In Search of a Mennonite Imagination

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The very power of the book — Rudy Wiebe's *My Lovely Enemy* . . . suggests that perhaps, after all, the Mennonite imagination is alive and well — simply unrecognized.

Magdalene Redekop[1]

I

Mennonite studies have in the past beem dominated by the disciplines of history and theology. Historical theology rediscovered the Anabaptist vision and a more secularly inclined historical interest has problematized that vision. Intense attention has been given to the Reformation period, reflecting historical perspectives that range from the examination of propositions by the historians of ideas to the examination of more concrete forms of evidence by social historians. What has emerged is, among other things, a sense of the complexity of the Reformation matrix and some unease about finding an adequate perspective on that diverse reality.

In this paper I would like to propose that the problem needs to be expanded before it can be properly interpreted. This expansion may in the course of time involve a number of additional disciplines and perspectives. I would like to suggest two: one historical and one theoretical. It seems to me that much can be learned by considering the imaginative expression and reflection of the movement and that this examination should be extended through time — beyond the 16th century and to our own world. This means that the attempt should be made to interpret the self-understanding of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition by examining the evidence, mainly the primary texts, in which expression is given to what these people believed, perceived and felt.[2]

Admittedly, this is not an easy undertaking, especially in moving from one time and place to another. There seems to be a great paucity of material in some of these and, in general, it cannot be said that our tradition has produced great writers or artists. Indeed articles on 'litera-

ture and the Mennonites' have usually concentrated on how these sectarians have figured in the works of established writers like Gottfried Keller or Friedrich Dürrenmatt.[3] In a more substantial study of this broad question such treatments would naturally have to be included, but it appears to me that the core must consist of self-expression.

Granted, this self-expression (what Goethe would call "Bruchstücke einer grossen Konfession") is not available in acknowledged works of literary or pictorial art. But there are texts of various kinds, including theological ones but not only those, and these all to some degree use concrete forms of expression. Indeed, there are some texts which are primarily concrete expressions of the Anabaptist experience like the many songs which were written and which have been preserved in the *Martyrs Mirror.* Naturally these texts have been mined for their theological statement, but what remains should not be consigned to the slag heap of historical research.

As I have tried to show elsewhere, the martyr ballads of our early history do much more than make theological or confessional statements.[4] In them are reflected the world view of the Anabaptist victim, including his or her view of the other world. And in producing this concrete expression the poet/writer has used a form which also conveys what one might call an imaginative concept of the reality around about him. In the case of these early rough-hewn lyrics it is a simple and crass view of a harsh reality that emerges. The world looks truly black and white and confronts the members of this minority with an either/or proposition. Their response to this harsh judgement is to renounce the world and, in many instances, to leave it. Although these songs are, for the most part, grim and humorless, they are not without a certain joy and hope that is all the more moving for standing in such a disproportion to the sad reality of their lives. The glory they see is that of a "better land", not to be obtained without first facing death, which they do with a dignity beyond common comprehension.

When one wishes to trace a historical continuum out of the 16th century a new difficulty arises. Anabaptists had scattered and gathered in small groups in many parts of Europe. Some had begun the wandering that was to characterize the movement for centuries. Growing toleration in the Low Countries led to a concentration of their members, as well as a new opportunity for expression. Here we can observe a direct continuum from the beginnings of the movement to the point where conditions had radically changed. Tieleman Jansz van Braght collected and memorialized the martyr literature in the *Martyrs Mirror* and Joost van den Vondel, whose parents had still been Anabaptist refugees, found the security in Amsterdam to become the leading writer of the Dutch "golden age".[5] Since Vondel eventually joined the Catholic Church he has been

given scant attention by Mennonite scholars, but he is surely an important figure in reflecting the path from refugee to citizen and, from the Mennonite perspective, from the centre to the fringe and beyond — a path oft taken since. He, and the other writers and artists of that rich period, demonstrate the reflection of a changed world and a changed perspective, changes that can be seen more in the sophistication of form rather than in the somber and ascetic contents.

