The Conrad Grebel Review

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Guest Editor: Hildi Froese Tiessen

Rudy Wiebe and the Mennonites: forty years on

Book Reviews

Foreword

We take pride in presenting this issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review* with its special focus on the much-celebrated writer Rudy Wiebe. We thank Hildi Froese Tiessen, guest editor, for pulling all the articles and other materials together.

While this issue focuses mostly on Wiebe, readers will discover a good number of book reviews on a variety of topics as well.

Looking ahead: Our Fall 2004 issue will feature the 2003 Bechtel Lectures delivered at Conrad Grebel University College by Nancy Heisey, President of the Mennonite World Conference (MWC). It will also include Siaka Traore's presentation to the MWC 2003 assembly, as well as reflections on the results and effects of that conference, which was held in August 2003 in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. A selection of book reviews will round out the issue.

Upcoming *CGR* issues now in process will be devoted to the 2002 Women Doing Theology Conference and to the work of influential theologian John Milbank. Other themes will take the stage in later issues.

We invite members of the Anabaptist-Mennonite Scholars Network – and other researchers – to participate in *CGR's* forum for thoughtful, sustained discussion of spirituality, ethics, theology and culture from a broadly based Mennonite perspective.

Stephen A. Jones, *Managing Editor*
C. Arnold Snyder, *Academic Editor*

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"There was nothing to be read about Mennonites": Rudy Wiebe and the impulse to make story

Hildi Froese Tiessen

> *When I was growing up I wanted to be a writer. . . . But of course I knew no writers, nor had ever met one; the Mennonite bush farm community in Saskatchewan where I was born and later the small Alberta town where I spent my teens certainly contained none. I read endless books, but had no idea how to go about becoming a writer in Canada. Nevertheless, there is in the human imagination that which wants more. Not merely more of the same thing, the stimulated imagination always wants more, yes, and also different.*[1]
>
> – Rudy Wiebe

> *They've claimed you, your stories, written you down, a hand pressing them into the page you've worn as a cloak for more than forty years. Time is a long time, a stairway to climbing, one glistening raspberry alone and uneaten in the garden.*[2]
>
> – Aritha van Herk

In a statement to some one hundred people gathered for the closing panel of the first conference on "Mennonite/s Writing" in May 1990,[3] Rudy Wiebe declared: "I've never thought of myself particularly as a Mennonite writer, you might be interested to know. The publication of my first book destroyed that illusion for me forever."[4] Three years earlier, in 1987, Wiebe had published in the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* an essay in which he had recalled the Mennonite reception of that first book, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*.[5] In that retrospective statement, he had confessed: "As some of you may know, publishing that first novel became for me both an exaltation and a trauma."[6]

It is common knowledge that the publication and reception of *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, the first Canadian English-language work of narrative fiction to feature Mennonites living in a Mennonite community, resonated

throughout the Canadian Mennonite world. Recently, reflecting on the impact of that novel, one of its original young Mennonite readers recalled how with that first book Wiebe "pushed us into 'the sixties' even before they had a chance to arrive with some appropriate ceremony." From the day of publication, this early reader remarked, "Wiebe has led the way, helping us to figure out how we might live, even before we knew what to brace ourselves for." Another early reader recalled that Wiebe's "portrayal of the Mennonites – perhaps better said, of creatures of flesh and blood who happened to be Mennonite – was the first one I had come across that reflected the reality which I was beginning to see but which I was too timid and confused to name."[7] Al Reimer, a young academic in 1962, and someone Wiebe had cited as one of his constant friends during the turbulent post-*Peace* period,[8] forty years later stated without equivocation: "To say that Rudy invented Canadian-Mennonite literature in English in the early sixties is no exaggeration. *Peace Shall Destroy Many* was the right novel at the right time in that it raised crucial questions and long-suppressed issues of Mennonite life and faith and dared to address them with probing honesty and creative independence. He created a Mennonite literary world that other Mennonite writers could enter and explore and make meaningful to readers in general. And that has led directly to the efflorescence of 'Mennonite' writing we enjoy today."[9]

Few people familiar with the vigorous flowering of Mennonite writing in Canada – nay, in North America – would deny Rudy Wiebe's central and persistent role as trailblazer and inspiration. Even when his influence has been indirect and diffuse, it has remained palpable. Different creative writers have given expression to it in diverse ways, each interweaving his or her own literary voice with Wiebe's. "What I remember now of *Peace Shall Destroy Many* are first impressions," Patrick Friesen recalls. "Mennonite life was given fuller expression than I had heard before. This wasn't a narrow sermon, a censored history; it was a deeply-felt, imaginative exploration of a particular community by someone who belonged but asked questions. Someone who knew the shadows had to be lit." Poet Jeff Gundy remarks on Wiebe's brilliance and delicacy, ambition, and indiscretion. Wiebe, he observes, quoting Ezra Pound on Walt Whitman, was the "pig-headed father [who] broke the new wood." For Di Brandt, "it was Rudy Wiebe who stood before me as the Man Who Had Survived Mennonite Wrath, who had risked

everything to write what he understood as the true fiction of our people, playfully, lovingly, eloquently, but with an unerring eye for the seam of contradictions running through us, our violence and our pacifism, our evangelism and our separatism, our sense of justice, of egalitarianism and our racism and sexism, our insistence on religious freedom and our communal repression of self expression, our relentless honesty and our deep deceptions for the sake of community appearances. Our humanness, in other words. Rudy Wiebe did it, I said to myself, trembling, so I can do it too."[10]

At the closing banquet of the 2002 conference on Mennonite/s writing – a gathering of writers, readers and critics where Rudy Wiebe's forty-year career (1962-2002) was celebrated – I drew attention to Wiebe's success as an author of national and international stature, particularly well known in Canada and abroad for his historical metafictions set in the Native communities of Canada. I said that Wiebe has been "a formidable force" in ensuring "the well-being of [Canada's] national literary culture," in shaping Canadians' perceptions of themselves as well as of "the prairie, the north and the indigenous peoples who occupied our land long before the Europeans arrived." Big Bear, I observed then, was "already there . . . in 1962 in the pages of *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, a novel in which the natives and Mennonites lived side by side."[11] Nevertheless, I insisted, in spite of his efforts at denial, Wiebe has always had a committed audience among the Mennonites, especially for his "Mennonite" texts. There have always been Mennonites who have laid claim to him as a writer who speaks their language, a writer who, to paraphrase critic Clara Thomas,[12] has the power to identify them to themselves.

* * *

What Al Reimer refers to as the "'Mennonite' writing we enjoy today" has been the focus of three conferences in recent years: "Mennonite/s Writing in Canada" (1990)[13]; "Mennonite/s Writing in the U.S.," held at Goshen College in 1997; and "Mennonite/s Writing: An International Conference," also at Goshen College, in 2002.[14] Like the first event of this kind in 1990, the third conference called together most of the prominent Mennonite writers of Canada and the United States (as well as the Japanese Mennonite poet Yorifumi

Yaguchi, in 2002). Among the writers present at Goshen in 2002 were Canadians Rudy Wiebe, Di Brandt, Victor Jerrett Enns, Maurice Mierau, David Waltner-Toews, Rosemary Nixon, Barbara Nickel, Patrick Friesen, Sarah Klassen, Armin Wiebe, and Sandra Birdsell, and Americans Jeff Gundy, Dallas Wiebe, Julia Kasdorf, Raylene Hinz-Penner, Todd Davis, Ann Hostetler, Omar Eby, Keith Ratzlaff, and Jean Janzen. The conference comprised a wonderful festival of readings and academic papers. It served as an occasion to observe the burgeoning of Mennonite literary production in North America (we celebrated the publication of seven new titles by Mennonite writers there).[15] At the same time it provided an occasion to recognize the fortieth anniversary of the publication of Rudy Wiebe's first novel and his subsequent four decades of literary activity. The conference proceedings were divided to reflect the dual focus of the event (Mennonite writing today and the watershed appearance of *Peace Shall Destroy Many*), between the October 2003 volume of *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* (appropriately dedicated to Ervin Beck of Goshen College, whose patient, steady hand, creative energy, and quiet persistence guided both the1997 and 2002 conferences) and the present volume of *The Conrad Grebel Review*.

Most of the material concerning Rudy Wiebe has been reserved for this special issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review*[16] which contains, also, some new material by and about Wiebe. Edna Froese's thoughtful and illuminating survey of Wiebe's Mennonite protagonists, J.D. Mininger's probing analysis of *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, Jane Robinett and Maryann Jantzen's enlightening explorations of dominant themes in *Sweeter Than All the World*, and Maurice Mierau's playful yet instructive musings on why Rudy Wiebe may or may not be "the last Mennonite writer" – these essays, prepared for the 2002 conference, form the core of this volume. They are accompanied by excerpts from an interview with Rudy Wiebe – excerpts that focus in particular on Wiebe as writer of "Mennonite" material – by Janne Korkka, and by a review essay that foregrounds one example of the substantial amount of collaborative work Wiebe has undertaken throughout his career, by Paul Tiessen. These critical works are augmented by the transcript of a compelling talk – a personal statement about the work of the fiction writer – Rudy Wiebe delivered at the University of Calgary this past spring.[17]

* * *

Rudy Wiebe's persistence in claiming not to think of himself as a Mennonite writer is matched by his insistence that the writer must sustain some detachment from his work. Quoting from an essay Wiebe published in 1965, J.M. Kertzer, in his engaging and illuminating "Biocritical Essay" which serves as an introduction to the Rudy Wiebe collection at the University of Calgary archives, observes: "Rudy Wiebe has mocked the 'personal fallacy' in literary criticism, which 'sees every work of art as arising directly out of the artist's experience' and sanctions 'a great deal of snooping'" into his life. "In contrast," Kertzer continues, "Wiebe insists that novels 'acquire a life and character of their own, independent of and quite beyond the artist himself."[18] At the Mennonite/s writing conference in Waterloo in 1990, Wiebe maintained his insistence on the artist's detached perspective; "navel-gazing is no good to anyone," he said. "The world of story and of fiction for me is all around me, and the world where I find my imagination stimulated is not necessarily found by sitting and looking in a mirror. It may start there. I know . . . [that] literature often begins with autobiography: this is *my* story, I have *this* story to tell. But if you're a writer, it goes beyond that and, after a while, you're not writing your own story at all. Of course you are, but you're not really. It goes beyond that. . . . We'd better get on with writing the world of our imagination in such a way that nobody will forget it, whether they know that we existed personally or not."[19]

Well, Rudy Wiebe does exist, and, his claims to objectivity notwithstanding, I would venture to say that some of his most sharply conceived work arises directly out of his own experience (the short fictions "Chinook Christmas" and "Sailing to Danzig," for example). And he continues to function actively within the Mennonite community to which these stories relate (most recently team-teaching a Sunday School course on the Bible as literature for his home congregation of Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church in Edmonton). Rudy Wiebe and his fictions are shaped, among other things, by the communities (Canadian, Albertan, Mennonite) in which the author has chosen to live. Like Wiebe, younger Mennonite writers continue to find their own voices – as he has, throughout his career – both within the context of the diverse Mennonite communities of Canada and the US, and beyond.

It is noteworthy that as the remarkably productive Mennonite writing community of Winnipeg has begun to disperse over the past decade or so,

with Patrick Friesen's move to Vancouver, Sandra Birdsell's to Regina, and Di Brandt's to Windsor, for example, another group of writers – self-identified as Mennonites – has begun to gather on the lower mainland of British Columbia, where in February 2004 nineteen Mennonite writers (including Andreas Schroeder, Barbara Nickel, Melody Goetz, Leonard Neufeldt, and others) met "to interact and connect with other writers, and to hear what other writers are writing." The spirit of censure that drove Rudy Wiebe out of his job as editor of the *Mennonite Brethren Herald* after the publication of *Peace Shall Destroy Many* no longer persists for them, these writers have taken pleasure in observing. Andreas Schroeder, in fact, remarked subsequent to their meeting that the west coast Mennonite writers seem "very comfortable with their Mennonite upbringing, far more inclined to include it in their work in a productive and even fond manner. It seemed we weren't any longer threatened or imprisoned by it," he remarked; "we could afford to acknowledge its many advantages and strengths as well as its failings without feeling we had to buy into the faith or the lifestyle uncritically."[20]

* * *

Much of the work published in this volume deals in some way with the intersections between the individual Mennonite and his community, the writer and "home" – subjects that have never been far from the heart of Mennonite writing as it has taken shape over the past forty years. Is it most fitting, then, that Rudy Wiebe's informal piece "Climbing Mountains That Do Not Exist: The Fiction Writer at Work" should be given the last word here. In this most engaging piece, Wiebe speaks as warmly and personally as ever he has about his childhood and the advent of story in his life. Here he remembers his mother, "deeply troubled" that her last child, Rudy, "should grow up to have the overweening pride to write stories he expected other people to print and read." And yet, he writes, inimitably, "from my point of view, it was exactly the powerful stories she told me in that isolated bush world, not only stories from the Bible but far more of her childhood in incomprehensible Russia, the village life in Orenburg Mennonite Colony, the brutal physical punishments of her father, her mother's death when she was six and enduring two step-mothers – the last her own age and once her best friend – and

particularly the stories of the family escape from the Communists, the escape over Moscow with a chronically ill baby Helen who was always, as by a miracle, strong and healthy whenever the Canadian immigration doctors examined her – it was all a miracle, and the greatest was not being forced to settle in Paraguay: these stories heard in bits and pieces over and over were far too powerful for me ever to forget, as was the pioneer farm life we lived. And all the more powerful," Wiebe continues, alluding, as is his wont, to the blatant and persistent chauvinism of the imperialist political and cultural centers of power in Canada, "because, in the books we read in school, there was never a hint that refugee bush homesteaders in Canadian boreal forests existed, fumigating lice and swatting mosquitoes and trudging through snowdrifts while their hands and faces froze. And most certainly in our school readers and tiny library there was nothing readable about bohunk Mennonites, speaking Low German. . . ."[21]

When I visited Edmonton earlier this year, the face of Rudy Wiebe stared out at me every time I passed a newsstand. It was on the cover of the spring 2004 issue of *Legacy*, a glossy "Heritage, Arts and Culture" magazine published in Alberta. Here was Rudy Wiebe being acknowledged as a cultural treasure of a province rich in writers. Wiebe's large readership in Canada and around the world, the hundreds of articles and reviews written about his work, his countless invitations to read and to deliver public lectures on diverse subjects of national, regional, or personal concern – all confirm the significance of his artist's voice.[22] Along with his prominent role on the literary landscapes of Canada and abroad, Wiebe is unmatched in representing and probing the experience of Mennonites – whether in contemporary or historical settings. He has written about Mennonites with immense scope and tenacity, vision and complexity, with a cooly skeptical eye and a warmly affectionate heart. This volume of *The Conrad Grebel Review* has been prepared in celebration of narrative and story-telling in the Mennonite world where, thanks to Rudy Wiebe (and to the "powerful" tales his mother told him), it is increasingly true that – as Wiebe himself once remarked – "[t]he impulse to make story needs no defence."[23]

Notes

[1] Rudy Wiebe, "The Invention of Truth," typescript manuscript. This essay, presented in a plenary session at a conference in Grainau, Germany, in February 2002, was subsequently published in *Zeitschrift für Kanada-Studien*, NR 1-2, 2002: 20-25.
[2] Aritha van Herk, [a letter to Rudy Wiebe], in *Rudy Wiebe: a tribute*, compiled by Hildi Froese Tiessen (Kitchener, ON and Goshen, IN: Sand Hills Books and Pinchpenny Press, 2002).
[3] The conference, "Mennonite/s Writing in Canada," was organized by *The New Quarterly*. It took place at Conrad Grebel College, University of Waterloo.
[4] Rudy Wiebe, "Closing Panel," in *Acts of Concealment: Mennonite/s Writing in Canada*. Ed. Hildi Froese Tiessen and Peter Hinchcliffe. (Waterloo, ON: University of Waterloo Press, 1992), 229-30.
[5] Rudy Wiebe, "The Skull in the Swamp," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 5 (1987): [8]-20. The essay was first prepared as the 1987 Marjorie Ward Lecture at St. John's College, University of Manitoba.
[6] *Ibid*., [8].
[7] Tributes by Paul Tiessen and John Rempel, respectively, in *Rudy Wiebe: a tribute*, n.p.
[8] See Wiebe, in "Closing Panel," 230.
[9] Al Reimer, in *Rudy Wiebe: a tribute*, n.p.
[10] Patrick Friesen, Jeff Gundy, and Di Brandt, respectively, in *Rudy Wiebe: a tribute*, n.p.
[11] In an oral tribute later published as "Rudy Wiebe: A Tribute," in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 77.4 (October 2003): 690.
[12] Clara Thomas, "Western Women's Writing of 'The Childhood' and Anne Konrad's *The Blue Jar*," in *Acts of Concealment: Mennonite/s Writing in Canada*. Ed. Hildi Froese Tiessen and Peter Hinchcliffe (Waterloo, ON: University of Waterloo Press, 1992), 130. Here Thomas remarks: "I agree with Bill Keith that *The Blue Mountains [of China]* is a magnificent epic and religious novel, but it does not and cannot identify me to myself as does, for instance, *The Stone Angel* or *The Diviners*, both of them written from a background so close to my own that Hagar is my mother, myself, as Morag is my sister, myself."
[13] See Note 3.
[14] This last conference, like the other Goshen conference, was organized by Ervin Beck; co-sponsor of the third conference was Conrad Grebel University College, represented by Hildi Froese Tiessen.
[15] See a list of these in John D. Roth and Ervin Beck, "In This Issue," in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 77:503-504. Absent from this list of six new books is David Bergen's *The Case of Lena S.*, which was being actively promoted in Canada while the conference took place. Roth and Beck remark that four more titles appeared in the year following the Goshen conference (and others have appeared since, including collections of poetry by Patrick Friesen, Di Brandt, John Weier, and Melanie Cameron; a collection of short fiction by a new writer, Carrie Snyder; and a new novel by Miriam Toews).

[16] *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* issue includes one essay on Wiebe's work, focusing on his use of photographs in his most recent novel: Hildi Froese Tiessen's "Between Memory and Longing: Rudy Wiebe's *Sweeter Than All the World*," 619-36.
[17] The lecture, one in a series of two given by Wiebe early in February 2004, was sponsored by the Chair of Christian Thought at the University of Calgary.
[18] J.M. Kertzer, "Rudy Wiebe: Biocritical Essay," <www.ucalgary.ca/library/SpecColl/wiebebioc.htm> , citing Wiebe in *A Voice in the Land*, 40.
[19] Wiebe, in "Closing Panel," 230-31.
[20] Andreas Schroeder, quoted by Angelika Dawson, "BC Mennonite Writers Gather," typescript press release forwarded to me by Elsie K. Neufeld, who hosted the writers' meeting. See also Angelika Dawson, "Writers inspired at B.C. gathering," *Canadian Mennonite* 8.6 (March 22, 2004): 10.
[21] Wiebe, "Climbing Mountains That Do Not Exist: the fiction writer at work," published in this volume.
[22] The most recent translation of Wiebe's fiction is a German edition of *The Blue Mountains of China*, translated by Joachim Utz as *Wie Pappeln im Wind* (Eichborn AG, 2004.)
[23] Rudy Wiebe, "Introduction," *The Story-Makers: A Selection of Modern Short Stories*, ed. Rudy Wiebe (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1970), ix.

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

Edna Froese

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Notes

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

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

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 complexion[3] 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 *zoê*.[4] The English word "life" subsumes both terms for life used by the Greeks: *zoê* and *bios*. *Zoê* 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 (*zoê*) 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 valences[8] – 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 (*zoê*) 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).

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

Jane Hostetler Robinett

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 geneology, 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 aufjefollna 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* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1950), 422-24.
[10] Rudy Wiebe, *More Stories from Western Canada*, vii.

