter and be close, yet separate.”⁷

Back on that hot July day, in the German Baptist frame church, the gathered body became an instrument. The rhythms and the harmonies of the Sacred Harp music provided a structure that joined the voices of participating singers into a great machine of sound. And as the music built throughout the morning, singers began to move their right forearms up and down with the rhythm, as though pumping an organ. It was a single organ created of diverse parts, centered in an act of worship, of ritual confession, of art – an offering to God of those willing to be shattered and made whole again. The bread of communion must be broken to nourish. Mennonite literature creates the possibility of a larger dough, in which the wild yeasts of dissenters and shunned can be kneaded back into the community to provide new flavors that can nourish us all.

Notes

¹ This phrase is from Julia Kasdorf’s poem “Mennonites,” in *Sleeping Preacher* (Pittsburgh, PA: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1992).

² This material has been gathered from personal interviews with Ediger Baehr’s family members and from her papers in the Archives of the Mennonite Church, and is part of a work in progress tentatively entitled “White Buffalo Woman: The Cheyenne and Mennonite Life of Anna Ruth Ediger Baehr.”

³ *A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry*, ed. Ann Hostetler (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2003).

⁴ Conversation with Robert J. Meyer-Lee, October 24, 2006.

⁵ *The Elements of Faithful Writing* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2005).

⁶ “The Cookie Poem” from *Rhapsody with Dark Matter* (Huron, OH: Bottom Dog Press, 2000).

⁷ “Learning to Sing in Parts” from *Piano in the Vineyard* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2004).

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