A continuum which seeks a path through the 18th century must come to terms with the Enlightenment, which separates our world from the Reformation as that movement separates the modern world from the ancient. The case of Johann Heinrich Jung-Stilling[6] illustrates how this revolution of the mind affected the common man of that time: even the quiet in the land could not escape. In attempting to combat the *Aufklärung* Jung-Stilling showed how much he was himself a child of his time: denying reason the right to usurp the place of revelation, he nonetheless sought for a rational basis for his faith, much like Lavater and other religious thinkers of the time. Jung-Stilling's writings found a wide popular audience, including Mennonites, in Germany and elsewhere. What captured their imagination — and I do mean captured[7] — was not his argumentation about the role of reason so much as the pictures he drew about the meaning of the Enlightenment and of the French Revolution. These images were drawn, in the main, from apocalyptical literature, describing Napoleon as the Antichrist.

Even more gripping to them was the notion that the world they inhabited was after all for the present the domain of the Evil One and that the Christian must be prepared to move on in the eventual direction of the New Jerusalem. Jung-Stilling reminded the Mennonites of their homesickness (*Heimweh*) and of the alien circumstances in which they were becoming surprisingly comfortable. From the strong response which Jung-Stilling received, then and later, it is probably correct to deduce that he had indeed hit upon a chord which they recognized, and it is not surprising that groups of Mennonites, along with other pious folk, on several occasions literally set out to find and settle in the place of safety in the East and even in the Holy Land and Jerusalem itself.[8]

Imaginative perspectives were also affected in a fundamental way by the development of Pietism, which conditioned the serious, modern Christian to internalize his religious experience to such an extent that the inner and outer realms are often separated. Such a bifurcation has drastic consequences, among other things, for the imagination. In the case of Jung-Stilling, for example, it enabled him to write an "inner" autobiography which seems to have very little to do with his "external" life or career. The first is perceived by Jung-Stilling as a thrilling and often desperate drama of the soul, while the second — a brilliant example of upward

mobility in an otherwise static society — does not figure there at all.[9] This new mode of thought opens the door to an imaginative schizophrenia which seems to have been seized upon by the Mennonite consumer of devotional literature and become a part of the "modern" evangelical consciousness.

Rather than escape into the world of outward adventure as provided by Dafoe and other 18th century writers, our forefathers escaped into the melodramatic soul and spirit adventures for which Jung-Stilling wrote the formula. Unable by this melodramatic means to evoke feelings like the longing of one's spiritual homeland, Jung-Stilling wrote about the feeling itself and even these weak representations were sufficient to remind Mennonite people of the way upon which they and their forefathers had set out. Indeed, Jung-Stilling is a good example of a writer who engaged his readers in spite of his theology and in spite of his fiction — but through the latter nonetheless.

'Religious fiction' has subsequently provided the occasion for the subversion of the imagination by referring to a frame of reference that is falsely artificial.[10] In this respect it is similar to what is called "rhetorical" poetry, that is, literature with a programmatic intent. One may well ask whether religious literature is not necessarily programmatic. I do not think so, at least not to the degree that the intent subverts the imaginative process.[11]

With the provision of an artificial interior world to replace the "bloody theatre" of the *Martyrs Mirror* the die was cast for much of the literature of the 19th and earlier 20th centuries. Little of this was produced by Mennonites, who had become hardworking farmers with little time for idle pursuits such as the arts. But when other writers took a Mennonite theme, as did the Prussian dramatist Wildenbruch in the later 19th century, it wonderfully focussed Mennonite attention, nonetheless. *Der Mennonit* is a poor and artificial play, which however did enjoy notoriety for a short time after the unification of Germany, celebrating the virtues of patriotism by exposing the lack of this quality among the Mennonite sect. Wildenbruch did not care, quite properly, that the nonresistant position had been given up by the Prussian Mennonites some time earlier in the century, since his story is set in the time of the Napoleonic wars. The Mennonite churches of Danzig and Hamburg however were greatly offended by what they supposed to be a critique of their later posture and attempted to have productions of the play banned in Berlin and elsewhere.

