

Escape From the Bloody Theatre: The Making of Mennonite Stories

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What follows is a transcript of the second of three talks I gave at the University of Winnipeg in November of 1992. The other two presentations were: "The Making of Mennonite Songs" and "The Making of Mennonite Pictures." Since the orality of my performance illustrated the points I was making, I have preserved that form in this article.

Since this paper is going to be about stories and images, I'm going to begin by telling a few stories. I found these stories in an article by Ervin Beck called: "Mennonite Trickster Tales: True to be Good." The jokes he tells are mainly American and often feature plain coat Mennonite men who are mistaken for Catholic priests. There's one, for example, about a traffic cop stopping J. C. Wenger, a retired Mennonite theologian. Upon seeing Wenger's coat, the cop says: "Oh, Father, I'm sorry to have stopped you." "That's OK," Wenger claims to have said before driving on, "You're forgiven."

Ervin Beck notes that such a trickster often appears to do nothing at all. He simply observes the "opponent placing the wrong 'frame' on his experience" and then "does not volunteer to correct it" (Beck, 1987, 67). He thus makes his escape

with impunity. Beck traces this kind of story back to a Dutch Mennonite trickster tradition. Here's a story he retells about Menno Simons:

Menno was riding on a stagecoach one time and instead of being in the coach he was riding up front, up high, with the driver. And the authorities dashed up on horses to arrest Menno if they could find him. And they said, "Is Menno Simons in that coach?" And Menno turned around and yelled into the coach, "Is Menno Simons in there?" And they said, "No, he's not in here." So Menno told the authorities, "They say Menno's not in the coach." So he lived to die in bed (quoted in Beck, 1987, 67-68).

This story and others (some taken from the *Martyrs Mirror*) were recounted in 1868 by J. G. deHoop Scheffer in *Doopsgezinde Bijdragen* in an essay called "Mennisten-Streken" or "Mennonite Tricks" (see Beck, 68). According to Scheffer the term "Mennonite tricks" was "used proverbially to refer to Mennonites in the same way that 'pigheaded' was used to characterize Lutherans, 'bigoted' was used for Calvinists, and so on." Of these politically incorrect terms the one typing Mennonites as deceivers intrigues me the most. Indeed the term "Mennisten-Streken" reminds me of the continued story from the *Rundschau* that my mother used to read: "Lieschens Streiche." I never thought of that little girl prankster as following a Mennonite tradition. I thought those "uetgedochte Geschichte" (as my father called them) were just an escape from housekeeping chores. After my mother pronounced the "Fortzateck folgt" it was time to go do the dishes. But in this group of stories Menno escapes martyrdom with such *streken*.

Here is the story that goes with the second playing card, "Mennonite Sweetness":

Menno was preaching in a barn. And as was the custom, the women sat in the center and the men around the outside to protect them. . . And there was a shout outside that the sheriff had come to arrest him. So the men barred the way. And Menno was standing on a molasses barrel for his pulpit, and in his haste to get down, the end of the barrel caved in and he sank to his knees in molasses and would have laid a gooey track in escaping. And so all the women in the front row each took one long lick of molasses off his hosen. And that explains why Mennonite children in Holland to this day have a sweet tooth (Beck, 1987, 70).

This Menno is no martyr at all. Beck describes him as both as a "foolish buffoon" and as a "quasi-divine figure near the creative origins of Mennonitism" who has given us the gift of a sweet tooth and the ability to survive.

These two images are part of a playing card game produced in 1978, as a fund-raising project, by some enterprising Mennonites in Holland. The game is called *Doopsgezind Kwartetspel* (Mennonite Quartet Game). I've used these cards because they show how the old images and the old meanings need to be put back into play. If (as I suggested in my first lecture) we tend to think of music as the safe place where meaning is put out of play, then it is appropriate that this game is called a quartet.

Back in 1868, Scheffer used the stories about tricksters to show how Mennonites coped with persecution as well as with "a moral obligation that at times seems oppressive"—the burden put on them by the severe admonition from Matthew

5:37: "Let your communication be yea, yea...." (Beck, 73). He defines the essence of the Mennonite trick in this way: "To say a truth and to withhold a truth, and then especially to say half the truth and appear that the truth has been told completely; to evade the answer on a question and yet give the person who asks the impression that nothing is lacking in the answer. . . ." (quoted by Beck, 1987, 69).

The usefulness of these tricks goes right to the heart of our Mennonite story and Beck just touches on that when he concludes by alluding to our "martyr complex." He tells the story of David Joris to show that "there *are* alternatives to being burned alive" (Beck, 1978, 73). David Joris was an Anabaptist glass painter renowned for his survival skills more than for his skill as a painter. His pursuers were so furious at his escape that after his natural death they dug up his body and burned it at the stake. Katie Funk Wiebe quotes a Mennonite tourist at the place of his death as saying: "That's [the] way I'd like to be burned at the stake!" (quoted by Beck, 74).

There is danger in joking about any of this and I have spent some sleepless nights trying to find ways of escaping this bloody topic. My excitement when I discovered these stories was partly because I had discovered an avenue of escape. When I read these stories about Menno's survival tricks, I wished I had heard them long ago. Why did this oral tradition get blocked, I wondered? The almost familiar sound of the Dutch and the thought of those women's tongues licking Menno's *hosen* makes me wonder why we did not hear these in our mother tongue? Walter Ong notes that the "concept of 'mother' tongue" honours the association of our first language with "nourishment and mother." Although vocal sounds involve the diaphragm, the esophagus, the vocal cords and other parts of the body, we "tend to think of language as basically an oral or mouth phenomenon" (Ong 1977, 23-25).