"Believing is seeing"[1]: "Re-storying" the Self in Rudy Wiebe's *Sweeter Than All the World*

Maryann Jantzen

> *A story is not simply a story . . . . It acts to create, sustain or alter worlds of social relationships.*[2]
>
> *If you don't know where you are and where you come from, you're more or less like an animal that has no memory . . . .*[3]

In Rudy Wiebe's *Sweeter Than All the World*, world-weary protagonist Adam Wiebe wanders the globe in a parodic imitation of his Anabaptist ancestors' attempt to find a place where they can live out their faith. Adam's wanderings, in contrast to theirs, seem to emerge out of a self-absorbed absence of values to live or die by. In the essay that follows, I will use insights garnered from narrative therapy to argue that Adam's self-absorption results from the subsuming of his multi-storied self-identity, originally formed by the intricate weaving together of diverse identity narratives, into a dominant self-narrative of Western culture, that of the autonomous, often overly individuated self.[4] Gradually, through interaction with ancestral narratives, Adam receives opportunities to "rework dominant notions and practices of self and culture."[5] However, his reactive self-absorbed responses to relational "infringement[s] on his autonomy"[6] threaten to sabotage his explorations of the past, as he continually looks "into mirrors and never [comes] different."[7] Not until story becomes flesh, until his family and ancestral narratives begin to meaningfully inhabit him, can he begin to "think different[ly]" (337).[8] Gradually, through his growing willingness to assume relational accountability that is birthed as he experiences with fresh eyes the embodied experiences of his Anabaptist forebears, Adam's inner "believing" becomes relational "seeing." As a result, Adam begins to balance his individuated autonomous self-story with an alternative self-understanding that allows for "authenticity and voice in relationship."[9]

Narrative therapist Michael White asserts that "the structure of narrative provides the principal frame of intelligibility for people in their day-to-day

lives,"[10] allowing them to "link together the events of life in sequences that unfold through time according to specific themes."[11] White speaks of diverse ways of conceptualizing the narrative self-construction process: narrative identity can be thin or thick, clear or opaque, depending on paradigms of self and reality. For example, he suggests that modernist structuralist thinking often produces "flat monographic descriptions of life [that] champion the norm and render the unexpected invisible."[12] In contrast, a thick multi-storied conception of life seeks the unique so as not to be misled by the norm and provides opportunities to rework and revise "dominant notions and practices of self and of culture."[13] As a result, White asserts, individuals can begin to generate both "alternative" versions of their present realities and new understandings of narratives of the past, resulting in "a linking of stories across time through lives"[14] and the emergence of "shared themes that speak to purposes, values and commitments."[15]

Building on White's work, Mona Fishbane explores the way the contemporary narrative of the self-individuated autonomous self, which she defines as "the dominant narrative of the self in Western culture,"[16] intersects with the Western cultural values of "individualism and competition"[17] to create a construction of self quintessentially about "self-creation and self-determination."[18] The assumptions of this self-narrative, she observes, often clash with "such values as intergenerational loyalty, obligation, or interdependence."[19] This model of the self, when combined with contemporary cultural pre-occupation with materialistic consumerism (what Richard Rohr refers to as a "mass cultural trance . . . like scales over our eye" so that "we see only with the material eye"[20]), can easily conflate the boundaries between self-actualization and self-absorption.

As an alternative to this individuated understanding of self-identity, Fishbane proposes a relational paradigm of self-understanding that links personal autonomy to "capacity for relational accountability"[21] rather than only to differentiation from family members.[22] She seeks to challenge central "Western notions about power and the self"[23] that privilege independence and individualism over interdependence and accountability. According to her identity model, authoring an authentic self-narrative ("being true to oneself"[24]) does not diminish awareness of relational accountability but rather occurs most effectively within a relational context. In her opinion, taking

"responsibility for consequences of one's actions on relational partners"[25] may be the determining characteristic of personal autonomy.

My reading of Wiebe's novel *Sweeter Than All the World* attempts to apply White's and Fishbane's theoretical understandings of narrative self-construction to protagonist Adam's Wiebe's shifting subjectivities, and asserts that Adam's redevelopment of a relational re-connection with his family and culture of origin is crucial for a healthy sense of self-identity.[26] I also work with the assumption that his re-encounters with ancestral and family narratives work as a catalyst for a "therapeutic"[27] re-interpretation that builds in him the capacity for self-transformation. Eventually, as Adam begins to allow the multiple narratives of his past to inform his present sense of self, he receives new ways of "seeing" and "believing" that "baptize" him into a larger communal story than his own narrow, ultimately self-destroying, overly individuated his-story. As a result, he is able to move out of the relational "blindness" of self-absorption into the authentic "seeing" of relational accountability, and to achieve a new kind of inner "believing" that builds connectedness and interdependence.

At the novel's beginning, we are shown the multi-storied narrative strands mediating Adam Wiebe's self-identity. Growing up in northern Alberta, Adam early learns to hear intuitively the wordless stories of the vast wilderness world around him – nature narratives linked later in the story with aboriginal spirituality – as he goes "alone into the bush, where everything spoke to him" (Wiebe 1) in a "language clear as the water of his memory when he lay . . . listening to the spring mosquitoes" (1). Alongside this nature narrative of place runs the crucial discourse of family stories of loss and longing, filtered through Mennonite tribal and theological understandings of the biblical master narrative. For Adam, in the beginning, "everything spoke and it spoke Low German" (1). In the novel, this cultural narrative of origin, which I will refer to as the discourse of mother-tongue, is identified closely with Adam's memories of his mother, whose "living prayers" (174) follow him through time and space. Later, in elementary school, Adam discovers a world of written words introducing him to the cultural narratives of Western civilization that "allow him to hear human voices speaking from everywhere and every age, saying things both sweet and horrible" (7). Wiebe's description here suggests

that Adam is, at a young age, sensitized to the imaginative power of words, and shaped by foundational Western cultural narratives privileging rationalism and personal autonomy. Held together in creative tension, these blended identity strands of place, mother-tongue, and culture have the potential to create a healthy model of relational self-determination in which the absolutizing force of each narrative is held in check by the ebb and flow of the others. In my reading of the novel, this model of the relational self is closely connected with the character of Susannah, Adam's wife, whom Adam recognizes as having an extraordinary ability to "make connections" (377) and whose complex family history, with its bi-cultural Mennonite and *Englische* strands, and whose vocation as a comparative literature professor, points to the need not only to contrast and compare identity narratives but also to hold them in productive tension. When Adam separates from Susannah, he is symbolically separated also from his relational self; in seeking to reunite with her, he also begins to re-embrace his relational identity. In addition, the author also seems to link both the unassuming but deep spirituality of Adam's mother (the source of "living prayers" [174]) and his depictions of aboriginal spirituality sensitive to the "text" of nature with the relational model of the self.

In the process of growing into adulthood, Adam continues to confront the larger world around him, first the competitive self-individuating world of the Coaldale high school where representatives of twenty different races jockey for position and "the English" consider themselves "the ruling class of the school" (11), and later the context of his medical studies, which firmly ground him in the dominant cultural narratives of western science and rationalism. However, before long, a growing inner dissonance with his multiple self-narratives sends Adam searching for an alternate way of conceptualizing self. Finding the proscriptions of "his parents' bush piety" (246) becoming "a swamp of sin-soaked boredom" (246), he becomes an "*aufjefollna Mennist*" (215). However, he cannot find comfort in the culturally accepted rhythm of relieving academic study with drunken partying, since remnants of mother-tongue – his recurring memories of his mother's bed-time call, "Adam, where are you" (7),[28] for example – still intuitively echo in his consciousness. In response, he turns more and more to the secular world of scientific study.

Chapter Four demonstrates well Adam's increasing inability to hold his narrative identities in creative tension. Eschewing his complex thick narrative identity, Adam has settled into "a transparent cycle" of "study, study, . . . save and study." He becomes preoccupied with "a deliberate concentration of books and labs and professors and finally cadavers and precise, clear requirements that can be fulfilled exactly if you concentrate and work hard enough." His studies allow him to conveniently evade the increasingly disturbing claims of mother-tongue; for example, he ends his weekend visits home "about the time it is necessary to go to church" because "yes, of course he has to study" (56). And yet his wife-to-be Susannah has begun to permeate his life (50) with "her undemanding or arguing presence like blood beating," hinting of a "possible [relational] happiness" (56). Her presence pushes aside his "ridiculously narrow world" and reconnects him also with "his mother's eternal and unshakable faith in the substance of things hoped for as the evidence of things suddenly seen" (56).

Paralleling these references to relational spirituality are the novel's occasional references to an embodied aboriginal spirituality lived out in close connection with the natural world. Adam's memories of hunting with his friend Napoleon's grandfather are important here. Referring to preparation for the caribou hunt, a physical quest conceptualized also as a spiritual way of being, the aboriginal elder tells Adam that success in the hunt is linked to spiritual awareness: "Power is seeing. There's a way to find everything you need, what you have to do is first see it" (59). However, in the first half of the novel, we increasingly sense Adam's inability to see beyond his own narrow self-interest. As a result he lacks the capacity to "believe" relationally; in other words, he lacks the spiritual vision to understand his self-identity in terms of his relationships to others rather than exclusively according to the needs of his own increasingly individuated and fragmented self-narrative. His increasing psychological imbalance is seen both literally in his physical "vertigo" (42), as he staggers unsteadily while attempting to shoot a caribou that looms before him like a ghost from the past, and metaphorically in the way the remnants of his personal and cultural past continue to haunt him despite his attempts to slay the claims of his culture of origin.

Although never totally able to cut himself off from his childhood narratives of place and mother tongue (as seen in his periodic trips to the

Northwest Territories and his increasing fascination with Mennonite history), Adam seems to succumb more and more to the lure of the absolutizing narrative of the autonomous self, a narrative represented in the novel by his "straight ahead roommate" (54), who, with his "purest Eric logic," encourages Adam to look to the present rather than the past to make meaning of his life. Eric, who later reappears in the novel with his third wife, is described as making "absolute personal decisions, no looking back at possible wreckage left behind" (197) and as seeming to define self-identity wholly in material and self-individuated terms – a good career, a smart and attractive wife, material prosperity. In the face of Eric's assertions that medicine provides "good money . . . with shitloads of respect" (55) and that "mothers are fine, in their place – the past" (53), Adam declares, "Anyways, what can you do with history?" (55), and so verbalizes his self-distancing from his culture of origin. Increasingly, he copes with his diverse identity narratives by compartmentalizing his life and by choosing to dwell only in the material world of science and logic. Significantly, with Susannah, who "pushes aside his ridiculously narrow world" (56), he can temporarily put aside the demands of his all-consuming work. Yet when he lives "hands-on in medicine" (57), she becomes a "dislocated fantasy" (56) that vanishes into "the flat, factual" (57) world of science.

The central part of the novel finds Adam reaping the consequences of his unbalanced immersion in the dominant narrative of the autonomous self until finally his relationship with his wife seems primarily governed by his own self-interest rather than any relational values. Challenged by Susannah, who is close enough for him to smell, "but indecipherably far away," to re-evaluate the twenty-five-year "life sentence" of their marriage, he realizes his carefully compartmentalized world has slipped away "before his very eyes," even while he has been so carefully protecting from her discerning presence what he views as his "secret . . . this-has-nothing-to-do-with-her" (103) world of extra-marital affairs. Susannah, who is leaving to immerse herself in the archives of Europe, is characterized here as aware both of the need to make connections with the past and of Adam's increasing relational paralysis. At the airport, the family of mother, father, son, and daughter is together, "trying one last time . . . to search out . . . themselves . . . trying to feel every bone in every individual body they know they love"(110).[29] But

Adam can say "nothing," prevented by his lack of relational accountability from making meaningful connections. Poignantly, son Joel's words, "If Grandma was here, she'd be saying a long prayer" (110), remind the reader of Adam's need to revisit his mother's relational spirituality; in contrast, however, the final distant words in the chapter, written as if filtered through Adam's emotional stasis, "the woman is leaving" (110), speak of Adam's increasing inability to maintain a relational sense of self.

As time goes on, haunted by the ghosts of the past, but increasingly locked in an absolutized self-narrative, Adam begins a futile search for meaning that takes him around the globe, first in a self-absorbed exploration of his family history and later in a search for his missing daughter, whose decision to cut herself off from any familial connections mirrors his own relational deficits. Chapter Eleven finds him in Prague with his latest lover Karen, whose narcissistic fixation with the existentialist novelist Franz Kafka seems to mirror Adam's own self-absorbed obsession with the past; for Adam exploring his/story has become a way to avoid the relational commitments of the present. Although sexually passionate, emotionally Adam and Karen are alienated: their "words can never quite find them home . . . search as deep as they may" (178).[30] His criticism of her "middle-class . . . , super-educated, super achieving . . . keyhole vision" (169) mirrors her accusation that he selfishly travels the world seeing nothing but "your past, your ancestors, your self" (176). Relationally, he has become impotent: "he can never decide to go, break and be gone. That first turning away, others always had to do it" (176). While visiting an ancient cloister, a place speaking of spiritual connection with the past, he climbs high onto the bell tower. Suddenly terrified as he comes face-to-face with the danger of falling, realizing "with a jolt of supreme terror, . . . I can only hold on till I fall" (177), he seems for a moment poised on the limits of self-sufficiency as the "wordless memory of Susannah moves through [him] like ancient air" (178). But Adam has not yet realized that his self-absorption will have to fade if his relational self is to rise again.

A turning point comes in a Toronto hotel room (an urban setting, far removed from narratives of nature and mother-tongue), where his sense of self-sufficiency is undercut by an increasing understanding of the culturally constructed wreckage of his life. Here the ubiquitous television set, "presenting

any number of backs, faces, breasts, hands, bunched buttocks . . . all possible human parts" (301), presents him with a fragmented picture of what his life has become and confronts him with his own objectifying sexualization of the hotel maid about whom he has fantasized. For Adam, sex has become an act of self-absorbed ego-fulfillment. Before him in the hotel room lie competing narratives of good and evil: books entitled *The Death of Adolph Hitler* and *The Mind of Norman Bethune*. Reminded by Hitler's life and death of the horror of human evil, he cannot find reassurance in the "book-face of Norman Bethune" (308), a man "vaguely known to some as good, though . . . throughout his life an egotistical bastard" (308). As "the television lumbers on in its unstoppable chronology of bits and pieces" (307), Adam articulates his disorienting fragmentation: "The white noise of twentieth-century indolence ending. Avoid the worst, always, as you can; find void" (307).[31] Adam's thoughts here reveal his growing awareness of the meaningless of his self-absorbed, relationally-alienated way of life, an increasing, intuitive recognition of how his rejection of relational accountability has stripped meaning from his life. His self-fragmentation and self-loathing are also articulated as he thinks about how his friends "cannot imagine what I am become. If, now, I am any more than bits and pieces of something at any given time"(305-6).

However, as Adam confronts the futility of his absorption into the twentieth-century western narrative of self-indulgence and personal gratification, his musings are disrupted by thoughts of Margaret Laurence, the well-known Canadian writer, whose novels, like Wiebe's, often explore the tension between self-interest and relational responsibility.[32] Imaging mentally the relational "community of the tribe" (309) gathered at her memorial service, he rediscovers inner resources that call him to "remember purity and care and enduring compassion and reconciliation with at least the members of your own small family" (308). As his mind fills with the biblical text he imagines having been read at the memorial service – "*How blessed are those who know their need for God, the kingdom of heaven is theirs*" – Adam begins to cling to the awareness that despite the "trapped, unnecessary" world reflected in the "black, silent TV," perhaps it is still possible to find individuals "who believe in responsible actions" and who can "somehow believe with their wavering Greek minds in a vaguely Hebrew god" who can

"help them decide for goodness" (308). Finally, at this crucial stage of the novel, recognizing his lack of spiritual awareness, Adam seems ready to accept himself as "a coward . . . a fucked up weakling about goodness" (297), who has avoided relational responsibility by disappearing into "work or excuses – or hiding; if not in a blank then among the sadly forgettable dead" (298).

Chapters Nineteen, Twenty, and Twenty-two, which shift frequently in time and place from the present to the past and from Canada to Russia, reveal Adam tentatively moving toward healing reconciliation with the narratives of his past. Returning to Coaldale, the Mennonite community where he lived as an adolescent, he comes back also to an "antediluvian teen past" lived beside "this slipping silent river he can never forget wherever he searches" (335-36). Chapter Nineteen juxtaposes Adam's experiences at the funeral of his sister Helen with memories of "those Russian stories as ancient as piled stones" (362) that have begun to chisel away at his self-absorption. Here his focus begins to shift from self-absorbed obsession with the "forgettable dead" (298) to re-experiencing "living stories" (371) that begin to help him redefine his sense of self.

Especially significant here are his memories of his visit in Russia with his distant cousin, Elizabeth Katerina. Her stories of suffering during the Russian occupation of Marienberg, Poland are not just disembodied sensational scenes featuring objectified "human parts" (301), but are narratives of relational responsibility lived out at tremendous personal cost. Despite her seemingly meaningless personal suffering, which has included experiencing multiple rapes, the murder of a close friend, and the tragic loss at sea of the elderly patients for whom she earlier sacrificed any attempt to save herself, Elizabeth models for Adam a self-sacrificial selfhood that sharply exposes the emptiness of twentieth-century self-absorption. His encounter with Elizabeth shifts his perspective of the past as "seemingly silent and motionless as a frozen river" to recognizing that its "current is always there under the surface," flowing "relentlessly with time and distance, enduring ancestors." Observing the gnarled old woman, "so strong, bent like curved steel, a gaunt, engraved . . . holy face," he had found himself crying" (356). This emotional reawakening is reaffirmed later in his tearful public tribute at his sister's funeral, where, caught up in the superficial social game of pious religiosity, "no one who actually knew Helen will say one loving word over

her coffin" (360). Despite the censorious faces around him – faces he imagines asking, "why is this crazy uncle" who does "nothing and [is] always running around somewhere in the world . . . interrupting the funeral?" (362) – he is able to move beyond self-preoccupation into relational vulnerability by telling a story about Helen, "the human being she was."

Rather than continuing to view his relationships as infringing upon his personal autonomy, Adam now seems ready to begin to see himself as, in Richard Rohr's words, "a part of a much larger Story, a much larger Self."[33] Chapters Twenty and Twenty-two suggest that Adam is increasingly drawing on his multi-storied past to reconstruct a more healthy relational sense of self. This shift in orientation can be symbolically seen in his public "testimony" to family connectedness at the funeral: a "going-forward" that seems to function as Adam's adult re-enactment of the discourse of conversion (the verbal practice of giving public witness to a private inner self-transformation) that Adam had learned so well during his "churched" childhood. Further evidence of his inner metamorphosis comes in his hard-won decision to remain relationally connected with his older brother John, despite John's simplistic theology and emotional insensitivity. And his reconciliation with Susannah after Helen's funeral (even though tentative[34]) speaks also of relational reconnection, as they mourn together the lengthy disappearance of their daughter Trish.

At Susannah's request, Adam shares with her his translation of the "appalling" but "comforting" words of his cousin "Young Peter" about his difficult sojourn in Siberia, a place of exile "solid as rock" with "the frozen spruce piled up like the dead waiting for spring to be buried," where the "questions come at you at any time of any night" (379). But Peter's living story also speaks of return from exile, a return whereupon he finds the silent faces he had known before his imprisonment still reading the timeless words of Jesus: "they that abide in me and I in them, the same bring forth much fruit, for without me you can do nothing" (380). Here, as Adam and Susannah are reunited, in the sanctity of both spiritual union and physical lovemaking, their story of grief over the loss of daughter Trish merges with the larger communal Russian Mennonite narrative of suffering and loss: Adam and Susannah are momentarily enclosed "in a sadness too enormous to be endured, of bodies sewn together by suffering, by torture, by faith, by hunger, by

Stalin, by God, by hope, by their daughter." They can do "nothing . . . only, they must, move close together" (382). Adam's memory of the green birch forest planted to memorialize the Mennonite dead of Russia also points to the re-growth of his relational sense of self, along with the presence of "Susannah so near him at least" that grows like a tree: "every branch, every root, every twig and family tendril is edging under the beds and around the light bulbs and along the edges of the ceiling, sprouting leaves like pain." At this point Adam draws comfort from knowing "he and Susannah are being wrapped, close, in the green, unstoppable growth of their ancestors' suffering" (380). Resting in the bitter but revitalizing power of this larger story, Adam seems ready to re-embrace the complex interplay of narratives that have shaped his identity.

Chapter Twenty-two ends with the powerful image of Adam and his family reunited, again "trying to feel every bone in every individual body, and feeling at last their hearts beat the conviction of their enduring love" (420), as they welcome Trish back from her self-imposed exile. Her return symbolizes also Adam's own return from relational exile. Earlier in the chapter, an uneasy tension is still apparent between Adam and Susannah, evident in her rage as she rebukes him for his continuing self-absorbed attempts to make sense of the "contradictory" elements of the story of his cousins Heinrich and Peter Loewen. She challenges him instead to let the story live by sharing it with son Joel so he can "make whatever sense he wants" (419) out of it. This scene suggests Adam will need to keep working at escaping the absolutizing impulses of rationalized self-absorption. Earlier, as he returns with son Joel to the northern prairie homestead where Adam was born, he has experienced an inner "contentment; almost as if he can, finally, stop thinking" (408). Walking through the worn-down house he hears once more, in his memory, "the voice of his mother in this waiting air" as she goes about her domestic tasks, her call in the evening air, "Adam, where are you" (7), bringing him home from his wanderings. Here we again see Adam's growing reconnection to the narratives of his past.