The case of Wildenbruch's *Mennonit* deserves fuller study, since it reveals a great deal about how a religious community responds to artistic representations of what it is or purports to be. In this respect at least Rudy Wiebe is correct when he calls such works both critique and witness.[12]

Wildenbruch the outsider touches a tender spot in evoking the nonresistant position which the Prussian church had so recently forfeited, but his play is so full of contradictory pathos that no one should have paid attention to it in the first place. What is of significance for the present line of thought is that this play does call into memory the rationale of the Mennonite tradition and it does this in the realm of the imagination. Later Mennonite writers would again take up that theme in its various aspects. When this was done with some measure of success, then a contribution to the self-understanding of the Mennonite people became possible.

The Russian Revolution was the diabolic engine which drove Mennonite writers to a rediscovery, not only of the Anabaptist vision and its dark glory, but to the theme which had been there from the very beginning: where do we come from? where are we going? (*Woher, wohin, Mennoniten*?) What is the nature of *our* social contract? Where is the way of the Cross? What is the meaning of separation, discipleship, love for the enemy? But in order for such basic questions to be asked genuinely it seems to have been necessary for the rich, proud Mennonites to be killed once again, dispossessed, harried and driven out of the land which they believed God had given to them. There it was discovered that there is indeed a great difference between inventing some story of inner struggle and eventual triumph, á la Jung-Stilling, or dealing with a horrible reality which has struck close to home — as did the Anabaptists of the 16th century. Gerhard Friesen (Fritz Senn) has registered this experience in the graphic symbolism of his "Hinter'm Pflug,[13] as have writers like Dietrich Neufeld, Johannes Harder and others.[14] Arnold Dyck, perhaps more than any other, was able to build a bridge between the old world and the new, not by affirming the new reality so much as by giving classical form to the Russian Mennonite consciousness in his novel *Verloren in der Steppe*.[15] Unknowingly and perhaps unwillingly, together with J. H. Janzen, Gerhard Friesen, Peter J. Klassen, Gerhard Loewen and a few others, he founded Canadian Mennonite letters.

II

This selective and somewhat casual exploration of the story of Mennonite imaginative reflection was intended to indicate not only what general areas might be taken into account in such a reckoning, but also something of the flexibility and range necessary for a perspective that will not be so narrow as to be essentially useless. There simply is not a sufficient body of texts arising out of the tradition itself to make a simple approach possible. But, having granted the limitations and adjusted the framework to include outside influences and interpretations, it does seem possible to raise and discuss the question about the nature of the

Mennonite imagination. In what follows some preliminary observations will be offered, rather than any confident conclusions.

In the first place it is clear that a religious tradition will think in terms of religious themes, imagery and symbolism. For the biblicist Anabaptists the model is obviously the Bible. That being granted, it remains a more difficult question to determine what parts of the Bible, whether Old Testament or New, for example, feed the imagination of the martyr poets. Did they have occasion to use the imagery of the Sermon on the Mount and the parables in the short time that their attention was given to the world about them? Or did the drastic reality of their fate immerse them in the apocalyptic vocabulary? The evidence suggests that the latter is true, although there are beginnings of the former as well. Also, the two may be combined in images like that of the sower and the seed and the harvest.

The imagery of the Bible is to a considerable extent the imagery of the earth. The writers of its various books used analogy, imagery and symbolism to give a human meaning to the message. The expression "God the father", for example, has important human connotations quite apart from its doctrinal-theological function.[16] The images of the parables like the one already mentioned, are good examples, which were indeed adopted and used by later writers. One of the oldest Biblical motifs is that of the journey: Adam and Eve setting out from the Garden, Abraham leaving Ur, Noah's sea voyage, Moses leading the people out of Egypt, and so on. This motif is not strictly Biblical, of course, and one is reminded of perhaps the greatest model: Homer's Odyssey. This comparison, however, suggests that there may be a noteworthy difference between the motif of the quest or the circular journey in which something is sought but not usually found but in which there is a return or hope of return.

The journey motif that finds its way into the imaginative structure of the Mennonite tradition is more directly biblical, in that it tells of a journey more like that of Moses, leading the people out of suffering to "a better land". Such a journey is not circular, although there may be excurses and detours in the wilderness, and the goal and purpose are known; it is thus not in the first instance a journey of self-discovery. Nor is it primarily an escape, although that element is present. The Old and New Testaments are combined in that the journey away from bondage is at the same time the 'walk' of the believer, his life's journey. This is why, in the Anabaptist martyr ballads there is so much emphasis on *how* the victim conducts himself.

