

# Review Articles

## New Voices, New Issues in Mennonite Poetry

**Victor G. Doerksen** *University of Manitoba*

Audrey Poetker, *i sing for my dead in german* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1986), 81 pages, \$7.95

Di Brandt, *Questions I Asked My Mother* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1987), 96 pages, \$7.95.

Patrick Friesen, *Flicker and Hawk* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1987), 73 pages, \$8.95.

In a letter to Arnold Dyck in 1946 Bishop J. H. Janzen said about the state of Mennonite writing: ". . . if we cannot heal ourselves of our *Schmock-bleewe*, then the copious martyrs blood of our history has flowed in vain and experience will not enlighten us." Janzen was complaining about the false front of the religious fiction considered both necessary and acceptable at that time, and indeed signed that letter as "J.H.J., who still hopes that some day antagonists will be able to appear in Mennonite literature." Although melodramatic fiction, play and poetry had villains and devils aplenty, it was necessary for that mode of writing to be exposed for what it was before the real villains and demons could make their appearance. This happened with a remarkable shock of recognition in the figure of Deacon Block in *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962), and since that time it has become more and more possible for Mennonite writers and readers to contemplate the skeletons in their closets, the taboos in their mores and the demons within their (and our) breasts.

In a sense we have come out of the closet as Mennonites, literarily

speaking, and once having emerged we find that we are men and women — not angels, as Janzen complained — upon whom the forces of nature have full sway. We act well and badly, we love greatly and miserably, and so forth. Our shared story is a religious one, but it is a profoundly human one too, and it is this story which is at the center of what can be called the Mennonite imagination. It is this story, the then and now, the good and bad, the physical and spiritual, which our literature must tell.

These three new books of Mennonite poetry might in themselves constitute a new level of achievement in the artistic world by writers of Mennonite background. In fact there is much more serious verse (that is, verses that deserve to be taken seriously) being written now than one might have expected, much of it turning up in the lists of the Turnstone Press of Winnipeg, which has demonstrated good judgement in its choice of authors as well as in its production of attractive, affordable books of poetry and fiction.

Two of the authors here are represented by their first books, Audrey Poetker, whose collection appeared in 1986 and Di Brandt, whose publication has been awaited with some interest by those who have heard her read from her work. Patrick Friesen with his fourth book has in the meantime become a mainstay of Winnipeg's literary world. In this review article I do not hope to do full justice to any of these poets, since my approach is in terms of Mennonite writing, a necessarily limited factor. Still, I believe that it is a valid way of considering this writing, since by showing how they represent or do not represent a growing and changing Mennonite imagination, I think something is said about them as poets and perhaps less as Mennonites. In any case I do not mean to labor the point of their being or having been or deriving from Mennonite stock, either physically or spiritually. Rather, it strikes me as potentially illuminating to see to what degree Mennonite images appear and play a structural role in their work.

The first of the books to appear was the collection of poems by Audrey Poetker, a young poet whose work had been published in various magazines but who was relatively unknown before now, certainly to the Mennonite world of Winnipeg. Her arresting title *i sing for my dead in german*, points immediately to what becomes the overriding concern of the book, namely the experience of sudden death by accident of grandparents and a favorite sister. But before those themes take control of the collection there are other powerful poems that run the gamut of love themes — with the 'other woman' figuring prominently. This is not something that one expects from a "Mennonite writer", but more surprising than its occurrence is the straightforward presentation:

the other woman  
you come quicker this time

for all your silver-wedded years  
 have taught you  
 i want you you say  
 as if i were a house coveted  
 & i a proud & empty woman  
 unfold my legs  
 like a lawn chair  
 you settle in  
 i sigh

That is a text that has not only come out of the exile of taboo, but it escapes the tortuousness that one might expect when dealing with such a rose and thorn issue. Poetker treats her other themes, like domestic violence ("Fathers Day Poem") or "How to Have an Abortion," with the same matter-of-factness, but this never becomes indifference, nor is her deceptive facility of language in any way facile.

Such themes, which all have to do with relationships, run together in what becomes a quest of sorts for an adequate word for "love." And this is where something rather Mennonite asserts itself in the poet, who wants to hear the words in German:

Three people i asked today  
 the poet says  
 one an eltesta in the church  
 how to say love  
 in low german ("Everything here is a poem")

Poetker's is an open mind with many currents moving through it, but her search through the registers of words and expressions, of sorting out the great and small experiences of life, comes back time and again to the question of meaning in the meanings. Sex has been less a Mennonite theme than death, but both of these are occasions for the imagination. Certainly the death scenes in Rudy Wiebe's novels are very Mennonite and very powerful and he too introduced "modern" Mennonite literature to the harsh realities of sex. Poetker takes up her variations on that little-sung theme with astonishing *Selbstverständlichkeit*, as a comparison with the poems of Di Brandt soon shows.