In addition, Adam's decision to purchase the northern Alberta homestead on which he was born speaks of his increasing ability to integrate his contemporary self-narrative with his originating narratives of place and mother-tongue. Instead of returning to the "little, dark log room where his

mother has given him birth" (412), he will build "a new log house on the hill" (514-15), a reconstruction speaking also of his enlarged vision of self. This new perspective which overlooks the continental divide simultaneously offers the beauty of connection with the natural world, the grounding of mother-tongue, and room to "look in all directions" from the veranda "facing east so that every day they could look over water that flowed in two directions, north and south . . . continents apart" (415). Adam's vision has been broadened, helping him to realize that he does not have to return to the restricting "log house" of uni-cultural conformity, but that as he builds a relational reality within the house of family, "long and safe," he can construct a multi-storied identity that draws from each of his cultural identity narratives. And Adam's desire to plant "lanes of birch trees . . . like the ones leading back from the Ural River" (415) memorializing "the names of the innocent and weeping dead" (417) demonstrates his determination to continue learning from the lessons of the past. Like the suffering martyrs of Soviet oppression, "who can see what they know is written on the white bark of the tree of life" (417), he has embraced his mother's "eternal and unshakable faith in the substance of things hoped for as the evidence of things suddenly seen" (56). Thus, he has begun to move from self-absorption with the demands and desires of his individuated self into the alternate autonomy of relational self-awakening. Adam's new way of seeing has helped him to believe relationally, to live his life embracing, rather than rejecting, the demands of relational accountability.

Notes

[1] Rudy Wiebe, *Sweeter Than All the World* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2001), 89.
[2] K. J. Gergen, *Realities and Relationships: Surroundings in Social Construction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 247.
[3] Rudy Wiebe and Eli Mandel, "Where the Voice Comes From," *A Voice in the Land: Essays by and about Rudy Wiebe*, ed. W. J. Keith (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1981), 150.
[4] Mona DeKoven Fishbane, "Relational Narratives of the Self," *Family Process* 40.3 (2001): 273-85. Retrieved 10 Sept. 2002, from Academic Search Premiere, EBSCOHost, 1-17.
[5] Michael White, "An Outline of Narrative Therapy," *The Narrative Therapy Website*, 3. Retrieved 14 Sept. 2002, <http://www.massey.ac.nz>.
[6] Fishbane, "Relational Narratives of the Self," EBSCO, 6.
[7] Wiebe, *Sweeter Than all the World*, 198.

[8] Through Susannah Wiebe's reply – "They used to say thinking different was conversion" (337) – to Adam's comment, "I'm trying to think different," Wiebe clearly alludes to the concept of conversion, of radical new ways of inner "seeing" (The "born again" model of conversion was widespread among Canadian Mennonite communities by the mid-20th century, partially due to the influence of American and Canadian fundamentalist radio evangelists such as Charles Templeton, Bob Simpson, Billy Graham, and Ernest C. Manning (see Wiebe, 339).) Wiebe makes use of this "born again" conversion concept in the "seeing is believing" motif that runs throughout the novel, a concept that he mentions as early as 1990, in reference to conceptualizing reality, in a taped interview with Penny Van Toorn.
[9] Fishbane, "Relational Narratives of the Self," EBSCO, 3.
[10] White, "An Outline of Narrative Therapy," 2.
[11] *Ibid*., 2.
[12] *Ibid*., 3.
[13] *Ibid.*
[14] *Ibid*., 4
[15] *Ibid.*
[16] Fishbane, "Relational Narratives of the Self," EBSCO, 1.
[17] *Ibid.*
[18] *Ibid.*
[19] *Ibid*., 3.
[20] Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs* (Crossroads: New York: 1999), 32.
[21] Fishbane, "Relational Narratives of the Self," EBSCO, 3.
[22] J. Grunebaum, cited in Fishbane, "Relational Narratives of the Self," EBSCO, 3.
[23] Fishbane, "Relational Narratives of the Self," EBSCO, 12.
[24] *Ibid*., 3.
[25] *Ibid.*
[26] *Ibid*., 4.
[27] Kenneth Womack, "'It is All a Darkness': Death, Narrative Therapy and Ford Maddox Ford's *The Good Soldier*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 38.3 (Summer 2002): 319. Retrieved Sept. 12, 2002 from Academic Search Premiere, EBSCOHost.
[28] Wiebe's obvious allusion here to God's call to the first Adam in the Garden of Eden, who is hiding from God's presence, reinforces our understanding of both Adam Wiebe's early immersion in the biblical master narrative and the inescapable spiritual dimension of the relational reality that he tries to avoid for so long.
[29] In juxtaposing the phrase "trying to feel every bone in every individual body they know they love" with Adam's apparent inability to "feel," Wiebe powerfully emphasizes Adam and Susannah's emotional and physical alienation; significantly, this exact phrase reappears in the scene of family reconciliation near the end of the novel (420), when together Adam, Susannah, and son Joel welcome daughter Trish back from her self-imposed exile: here the physicality of their connection becomes a powerful metaphor for psychic connectedness.
[30] Wiebe may be signalling an assumption that no matter how physically satisfying a sexual relationship may be, outside the context of relational accountability, it is likely to become alienating and, ultimately, self-destroying.

[31] Here, in my opinion, we find a narratorial intrusion sharply critical of Western cultural self-indulgence and self-referentiality, reminiscent of (though not as overt as) Wiebe's polemic in *The Blue Mountains of China* against the pretentiousness and meaninglessness of much 20th-century intellectual posturing generated, for example, by the so-called "'great' poets and novelists of the western world" who "[muck] around wading and parading their own mighty organs and viscera . . . shooting themselves off at the moon . . . ." (*The Blue Mountains of China*, 196-97).

[32] For example, in *The Stone Angel*, Hagar's pride and self-sufficiency prevent her from establishing meaningful healing connections with her socially inferior husband and her sons and daughter-in-law. Significantly, Adam is clearly linked to Hagar on page 309, when Wiebe writes, "like Laurence's Hagar [Adam] thinks: *Someone really ought to know these things*" (the vague "*These things*" seems to refer to gaining a transforming understanding of the responsibilities of relational accountability).

[33] Rohr, *Everything Belongs*, 24.

[34] Wiebe's decision to keep Adam and Susannah's reconciliation incomplete may be cautioning readers that while relational accountability is necessary to constructing a healthy self-narrative, relational connectedness is not sufficient in and of itself; it may also become an absolutizing self-narrative requiring a balancing self-individuation: ultimately, it is Adam (not Adam in the context of his relationship to Susannah) who must bear the burden of shaping his/story.

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Why Rudy Wiebe is Not the Last Mennonite Writer

Maurice Mierau

"I live in America, help me out, but I live in America, wait a minute
You might not be looking for the promised land,
but you might find it anyway
Under one of those old familiar names. . . ."
– James Brown, "Living in America"

On the night of September 17, 2002, I was at a baseball park in Winnipeg, one of the centers of North American Mennonite culture, with my teenage son. We were there to see a concert by the perpetually sixty-nine-year-old James Brown. My background is Russian Mennonite, and I grew up with an elaborate family mythology of traumatic flight from communism during World War II and redemption in the new world. I have no formal ties with any Mennonite institutions. My son is a thoroughly assimilated member of the game console generation, whose whole idea of being a Mennonite is based on his great-aunt's cooking and my poetry readings and dinner conversation.

In Winnipeg on September 17, James Brown performed a frenetic version of his 1980s hit from "Living in America." Brown was on stage with his band that includes two drummers, two bass players, four horn players, three guitarists, four background singers, and two highly toned dancers who wore bikinis imprinted with the Stars and Stripes. When James began to intone the "old familiar [place] names" of the song lyric, he went through the litany of New Orleans, Dallas, New York City, etc. as usual, but when he came to Chicago he substituted Winnipeg, also a three-syllable word. I assumed this was part of his usual assimilationist rhetoric, and noticed that the Canadian crowd did not respond well to this expression of cultural free trade.

At the time of the concert I had already begun writing this paper, and in the coolish fall air of the Winnipeg Goldeyes baseball park, I asked myself if James Brown was right. Was I really "Living in America"? Was Winnipeg a smaller, colder Chicago? What did it mean for me to consider myself a Mennonite, or even a Mennonite writer, when my son and I attended a James Brown show rather than singing tenor together in the church choir? Rudy

Wiebe's first novel appeared in 1962, the year of my birth. What was the case for Wiebe as the last Mennonite writer, and all of us who come after as more or less assimilated camp followers, living in America, desperate to move a little product, sell a few books? My first draft of this paper made that case. This version is partly the story of my conversion to the opposite point of view.

Before trying to parse the "Mennonite writer" tag, I want to separate that moniker into its components, beginning with "writer."[1] In the twentieth-century world beyond the little Mennonite one, writers were busy electing themselves unacknowledged legislators and indeed high priests of a new religion called art, a religion with the trappings of both science and mysticism, and one which ignored the mass killings and horrors that characterized the century. T.S. Eliot, in many ways the daddy of literary modernism, is a convenient exemplar of the role that literary writers were trying to establish for themselves: "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality. . . . It is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science,"[2] wrote Eliot famously in 1919, filled with bloodless detachment one year after the Great War ended and two years after the Russian revolution. Eliot's own contradictory personality is endlessly fascinating: this was a Christian who had his sane but unstable first wife confined in an asylum where she died,[3] and whose unintended legacy to pop culture is Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Cats*, a sleazy Broadway adaptation of his verse for children.

The only writers in Mennonite communities at the time Eliot helped define literary modernism were the preachers, who published their obsessive-compulsive repetitions of theological propaganda in church magazines and books.[4] These writers had a religion already; they did not need to invent anything. Their writings were intended only for the faithful – the endogamous, visually predictable folks in the churches – much as modernist writing was only for the initiates (only naive teenagers like I was read the footnotes to *The Waste Land*). The preacher-writers often ventured outside their communities for graduate school, learning Greek words to embellish the dogmas they already accepted as absolute truth. The preachers' sermons and writings served the same function as the pronouncements of mullahs in fundamentalist Islam: to reinforce doctrine, suppress dissent, and rationalize ugly schisms such as the one between General Conference and Mennonite

Brethren churches in nineteenth-century Russia. Like secular writers, the preachers used the force of their often charismatic personalities to insist on the suprapersonal nature of the dogma they dispensed. The great, impersonal tradition was one that had their personal stamp on it. And yet they were part of an idiosyncratic minority religion, much as the tradition-worshipping Eliot was also an avant-garde writer.

Even if you pick other icons of modernism – such as the Jesuit-educated James Joyce, paring his fingernails as he builds the temple of art, or Ezra Pound, with his peculiar combination of anti-Semitic ranting and high art whining – there is no getting around the extreme individualism of the modernist ideal and also the way in which it idolizes art-making itself. The Mennonite preacher-writers did not see themselves as separate from their communities, nor did they see themselves as visionaries or artists of any kind. There was simply no need for that until the secular, European world's traditions and culture had penetrated the Mennonite psyche, carried along by war, geographic and linguistic displacement, inter-marriage with other ethnic groups, urbanization, and all sorts of other social change. (Literary theory only changes people's lives in rich, secular societies, much as anorexia only occurs in countries where there is plenty to eat.) It was the shock of the new and the modern world, as well as the education that the preachers had done their best to ignore and protect us from, that made us dissatisfied with them as bearers of the Word.

But still, a "Mennonite writer" is a contradiction. It is hard to imagine how anyone could continue to be in a rigid little Protestant sect that believes both in pacifism and Christian capitalism, in patriarchy and the priesthood of all believers, in separation of church and state but often only when that's convenient, and simultaneously pursues an artistic agenda that bears any trace of modernist influence, or indeed valorizes making art out of one's own experience and history, even when that experience is different from the official version of propaganda and pulpit.[5] And yet, in 1962, Rudy Wiebe seems to have done exactly that in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, the novel whose fortieth anniversary formed the occasion for the 2002 Mennonite/s Writing conference in Goshen, Indiana.

The genesis of that novel and its origins in Wiebe's experience of his own past were best documented by Wiebe himself in 1987 in a lecture titled "The Skull in the Swamp."[6] In this piece he talks about the enormous influence

of his teacher and mentor, F.M. Salter, the first professional reader to complain about Wiebe's addiction to certain stylistic tics associated with William Faulkner. Wiebe's lecture tells the story of Salter's role as teacher, editor, taste police, and goad. It also tells the story of how Wiebe's writing career began with the controversy around his first novel, a controversy that would now simply be lost in the 500-channel universe. Wiebe quotes from letters he received from devout Mennonites who lived in the communities he wrote about, expressing their shock that their secrets were now public in the form of a realistic literary novel, a format that discarded the familiar ideological filter of the preachers. In addition, Wiebe talks about how he had to resign from his editorship of the Mennonite Brethren conference newspaper and then accepted a job teaching English at Goshen College in 1963.

So perhaps the story of Wiebe's career is really a confirmation that being a "Mennonite writer" is a simple thing. Maybe we can start with the assumption that a Mennonite writer is simply someone who works with materials that are part of the Mennonite community's shared experience or history. Writers may need to move from one Mennonite sub-brand to another occasionally if controversy threatens their livelihood, or become financially independent of the mullahs entirely, but really one can be in the literary world and the Mennonite one at the same time. Further, it is possible that Mennonite writers might lose all formal identification with a Mennonite faith community and still deal with some aspects of Mennonite experience. However, this is still problematic: what this assumption means is that Sandra Birdsell's novel *The Russländer* is "Mennonite" writing, and much of her other work is not; so is she a Mennonite writer?[7] If the right answer is "sometimes," then perhaps we are dealing with a question of marketing more than with literary, ethnic, or church affiliation. So what is "Mennonite writing," and can there be any of it after Rudy Wiebe?

Ann Hostetler has recently asked a similar set of questions: "What is a Mennonite poet? Does ethnic/religious context influence a writer's form or discourse? How and by whom is Mennonite ethnicity constructed? Is it possible for someone to be culturally Mennonite, although not a member of the church, when the church defines itself as a community of believers baptized as consenting adults?"[8] Hostetler's argument that "ethnic" literature depends for its success on its "intercultural translatability" is one that I largely

accept, but translatability itself is a difficult concept. At what point have we translated ourselves so far out of our humble ethnic skins and into the literary values of the postmodern academic world that we are ready for a bar code as fully assimilated, cooperative, well-educated post-colonial writers? Could a Mennonite writer be mass-produced on this model, and if so, why would anyone bother?

If mass-production of sterile work is undesirable, maybe we need to go back to the question of what a Mennonite is in the first place. A "Mennonite name" is a signpost of ethnicity and belonging sometimes,[9] but what if it is not accompanied by the intellectual and spiritual conformity that normally go with membership in a sectarian church? For contemporary leaders of the Mennonite Brethren church community in Winnipeg, like Art DeFehr, there is an easy answer to this question: "You don't have to be a Mennonite to be a Christian, but you must be a Christian to be a Mennonite!"[10] The Soviet army in 1945 did not make fine distinctions like DeFehr's in East Prussia. Rudy Wiebe eloquently reminds us of this fact in his latest novel, *Sweeter Than All the World*, in the horrifying sixteenth chapter where Elizabeth Katerina Wiebe is gang-raped by invading Soviet soldiers along with a nun who is raped and murdered. To the Soviet invaders, these women are simply German scum. They speak German, and therefore they are less than human. If they were discovered speaking Russian in a formerly German zone, then they would be traitors to the Soviet Union and sent back to the mother country for death in a forced labor camp. Linguistic and cultural difference matter as much as any confession of faith, and sometimes more. The cultural and political ambiguity of the Russian Mennonites, caught between German and Russian armies in both world wars, was often startlingly resolved at the point of a bayonet or with a bullet to the head. Literary criticism must account for these radical simplifications, and not behave like fundamentalist Christianity, assuming that the world is not real but just a temporary home, a text to be cleverly deconstructed or dodged.

There are examples and counter-examples too. The Armenians who were massacred by the Turks in 1915 were seen by their murderers as members of a religion, and not as an ethnic group. Women and children were often spared upon conversion to Islam.[11] Sometimes reading the right book can save you. In the Balkans in the 1990s, people were murdered and abused

based on their membership in an ethnic and cultural community; snipers did not check to see what God you worshipped before shooting. The Tutsis in Rwanda who were mass murdered and brutalized in 1994 by Hutus spoke the same language as the men and women who perpetrated the atrocities. When thousands of men, women, and children were hacked to death, shot, incinerated, and raped by Hutu militias, no one asked to see the victims' confession of faith. Sometimes history is bigger than a text or a language.

I think it is useful to look at the Jewish-American experience briefly to gain some perspective on the Mennonite literary world after Rudy Wiebe. Cynthia Ozick's essay "Toward a New Yiddish" was written as a lecture in 1970. In this essay she argues that "if we choose to be Mankind rather than Jewish . . . we will not be heard at all; for us America will have been in vain," and further that "Jewish" writing is "a type of literature and a type of perception."[12] Ozick implicitly defines Jewishness as a broadly cultural phenomenon. For her the perception and perceptiveness of Jewish writers, regardless of their religious affiliations, is located partly in the religious and ethical Hebrew tradition and also in the linguistic and cultural experience reflected in the Yiddish language.

Obviously Jewish culture is older, larger, and more culturally influential than Mennonite culture. But many parallels to Mennonite experience come to mind, beginning with the life and death of Low German and what that means for Mennonite culture and writing. The loss of Yiddish in Jewish culture and the emergence of the 'secular' in Jewish writing seem to be repeating themselves in Mennonite writing. There has been a clearly traceable movement from naïve folk literature in Low German to the emergence of many sophisticated writers engaged with the Mennonite experience over the last two decades. These new writers are producing work in English for an audience that extends beyond their ethnic communities but also speaks to those communities.

Ozick sees Jewish writers as having a place in maintaining the cultural and historical memory of their communities. I suggest that this role is paralleled in contemporary Mennonite writing where the church community often engages in radical fundamentalist amnesia while it is the writers, frequently alienated from the faith community, who are interested in the group's history. Here is what Ozick says: "My Russian-born father had a

plain word to signify a certain brand of moral anesthesia: *Amerikaner-geboren*. I translate it without elaboration as having been autolobotomized out of history" (160). Surely "autolobotomization" is one of the hidden themes of Mennonite writing, from Rudy Wiebe to Di Brandt and onwards.

As for the idea that a preoccupation with our own history removes us from the universal truths that are not to be found in the merely ethnic and the parochial, Ozick writes that Literature does not spring from the urge to Esperanto but from the tribe. When Carl Sandburg writes in a poem "There is only one man, and his name is Mankind," he is unwittingly calling for the end of culture. The annihilation of idiosyncrasy assures the annihilation of culture.[13] For an idiosyncratic Mennonite like me, this passage brings to mind the deeply tribal theory of the virgin birth held by Menno Simons. J.C. Wenger, in the 1956 edition of Menno's *Complete Writings*, dismisses Menno's 1556 "Reply to Martin Micron" (in which Menno lays out his bizarre theory of the virgin birth) as "tedious," "wrong," and "unprofitable." What made Wenger uncomfortable, of course, was Menno's weirdness, his difference, his insistence on a poetic "heavenly flesh" that does not conform to any of the rationalist or historicist Christologies that came out of the theological cookie-cutters of better-dressed Protestants. There is no denying that Menno's treatise on the virgin birth is tedious, incidentally, but that is not really a distinguishing feature of this work compared to any of his others.

So here's another question. If we are convinced by some combination of the experience of other ethnic groups and the forced simplicities of our history to revel in our own difference and to make a literature out of it imbued with those perceptions unique to our long-term cultural experience, does that make us post-colonial writers rather than Mennonite ones? Maybe Rudy Wiebe was never a Mennonite writer either – he was just the first post-colonial to appear in our midst. The seminal text of post-colonial writing is *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. Here's what the three authors of this book said in 1989:

> We use the term 'post-colonial' . . . to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression.[14]

After this totalizing, almost imperialist, territorial claim, they go on to lay out the classic postmodern wish-fulfillment fantasy:

> European theories themselves emerge from particular cultural traditions which are hidden by false notions of 'the universal'. . . . Paradoxically, however, imperial expansion has had a radically destabilizing effect on its own preoccupations and power. . . . Marginality thus became an unprecedented source of creative energy. The impetus towards decentring and pluralism has always been present in the history of European thought and has reached its latest development in post-structuralism.[15]

This is really an essentialist, romantic fantasy wearing black and speaking a little French, with a clever title borrowed from Salman Rushdie. In this account, history, in the multitudinous forms of European imperial aggression, is a nightmare from which "post-colonial" writing is trying to awake, writing back *at* the traditional centers of culture and power; indeed, power is irrelevant, and marginality, with its magical ability to "radically destabilize" the traditional center, is the new source of quasi-mystical power. So-called post-colonial theory, then, strikes me as built on a special kind of false consciousness, one in which the text is privileged over the world, and one which equates the masterpieces of European culture with the monstrous acts perpetrated by European civilizers, often in colonized countries. Of course, I am oversimplifying here, and there has been at least a decade of sophisticated critique of first-generation post-colonial theory coming from within academe.[16] In addition, a whole world of rich imaginative literature has been uncovered and anthologized by the evangelists of post-colonial theory. But does it help us decide if there are Mennonite writers after Rudy Wiebe? I don't really think so, although it may be a reminder that the next generation of so-called Mennonite writers may be African or Caribbean. Mennonites have been mentally colonized by Baptists, tsarists, communists, capitalists, and bloody-minded patriots of all kinds. Mennonites also have a brilliant tradition of colonizing themselves and others. But we have also placed ourselves on the margins of history precisely at those points of rupture or maybe rapture when new worlds are born at the center: the Russian Revolution, the World Wars, the Thirty Years War, the Spanish Inquisition's

foray into Europe, Münster. As a group we have a Graham Greene-like talent for ending up in trouble spots. This should make us anti-colonial and filled with the energy to dissent from the ethics and aesthetics of the center, while being unable to take our eyes off the chaos and heat of that same center. We should be passionate realists and dispassionate experimental writers.