In later periods of toleration the Mennonite people used the occasion of their travel through the wilderness to make the desert bloom. In the Low Countries and the Vistula Delta they reclaimed arable land and in the Ukraine they turned the grassy steppe into rich grain fields. These

achievements distracted them from the fact that they were supposedly en route,[17] and as they put down roots and became comfortable it was again cataclysmic events which reminded them of their ongoing journey. Thus quite naturally the imagery taken from Scripture in time became their own, whether to celebrate the blooming of the wilderness or to express pain when driven on. It appears to me that there is a very valid stock of biblical imagery that is legitimately Mennonite story as well, since it has been incorporated through history.

It is another matter to consider the use of such imagery when referring to the inner dimension dwelt upon by a pietist religiosity. Here some serious questions must be raised about the nature of imagery itself, since it seems to me that the process of internalization has brought with it a trivialisation of religious experience. When one experience is compared with another which has been given imaginative form — and that is what imagery does — there is a claim made about the nature and weight of the experience. There is only so much credibility available. If one claims, for example, to have had a "vision" like that of Saul on the road to Damascus — as many evangelical Christians have done — then one must ask whether indeed they were struck blind and left in a state of confusion as was Saul, and with as radical a result. When such comparisons are duplicated many times over it becomes very difficult to take them seriously at all. Zinzendorf's later poetry is full of such clichés, as is much religious and Mennonite verse.

Quite apart from the pervasive and pernicious problem of cliché, it may be observed that Mennonite writing has looked too narrowly to the Bible for its forms of expression. Biblicism has sometimes been bibliolatry. Luther, who taught the Anabaptists how to write martyr ballads,[18] explained his successful Biblical translation in terms of looking around him and at how people said and perceived things; in other words, he discovered the vernacular, the concrete language of everyday life. Mennonites have done something similar in the use of *Plautdietsch*, which has freed them from the traditional patterns and confronted them with the concrete reality of everyday. It is nonsense to claim, as does Jack Thiessen, that Low German is the "one true" bond in the Mennonite world,[19] but I would gladly argue that this language has provided an opportunity for Mennonite experience to find concrete expression apart from the traditional fetters of the "biblical" High German.

Elsewhere I have argued that in terms of fundamentals not very much had changed between the time of Jung-Stilling and the most recent past.[20] Only lately have Mennonite poets and writers broken with the stock forms of the past. This is a revolutionary situation, since, in the past, it was not only the form but also the "content" that seemed invariable. Verse was "Christian verse", celebrations of a divinely ordered

nature in the manner of the earlier 18th century (Brockes, Haller, etc.). Novels consumed (hardly any were produced) derived from the Victorian age and its classic, *In His Steps*. Though Mennonite authors like the Harders, Janzen, Dyck and others were writing Mennonite fiction, almost no one knew about it and so these works had little access to the generic Mennonite imagination.

It is clear that we have now arrived at a new stage of development in which the imagination is being given attention. Music, for example, has long been an accepted mode of expression among Mennonites, but it is only recently that a "Mennonite Concerto" was composed, and that not by a Mennonite. Writers like Rudy Wiebe and Pat Friesen turn to Mennonite themes with a free and fresh imagination. This presents the community with stories and imaginative forms which have the potential of illumination, though, as the first of Wiebe's novels demonstrated, at some cost. When an individual or a community is given a mirror of this kind, the image may not be appreciated.[21] And yet, if the art is true, so will be the picture.

In his latest book, *My Lovely Enemy*, Rudy Wiebe employs the means of fantasy in order to combine the traditional sense of love with the associations of the present, as well as to realize in his fiction 'here and now' the resurrection hope of the journey's end.[22] Shocked reactions to Wiebe's explicit contemporaneity demonstrate, among other things, that the popular Mennonite imagination is not yet prepared for the associative leaps of fantasy.[23] And yet, it appears to me that after the long period of imaginative drought, freer forms like this are necessary to cut away from the old patterns and to allow new, relevant ones to be put in place.

