

Literary Refractions

So overwhelming have the dilemmas of this world become for the human soul that it is necessary to clear the air by asking basic questions.

– Peter Solomon Seiltanzer, A.K.A. Skyblue the Badass

Beneath this naïf charm of language there lies a considerable philosopher

– Geoffrey Brereton, on Montaigne

When immediately after reading “Can a Mennonite Be an Atheist?” I chatted with Dallas Wiebe on the telephone, he remarked that this essay was a parody of Montaigne (1533-1592), generally acknowledged as the first writer of the “personal” essay: the “familiar” essay rooted in personal experience and observation. Dallas also declared that the essay is “a Skyblue essay in disguise.” (Readers will note, near the end of the essay, the presence of Skyblue, identified elsewhere in Dallas Wiebe’s work as “the irresistible hero, both funny and sad . . . the eternal striver.”) In the “Preface” to Wiebe’s first novel, *Skyblue the Badass*, the narrator observes that Skyblue’s “attendant spirit” has “protected, guided and comforted” him “in the inevitable defeat that is life.”

What follows, then, is a personal essay in the style of Montaigne and in the voice of Skyblue the Badass, another of whose essays, entitled “Skyblue’s Essay on Tolstoy,” begins like this:

Few people realize how small Leo Tolstoy was. Most people think that you must be a big man to write big books. Leo was so small that he could sleep between two pages of War and Peace. When he was ready for bed, his wife would say, “Leo, what pages do you want tonight?” And he would say, “Oh, how about 1002 and 1003.” His wife would then open the book to those pages, put a little pillow between them and tuck Leo in. While her husband fell asleep, she would always kneel and pray that during the night no one would come by and slam the book shut.

When I remarked to Dallas on the telephone that I found “Can a Mennonite Be an Atheist?” at once provocative and playful (and, I might add now, oddly,

profoundly moving), he did not demur. “How to discuss this stuff,” he queried, “without sounding pompous, without being preachy?” Wiebe’s approach in “Can a Mennonite Be an Atheist?” – like his approach in much of his work – is, in the words of critic Paul Tiessen, “filled with serious purpose . . . [and with] serious mischief.”¹ It is, in the words of reviewer Wilbur Birkey, a “blend of irony and aspiration.”²

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¹ Paul Tiessen, “Postmodern Practice and Parody: Dallas Wiebe’s *Our Asian Journey*,” unpublished paper presented at the Bluffton College conference on “Anabaptism and Postmodernity,” August 11-13, 1998.

² Wilbur Birkey, “Review of *Our Asian Journey*,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 72.4 (1998), 707.