I am of course moving towards saying that there is some kind of Mennonite vision of things which our literary artists since Rudy Wiebe have begun to articulate. I disagree with Jeff Gundy's statement that "poets of Mennonite extraction have radically varied experiences – almost one per writer."[17] While it is true that there is a huge range of individual experience within the diverse history of Mennonites even just in North America, I suggest that there are some commonalities of experience too. I think of the admittedly somewhat ironic passage in Patrick Friesen's essay, "I Could Have Been Born in Spain":

> If I met a Mennonite on, say, 4th St. in New York (I would be able to tell by the walk), I would say, "Hey, I know you; let's go and talk."
>
> Then we would go to the corner bar or restaurant and find out who our relatives are and how, exactly, each of us is lost.[18]

Below I attempt to sketch what kind of artistic vision Mennonite writers might have, based on the work of a number of writers who are continuing in Rudy Wiebe's wake.[19] Julia Kasdorf writes that "a few Mennonite intellectuals . . . wonder if I am entitled to tell the stories I have told and suspect that I have simply crafted a marketable fiction of identity for myself."[20] I think it is possible to acknowledge both that "ethnic" or "post-colonial" labels make writing marketable in a literal sense, and also that a "Mennonite writer" *needs* a fiction that is marketable to herself, a story that makes every kind of sense. Victor Jerrett Enns, editor of *Rhubarb* magazine, recently solicited responses to the question of "What is a Mennonite writer?" for a forthcoming issue. Here is my response to the question, as much a marketable fiction as any other:

> I define a Mennonite writer as anyone whose writing is shaped in a primary way by a Mennonite sensibility. A Mennonite sensibility, to me, is one that includes some intellectual or visceral knowledge of Mennonite experience (preferably both), whether that experience

> be cultural, historical, theological, or literary (preferably all of these). This means, of course, that you don't need to be either an ethnic or a religious Mennonite to be a Mennonite writer.[21]

I don't claim any particular originality in this definition, and in fact the whole question has been addressed with particular clarity by Hildi Froese Tiessen in her introduction to the Summer 1990 *Prairie Fire* special issue on "New Mennonite Writing," where she notes the fact that the contributors write out of ". . . an experience rarely in the past encoded by artists . . . an experience which is at one time universal and particular, complexly communal and personal, ethnic and religious."[22]

I think there is a further clue to what knowledge of Mennonite experience might look like in Kasdorf's essay "Writing Like a Mennonite": "That trauma can both confine one to silence and compel one to find articulation is clear in the brief history of Mennonite literature."[23] And the trauma of history, the contradiction of Mennonites' painful withdrawal from and simultaneous engagement with the relentless world, is as real for so-called Swiss Mennonites as it is for Russian Mennonites, as indeed it is for many groups, none of which has an exclusive claim on trauma or silence.

Look at this, says Sandra Birdsell in her novel *The Russländer*: look at our passionate attachment to the world and all the beautiful things we accumulate. Look at this world from the eyes of a woman trained to be silent and subservient, to lower her gaze, to never use language to describe either the splendor or the horror of what she sees:

> The reflection of lit candles on the Christmas tree quavered in the glass front of a cabinet across the room. Shelves inside the honey-coloured cabinet were laden with Aganetha and Abram's wedding china, pieces which Katya had held to admire, how each rose pattern was slightly different, the gold inscription of their names. . . . (27)

As David Suderman puts it later in the novel, when the troubles of 1917 and the larger world begin to intrude on the idyllic existence of the heroine: "we're here, but we keep saying we're not" (137). This is the quintessential Mennonite position, detached and obsessively attached at the same time. Birdsell's loving re-creation of the lost world of Mennonite villages in Russia also captures the ambiguity of Mennonite perception: neither German nor

Russian, neither intellectuals nor peasants, neither violent nor gentle, here and not here at the same time, the novel's viewpoint character observes sharply while almost never speaking a sharp word.

Look at this, says Julia Kasdorf, our attraction toward and repulsion away from everything "Loud":

> Children, reaching for the reddest crayon,
> when do we learn what is too much?
> When do we start averting our eyes
> at overdone Puerto Rican girls on the train,
> . . . . When do we start
> calling flowers and women "cheap,"
> as if life were a sale? Are we so far gone
> we don't know how to praise them, loud
> as the shopkeepers on Church Avenue
> who save insults for their best customers?
> Carmine, the butcher who loves me, shouts
> *Wadda ya want with chicken breasts?*
> *Don't you know white meat makes you ugly?*[24]

We want desperately to be as flamboyant as we feel, but like Katya in *The Russländer*, we also want husbands to choose us because we are quiet and decorous.

Look at this, says Patrick Friesen, we never stop wanting to be right with the Lord, to be spiritual beings even when the church tried to choke the life out of us:

> the town believes so hard they worship themselves thin and hardly anyone reaches for the wine
> you fall asleep at the edge of the clearing when you wake snow has fallen for a million years
> you have grown young and ancient you rise in the still air your breath in clouds before you
> the shadow of a man beneath the moon struggling through the snow and night[25]

Look at this, says Rudy Wiebe, look how we are rooted in our past, rooting in it like pigs in shit, how we never get away from it, how it holds us and

traps us appearing on every channel, how it frees us too, how it lets us be Mennonite writers even if we don't all go to church, how the past lets us build a type of perception and a type of literature that is our own and also everyone else's, that maybe belongs finally only to God:

> Adam wipes his eyes, and finally he can look up. Faces blur into focus . . . and what does he know about her now anyway, decades of life gone by, she and Joe and their seven children with names like Tanguay, Wong, Lopez, Porteous and a solitary Loewen between them, those Russian stories ancient as piled stones, and several of her middle-aged children divorced and all their married-again spouses and twenty-two grandchildren and eleven great-grandchildren. . . . All their eyes looking at him: why is this crazy uncle interrupting the funeral, so rich he never has to be a doctor . . . always running around somewhere. . . . It's for Helen, you witless nits, a few words over her body, the human being she was, you who knew her best, say it![26]

Look at the divine comedy of our bodies and desires, says David Bergen, look at the comedy of religion in a world that no longer believes, look at Lena S. telling Mason, the minor teenage poet:

> 'My father has tests. Three of them. Supper at our house, a quiz on some historical figure – the last time, it was Galileo – and you'll have to memorize a Bible passage. My father asked if you were a Christian and I said yes, but I don't think he believed me.' She glanced at him. 'You are, aren't you?'
>
> 'I guess so. If I have to be.'
>
> . . .
>
> 'You have to be,' she said.[27]

The world described by these Mennonite writers is the same world where Bakhtin turned manuscripts into cigarette papers, the world of consequences and concentration camps, not the academic fantasy where there are binaries and not oppositions, no simple conflicts between the hungry and the obscenely, garrulously wealthy, and no humor of the kind found in Rabelais and Kasdorf and Friesen and Armin Wiebe and David Bergen and so many

others. We live in a world that is radically at odds with the value system and language of our Mennonite predecessors. We have literally lost a language, maybe more than one, and we are in the process of losing culture and memory as well. It is up to artists from the Mennonite community to practice their art with the kind of integrity that will shed a little light on their contradictory experience and fading memories.[28] For whatever it turns out to be worth, we are Mennonite writers, we are in the world, and we are not.

Notes

[1] I don't mean to imply that there's something new about the question of what is a Mennonite writer. See, for example, the "personal statements" on their work and identity by a diverse group of Canadian "Mennonite" writers in *Prairie Fire*'s special issue on "New Mennonite Writing," 11.2 (Summer 1990).

[2] T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1932), 17.

[3] See Robert Craft, "The Perils of Mrs. Eliot," *New York Review of Books*, May 23, 2002.

[4] I am assuming that there was no significant Mennonite literary writing other than Rudy Wiebe's work until the 1970s. Not everyone will agree.

[5] Julia Kasdorf, in her essay "Bodies and Boundaries," describes the 1997 decision of the Franconia Conference of the Mennonite Church in Pennsylvania to expel North America's oldest Mennonite church over their acceptance into membership of openly gay and lesbian people. I am reminded both of the Taliban, approaching the problem more directly by collapsing brick walls on top of homosexuals, and of the many other Mennonite conferences in Canada and the United States expelling those churches willing to accept homosexual people. See *The Body and the Book: Writing from a Mennonite Life* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 78.

[6] Rudy Wiebe, "The Skull in the Swamp," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 5 (1987): 8-20. Julia Kasdorf's account of the reception of Wiebe's novel in her essay "Marilyn, H.S. Bender, and Me" in *The Body and the Book* is also notable for its insights and feminist perspective.

[7] This same point applies to Rudy Wiebe's *oeuvre*. See note 20 below.

[8] Ann Hostetler, "The Unofficial Voice: The Poetics of Cultural Identity and Contemporary U.S. Mennonite Poetry," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 72.4 (October 1998): 514.

[9] Lois Barrett tells a familiar story about church people asking her if Barrett was a "Mennonite name" in her essay "Flowing Like a River," in *Why I am a Mennonite*, ed. Harry Loewen (Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1988), 21. I note with approval that Barrett married a Mierau.

[10] Art DeFehr, "Mennonite by Chance and by Choice," in *Why I am a Mennonite*, ed. Harry Loewen, 35.

[11] See István Deák, "The Crime of the Century," *The New York Review of Books*, September 26, 2002, 50.

[12] Cynthia Ozick, "Toward a New Yiddish," in *Art & Ardor* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 169 and 177.
[13] *Ibid.*, 168.
[14] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 2-12.
[15] *Ibid.*, 2-12.
[16] ". . . as Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge have well demonstrated, the concern in *The Empire Writes Back* with 'textuality' as an abstraction 'tends to function at the expense of specific histories and power-relations in different parts of the world.'" See Dennis Walder's *Post-colonial Literatures in English: History Language Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 69-70.
[17] See Ann Hostetler, "The Unofficial Voice: The Poetics of Cultural Identity and Contemporary U.S. Mennonite Poetry," 514.
[18] Patrick Friesen, "I Could Have Been Born in Spain," in *Why I am a Mennonite*, ed. Harry Loewen, 102.
[19] I am indebted to Ann Hostetler for her useful distinction, also in "The Unofficial Voice," that the Russian Mennonite and "Swiss Mennonite" traditions are quite different historical experiences, especially in terms of the descendants of Russian Mennonites who emigrated to North America during the two world wars and are still close to this traumatic experience. However, I think there is sufficient commonality between these Mennonite groups that one can still talk about an emerging Mennonite aesthetic and even rhetoric in recent Mennonite imaginative literature.
[20] Julia Kasdorf, *The Body and the Book: Writing from a Mennonite Life* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 10.
[21] Maurice Mierau, personal e-mail to Victor Jerrett Enns, November 1, 2002. This definition takes into account the uneasiness many "Mennonite writers" feel about having their entire output labeled as ethnic writing. For example, at the Mennonite/s Writing conference in Goshen where I presented this paper on October 25, 2002, Rudy Wiebe stood up and spoke about his many books that don't have any Mennonite characters or explicitly Mennonite content in them, thereby objecting to the characterization of his work as simply "Mennonite."
[22] Hildi Froese Tiessen, "Introduction," *Prairie Fire*, 11.2 (Summer 1990): 9. See also Froese Tiessen's introduction to another special issue of a literary magazine, "Mennonite/s Writing in Canada," *The New Quarterly*, Vol. X, Nos. 1 & 2 (Spring/Summer 1990): 9-12.
[23] Kasdorf, *The Body and the Book*, 177.
[24] Julia Kasdorf, *Eve's Striptease* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998), 43-44.
[25] Patrick Friesen, *the breath you take from the lord* (Madeira Park, B.C.: Harbour Publishing, 2002), 39.
[26] Rudy Wiebe, *Sweeter Than All the World* (Toronto: Albert A. Knopf Canada, 2001), 362.
[27] David Bergen, *The Case of Lena S.* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2002), 67.
[28] I do not mean to suggest that Mennonite writers become elegists for a mythic Golden Age, as Kasdorf puts it so eloquently: "Do I want to spend my one and only life grieving the demise of a traditional, patriarchal, insular subculture? Why must even my writing, that most excessive and self-indulgent enterprise, be converted into an instrument for community service?" (*The Body and the Book*, 18-19).

"It almost always begins with these kinds of living stories": An Interview with Rudy Wiebe

Janne Korkka

In the same way that – say, the Frieda Friesen stories in The Blue Mountains of China *are based on an actual living person, I think my way of telling stories is to start with literal things somehow, whether I know them actually or they're somewhere sitting in my head. Somewhere. And out of this grows something that's intriguing and interesting to me. And then hopefully it's interesting to others. But it begins with these – it almost always begins with these kinds of living stories of past human beings. You know, in some form or another. Like Almighty Voice. Almost all my stories are like that, some way.*[1]

JK: You really seem to be intrigued by scarcity of information and facts, or just their contradictory nature. I'm thinking of Big Bear, Almighty Voice in "Where is the Voice Coming from?", Albert Johnson in *The Mad Trapper*, the now extinct Yellowknife nation in *A Discovery of Strangers*, and Yvonne Johnson again. How important is this when you become interested in a subject and decide to go deeper and deeper, eventually turning it into fiction?

RW: Well, there are two things. The interest in the story is obviously triggered by the facts that are there. The more contradictory they appear, or if they seem to clash with our understanding of human nature, the more interesting they are. But I've learned to trust my instinctive response. Whatever intrigues me is what I should follow. That clearly began with Big Bear, because that story opened up more and more.

The story of Almighty Voice illustrates that. It was actually written in the middle of the process of writing *The Temptations of Big Bear*, but I had been thinking about Almighty Voice's story for a long time, 15 or 16 years before I wrote it. So I knew that basic story, the same way I knew Albert Johnson's story. I had listened to it as a child, a cowboy ballad sung on the radio. If that kind of thing sticks in the mind of a certain kind of imaginative person, you have to keep digging as there is something numinous, something loaded there that's good.

Then you start looking at what history has to tell you, since it is an historical event. When it gets even more complicated, as it probably does, or contradictory, as it often does, you really start getting intrigued. The fiction writer is always happy when facts don't work out any more, because then you can make it up. But make it up in such a way that the mystery expands, right? You don't want to solve these things, you want to plumb their mysteriousness.

JK: I have always liked "Where Is the Voice Coming from?" because it is at least as much about the process of telling the story – or *making* the story – as about the events themselves.

RW: As I look at that story again, it seems that at every turn where the reader feels that you're starting to get somewhere, something else that doesn't quite work appears. That's the mystery of human behavior, and stories should never try to resolve that. That's why stories often end in deaths, because death somehow seems to finish the whole issue. But death doesn't end anything for the people who surround the corpse. It makes it all the more complicated, and sometimes it makes it all the more devastating. There is a convention in fiction: when you die, that's it. There was a time when you got near that, then that was the end of the story. Nowadays it isn't; many of our stories start at death.

JK: Especially in the native stories you have dealt with there is often little information, the information is contradictory, or you can't use the common western approach and access the information by reading a book. Big Bear was forgotten by most people for a long time, and Almighty Voice's motivations weren't noticed nearly as much as the actions of the people who were pursuing him. Also, hardly anybody in Yvonne Johnson's life was genuinely interested in her problems before she herself became a problem for the judicial system. Would not being listened to at all be a primary feature of potential stories for you? Or is it just common in the stories of a marginalized people?

RW: I think it partly reflects my own growing up as the child of refugee parents who do not make up a particular race or group of people, who do not constitute a very large part of Canadian society, and who certainly at that

time were a quite powerless part of society. You've read the stories of the two solitudes, right? They are the French and English facts of Canada. In my case, these two solitudes make no difference to you. Your particular world is in no way reflected by that, if you grew up in a bush farm or a homestead in Northern Saskatchewan, in a small Mennonite community that's just been created there because of the depression, and which speaks Low German all the time. So, a part of what I'm doing as a writer is telling the stories out of this particular world.

If you think in terms of my first novel *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, or Big Bear, who was born within 40 kilometers of where I was born, then this was what really electrified me. He existed before cars, before electricity, before telephones. I did, too. For the first 12 years of my life I lived in a log cabin in somewhat the same way that the native people lived on reserves. So the world of, say, the 1880s was closer to me than the world of telephones and television. It should not surprise anyone that a kid growing up under such circumstances is intrigued by the people that lived in his landscape before he was there, by the way your world was before you were born.

JK: In one of the earlier interviews that you've given (Juneja et al., 8)[2] , you commented on the parallel experiences of dispossessed minority peoples – Native Americans, Mennonites, and so on. You basically said that these parallel experiences make it easier to access and formulate at least some kind of an understanding of the other peoples' experiences. How much would you say this sensitivity guides the actual process of writing?

RW: Well, writing is an exploration of the human spirit. You try to be sensitive to other people, even though their sensitivities are not yours. But there has to be something that draws you to them, or you wouldn't even use them as a character, right? The kind of existential questions that Big Bear faces are intriguing to me. If you do believe, as he believed, that the world is created by the creator and it's given to us as a great gift, how do you then explain, in the light of what you've always believed, the fact that all of a sudden these almost thoughtless beings come into this world believing it's theirs, and they seem to destroy your world? To me, that is a profoundly Christian – a profoundly religious and spiritual – question. That's what intrigues me, not so much the fact that he's eventually sentenced and sent to prison and punished

by a system that he has never lived by and has no concept of. No more than he has a concept of the Crown and the King or the Queen. Of course he understands authority; he's not stupid. But he's never lived his life according to the white practice. That is what drives me to explore that kind of person, and try to tell that story.

JK: My personal favorite of your works is maybe *The Blue Mountains of China*. What I enjoy most is how it brings together different Mennonite voices who come from very different backgrounds. Most of them still shared what has been thought of as a very homogeneous religious background. However, as the novel advances, and the vastly different experiences shape the characters, the end result is anything but homogeneous. So, characters are disillusioned with their faith. Some keep it up, but end up realizing that the world they live in is very different from certain parts of Russia, or wherever you think that your ancestors came from. And then there's John Reimer, who combines all this into what he sees as a need for a new approach to religion and life. What this makes you wonder is whether such a homogeneous background has ever really existed at all, for Mennonites or any other group.

RW: Well, I think it does to some extent in terms of the idea that animates their life. Not that it's possible to live it in the same way in any given place. The point is, if you really take seriously (and this is what Anabaptism was always about, taking seriously the kinds of things that Jesus says) the core of things that Jesus says in his teaching, it's basically the Sermon on the Mount. Live peaceably with your neighbor, you know, love God. Live at peace with all creation, especially with your fellow man. And when you say something like "How blessed are the peacemakers, for the kingdom of God is theirs," if you live at peace, and if you are a peacemaker, that kingdom, that world, is yours. That's an incredible statement. So then that is one of the basic things that Anabaptism is based on. It takes those kinds of things seriously: trying to be a peacemaker in a violent world. The Reformation world was extremely violent, as was the experience of the Russian Mennonites between the First and Second World Wars. This is what *The Blue Mountains of China* explores: the world situation the Mennonites were in in Russia and in South America and in Canada. That novel explores the possibilities there are to be explored.

There were very different responses to the forms of violence the Mennonites encountered. You cannot have, in Russia, somebody walking along the highway with a cross; you couldn't do it. You'd be out of there fast – the police would pick you up so fast, and you would be gone. In Canada, you could do this. It's a place where you can express what you believe in such a goofy way. In Russia you'd have to express it in other ways. But the basic ideas I think are there, and that's partly what I'm trying to explore. Maybe there's a problem in trying to pull it together too much in the end, I don't know. But I still like those two guys, sitting by the side of the road at night, and they're talking, the one presumably completely disillusioned, while the other one is living this crazy illusion. And there they are in the bush, beside a Canadian highway, listening to the sounds of cars going by. I still think that's not a bad way to end a book.

JK: There's been, of course, quite an extensive debate on whether that ending clashes with the mosaic in the main part of the novel. I don't think it necessarily does. It starts heading in a different direction, of course, but maybe it just opens a new path.

RW: It goes north, it goes north.

JK: That may be the new path. It's of course based on the main body of the novel, and it's not followed very far, this new path, because the narrative just stops. It doesn't develop this new idea.

RW: You could pick up that story – you could start that story where it ends. It's 1967. You could bring it up to the present if you wanted to. I've never been interested in doing it, but . . . . A book is not a life, you know. A book is something made with words; a life is not made with words. But it can be helpful in living a life, I suppose, or intriguing or interesting for a few moments.

JK: This ties up partly with *My Lovely Enemy*. Not that many critics have discussed the book in length –

RW: No.