The writers of Anabaptist songs responded directly to a reality which impinged on them to the extent that in most cases they died. Those texts reflect that reality. There is a tough realism and honesty in them. 'Christian' writing has long wandered through a wilderness of artificial inwardness. Recent Mennonite writers who have sought their roots and asked how and why they are what and where they are have returned to a direct apperception by the imagination and thus have produced a more honest literature. In so doing they have in their own way participated in the rediscovery of the Anabaptist vision.

Notes

[1]*Conrad Grebel Review*, Fall, 1983, 61.

[2]This paper arises from a study of the imaginative reflection of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition by an examination of texts under the aspect of literary criticism in the broad sense of that term. It is part of a sabbatical project supported by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

[3]As, for example, in the *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, "Literature, Mennonites in."

[4]"The Anabaptist Martyr Ballad" in *MQR* LI, 5-21.

[5]See Reinder P. Meijer, *Literature of the Low Countries* (The Hague: Nÿhoff, 1978) pp.126-142.

[6]See the detailed treatment by Max Geiger, *Aufklärung und Erweckung* Beiträge zur Erforschung Johann Heinrich Jung-Stillings und der Erweckungstheologie. (EVZ Zürich, 1963).

[7]See my "From Jung-Stilling to Rudy Wiebe: 'Christian Fiction' and the Mennonite Imagination" in *Mennonite Images*, ed. Harry Loewen (Winnipeg, 1980).

[8]See Fred R. Belk, *The Great Trek* (Scottdale, 1976). Also H. Sawatzky, *Templer Mennonitischer Herkunft* (Winnipeg, 1955) and Victor G. Doerksen, "Eduard Wüst and Jerusalem", *MQR* LVI (April, 1982) 169-178.

[9]Cf. *Mennonite Images*, p.199f.

[10]Of course, the imagination and the art it produces may be called artificial, but in order for it to be 'true' it must be *wahrscheinlich*, that is, probable in the Aristotelian sense.

[11]This foreshortened discussion is expanded in the longer manuscript from which this paper was excerpted.

[12]W. J. Keith (ed.), *A Voice in the Land. Essays By and About Rudy Wiebe* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1981), pp. 39-47.

[13]First published in segments in the *Mennonitische Warte* (1935/36), this epic cycle not only depicts, but criticizes the catastrophic "Russian Mennonite experience".

[14]See Dietrich Neufeld, *A Russian Dance of Death* (transl. A. Reimer), Winnipeg, 1977 (first publ. in German, 1921/22); Johannes Harder, *No Strangers in Exile* (transl. A. Reimer) Winnipeg, 1979 (first publ. in German, 1934 as *In Wologdas weissen Wäldern).*

[15]Pub. 1942-48.

[16]Cf. the father imagery in Fritz Senn, for example, which has authoritarian Mennonite, but also religious, overtones.

[17]See my "Eduard Wüst and Jerusalem", 171.

[18]His "Eyn new lied von den zweyen Merterern Christi zu Brussel von den Sophisten zu Louen verbrand" was written in 1523.

[19]Most recently in the *Mennonite Mirror* (November 1983), p.28: "Wenn es weiterhin dann auch noch stimmt, dass die plattdeutsche Sprache-*Plautdietsch* also — der Kern, ja das Wesen des eigentlichen Mennonitentums ist . . ."

[20]"From Jung-Stilling to Rudy Wiebe", H. Loewen (ed.), *Mennonite Images*, p.208.

[21]This occurred at the appearance of Rudy Wiebe's first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962). Cf. the Mennonite 'image' in Sandra Birdsell's *Night Travellers* (Winnipeg, 1983), where this is a secondary, as well as generally negative, theme.

[22]Wiebe has used the journey motif in the *Blue Mountains of China* primarily, but the 'spiritual' journey's end, the funeral, is a common and effective motif in his works.

[23]There will have to be fuller discussions of fantasy in both its psychological (unfulfilled needs) and imaginative (free fancy) connotations before there can be a satisfactory interpretation of this novel.