In Di Brandt we have another powerful poet, but her power is of the pent-up variety. Unlike Poetker, whose background is only vaguely Mennonite, Brandt emerges from a hotbed of conservative Mennonite values and she emerges kicking and screaming, so to speak. Her prose poems are a controlled torrent of words, her poetry is often the intoxication of new-found freedom, but not a freedom easily accepted. One of her poems is a shout of defiance:

i will dance mighty ones i will dance  
 on your brittle bones i will eat your  
 old glowing between the shadows of the  
 Almighty's knowing & sun's daily  
 glitter i will string together such  
 words though they are made of earth  
 they shall be the world's diamonds i  
 shall throw them stone by stone in your  
 ancient teeth i will make songs against  
 your howling every black note will be  
 shimmering & beaded with poison

And there are many references back to a legalistic, male-dominated  
 biblicism:

how come there were all those stories  
 of the brother who made it in & the  
 brother who didn't i thought this was  
 a poem about love but it isn't it's  
 a poem about hate about being left out  
 in the cold. . .(67)

There are also poems about a father and about a mother, poems  
 which are angry but haunting and finally there is a coming to terms of  
 sorts:

the year he was dying my father  
 put his house in order incorporated  
 his farm signed over the family  
 business to his only son before he  
 died my father tried to make sure  
 his daughters were saved confronted  
 each one about the state of her  
 sould i looked away while he prayed  
 like Daedalus with his mother at  
 the slow brown Red carrying its mud  
 past the hospital window stiffnecked  
 to the end before he died my father  
 put his house in order his acred  
 mansions & dreamed a garden for his  
 grave asked for flowers when he died  
 instead of the Bible plan (61)

Both Audrey Poetker and Di Brandt react as poets to fatal accidents  
 involving people close to them. For Brandt this is a certain kind of "act of  
 God": "i had forgotten how God uses fate in southern Manitoba to bring

people to their knees to make them repent their life follies with every traffic accident i wasnt ready for another great saving Reinland caught me off guard with its green trees & ditches rammed me hard with its stick . . . its a sign from God they kept saying to remind us of what the random collision of molecules the old mad man in the sky who cares only for ice in the belly not the grieving" ("How i got saved"). While Brandt makes utter mock of pietist rhetoric ("Testimony"), mercilessly reaming out its mindlessness, Poetker sets its childlike faith words ("Gehe nicht vorbei, o Heiland") in glaring juxtaposition with the alternative emptiness (the big O, Big Empty, Bermuda Triangle); she is not worldly-wise, only wordly, and, at the conclusion of her book, one feels, not that either.

If Brandt and Poetker both display a rich response to initial shock experience, Patrick Friesen in his new book shows that he has gone through the first stages of writing that depend on strong contrasts and simple juxtapositions. His verse has matured in every sense. His short poems are models of economy ("wedding music") and his longer-line poems, which incidentally I prefer, have a subtle movement and are informed by what might best be called grace. The father figure which played such a dominating role in his earlier collection (the "Pa poems" of *Unnearthly Horses*) is a mere echo here (vater sterbt [sic]), and the poet has come to a new position. In what may be the finest poem in the collection with the terrible title, "an audience with the dalai lama / or, the old fashioned pas de deux," Friesen gives a kind of statement of this position:

sometimes mother's on the phone do I love her yes I do and I still have  
 father's hat  
 no I haven't seen God I live with angels some fallen  
 I sing *have thine own way lord* half the time I don't mean it  
 my wife sloughs her gown my pants at my knees like some clown  
 my son with his other world eyes you could never know them or their  
 danger  
 or my daughter's prayers at night when everyone's asleep  
 this is  
 a way she speaks  
 and this is what I know what I need to know I want to redeem love  
 before it does me in

Patrick Friesen has himself become a father, poetically speaking, and his maturity may be a good example to younger and newer poets. But there is no doubt that a poetic outburst from Mennonite women was long overdue and in its arrival on the scene one may be thankful that it is being sounded by writers who are, though very different in approach and style, each gifted and resourceful poets. For Poetker and Brandt Mennonite means something more than either faith or folklore. Poetker's search for love in the *Plautdietsch* idiom indicates an intuition of meaning (not so

much intellectual meaning perhaps as a meaningfulness which can fill a void), while Brandt's anger is intellectual and visceral too. It is directed against something she knows all too well, something which is also within her and which she therefore also loves. There is a great hope in such an *Auseinandersetzung*.

Surprisingly — for me — breasts abound in the poems of both women poets, a warm, affirmative sensuality which, since it occurs in subjective references, seems to signify self-affirmation and self-worth. I would be foolish to claim to understand fully what it is that is said when women talk about themselves in this way and reveal much more than their physical attributes. This is scarcely a topic that can be laid on the scale of traditional Mennonite imagery. It is something new, as is the sophistication of Friesen's mature poetry. Both of these developments may lead ultimately away from what can reasonably be called Mennonite poetry. But in the short term we can now look forward to the development of a rich literature, written by women and men, reflecting the whole (read: unexpurgated) wide range of the past and current Mennonite experience.