JK: – and the Mennonite response was very mixed when it was published. Maybe the most conservative readers read the book as a suggestion of Jesus' sexuality, or as a story where adultery goes unpunished. Perhaps the less conservative readers saw beyond these details, but still may have had a great problem with the almost complete lack of definitive resolutions in the book. It's really inconclusive in quite a number of ways. Even the resolutions that are suggested don't take place on a realistic level. The affair doesn't seem to end, there's no guilt or remorse, no one is punished, and the difference between the real world and the experiences on a mythic or a mystical plane just become blurred, even irrelevant in a sense. I see signs of this lack of resolution and really accentuated open-endedness in most of your works since *The Blue Mountains of China*. But why does it surface as a great problem only in some of the works?

RW: Well, I don't know, I don't want to theorize really about *My Lovely Enemy*, because – in terms of response to it, it was probably the least successful of my books. It was published once, and it's never been republished, never – no one's ever been interested in it, presumably; I don't know. Actually, I think in many ways it's still one of my most interesting books; at least I'm still most interested in the ideas that it explores, the character possibilities that it explores. But somehow we think, even though in life this doesn't often happen, that in books or in the movies there should be some kind of justice. If you're a bastard, you get dealt with, you get your comeuppance, or whatever, right? But this, too, is a convention, of course. It doesn't happen in real life. The people in the book are going to die just like everybody else, right? It's just the book doesn't go to that point. But these kinds of things are worth exploring in every conceivable way, every way you can imagine. One of the things I was trying to do with that book was stretch my imagination beyond the usual things that always happen in stories. Push it, push it, push it. And the core story in there, of course, is the Maskepetoon story. Push that whole idea of what you do with your enemy, and the usual thing is you take revenge, you take revenge in the same way. If he kills you, you kill him back, you know, always that way, always that way. Of course, I didn't make up that story, because that's literally recorded by John McDougall, the Methodist missionary, about Maskepetoon, how he dealt with his father's killer. So,

that was really the trigger. The question would be, how to deal with adultery, which is, of all things, presumably one of the most serious problems of our social world. (In another sense it isn't, of course, at all. If we have people marrying four or five or six or seven times, how can adultery be a problem?) But in one sense, you know, we have this crazy notion still that somehow, constancy in love is the great thing, right? Even if nothing in our society reflects that. And I'm just trying to explore some of those things. . . .

I think fiction is, in one sense, an exploration. It's an exploration of human behavior and ideas. Things that intrigue me perhaps take a more religious and spiritual turn than they take a social turn. To me, those kinds of values and drives are more basic than, for example, getting married or not. It's just the way I was brought up and the way I think. To me, religious and spiritual values are often more important than social or economic ones. Some people are interested in exploring social and economic implications of what human beings do, but I'm not terribly interested in that. I suppose this lines me up with Native people – who are more structured by their values, the spiritual feelings and apprehensions that they get out of their world, especially out of the natural world – than many urban people today. Of course the social and the economic elements are important, but you don't have to restrict your thinking to those things. Many novels are not at all interested in exploring religious – Christian religious or any kind of other religious – structures, which is the way the majority of people structure their lives, I think.

Notes

[1]This epigraph, and what follows, are from an interview Janne Korkka conducted with Rudy Wiebe at Wiebe's Strawberry Creek lodge south of Edmonton. The conversation took place after Wiebe gave Korkka a tour of the handiwork of beavers who regularly fell trees on the Wiebe property. The interview was conducted with the assistance of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, with additional financial support from the Emil Aaltonen Foundation in Finland. Parts of this interview were published in the journal *World Literature Written in English* 38.1. We are grateful for WLWE's permission to reprint excerpts.

[2] Om P. Juneja, M. F. Salat, and Chandra Moran. "'Looking at our particular world': an interview with Rudy Wiebe." *World Literature Written in English* 31.2 (1991): 1-18.

A Review of Geoffrey James and Rudy Wiebe: *Place: Lethbridge, A City on the Prairie*

(Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre; Boston: David R. Godine; Lethbridge: Southern Alberta Art Gallery, 2002)

Paul Tiessen

Novelist Rudy Wiebe and photographer Geoffrey James engage each other in this volume with a startling lightness of touch. Neither artist makes any overt demands on the other; indeed, each seems almost to ignore the other! Yet their joint appearance in this volume – thanks to Southern Alberta Art Gallery curator Joan Stebbin – turns their combined texts into a single playful performance, a conversation of sorts.

The outside front cover of this elegant volume carries a one-word title in large white print – *Place* – a title unencumbered by the subtitle that fleetingly claims our attention only on the fifth page: *Lethbridge, A City on the Prairie*. Filling the visual field of the cover is an austere black-and-white photograph: a straight dirt road running between wheat fields to a vanishing point along the perfectly horizontal line of land where smudges of mountain peaks are just barely visible. The sky, sitting flatly above that horizon, occupies over half the picture. We are invited, then, into a visual world presented in bare terms.

In James's work inside the book, we find a Lethbridge that is there very much as "place," with townscapes virtually devoid of human figures. The apparently enervated town points to a provisional quality in any human habitation, to a kind of spatial and historical arbitrariness expressed so strongly in the Lethbridge region, invested as it is by a dramatic terrain that precedes human intervention and promises to outlast human influence.

James gives us no captions. What he does provide are words internal to some of the photographs, words that guide us in fixing meaning. Contemporary fantasies like "A Better Way Of Life" (59) marking (with an unintentionally ironic tongue) a subdivision on a flat plain, contrast with the merrier "Top Hat" (55) and "Bow On Tong" (29, 100) that hoot from some of the commercial establishments. The marker for the "The Chinese National League" (27) is one of several reminders of the ethnic and racial layering in the historical experience and identity of the town. External to the photographs are only the titles of sections: "Approaches," "In the City," "A Better Way of Life," and "Paradise Canyon and Beyond."

Although the abstract idea of "place" is poignantly anchored in a series of particular manifestations of "Lethbridge," we are invited to see it also as a parable of the twentieth century's urban encounter with the land in western Canada. Civilization's progress is presented in muted terms, with nostalgic recollections of urban rhythms from decades ago juxtaposed to satiric evocations of contemporary strivings.

We can note, too, that this photographed world speaks often through what James withholds, whether by cutting down on, or even suppressing, a picture, a topic, a theme. His forty-six black-and-white photographs, the bare images all the more luminous as a consequence of his stark approach, are by implication set in the dramatic architectural context of Erickson's university and the city's Japanese gardens. But we do not see these famous Lethbridge landmarks, even though James mentions them in his Preface.

Thus, in not showing what we might most want to see, James prevents our pursuing his work as though it belonged to a more "touristic" genre; he prevents us from taking ready-made approaches. Instead he pursues a different rhythm and purpose in foregrounding less-acknowledged encounters between the human architectural and the grand primordial. There is in his approach a persistent undertow of uneasiness about what we seem to be trying to do with the natural world. When he does acknowledge that human effort has produced a rugged glory of its own, he goes back to the industrial era's heroic achievement evident in the girders and trestles, the foundations and footings, of the High Level Bridge (21, 95), its steel sections alive in the strong reflections and shadows that play on the river and the cliffs.

The absence of "people" from James's images of "The West" eerily undercuts the possibility of a personal intimacy in his work, and pushes it instead in the direction of a monumental abstractionism. It is as though James seems to find in the empty public spaces of the book an echo of ghost towns. However, people are there in the tracings that they leave in the wake of their striving and their dreams, as in the forlorn lostness of decaying industrial sites (45, 47). They are there in the naive carelessness of modern sand traps and golf greens, inscriptions of their desire for contemporary pastimes in the-great-out-of-doors. These inscriptions are etched into the fissures and slopes of the ancient landscape (in a new neighborhood that comprises, as Wiebe puts it, "the ultimate Lethbridge double-garage-facing-the-street-with-golf-course suburb of Paradise Canyon" [123]) that stunningly still marks this world along the Oldman River. And people are mirrored, too, in the wistfulness of the faces of quirky one-of-

a-kind houses: an art deco house, for example (37, and outside back cover), or one with a skull attached to the front facade (43).

It is only when we are over two-thirds of the way through the book that James's photographs – serving in one sense as overture or preface to the prose – gently give way to Wiebe's written text. The segue from image to written text is gradual, a handful of photographs continuing to make their way down the last thirty pages, where Wiebe's text dominates. Wiebe's prose at first reinforces our impression of only a loose kind of referentiality between prose and picture. In the end, we might feel as though the layers of Wiebe's prose are filling in the many unpeopled and largely uninscribed spaces of James's expanses.

What Wiebe presents are eight tender meditations (hovering between essay and story) that carry the air of recollection: wistful, nostalgic, sweet. Wiebe gives the impression of being in warm and easy conversation (e.g., 93-94) with the geographic forms that make up Alberta, including the drama of the land around Lethbridge, and so he travels lightly through what is the world of his teenage years. Sometimes, lurking in his texts, he does give us reminders of today's more troubled world (e.g., the Kosovos of page 94) beyond the narrative and visual currents that carry us along here. At the start, Wiebe's pieces somehow feel lighter than James's photographs, more airily open and speculative in their treatment of place and time. Especially whimsical is Wiebe's essay on pages 113-16, a hilarious send-up of the dynamics and politics of naming, as Wiebe playfully runs over details of Lethbridge's past.

In Wiebe's stories/essays, unlike James's photographs, the presence of people, starting with the engaged narrator, is pronounced, not carefully excised. Not surprisingly for Wiebe, those who peopled the past now make their presences known. Thus, we discover that the golf links of James's photographic eye overlap with the sites of the 1870 Cree versus Blackfoot battle that Wiebe recalls. It is as though Wiebe is giving us new layers of irony in what James's eye has already beheld. Together, Wiebe and James ask: What are realities that we suppress by the lives we pursue, by the truths we construct?

There is a general title that announces the lyrical quality of Wiebe's tone, and Wiebe's preoccupation with history and place: "Where the Black Rocks Lie in the Old Man's River" (90). Each of the subsequent vignettes begins with a sentence presented partly in bold, enlarged type, as though providing a special point of entry. These caption-like statements hold in place various possibilities: for example, of lightness and movement – "It is bright

spring, and we have been travelling" (93), or of a narrator's child-like wonder at the contradictions that were Lethbridge in 1947 – "The first time I saw Lethbridge" (97) and "When my parents, my sister and I" (101), and so on. Sometimes the caption is particularly poignant and ironic in unexpected ways: the topic "'Lethbridge was happiness'" leads to a survey of official and unofficial racism in Lethbridge (and Canada), particularly as it affected first the Chinese and then the Japanese (117-20). Wiebe tells us, too, that through the effects of Canada's Homestead Act, even his forebears the Mennonites, arriving from Ukraine, were forced into what was for them an unfamiliar societal mould – "the sometimes devastating isolation of single farmsteads" – that brought its own cruel hardships (122).

Wiebe's world is a place animated by spirits that we tend to keep at bay by mechanisms at our disposal (93), but that seem to be there nevertheless, "leading you away on an endless stream like thinning memory" (126). Here Coyote once lent his song to Cree warriors, thus bringing sweet peace to a valley that had been in bloody battle. Wiebe seems quite sure (though of course – in true Wiebean fashion – he cannot absolutely say) that the Coyote's song is still there, in what is now called Lethbridge, though certainly it cannot be heard "between the endless auto roar of one bridge and the grinding thunder of a possible long train crossing the other" (111).

Even more palpable and enlivening than the presence of spirits for the narrator is the presence of words: coulee, chinook, cottonwood, sage, cactus, Napi-ooch-a-tay-cots (in Blackfoot), and prairie (101, 103, 105). The Lethbridge that the narrator recalls leads him to incredibly beautiful reverie when he explores memory itself amidst the words and stories, the names and naming, familiar and strange languages and books, the "shelves and shelves of books" that he encountered as a child (103), the books that map memory. It is a world that Wiebe was born into when he was twelve years old, after his family left the northern Saskatchewan bush where it was words like "slough" and "muskeg" that filled his universe. At twelve he entered a place where Blackfoot and Cree stories were to become "as evocative to [him] as those of Moses and Odysseus, Shakespeare and Goethe" (103). At twelve, he had moved "from an isolated bush farm and a single-room log school to sidewalks and electricity and coal mines half a mile deep and sugar beets and libraries with shelves and shelves of books" (103). He had moved into a world defined by *this place* called Lethbridge.

Climbing Mountains That Do Not Exist: The Fiction Writer at Work

Rudy Wiebe

On the last pages of J. M. Coetzee's most recent novel, *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), the dislocated protagonist Elizabeth C. writes a letter to philosopher Francis Bacon. She writes, as she terms it, "in a time of [soul and body] affliction," a time where, despite her occasional, fleeting experience of "raptures . . . when soul and body are one," she no longer understands the purpose "in the mind of our Creator" for creating human beings as they presently find themselves to be: they are always struggling with words, and words are always saying *like*, that is, "saying always one thing for another." She concludes the explication of her agony and despair with a great cry:

> *We are not meant to live thus . . . . We are not made for revelation,* [her italics], revelation that sears the eye like staring into the sun.
>
> Save me, dear Sir, save my husband! Write! Tell him the time is not yet come, the time of the giants, the time of the angels. Tell him we are still in the time of fleas. (229)

For my own purposes here, allow me to paraphrase Elizabeth Costello: We contemporary human beings are neither giants: those enormous, awesomely powerful physical beings, nor are we angels: beautiful, powerful ethereal creatures bringing spiritual/sacred messages from the divine – O, no, we are neither. We are the tiny vermin, the parasites that can only live by sucking blood; our only strength is that we are tiny weaklings who, in order to live, have the capability to steal life from other living creatures! Please, write! Tell us!

In other words: in writing, in telling – that is, by means of words we see, words we hear in our minds by reading, by talking – we will understand what we truly are. The words will save us.

Save us from what? Fleas?

No, that is not the right question – what? The question is – save us from whom? Elizabeth Costello says the orderly language of the philosopher, who "selects his words and sets them in place [like] . . . a mason builds a wall

with bricks," those words will save us from who we are at this time – which is not the time of giants or angels – but those words will save us from who we are now, because we are the fleas.

Keep this allegory in mind. I will return to it.

* * * * *

All my adult life – over half a century now – I have written stories, literally millions of words published, spoken, read – and the story I remember having heard first, the very first story in all the recesses of my life's memory, concerns a matter of fleas.

There is a huge variety of parasitic blood-suckers in the world; often they are insects, and the kind that hide on your person or in your bedding in my childhood we called *Waunztje* [fleas, lice]. We always spoke Russian Mennonite Low German at home, a language basically rooted in Old Saxon and carried by my ancestors from where they originated during the religious confrontations of the sixteenth century along the European Lowlands of the North Sea, carried in various forms over four centuries from the Netherlands to Poland to Ukrainian Russia and eventually to North and South America. Low German is as closely related to English as it is to modern German.

In the spring of 1938, when I the youngest Wiebe child am three years old, our family has been in Canada for eight years, but my parents know only a few words of English; like many other immigrants/refugees, they have always managed to live and work in Canadian communities of their own people so they can get by. If my sisters Helen and Mary come home from Jackpine School and say something to me in English – they go to school and Elsie will start next year, but my brother Dan no longer does: he was nine when he arrived in Canada and when he turned fifteen in January, 1935 he was struggling in Grade Five and my father said now the school law was past and he could go work for his keep and maybe some money in Klassen's sawmill – but if Helen or Mary say something to me in English, I'll know it as easily as anything else because different languages mean nothing to me. Words are whatever someone says, and like any child I know them without thinking how I know: at age three they are still simply a mystery everyone understands, and what I learn is how to make the sound so no one will laugh

at me. Probably my sisters say words from their beautiful school readers which they sometimes can bring home for an evening, the heavy blue covers of the *Highroads to Reading* books I can feel ribbed under my fingertips, the smooth colored pictures inside, all the pictures of English words:

> If the moon came from heaven,
> Talking all the way,
> What could she have to tell us,
> And what could she say? (Christina Rossetti)

"That's moon," Helen might have pointed up with the same finger that had led her voice and my eyes as she read aloud those strange, short lines. "It's almost like *Mond*, just a little different."

And of course I believe her, and remember it; for her and me anything can have as many names as it wants: that can as easily be Low German *de Mond* as High German *der Mond* or English "the moon" leaning round and enormous up out of the black wall of aspen across the field on Louis Ulmer's homestead. There are marks on its orange face, they could be eyes, or scars; maybe the spring moon also has a Russian name; we know our father could speak Russian all the time if he wanted to, and Mother too, but they never do, never, not one word in that Communist Stalin language, now be still about it.

Perhaps the moon would have something to tell us in Russian, if they would ask her.

* * * * *

The poplar leaves shiver in the night wind, branches groan against each other high over us in the tent, but we have our barn lantern burning under the sloped canvas, a tiny flame of light enclosed by glass among the sheets and quilts and pillows heaped around us. That day we helped carry all our family bedding out of the house, stripped our fingers along every seam, shook the crushed oat straw out of the mattresses in the middle of the yard, watched as the huge bonfire burned the heap into air and ashes, and now the story can start, it can go on and on:

> It is time for Mother Duck to go out of the house and look for food. She warns her six ducklings one more time about the red

> fox, that they must stay inside, they must lock the door behind her and not open it, no never, only when she comes back and they hear her voice call them, only her voice. Then she goes out, and immediately the six ducklings slam the house door shut behind her. And they lock it!

Our house is locked too, but we are not inside. In the long northern evening we three youngest, Helen and Elsie and I, crowd together among bedding in a tent set up in the hollow behind the house, near the root cellar and the several well holes now filled in because my brothers could not find any water in them, and actually we're close to the *Betjhues*, the toilet among the trees, and it won't be as far to go there in the dark if one of us has to. Our log house is closed tight, there is nothing alive inside except the mice who will have all run away by now, Helen says, because the horrible stink of formaldehyde is burning slowly, it must burn for at least three days to kill all the *Waunstje* that hide in every mud-plaster crack, in the log joints and splits where they wait all day to come out at night to bite us, suck blood from around our eyes and behind our ears, along our necks where we're sleeping against the straw mattress and the feather pillows made from plucking our chickens. My straw-and-feather bed is soft and very warm but the lice and fleas that creep in, my mother says, unstoppably day and night from the poplar and willow bush all around us, they like the warm seams of our bedding too and they hide in every fold, waiting there for our blood, and sometimes I wake up at night shrieking in pain. But no fox can sneak out of the bush to get into a house where the door is shut and locked, and the ducklings won't open when a red fox knocks, and certainly not when they hear his voice. Never.

> "Go away!" they all shout. "Our mother has a sweet voice but your voice is so rough! You are the red fox, go away!"
>
> And the fox will go away – to the grocery store. He says to the grocer, "Give me a big piece of chalk, I want to eat it!" The grocer is worried; he thinks this fox wants to trick someone again, but he is also very afraid of the fox and so he gives him what he wants. That's the way it is with people who are afraid.
>
> The fox chews the chalk and goes back to the ducklings again. "Open the door, my darlings," his voice now so soft and sweet, "I

have a present for each of you!"

And of course the ducklings know such a sweet voice can only be their mother, so they unlock and open the door – but there are the huge jaws of the fox! They scatter in every direction, hide among the firewood, inside the stove, behind the water pail, even behind the chamber-pot under the bed but the fox, the terrible red fox, will find them wherever they are and gobble them all up.

Yes, every one – well no, only five, because the littlest duckling is so smart it jumps up on the window sill and hides behind the curtain. The fox's stomach is stuffed with five fat ducklings but he wants the sixth too, foxes always eat everything, they never leave a crumb behind, and he looks and looks, but the littlest duckling stays so perfectly still, barely breathing, that finally the fox thinks, why bother, that last duckling is such a little *Tjnirps* I'm sure it won't even taste good! And he wanders out of the house, he's so-o-o full, lies down on the grass beside the river, such hard work catching lunch, he is completely happy and stretches out and falls asleep in the warm sunshine.

Now I'm the littlest in our family, I'm often called "*Du Tjnirps*" (You little twirp!) and I know for sure I'd be the smart duckling too, no fox would ever find me up behind the window curtains. Though I have never seen a river. Sometimes in spring when the snow melts, the water runs past for several days like a creek through this hollow below our locked house with formaldehyde smoking through it, the ugly scrabbling bedbugs will be falling now, out of the cracks and plaster between the logs like snow, my mother and sisters will sweep them into drifts and shovel them out when we open the door and the windows wide, let the wind whistle through and blow out the stink.

But my present remembering of this story puzzles me. From the farthest recess of my memory over six-and-a-half decades ago, I believe I hear, I know I gather together this story from where I am in a tent below the log house my father and two brothers built in a clearing on our CPR homestead in the boreal forest north of Fairholme, Saskatchewan; years later my mother told me – I remember this exactly because at the time I wrote it in an essay – my mother told me I had refused to wait for the house to be finished, that the local midwife Mrs. Biech came to help her, and I, her seventh and last child,

was born in a temporary cabin that later became our chicken barn in the hollow where the tent stood. But we did not live long on that particular land; we moved to another homestead near Speedwell School before I was four, and I remember nothing of that chicken log cabin, or even the larger house except what I see of its exterior in a few family snapshots; I recall not the faintest image of a room, a table, a bed, a curtain or window sill. Nevertheless, this story is as indelible a memory and the earliest as I have: the duckling story, the tent in the hollow, our house locked thick with poison gas, the dead lice. What my Mother most detested and fought relentlessly: *Waunztje*.

(And now that I've, for the first time, written this story down, is it fixed for good; beyond any drift of memory.)

Helen must have told me the story, my ten-year-old sister then, who will die when she is barely seventeen. The first death in our Canadian Wiebe family, and the only one until our father dies at age 86, thirty years later. As a student at the University of Alberta I will write a short story about a boy's older sister dying in an isolated farm home; it will be my first published story, appearing complete with an illustration in a national magazine in 1956; the $100 I will be paid, at a time when I earn 85 cents an hour working in Silverwoods Edmonton Dairy, will begin giving me occasional, spasmic fantasies of living a writer's life. But sometimes when I ride my bike to work north across the High Level Bridge – just before summer sunrise because my job is breaking ice for the horse-drawn milk wagons that begin to load their milk bottles at 5:30 – sometimes at dawn the wide North Saskatchewan River Valley is filled with white, coiling mist and it seems then there is no valley, there are no high river cliffs, no roads nor trees nor deep river a hundred meters below me, I am carried on clouds towards a city blazing brilliant gold in the rising sun and anything is possible; all I need is the nerve to imagine it.

The story must be one Helen has read in Jackpine School. But then it would be English. Do I know that much English? We speak only Low German at home. Except my oldest sister Tina's husband, she's 18 and married to Gust, he speaks to my parents only in High German, like the preachers in church, because the August Fiedlers and their cousins the Johann Lobes who have a steamer tractor that burns poplar or spruce like any cookstove and blasts itself across the land pulling their breaking plow with shares higher than me, ripping up the ground when we'll finally get some land cleared,

Dan says the Fiedlers and Lobes are not Mennonites. They came to Saskatchewan from North Dakota and are Germans, so they can only talk High German or English – or Schwabish, which I don't learn because no one ever talks to me in it.

This red fox story I remember is like a German folktale my mother might have known from her Mennonite school childhood in Russia, but I cannot remember her telling me anything like that: she told me stories from the Bible, so early I don't remember not knowing them, and there are, of course, no talking ducks in the Bible. So:

> Mother Duck returns to the horror of her door hanging open, her house empty and furniture thrown around like feathers, O – O, the horror! She is crying her worst fears for her lost children, they are gone forever because the terrible Red Fox – but the sixth duckling bumbles against the curtain, drops to the floor with stubby wings beating, O smart little Sixth! she'll tell Mother everything. Together they follow the tracks of the fox all the way to the bank of the river where he lies snoring. With his bulging belly, which they see ripple; yes, it is stirring a little.

* * * * *

This first story I remember I know is a story completed (a postmodern critic would say, it is "brought to closure") by stones. My father says there are stones everywhere on our homestead land, and even I as a toddler know that when he and my brothers get the trees cleared away at last, chopping and digging at roots and tearing out stumps with our sweaty horses, even after the breaking plow has ripped the sod into turned strips, there will be enough stones to break our smaller plows and disks, you can hear the crack! of the steel shares hitting them in the field beyond the hayslough. Sixty years from now, when I and my son return there, and the bush has grown back again tall as any aspen forest, the barbed-wire fence outlining where the field once was will be nothing but a pyramidal ridge of gathered stones, like the relentless eskers of human glaciation temporarily passing.

> Mother Duck considers the fox's moving belly. Then she takes out of her apron pocket her scissors, her needle and thread. Swift and straight she snips the fox open and out jump the five ducklings, alive and unharmed. Quickly, Mother sends them down to the river for stones. They bring them up, big as they can carry, and lay them neatly one by one inside the fox and Mother sews him up again so smoothly he will never even dream he has so much as a scar. And then they're off, back up the hill, inside the house, lock the door and talk, O, all at once,
>
> "I was still half-way in his throat . . ."
>
> "He's so greedy, he just gulped us down . . ."
>
> "I felt really cozy . . ."
>
> "The gurgling, ugggh, that stomach . . ."
>
> "I felt so sour all over, uggggh. . . ."
>
> and down by the river Red Fox wakes up. He has a dreadful thirst, his throat is parched and, strangely, his stomach now feels heavy, and hard. He wobbles to the river and bends down and opens his long mouth to drink; the heavy stones slide forward, he tips over headfirst, he falls, he drowns.

Since the age of three I know one immovable principle of fine fiction: no fox gets away with eating cute little ducklings.

* * * * *

This first remembered story has, I now recognize, a strong whiff of Arctic Dene about it; their marvel stories often begin with the phrase: "In the days when animals talked like people – this happened – . . . ." How fitting that would be, here, with all this hunger and thirst, no sex but lots of mother love and danger and greed and the proper character dead as a happy ending. On our homestead we always had chickens but never ducks. Like all our scattered neighbors we had only one farm dog and sometimes at night we heard hunting coyotes in the unsettled reaches of the "free range" as we called it. West of us where nobody lived, there was only bush and muskeg and taizu for miles to the white sand beaches of Turtle Lake, but I never saw a coyote, let alone a fox. What were the coyotes saying in their strange, laughing language? The

English I heard at school – once I went there, saw and read it too – the English sang in my head, walking home the daily miles from our one-room school with the cresent moon pale and opposite the westerly sun, the sounds of words like waves playing in my mouth, knowing them by heart:

> The Moon's the North Wind's cooky.
> He bites it, day by day,
> Until there's but a rim of scraps
> That crumbles all away. (Vachel Lindsay)

And in fall as I neared home and autumn darkness began to creep up past the bare tips of the trees and over the sky:

> Some one came knocking
> At my wee, small door;
> Some one came knocking,
> I'm sure – sure – sure;
>
> I listened, I opened,
> I looked to left and right,
> But nought there was a-stirring
> In the still dark night. . . . (Walter de la Mare)

* * * * *

As many of you will have recognized, the Fox and Ducks story that is still knocking at the "wee, small door" of my antediluvian memory comes from the Brothers Grimm. *Die Maerchen* – fairy tales, as the title is usually translated, but not well, there's very little "fairyish" about them, certainly no implication of "airy fairy!", of tiny, utterly useless wings instead of sturdy shoulderblades. The root noun *Maer* in German means something much more realistic, more earthy, like "news", "a saying", "a tale." I think *Die Maerchen Der Brueder Grimm* is better translated as "The Folktales of the Brothers Grimm," and the one I just told you is number five in their magnificent gathering of 200 stories first published in 1812, ". . . *diese unschuldige Hausmaerchen* . . ." as the Grimms call the stories they collected: "these innocent little house stories" through which flows . . . *jene Reinheit um*

derentwillen uns Kinder so wunderbar and selig erschienen: innocent stories . . . "where flows that purity because of which children appear so marvelous and blessed to us."

To disassemble my 66-year-old memory: the fact is *Maerchen* Number Five is not about a fox and six ducklings; it is the story of a huge wolf, and seven little goats. The wolf gets into the house not only by threatening the grocer for chalk to soften his dreadful voice, but by terrifying the local miller into giving him flour to whiten his deadly black paws; the smallest, seventh, kid escapes to report to Mother Goat by hiding, not behind the window curtains, but high in the clock hanging on the wall. When the wolf awakens with his belly sewn shut, he staggers to a man-dug well (not to the river) for a drink, and as he does so the stones inside him clatter together. And then, in the Grimms' story, that *Boesewicht*, that devil of a wolf, bursts into song (I translate):

> What rumbles, what bumbles
> Around in my gut?
> I thought I was full of six little goats,
> But really, it's nothing but broken stones.

Utterly amazing. At the moment of his death, the villain is granted an epiphany; before he drowns, the murderous wolf sings a song of profound self-recognition!

I say, may we all, villains or not, die so well.

* * * * *

What story did my gentle sister, who lived half of her life sick abed, what did she tell me? I cannot believe that, in her telling, the wolf sang his rumble song, but truly I am more than happy at the mirrored and doubled differences between my memory and text. For in the isolated pioneer community of some two hundred people where I lived the first twelve years of my life, what every child knew instinctively was that, whatever actually had happened, the story of that happening, if you wanted to listen, would be told by any mouth into any ear in any of three different languages (how lovely if it had been four; to me Russian always feels so powerfully deep, so allusive, so

sad), and the story circulating in an endless stew of gossip and implication would be dancing in an immensity of detail only a literal contortionist would attempt to order. The Bible itself – the very *Word of God*, as one might say I heard it proclaimed from our church pulpit while still in my mother's womb – the biblical stories had marvelous diverse variations at their very core, which the preachers demonstrated ever more clearly with each attempt they made to prove their direct and simplistic unity.

For example, the beginning stories of both the Old and New Testaments – for me the most memorable stories – are told severally, and in strikingly different ways. In Genesis chapter one the creation of Adam and Eve has the imaginative purity of God speaking all that is into existence:

> And God said, "Let us make man after our likeness . . ." So God created
>
> (the Hebrew word used here is *bara*, which means "to create something out of nothing": as you would seemingly in speaking)
>
> So God created man in his own image . . . male and female he created (*bara*) them. (Gen. 1:26-27)

And this female and this male are in a perfect paradise because God tells them:

> "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And every beast of the earth, and every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." (Gen. 1: 29-30)

A perfect, *vegetarian* paradise. For every form of life that breathes. No wonder when, at the end of Genesis 1, God "saw everything he had made . . . behold, it was very good."

But behold, how devastatingly different the story of beginnings is in Genesis 2 and 3. In this account God does not speak human beings into existence: rather, he "*forms* man of dust from the ground":

> (the verb 'form' is *yatsar* – "to fashion," and the image is that of a potter shaping a pot between his hands),

and to create "a companion/a helper/fit for man," God takes a rib from man's side and "makes" Eve.

> (the Heb. verb for "make" here is *banah*, meaning to build up – like you build a building out of materials already at hand.)

More to the problem: in the second Genesis story not only does God speak, but Adam, Eve do so as well, and also the "subtle" serpent, and of course, once these creatures can speak, they are able to question what has been said to them, and even more calamitously, they can (to quote Jonathan Swift) say "the thing which is not"; that is, if they can speak, they can also lie. Both to each other and to God – or at least they can try – because in this version of the story there are now certain fruit trees that God has told them they are not to eat, they are profoundly dangerous: eating of the Tree of Life or of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil will be the death of you. What is this word, *death*? In a perfect paradise of life and beauty? It is never mentioned in Chapter 1. But in Chapter 3 there is nothing for it: Adam and Eve are *garash*, driven out, they are thrown forcibly out of Eden to eventually die.

The superb New Testament story of beginnings – i.e., the birth of Jesus – reveals an even greater variety. There are four gospels about Jesus' life, and the earliest account to be written down, Mark, tells us nothing at all of his birth, only that the adult Jesus is known to be a carpenter from Nazareth, the son of Mary (his father is never mentioned), and he is part of a family of four (named) brothers and several (unnamed) sisters. Luke's birth story is the one the world knows best: it is so enchantingly pastoral, complete with an old man, and also a young virgin engaged to be married, both of them having long conversations with angels bringing them messages. It is full of long marvelously poetic songs, both human and angelic, of celestial revelations to shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night, of the crowded Bethlehem inn and so the birth happens in a barn with a hay-filled manger for a baby cradle; all of which ends with a mysterious sentence regarding the teenage mother:

> But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart. (Luke 2:19)

The story in the Gospel of Matthew is dark, and full of dream warnings. It begins in the dead of night with Joseph being warned by an angel in a dream (the angels in Luke do not appear in dreams; they are, it seems, literally present). Joseph is warned that, though his betrothed is pregnant and that not by him, he is to marry her anyway. The story gets darker: when the strange "wise men from the east" arrive to give Jesus spectacular kingly gifts, they are "warned in a dream" not to return to that Roman puppet King Herod in Jerusalem, and Joseph is warned in the same way to "take the child and his mother and flee into Egypt." Then total darkness descends: because Jesus, the presumptive "King of the Jews," was born in Bethlehem, King Herod has all the male children in the area who are under the age of two murdered. And the ancient prophecy of Jeremiah has come to pass:

> A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children, and she would not be comforted because they were no more. (Matt. 2:18)

There is not a word of this massacre, nor of Egypt, in either Mark or Luke; nor are they in the fourth gospel, John. John writes nothing of a literal birth at all. Rather his text opens in a burst of brilliant theological/philosophical explication concerning Jesus as "the Word [Greek "logos"] made flesh" so that all "who received him, who believed in his name, [to them] he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." (John 1: 12-13) To explore what all that could/might/does mean has occupied millions of thinkers for two millennia.

* * * * *

Therefore, allow me to return to my, in comparison, utterly simple writer's life. I have discussed the Brothers Grimm and Bible texts as "stories" that I knew since my faintest, earliest memory – and of course I understood little of their complex, as it may be contradictory, variations until much later when I lured myself into trying to write stories of my own. The question then is: Where do you get stories?

That is not a simple question. In the process of trying to write, through senior high school and into university, I realized the only stories I could write must, in some distant apprehension of memory and imagination and present, begin, be based on the facticity of my own life and on that of the humanity I observed living around me. As Descartes said of our species, *homo sapiens*, "*Cogito ergo sum*" – I think, therefore I am. In other words, to live in this world I cannot doubt my own existence, but in order to make other *homo sapiens* aware of my own self-awareness, I must SAY it: that is, speak words, as Descartes did.

Homo sapiens is the *speaking animal species*, and in this sense our first stories begin with, "I am who I am, me," but they can only continue, they can only develop with the necessary, complementary recognition that: "You are who you are, you."

In this recognition of difference, formulated in words spoken out loud for an ear to hear – and of course in later human history also written down, i.e., made visible for an eye to read – in this recognition lies all the possibility of every story we *homo sapien* animals can conceive. The story lies in imagining and constructing, with words, the differences between the I and the You.

In terms of a writer's working experience, English novelist Graham Greene explains this very well in *Ways of Escape*:

> The main characters in a novel [I'd say, any fiction] must necessarily have some kinship to the author – they come out of his body as a child comes from the womb, then the umbilical cord is cut and they grow into independence. [Here's a key sentence:] The more the author knows of his own character, the more he can distance himself from his invented characters and the more room they have to grow in. . . . [If] the cord has not been cut . . . [the characters are] only a daydream in the mind of a young romantic author [i.e., the characters are inert, not believably, fictionally "alive"] . . . .

Of course the *accident* of my birth – that is, I had no choice of where or to whom I was born – did not place me, like it did Graham Greene, into an intellectual English family widely connected to the ruling classes; I did not, as by right, go up (as they say) to Oxford; I had no uncles with coffee estates

in Brazil, nor was I the namesake of another who was Winston Churchill's Permanent Secretary of the Admiralty and a Knight of the Bath. Nevertheless, though Greene wrote a great deal from a very young age, with a good deal of early success, he found it very difficult to "know who he was" – a difficulty he describes brilliantly in several autobiographical books – and so struggled many years trying to write genuine fiction with believable, independent, living characters in it, You's as well as I's. He did, however, persist and lived an amazingly imaginative life, creating an immense, long, jagged mountain range of stories thousands of readers now call "Greeneland".

As far as my mother was concerned, my birth was no accident, not in any sense of that word. A child for her was a gift directly from God her Father to whom she in prayer dedicated every day of her life on earth and whom she expected to meet personally, at the moment of her death and with inexpressible joy, in His eternal home in Heaven. That her last child, a little Mennist born at the bush dead-end of a wagon track cut deep into Saskatchewan wilderness should grow up to have the overweening pride to write stories he expected other people to print and read – such behavior troubled her deeply.

And yet, from my point of view, it was exactly the powerful stories she told me in that isolated bush world, not only stories from the Bible but far more of her childhood in an incomprehensible Russia, the village life in Orenburg Mennonite Colony, the brutal physical punishments of her father, her mother's death when she was six and enduring two step-mothers – the last her own age and once her best friend – and particularly the stories of the family escape from the Communists, the escape over Moscow in 1929 with a chronically ill baby Helen who was always, as by a miracle, strong and healthy whenever the Canadian immigration doctors examined her – it was all a miracle of God her Father, and the greatest was not being forced to settle in Paraguay: these stories heard in bits and pieces over and over were far too powerful for me ever to forget, as was also the pioneer farm life we lived. And all the more powerful because, in the books we read in school, there was never a hint that refugee bush homesteaders in Canadian boreal forests existed, fumigating lice and swatting mosquitoes and trudging through snowdrifts while their hands and faces froze. And most certainly in our school readers and tiny library there was nothing to be read about bohunk Mennonites,

speaking Low German; as someone once said to me, it wasn't even a language that could be written, fit only for people shoveling cowshit.

At least I was visually invisible: no one could give me a glance and instantly see I was a "bohunk Mennonite." But I knew who I was, I knew the powerful stories of past and place I carried: heavy, full of starvation and slow dying and cattle-car exile and third-class travel across the world and the odd miracle escape, the Canadian double-whammy of Saskatchewan bush poverty *and* piety – how could you be witty or clever about *that* at a university party? During my first year at the University of Alberta, Calgary Branch, I played spiker on the Varsity Volleyball team but did not dare to join the Creative Writing Club.

But *Deo gratias*, in Edmonton there was Professor of English F.M. Salter. A world scholar on Medieval English Drama and Shakespeare, he had nevertheless in 1939 organized the first full-credit university course in Canada in Creative Writing. As he told me, to placate skeptical university administrators, he agreed to call it English Composition. I need only mention that Salter mentored both W.O. Mitchell and Sheila Watson; in 1955 I got into his writing course via Shakespeare (he accepted only four students that year), and it was there I first – to use the image of my title – began climbing my peculiar fictional mountains into existence. Well, not really mountains – more like 'very small mounds' – in any case, two stories of the 18 pieces I wrote that year (we had to hand in a complete, new text every week) were published nationally. Here is the beginning of the first:

Scrapbook

In the darkness under the rafters he awoke to the screaming.

It was like his dream of being crushed by a huge tree and waking up to find his brother's arm lying on him, inert and solid in sleep. But now he had had no dream. Rather, he had felt something a long, long time, as if it stretched back without end into his slumber, even as if he had felt it forever: the leaping rise, the rasping plateau of sound, and then the moaning fall of it down to a whimper, before he awoke and heard it.

. . . suddenly he knew that David was not in bed beside him . . . . Where was David – *had* he heard – and then he jerked erect, careless of the

dark, because the stove-pipe which reached up through the middle of attic floor seemed surrounded by light. It was! for a light from the living room below shone up through the opening around the pipe. Then he heard movement there. Were they all up, with the light burning? Perhaps he had heard –

The screaming came again. . . .

(To summarize the action: the boy creeps downstairs to find his family in the living room surrounding his sister Margaret, who has been sick in bed for some months and is now sitting up, tortured by incomprehensible pain. Their farm is too isolated to get a doctor; the boy rides through the dark woods to the neighbors, who come with laudanum to help Marg with her pain. It ends:)

In the late morning when (the boy) awoke and came downstairs, his mother told him Margaret was dead.

The house did not smell right. Everyone seemed to be struck dumb, and cried unexpectedly. He could not find David anywhere. He did not want to go into the living room; he could not think of anyone as dead.

"Mom," he said, "I want to go to school."

His mother didn't seem to hear him. . . . He went out, and the early spring sunshine was fresh and good. No one noticed him as he slipped into the barn, bridled Prince, and rode off.

Yet, somehow, school wasn't right either. When he got there he didn't feel like saying anything about his (night) ride, or even why he arrived during recess. He sat in his small desk in the one-room school and the teacher said, "Grade three, take out your Healthy Foods Scrapbooks." He lifted the lid of his desk and there, slightly dog-eared and crumpled from much looking, lay the scrapbook. He and Marg had made it for health class. Actually Marg had done all the work; he had just watched. That was why his book had been first in class. On the cover was the bulging red tomato she had cut from the tomato-juice label, and there was the kink she had made when he bumped her because he was leaning so close as she sat propped in bed, cutting it out. He said, almost aloud, "She's dead," and he knew that 'dead' was like the sticks of rabbits he found in his snares.

And suddenly he began to cry. Everyone stared, but he could not stop.

Eleven years before I wrote this story, my sister Helen had lain ill on the bed we had set up for her in the small living room of our farm house. In January 1945 she received for her birthday a compact five-year diary, five narrow lines per day; decades later my sister Liz shows me that diary. I see Helen's neat fountain-pen writing:

> – "Saterday,[!], January 27 . . . Mother and dad went to the school meeting. I helped Rudy make a scrap book. We also [almost?] got it finished."
>
> – "Sa'day, February 3: . . . I helped Rudy make a scrap book on food in the evening."

A month later she wrote her last entry; the diary is blank to the end of March, and suddenly there is Liz's writing: "Sister Helen died on 28 of March. Her heart tore off she had an easy death though, died March 28, 1945 2.00 P. M."

Let me draw some details together:

Detail: The screaming

Detail: The scrapbook in the school desk

Detail: Rabbit bodies in snares like frozen sticks

Detail: I helped Rudy make a scrap book

What really happened to our Wiebe family in March 1945? The house and the school no longer exist; the only two facts I could verify for you are Liz's handwriting in the diary, and a gravestone in a patch of poplars in the Fairholme Community Cattle Pasture about 90 kilometers north of North Battleford, Saskatchewan. But I think you experienced something more than those two minute facts, even though I only read short excerpts of a small story I wrote long ago, a story never reprinted – nor do I remember ever reading it aloud before – since it last appeared in a collection of my short stories thirty years ago; hearing it you experienced some human emotion, perhaps some faint flicker of your own apprehensions when you first began to comprehend the possible dimensions of death. This experience would not have happened to you if – to use the image of my title – if I had not, at age 21, laboriously climbed a story mountain that did not exist until I had climbed it; and then it was visible, plain for anyone to see: yes, that story is there. And it

still is, there – even though no one has looked at it for decades. The story is not really all that happened when my sister died – in fact, Liz or my brother Dan, who are the only family members still alive, might tell you that almost nothing in the story happened exactly that way in "real" life – as far as they can remember. And, if you were to ask Liz about this, you might also ask her to explain those strange words she wrote in the diary:

> Sister Helen died on 28 of March. Her heart tore off she had an easy death though

If Liz can remember why. Probably, if I had known about these words when I was writing my story, that story would be quite different from the one that exists now.

* * * * *

To speak, then, in less personal, more literary critical terms, we seem to have more or less worked our way through the "postmodern era" of literature and we're not yet sure in what "era" we are living now – at the moment we're sure of very little except that we're post-9/11. As I read it, "postmodernity" questioned the legitimacy of both faith and reason, contending that both can only offer story versions of reality which cannot "validate a precise correspondence between themselves and what may actually be going on in reality" (Joseph Natoli, *A Primer of Postmodernity*, Oxford, 1997, p. 15). It seems that contemporary humanity continues to hang in this uneasy suspension of possibly nothing: between faith and its direction of spiritual understandings, and scientific, logical reasonableness. What is the world, actually, in truth? Is the world always, and only, whatever the individual eye seeing it says it is? Everything, all is relative to the individual sensibility? Many argue that, and yet the obvious fact is that, when we get into our cars and drive home, we all obey the road's dotted line and the red and orange and green lights, because we know we can't live together by the millions, as we must, unless we all behave thus reasonably, according to such agreed rules – that is, in our daily life we still obey Descartes' maxim: *Cogito ergo sum*. But nevertheless, again, we also sense we are more than a suspension of questionable dualities: faith/reason; evil/good; white/black; communism/

capitalism; west/east – continue listing at your leisure. We sense we subsume within ourselves both these dualities – and also that we are more than both – much more.

Perhaps I should give the question back to the story maker J.M. Coetzee: to Elizabeth Costello's cry of the heart:

> [T]he time is not yet come, the time of the giants, the time of the angels . . . we are still in the time of fleas.

In fact, I do not agree with her. Though my first childhood memory is surrounded by plenty of actual *Waunztje* – lice, fleas – and for the first homestead years of my life they were a continuing, sporadic plague, nevertheless I do not think fleas define our humanity at all well, not even when we consider the enduring and unmitigated horrors of twentieth-century world history. I believe human beings are not only a bloodsucking, insectiferous plague; I believe they are also capable of being giants, of being angels, and I believe we are all capable of experiencing that. And we have.

Giants are often best recognized in the past: sometimes in the very distant past, and many magnificent novels have been written about them. Much of my writing life I myself have tried to make visible the stories of "giants" (I'm not talking of Alexander or Napoleon), and if you were to ask me who my own favorite fictional characters were, I would tell you their names: Frieda Friesen (*Blue Mountains of China*), Big Bear (*The Temptations of Big Bear*), Greenstockings (*A Discovery of Strangers*), Adam Wiebe of Danzig (*Sweeter Than All the World*). I believe there is something "giant" about them, something to recognize as "human greatness," as, I would say, we can discern it in contemporaries like Nelson Mandela or Mother Teresa, whose lives, despite their very public flaws, reveal an incredible, humane goodness. Almost, as the Creator God speaks in Genesis 1: "Behold, their life is very good."

I have tried to tell the stories of giants; it seems to me now that, after more or less half a century of writing, I have not wrestled enough with angels. The present TV interest in angels – fleeting and flat-footedly head-on as it is – nevertheless reveals the human longing for something far beyond ourselves, something outside the scope of natural law and reason. For I think most of us sometimes do catch a glimpse, perhaps just as we're looking around, of

something that has been with us, and still is if we only had the eyes – or perhaps the words – to contemplate what it was. It is there, it is with us. And we are comforted. Like Graham Greene writes when, at the end of *Brighton Rock*, the girl Rose cries out as she makes her confession: "I wish I'd killed myself," and the priest, bending his old head, responds to her: "You can't conceive, my child, nor can I or anyone – the . . . appalling . . . strangeness of the mercy of God."

So, as a conclusion let me read you my one angel story, which intimates a little of that "appalling strangeness." It's a very short story and, it seems to me, most appropriate to read in Calgary, the undisputed "Oil Capital of Canada," especially at this time when yet two more multi-billion dollar oil plants are about to be built in the boreal forest on the Athabasca River. You can find this story in my collection *River of Stone*.

* * * * *

The Angel of the Tar Sands

Spring had most certainly, finally come. The morning drive to the plant from Fort McMurray was so dazzling with fresh green against the heavy spruce, the air so unearthly bright that it swallowed the smoke from the candy-striped chimneys as if it did not exist. Which is just lovely, the superintendent thought, cut out all the visible crud, shut up the environmentalists, and he went into his neat office (it had a river view with islands) humming, "Alberta blue, Alberta blue, the taste keeps" – but did not get his tan golfing jacket off before he was interrupted. Not by the radio-telephone, but by Tak the day operator on Number Two Bucket in person walking past the secretary without stopping.

"What the hell?" the superintendent said, quickly annoyed.

"I ain't reporting this on no radio," Tak's imperturbable Japanese-Canadian face was tense, "if them reporters hear about this one they're gunna – "

"Did you scrape out another buffalo skeleton, for god's sake?"

"No, it's maybe a dinosaur this time, one of them real old – "

But the superintendent, swearing, was already out the door yelling for Bertha who was always on stand-by now with her spade. If one of the

three nine-storey-high bucket-wheels stopped turning for an hour, the plant dropped capacity, but another archaeological leak could stop every bit of production for a month while bifocalled professors stuck their noses . . . the jeep leaped along the track beside the conveyor belt running a third empty, already he could see it, and in three minutes he had Bertha with her long-handled spade busy on the face of the fifty-foot cliff that Number Two had been gnawing out of the ground. A shape emerged, quickly.

"What the . . ." staring, the superintendent could not find his ritual words, ". . . is that?"

"When the bucket hit the corner of it," Tak said, "I figured hey, that's the bones of a – "

"That's not just bone, it's . . . skin and . . . ." The superintendent could not say the word.

"Wings," Bertha said it for him, digging her spade in with steady care. "That's wings, like you'd expect on a angel."

For that's what it was, plain as day now, tucked tight into the oozing black cliff, an angel. Tak had seen only a corner of bones sheared clean but now that Bertha had it more uncovered they saw the manlike head through one folded-over pair of wings and the manlike legs, feet through another pair, very gaunt, the film of feathers and perhaps skin so thin and engrained with tarry sand that at first it was impossible to notice anything except the white bones inside them. The third pair of wings was pressed flat by the sand at a very awkward – it must have been most painful –

"The middle two," Bertha said, trying to brush the sticky sand aside with her hand, carefully, "is what it flies with."

"Wouldn't it . . . he . . . fly with all six . . . six. . . ." The superintendent stopped, overwhelmed by the unscientific shape uncovered there so blatantly.

"You can look it up," Bertha said with a sideways glance at his ignorance, "The Bible, Isaiah chapter six."

But then she gagged too for the angel had moved. Not one of them was touching it, that was certain, but it had moved irrefutably. As they watched, stunned, the wings unfolded bottom and top, a head emerged, turned, and they saw the fierce hoary lineaments of an ancient man. His mouth all encrusted with tar pulled open and out came a sound. A long, throat-clearing streak of sound. They staggered back, fell; the superintendent found himself on his knees, staring up at the shape which wasn't really very tall, it just

seemed immensely broad and overwhelming, the three sets of wings now sweeping back and forth as if loosening up in some seraphic exercise. The voice rumbled like thunder, steadily on.

"Well," muttered Tak, "whatever it is, it sure ain't talking Japanese."

The superintendent suddenly saw himself as an altar boy, the angel suspended above him there and bits of words rose to his lips: "*Pax vobis . . . cem . . . cum,*" he ventured but the connections were lost in the years. "*Magnifi . . . cat . . . ave Mar. . . .*"

The obsidian eyes of the angel glared directly at him and it roared something, dreadfully. Bertha laughed aloud.

"Forget the popish stuff," she said. "It's talking Hutterite, Hutterite German."

"Wha. . . ." The superintendent had lost all his words; he was down to syllables only.

Bertha said, "I left the colony, years ago I. . . ." But then she was too busy listening. The angel kept on speaking, non-stop as if words had been plugged up inside it for eons, and its hands (it had only two of them, in the usual place at the ends of two arms) brushed double over its bucket-damaged shoulder and that appeared restored, whole just like the other, while it brushed the soil and tarry sand from its wings, flexing the middle ones again and again because they obviously had suffered much from their cramped position.

"Ber . . ." the superintendent said, "Ber. . . ." Finally he looked at Tak, pleading for a voice.

"What's it saying," Tak asked her, "Bertha, please? Bertha? What?"

She was listening with overwhelming intensity; there was nothing in this world but to hear. Tak touched her shoulder, shook her, but she did not notice. Suddenly the angel stopped speaking; it was studying her.

"I . . . I can't. . . ." Bertha confessed to it at last, "I can understand every word you . . . every word, but I can't say, I've forgotten. . . ."

In its silence the angel looked at her; slowly its expression changed. It might have been showing pity, though of course that is really difficult to tell with angels. Then it folded its wings over its feet, its upper wings over its face, and with an ineffable movement of its giant middle wings it rose, straight upward into the blue sky. They bent back staring after it, and in a moment it had vanished in light.

"O dear God," Bertha murmured after a long time. "Our Elder always said they spoke Hutterite in heaven."

They three contemplated each other and they saw in each other's eyes the dread, the abrupt tearing sensation of doubt. Had they seen . . . and as one they looked at the sad cliff still oozing tar, the spade leaning against it. Beside the hole where Bertha had dug: the shape of the angel, indelible. Bertha was the first to her feet.

"I quit," she said. "Right this minute."

"Of course, I understand." The superintendent was on his feet. "Tak, run your bucket through there, get it going quick."

"Okay," Tak said heavily. "You're the boss."

"It doesn't matter how fast you do it," Bertha said to the superintendent but she was watching Tak trudge into the shadow of the giant wheel. "It was there, we all saw it."

And at her words the superintendent had a vision. He saw like an opened book the immense curves of the Athabasca River swinging through wilderness down from the glacial pinnacles of the Rocky Mountains and across Alberta and joined by the Berland and the McLeod and the Pembina and the Pelican and the Christina and the Clearwater and the Firebag rivers, and all the surface of the earth was gone, the Tertiary and Lower Cretaceous layers of the strata had been ripped away and the thousands of square kilometers of black bituminous sand were exposed, laid open, slanting down into the molten centre of the earth, *O miserere, miserere*, the words sang in his head and he felt their meaning though he could not have explained them, much less remembered Psalm 51, and after a time he could open his eyes and lift his head. The huge oil plant, he knew every bolt and pipe, still sprawled between him and the river; the brilliant air still swallowed the smoke from all the red-striped chimneys as if it did not exist, and he knew that through a thousand secret openings the oil ran there, gurgling in each precisely numbered pipe and jointure, sweet and clear like golden brown honey.

Tak was beside the steel ladder, he about to start the long climb into the machine. Bertha touched his shoulder and they both looked up.

"Next time you'll recognize what it is," she said happily. "And then it'll talk Japanese."

Mennonite/s Writing: Writers Participating

Julia Kasdorf with infant daughter

Rudy Wiebe responding to Rudy Wiebe: a tribute

Di Brandt

Yorifumi Yaguchi and conference organizer Ervin Beck

Jeff Gundy

Armin Wiebe

Rudy Wiebe and Di Brandt

Rosemary Nixon

Ann Hostetler

Patrick Friesen and Victor Jerrett Enns

Sandra Birdsell

The photographs included in this volume were taken at "Mennonite/s Writing: An International Conference," 2002. The conference was organized by Ervin Beck of Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana, and co-chaired by Hildi Froese Tiessen of Conrad Grebel University College, Waterloo, Ontario. Photographs are courtesy of Goshen College Public Relations and Hildi Froese Tiessen.

Rudy Wiebe Special Issue: Note on Contributors

Hildi Froese Tiessen, guest editor of this issue, co-chaired with Ervin Beck the third conference on "Mennonite/s Writing" at Goshen College in 2002. She teaches literature at Conrad Grebel University College at the University of Waterloo, and has edited several volumes of work by and about Mennonite writers.

Edna Froese teaches English at St. Thomas More College, University of Saskatchewan. She has published articles in *The Journal of Mennonite Studies*, *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, *Canadian Poetry*, and *Canadian Literature* (forthcoming), and book reviews in *NeWest Review*, *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, and *Christian Living*. Her writing often focuses on the intersection of literature and theology.

Maryann Tjart Jantzen teaches English at Trinity Western University in Langley, BC, and is a doctoral student at Simon Fraser University, specializing in contemporary Canadian literature. Currently, she is researching and writing about how the Mennonite/ Anabaptist past interacts with and informs the writing of contemporary Canadian Mennonite authors.

Janne Korkka is working on the sometimes monumental task of writing a doctoral dissertation on Rudy Wiebe's fiction at the University of Turku in Finland. His main research interest is contemporary (Western) Canadian literature, and his published work is mainly on Wiebe and Thomas King.

Maurice Mierau is writing a book about the modern era of tuberculosis treatment and the career of a Winnipeg TB doctor, Earl Hershfield. The book will be published in Fall 2004. He is also writing a memoir of his childhood, which continues. A chapter of the memoir appeared in the Summer 2003 issue of *Prairie Fire* magazine.

J.D. Mininger is a Ph.D. student in Comparative Literature at the University of Minnesota - Twin Cities. He has written on Immanuel Kant, Paul Celan, and Walt Whitman.

Jane Hostetler Robinett is an associate professor of rhetoric and writing studies at San Diego State University. She is the author of *This Rough Magic: Technology in Latin American Fiction* and of articles in the fields of narrative, trauma studies, and technology, ethics and culture. Her most recent publication, “Looking for Roots,” appeared in *Mosaic* (March 2003).

Paul Tiessen teaches English literature and Film Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, ON. He has published extensively on Mennonite art and literature, and on literary modernism and film.

Thomas Yoder Neufeld, *Ephesians. Believers Church Bible Commentary*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2002.

Thomas Yoder Neufeld's commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians for the Believer's Church Bible Commentary (BCBC) provides an excellent, comprehensive guide to this remarkable New Testament manifesto for Christian peacemakers. As a lay theologian new to the BCBC series, I was impressed at the book's structure, focus, depth, and readability.

Yoder Neufeld makes a balanced but persuasive case that Ephesians represents a "Pauline school's" encyclical-type summary of the apostle's vision and witness. His comparative tables of the epistle's similarities with Colossians and other NT parenetic texts present enough evidence to establish both Ephesians' literary dependence and creative transformations of those and other (e.g., apocalyptic and even proto-gnostic) traditions. The author's enthusiasm for Ephesians' robust "second- and third-generation" ecclesiology is contagious: "Congregations and denominations that show signs of wear should listen especially carefully to this letter" (28). His translation of the Greek text often provides several synonyms or interpretive options, accurately reflecting the rich semantic field of the epistle's extravagant vocabulary. Yoder Neufeld has wisely has deferred more technical discussions to ten appendices, providing succinct critical overviews of vocabulary (e.g., "head"), concepts ("Apocalypticism"), or issues ("Pseudepigraphy") that are important.

Yoder Neufeld's grasp of the secondary literature is wide, and his sensitivity to the nuances of syntax and vocabulary is admirable. However, I do wish that he had paid more attention to the epistle's sociological and historical context. He acknowledges that the central social issue behind Ephesians is the ongoing struggle by Jews and Gentiles to live together in the church. But he could have made more of the fact that Paul's arguments to persuade a Jewish-Christian majority to welcome a Gentile minority have, by the "late first century" (25), to be inverted by the author of Ephesians; now the task is to persuade a Gentile Christian majority to continue to include the waning Jewish-Christian minority.

Although Yoder Neufeld is clear about this epistle's concern for peacemaking, he still tends to give more attention to the theological aspects of the text than to its social dimensions. He never really engages Markus

Barth's famous contention that Eph. 2:11-22 *predicates* reconciliation with God upon social reconciliation – a position as scandalous today as during the Cold War when he asserted it. And though Yoder Neufeld notes the irony that Eph. 2 has not been widely used by the historic peace churches, he ignores its importance for other traditions, most notably perhaps by the modern ecumenical movement.

This tendency holds in his expository comments as well. On one hand, the author challenges traditional Mennonite "non-resistance" by emphasizing the epistle's calls to nonviolent militance (84f; 193; 313-15). On the other hand, I would have liked more discussion of what it means to concretize this call. Given the renaissance in contemporary experiments in nonviolent engagement, I would have hoped for more than his passing mentions of Christian Peacemaker Teams or VORP and Justapaz. Contrast this with his lengthy discussion of the issue of "Praying to God the Father" (166-68). This privileging of theological and pastoral concerns over social and political ones may have been expected by the BCBC editorial board. Still, this North American bias needs to be challenged more – especially with a text like Ephesians!

Perhaps the greatest strength of this commentary is Yoder Neufeld's consistent willingness to allow several possible readings to stand side by side. It is an appropriate approach for a Believers Church audience, with its tradition of reading scripture in community. This more "rabbinic" approach affirms that different readers offer diverse interpretive perspectives that help illuminate, and find resonance in, the biblical text.

Yoder Neufeld's treatment of the Household Codes of Eph. 5:21ff is sensitive and well-informed, and he takes the problems of patriarchal context seriously without solving them by abandoning the text. The discussion may be too nuanced and equivocal for some readers, but it represents a valiant effort to work with a text that is inevitably thorny in light of recent culture wars, particularly around gender (284-89). However, a little more sophisticated social theory and some "second wave feminism" could have helped re-contextualize what for too many has been a "text of terror." There are other good discussions in this commentary of what Ephesians means for the church; for example on leadership and church discipline, particularly as related to sexual abuse. And Yoder Neufeld, a leading scholar on the "Peace-

Warrior" tradition in the Bible, does an excellent job on the great "call to nonviolent arms" of Eph. 6:10ff.

I commend this commentary enthusiastically, and not only for those in Believers Churches. It is a state-of-the-art reference tool, as rich as the epistle it reflects upon, and offers a strong peace church reading of *the* NT text about becoming a peace church.

Ched Myers, Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries, Los Angeles, CA

Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.

Astute political commentators on both sides of the Atlantic are bemused by the religious language so often used to justify military intervention by the United States around the world. For instance, an essay in the *Guardian* (July 28, 2003) was titled "US leaders now see themselves as priests of a divine mission to rid the world of its demons." To understand the background of such religious crusading, one can do no better than this book. Authors Jewett and Lawrence combine biblical scholarship with extensive historical and political analysis, illuminated by their familiarity with the artifacts of popular American culture. Underlying their argument is the historic tension between two competing strands in American civil religion: zealous nationalism and prophetic realism.

Zealous nationalism is grounded in the conviction that the world must be saved by the righteous destruction of all enemies. This ideology of redemptive violence emerges in the biblical conquest narratives and finds its distinctive American form in such ideas as Manifest Destiny. Prophetic realism, on the other hand, emphasizes justice, tolerance, and the rule of law, deriving inspiration from the biblical prophets (especially Hosea, Isaiah, and Jesus). American examples include Abraham Lincoln's mature wisdom and the late Senator Daniel Moynihan's appeal on behalf of international law. Although our authors strive to balance these themes, much of the book

documents the widespread destructive power of zealous nationalism. Their thorough analysis of zeal, originating in the Bible, is updated by vivid parallels with Islamic Jihad.

For three decades, Robert Jewett has used the comic book character "Captain America" to illustrate the "myth of the American superhero" – a lone crusader who intervenes dramatically to purge society of threatening evils. But this brand of heroism, embodied in many other heroes of popular culture, has a disturbing side. "When confronted with genuine evil, democratic institutions and the due process of law always fail. . . . [D]emocracy can be saved only by someone with courage and strength enough to transcend the legal order so that the source of evil can be destroyed" (29). The subtext is that ordinary citizens and normal democratic procedures are incapable of responding to the threat.

Jewett first exposed zealous nationalism in *The Captain America Complex* in 1973. After collaborating with John Shelton Lawrence to write a whimsical study of superhero themes in popular culture, *The American Monomyth* (1977), he published a revised version of *Captain America* in 1984. (During his 20-year tenure at Garrett Theological Seminary, Jewett also wrote on various New Testament themes.) Jewett and Lawrence reunited to produce *The Myth of the American Superhero* (2002), followed now by this comprehensive manifesto. This three-decade evolution demonstrates that the central argument is not a novelty but a thoroughly crafted product.

The authors' survey of more than two centuries of American history is obviously selective, but many will find it persuasive. While much of the exegetical and historical material has been recycled from the 1973 original, more recent developments in both scholarship and current events have been judiciously integrated. Just one example is the amazing congruence of the earlier perspective with post-September 11 discussion of the war on terrorism (cf. pages 4, 20,146, 213, 287-8). Topics addressed along the way include apocalyptic zealotry, conspiracy theories, the stereotyping of enemies, obsession with victory and overcoming evil, the controversy over flag worship – many of which can be paralleled by similar tendencies in Israeli militancy and Islamic Jihad. The authors pile up examples of the dangers inherent in the redemptive violence that characterizes zealous nationalism.

Occasional abrupt shifts between modes of discourse, from scholarly

analysis to ethical and political exhortation, reveal the authors' prophetic and unabashedly Christian motivation. Pacifist Mennonite readers will approve their insistence that war is futile as a response to terrorism, but the model of prophetic realism advocated here, while sympathetic to utilizing nonviolent alternatives to war, is not based in absolute pacifism. The authors recognize the need for force to back up law and order (e.g., 319).

One telling image sums up the book. Jewett and Lawrence reproduce a 2002 cover from Germany's *Der Spiegel*, depicting President Bush as Rambo, flanked by Cheney, Rumsfeld, Rice, and Powell costumed as other pop culture superheroes, all armed to the teeth (40). But what was intended as critical satire was taken over with pride by the key players: Bush and friends eagerly displayed poster reproductions! The sobering reminder is that those who most need the message will be the last to get it.

J.R. Burkholder, Professor Emeritus, Goshen College, Goshen, IN

Elmer John Thiessen. *In Defence of Christian Schools and Colleges.* Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001.

Do religious schools and colleges promote division and fragmentation in a society? Do they foster intolerance? Do they violate academic freedom? Does funding religious schools violate a separation of church and state? Are religious schools elitist? Do they indoctrinate? In raising and responding to these and other questions, Elmer Thiessen invites us to listen carefully and patiently to those opposing religious schools. He often begins by asking whether definitions are clear. At many points he says that he is not prepared to defend every religious school—he would not expect others to defend every public school. Thiessen's purpose is to defend the idea of having religious schools and colleges in a system of educational pluralism.

In its scope and deftness in dealing with controversial issues, Thiessen's work is without equal in the current literature. It deals with issues arising in elementary, secondary, and post-secondary education. It adduces evidence not only from the experience of educators in Canada and the US, but also

from the UK, and, at points, from the Netherlands, Australia, and other developed countries. Its findings will be of interest to public policy makers as well as to adherents of many religious traditions and advocates of good common schools in general.

In attempting to move beyond past differences and to further a more inclusive conversation, Thiessen says he wants "to respond to objections against religious schools using arguments that will be accepted by Christians and skeptics alike, as well as adherents of other religious traditions. [He says his] approach aims specifically at bridging language and world-view barriers" (4). In the best Anabaptist tradition, he expresses strong convictions in ways that invite conversation.

Several questions arise from Thiessen's way of dealing with the role of the church as church in education. Thiessen emphasizes that it is impossible to rear children "neutrally." They need to have roots in a community and tradition in order to have an orientation from which to make their own decisions as they mature. He has a remarkable chapter on "The Possibility of Christian Curriculum and Scholarship." He comments very briefly on "intermediate institutions" in a society – "families, clubs, corporations, unions, churches, and schools" (223). But then at several points he writes:

> It should be noted in my analysis of shared responsibilities for education, I made no mention of the church. I believe authority for religious schools rests in religious parents, not in the church. (78)
>
> . . . I am quite deliberately distancing myself from any position which gives the church a stake in the schooling of children. (225)

Thiessen is trying to distance himself from established church traditions, where most of us would say the role of the church was inappropriate. He seems to be talking here primarily about elementary schools, which can be operated effectively by groups of parents. Is he saying that Christian colleges and universities should be founded and run by parents? Is it reasonable to say that citizens should cooperate in *states* in supporting *state* colleges, but that Christian parents and other church members should not cooperate in *churches* in supporting *church* colleges? Will there be Christian colleges for parents to support if churches that provide the larger settings in which children can mature do not, as churches, play a role? Do churches as churches have

absolutely no role or involvement, beyond the Sunday school, in the educational preparation of future generations and in having groups of scholars grappling with issues confronting Christians? Thiessen's attempt to deal with education at all levels in general terms and his focus on basic and philosophical understandings, rather than on practical and structural implications, may lead to his silence on these questions that need further attention.

At various points, Thiessen expresses his conviction that "monolithic state-maintained systems of education are a mistake" (241). He objects to monopolies, especially in the realm of ideas. In the last two chapters, he adopts an "offensive strategy" and outlines an alternative model: "a plurality of schools, each school reflecting differing cultural/religious values, while at the same time, requiring each school [that would receive some state recognition and support, presumably] to teach the same universal and civic values that are thought to be essential for a multicultural society and a democracy" (226). In this last requirement, Thiessen may be reflecting his experience in the Canadian environment. American readers may have more questions about the degree to which Mennonite schools would be ready to commit themselves to values Washington might propose as "universal."

Thiessen's book does well what it proposes to do: to take the charges of opponents seriously and to make the case for having religious schools and colleges today. A parent or school administrator can use this book as a reference work, turning to its well-labeled chapters and helpful index for informed comments on specific questions.

Albert J. Meyer, Educational Research, Goshen, IN

Samuel Terrien. *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.

This volume is the first Old Testament volume in Eerdmans' Critical Commentary series, which aims at both the "serious general reader and scholars alike." By critical is meant a "detailed, systematic explanation of the biblical text." While in Terrien's published work Job plays a larger role

than do the Psalms, he has published on the Psalms since 1952. The present work thus represents half a century of attention to this material.

The commentary begins with a 65-page introduction that illustrates the difficulties of writing for both a specialized and a general audience. The footnotes, intended for scholars, cite scholarly literature in French and German as well as English. As for remarks in the text of the introduction itself, many of these presuppose specialized knowledge. For example, on pages 8ff. Terrien mentions Canaanite sacred poetry, by which he means "the proto-Canaanite literature of Ras Shamra – Ugarit" (9). He then mentions that many new gratuitous translations have been based on this material, with a footnote to his review of Dahood's multi-volume commentary on the Psalms. While a scholar will immediately recognize the history and dynamics behind this remark, the lay reader may well wonder, What is 'Canaanite sacred poetry,' how is it related to the Ugaritic material, and how are these related to 'Phoenecian – Canaanite models'?

In the commentary itself, each psalm is given a title, some of which are quite traditional – Psalm 23 is titled "The Lord is my Shepherd" – while others are given a more interpretive title, such as Psalm 12, "Prayer against Astrology." Following the title of each is a new translation of the psalm, divided into strophes and arranged according to literary pattern. Psalm 12 is divided into five strophes and arranged on the page to show its chiastic structure. A scholarly bibliography is given after the translation.

The commentary proper is divided into three parts: Form, Commentary, and Date and Theology. The coupling of date with theology is surprising, since the notion of dating biblical literature based on a presumed schema of intellectual development has gone out of style. Terrien's dating of Psalm 12 is a case in point. He implicitly dates this psalm to the seventh century, when Manasseh reintroduced astrology into Judah. He does not commit himself as to whether the psalm preceded or followed the prophetic critique of Jeremiah and Habakkuk. But Psalm 12 does not talk about astrology, at least not on a simple reading of the text. Furthermore, and surprisingly, this interpretation of the text is not argued in the commentary. Apparently it is to be presumed. Of course, if the text is not about astrology, then the putative dating of the text is without basis. Generally Terrien dates the psalms early, as illustrated by Psalm 82, which he places in the early days of Israelite settlement, when syncretism entered Israel along with agriculture. This psalm is said to precede

the ninth-century prophets Elijah and Elisha by several centuries. Such datings are rare today.

In the Form and Commentary sections we encounter some unexpected suggestions. Taking Psalm 1 as an example, we find that the verbs "walk," "stand," and "sit" (v. 1) suggest "nomadic transhumance with its necessary choice between two tracks in the sand." The footnote (note 2) states that "semantic reminiscences of nomadic or seminomadic existence have been preserved" and refers to several scholarly works for supporting evidence.

Under Commentary, Terrien begins with a discussion of the first word of the psalm, *ashre*, which, as he notes correctly, is probably a wisdom term. However, he translates the term with "blessed" (normally Hebrew *baruch*) rather than with "happy" or "fortunate," which would be more in keeping with a sapiential background. He further comments that this root, based on Akkadian and Arabic, means "to go forward," "to walk on," "to march steadily." He concludes from this evidence that *ashre* is "a hortative of felicitation for blazing a trail." What is problematic are his arguments from comparative philology and from a putative root meaning. Indeed, the most recent edition of Koehler-Baumgartner, the standard scholarly Hebrew lexicon, derives *ashre* from the Hebrew root meaning "happy" rather than from "stride or step."

These negative comments do not suggest that this commentary lacks merit, because on the whole it does have considerable merit, but rather to suggest that it is not a commentary for those outside Old Testament studies. The general educated reader will not be able to separate the pearls from the dubious, nor will s/he have ready access to the copious scholarly literature cited.

Perry Yoder, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, IN

Robert S. Kreider, *My Early Years. An Autobiography*. Kitchener, ON and Scottdale, PA: Pandora Press and Herald Press, 2002.

Robert Kreider is one of the grand old men of the Mennonite church and community. This book is the story of the first thirty-three years of his life, years during which he devoted much of his time to the service of humanity,

working within the framework of Mennonite charitable, relief, educational, and church structures. He helped to shape wartime and post-war events which radically changed much in world-wide Mennonite perspectives and programs.

The work falls into six parts: ancestry, childhood, education, civilian public service, overseas post-war service, and further education. The writing in the several parts differs considerably. Most of the early material is based on primary research, family records, and personal childhood recollections. In the later chapters, the author relies on and reproduces major portions of numerous detailed letters and reports that he, and later his wife Lois, wrote. Most were addressed to his parents or to colleagues and administrators of agencies Kreider served.

The information on Kreider's Anabaptist ancestors provides interesting biographical and personality portraits, as well as individualized insights into the life and times of early Swiss/southern German and American Anabaptists and Mennonites. Similarly, but based on personal recollections, the author provides portraits of family members, childhood friends and acquaintances, and of the communities and conditions in which he grew up. Many of his relatives were traditional Mennonite farm folk, but Robert grew up in town since his father was a teacher in Mennonite colleges in Indiana, Ohio, and Kansas. The individual portraits shed light on Mennonite life in the United States before World War II.

The entry of the US into the war in 1941 resulted in the creation, by leaders of American historic peace churches, of a Civilian Public Service program in which those who objected to military service on grounds of conscience could serve their country. Kreider was in the vanguard of these developments. He worked in the CPS program for four-and-a-half years, mainly in an administrative capacity, either as project leader or in the Akron, Pennsylvania office. Those were exciting, creative times when Mennonites looked for innovative and therapeutic avenues of service, and Kreider provides intimate portraits of the key Mennonite Central Committee CPS leaders and of their dreams and programs. There are only scattered references to parallel, in some respects quite different, developments in Canada. The perspectives are American and international.

Civilian Public Service provided the background for post-war Mennonite relief efforts in Europe. Kreider, who married Lois Sommer shortly before accepting an overseas appointment, was slated for post-war service in China, but when that became impossible he became the MCC representative

on the Council of Relief Organizations Licensed for Operations in Germany (CRALOG). He worked in post-war Europe for three-and-a-half years, assisting in and directing the distribution of relief supplies to the needy. Lois, after several years, joined him there.

Kreider's work brought him into close contact with representatives of other relief organizations and with officials of the military occupation forces. Excerpts from his and Lois's letters and reports are quoted extensively. There is much information about individuals, places to which Kreider travelled, and meetings and conferences he attended. Kreider and other MCC officials often became frustrated with bureaucratic bungling and rivalries between relief agencies. But it is difficult from these excerpts to gain a good overall understanding of the interrelations between MCC programs, other relief and rehabilitation programs, and the much larger German and European reconstruction efforts. Having read many of Kreider's complete reports, I admired the breadth of his understanding of the larger situation which was, in my opinion, not matched by any other MCC worker. Excerpts in this autobiography, however, are weak in documenting that broader understanding.

Amos Kreider, Robert's father – and in his view the ideal parent, was involved in the Fundamentalist upheaval of the 1920s that shook Mennonite colleges and resulted in the closure of Goshen College for a year. The Kreider family established itself at Bluffton, where Amos taught at Bluffton College and Robert received much of his education before going on, before the war, to the University of Chicago. He returned to Chicago in 1949 after his service in Europe and earned a doctoral degree in 1952. There he was part of a small but very active and visionary group of Mennonite students closely associated with the Mennonite seminary, then located in Chicago. These men laid the intellectual groundwork for a generation of leaders. It was a mark of the high esteem in which he was held that, even before completing his studies, Kreider was offered both teaching and administrative positions at several Mennonite colleges. He chose Bluffton, and with it the beginning of the next chapter of his life.

Kreider seemed able to bring out some of the best in his Anabaptist and Mennonite tradition without the intense personal crises and struggles that beset so many of his contemporaries. Readers will eagerly await the sequel in which the later years of a remarkable Mennonite leader will be documented.

Ted Regehr, University of Saskatchewan, Emeritus

Eberhard Bethge. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian. Christian. Man for His Times. A Biography.* Rev. and ed. by Victoria J. Barnett. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.

Anyone who is seriously interested in the life and legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) will at one point have to read the monumental biography written by his close friend Eberhard Bethge. It was first published in a German edition in 1967 and then in 1970 was translated into an abridged English version (based on the third German edition). The present work "brings into English for the first time the complete text of the German edition of 1967. All material that was omitted or abridged in the 1970 English translation has been restored" (ix). The result is that no other biographical work could match the detail, depth, breadth, or sophistication of this volume. It is, truly, a classic standard work.

The 1048-page opus is divided as follows. Part One: The Lure of Theology consists of five chapters dealing with Bonhoeffer's childhood, student years, pastorate in Barcelona, lectureship in Berlin, and first visit to America. Part Two: The Cost of Being a Christian has six chapters treating Bonhoeffer's first pastoral responsibilities, his lecturing in Berlin, his pastorate in London, and his time at the underground seminary in Zingst, the seminary in Finkenwalde, and the collective pastorates. Part Three: Sharing Germany's Destiny consists of chapters discussing Bonhoeffer's extensive travels, the conspiracy against Hitler, Bonhoeffer's imprisonment in Tegel, and his final custody by the state. The work is completed by two appendices, one on the Zossen files and another one on Bonhoeffer's reading list in prison, endnotes, a table of chronology and a very extensive general subject index.

Victoria Barnett has accomplished a great feat by examining and comparing the German and English texts while revising and completing the latter for this edition. A considerable achievement is the updating (with some additions) of the endnotes to include English translations of works that were previously only cited in German. Equally as significant, especially for the scholar, is the updating of the variously published works of Bonhoeffer in older editions (in particular, *Gesammelte Schriften*) to the corresponding volumes of the new standard critical edition, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke* (*DBW*), completed in 1999. Since all research now uses *DBW* as the

benchmark for citation, this bibliography can easily be used with reference to Bonhoeffer's written legacy.

Given the large amount of text in this biography, the number of stylistic and editorial mistakes is nearly negligible. Two minor factual inaccuracies, however, should be corrected. First, on p. 78, Bonhoeffer is described as listening to J. S. Bach's St. Matthew Passion while in Tegel prison in 1943. Yet, as a comparison with *DBW* 8, 184 indicates, Bonhoeffer's own letter to his parents from 17 November 1943 suggests he was merely remembering (but not actually listening to) Bach's music while in prison. Moreover, it is evident from the context of the letter that he was referring to Bach's Mass in B Minor and not to the St. Matthew Passion (only the first work opens with the Kyrie Eleison, a matter noted by Bonhoeffer in the letter). Second, on p. 429, the correct translation of Annette von Droste-Hülshoff's short prose writing *Die Judenbuche* is not "Jewish Books." Since the writing itself focuses on two murders that happened under the same beech tree, the correct translation is "The Jewish Beech."

In sum, anyone – scholar or lay person – who wishes to gain a detailed understanding of Bonhoeffer's family background, his theological formation, ecumenical interests, social and political perspectives, pastoral concerns, extensive relationships, international travels, or involvement in the conspiracy against Hitler – in short his highly complex life, needs to turn to the pages of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. With this work the cliché that some books are a "must read" is unreservedly true; for this biography is simply a goldmine.

Peter Frick, St. Paul's United College, Waterloo, ON

Daniel Liechty, ed. *Death and Denial: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Legacy of Ernest Becker*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002.

Many readers will remember the wide popularity during the 1970s of Ernest Becker's Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Denial of Death*. Various factors conspire to slant this memory towards being one of a passing academic fad. One prominent factor is its explicit reliance upon psychoanalysis and existentialist thought, both of which are commonly considered *passé* in many

academic disciplines. Another is its speculative or philosophical flavor, in contrast with the more rigorous empirical orientation that has dominated the social sciences in recent decades. Yet Becker's influence endures, and Daniel Liechty has done us the immeasurable service of gathering together a set of "progress reports" in this single volume.

The essays collected in *Death and Denial* are required reading for anyone with an interest in Becker's work and influence, but they also provide a widely accessible introduction as well. Liechty's book should prove stimulating and provocative for any broadly informed reader with either theoretical or practical interests in the significance of death in contemporary society and culture.

Liechty's introduction sets the book's tone very effectively, summarizing the general theoretical rubric of "Generative Death Anxiety" of which Becker's work is a central part. "[GDA theory] suggests that at the deepest level, human behavior is motivated by the unavoidable need to shield oneself from consciousness of human mortality" (ix). Liechty's summary of the history of this idea makes clear that Becker's contribution was much more synthetic than seminal, that Becker was not its originator but probably was its most eloquent and compelling voice. Liechty, whose own credentials and experience are widely interdisciplinary (encompassing theology, ministry, social sciences, and social services), is well-placed to provide a responsible, accessible perspective on how Becker's influence, though dispersed over a startling array of academic and therapeutic fields, may nonetheless be seen as providing theoretical unity and coherence that transcends disciplinary boundaries.

One refreshing characteristic of Liechty's book is that this broadly interdisciplinary thrust does not display any stereotypical "humanities" animus toward empirical scientific inquiry. The first chapter, in fact, is a wonderfully compact summary by three research psychologists of their experimental studies in "terror management," and a discussion of how these studies provide significant empirical support for Becker's more theoretical analysis of death anxiety and human behavior. This empirical aspect is reinforced throughout chapters on psychology, psychotherapy, and social sciences.

But neither does the book represent any simplistic bifurcation of sciences and humanities. Though I may be somewhat biased by my own

disciplinary background and inclinations, I am tempted to claim that the most interesting and important chapter is by sociologist James Aho. Aho evokes Becker's assumption that empirical social science must have a "transcendent dimension," a theological reference, in order to make sense of human action as both meaningful and free. As he puts it, "social scientists must begin entertaining the strong possibility that faith in a transcendent dimension, in a Thing that is not a thing, an Object that is not an object, is a precondition for creativity and psychological health" (124). This general direction gains further resonance in chapters on Feuerbach (by Van A. Harvey) and on Emmanuel Levinas (by Richard Colledge).

What I have emphasized only scratches the surface of *Death and Denial*. Of particular interest to many readers in the Anabaptist tradition will be the chapters on issues of violence, war, and the defining of enemies (e.g., chapters by C. Fred Alford, Gavin de Becker, and Sam Keen). Other chapters discuss GDA theory in relation to forgiveness, neuroses, addictions, children and poverty, industrial organization, medicine, communication, Buddhism, Christian anthropology, and feminism. The scope is encyclopedic, and the chapters are all rigorous and substantial without being intimidating.

This book provides valuable perspective for those already somewhat familiar with Becker or with GDA theory, but it also provides an excellent springboard for others looking for beginning orientation. Its only significant weakness is that its wide scope will probably result in most readers finding some chapters much more interesting and helpful than others. Kudos to Daniel Liechty for the energy and insight he brings to the furtherance of Becker's legacy!

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