If you focus, as I have started out doing, on oral stories rather than printed ones, you are forced to put things together that have been carefully kept apart. Letting in these oral voices can be entertaining but it may also threaten the fabric of the history we have constructed. The move from a view (explored in my first lecture) that music is born out of maternal voice rather than crafted leads easily into the view that music is spiritual. By the same token, the view that historical patterns (the exodus pattern, for example) are not constructed by us but rather found *in* the events, leads easily to the view that the pattern is divinely revealed. Maybe the pattern of the Mennonite exodus is a way of responding to the fact that the refugee story runs away from the martyrdom story. Gary Waite refers to a "tension between martyrdom and survival" (Waite, 1987, 55) in his study of methods of survival used by David Joris. This tension may be at least as important in Mennonite writing as the theology of martyrdom by itself. Indeed, the opposing pulls of these two concerns may help to account for the fact that the phenomenon of the contemporary literary explosion is happening specifically among *Russian* Mennonites in Canada. It is here where the refugee or survival story dominates over the martyrdom story. Is it not possible that with this comes a celebration of survival that allows for the deceptions practiced by literary artists?

If this is the case, then it exists in tension with what I heard a non-Mennonite editor at a conference once refer to as the Mennonite writers' "celebration of grief."

This celebration extends back to the Anabaptist martyrs' hymns. Arnold Snyder notes that the "martyrs songs" are "closest to the genre of oral narrative poetry" and he asks: "What essential narrative structures were operative?" You don't have to be a literary critic to answer that one. You just have to know the Bible stories—exodus, the crucifixion, the second coming. What I want to do here is to focus on the central importance to all of these of martyrdom. My starting point is an important article by Ethelbert Stauffer that appeared in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* in 1945 (first published in German in 1933). It is called "The Anabaptist Theology of Martyrdom" and it raises very troubling questions. All Stauffer does is to tell the basic story very plainly. The most troubling part of the story is the ending, dealing with the last judgement:

As soon as the last martyr will have died and the number of those who paid their testimony with their blood will be full the day of retaliation will dawn, a day of glory for the martyrs and a day of horror for the persecutors. Then they will recognize whom they actually have tortured and will experience in their own bodies the supreme power of God. Martyrdom is in truth a reflex of the cosmic battle between God and Anti-God, and the victory of the martyr forecasts the final victory of the spiritual powers. Thus martyrdom is both a causal and a theological necessity (Stauffer, 1945, 180).

Those who "so cruelly oppressed the saints will have a horrible end" and Stauffer notes that in "their polemic against the persecutors the Anabaptists appeal constantly to this threat" (Stauffer, 202). The "immanence of the day of vengeance and glorification" is inseparable, Stauffer argues, from the comfort offered by the Anabaptist view of history and it is this conjunction that most thoughtful Mennonites find disturbing. So disturbing, in fact, that Harold Bender (then editor of *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*) found it necessary to defuse Stauffer's article in advance in his editorial by arguing that what Stauffer outlines as a "martyr-theology" is in fact "no theology at all," since it does not contain "a statement of the positive content of the faith for which he bleeds and dies" (in Stauffer, 1945, 178).

Although Stauffer denies that the "brethren... look for satisfaction of a primitive urge for vengeance" (203), his analysis does put an interesting light on the desire for escape from martyrdom. Since martyrdom is a "sign of divine election" (Stauffer, 199), an honour bestowed by God himself, active efforts to escape ought to be a mark of dishonour. The passive acceptance of martyrdom, indeed, was seen as the true battle.

The military language is reflected, as Stauffer notes, in the title of van Braght's book: *Het Bloedig Tooneel... or The Bloody Theater or Martyrs' Mirror of the defenceless Christians who suffered and were put to death for the testimony of Jesus, the savior, from the time of Christ until the year A.D. 1660*. A panoramic view of history is here pictured as a battle and the word *theatre* refers, Stauffer reminds us, to "the old figure of speech of the early 'Theology of Martyrdom' which compared the fight in the arena (or theatre) with the fight of the martyrs against Satan" (Stauffer, 1945, 186). In this great war, the list of martyrs is like the epic catalogues in Homer's *Odyssey* and the martyr, in Stauffer's words, is "the 'true soldier of God' fighting against the power of darkness." Menno Simons

speaks of “life on earth as an incessant warfare” of the Cross (quoted by Stauffer, 200).

Are these old stories irrelevant to the stories we are making today? I think not. Stauffer talks about the “*via dolorosa*” or the path of suffering and this mournful tone can surely be heard in the very titles of our books: *is sing for my dead in german*; *My Harp is Turned to Mourning*. The continuing centrality of the image of martyrdom in our literature is signalled on the cover of the collection of Mennonite writing entitled *Visions and Realities*, edited by Harry Loewen and Al Reimer. The cover is a reproduction of an engraving from the *Martyrs Mirror* and the issue contains a cycle of poems by Maurice Mierau called “The Martyrdom Method.” In 1985, forty years after Stauffer’s article appeared, Cornelius Dyck published an article called “The Suffering Church in Anabaptism” and concluded that “It may be that the motif of suffering has become a major ingredient of Mennonite identity, past and present” (Dyck, 1985, 5).

To take refuge in the pleasure of suffering is not, of course, unique to Mennonites. The fetishizing of a suffering woman has become a problem in feminist criticism, for example, and may go back to a Victorian cast of mind. In George Eliot’s *Adam Bede*, for example, we find the following Mennonitish sounding passage: “deep, unspeakable suffering may well be called a baptism, a regeneration, the initiation into a new state” (Eliot, 1965, 436).

When we look back now to the Anabaptist times we have to remember that we experience what Harold Innis called *the bias of communication*. We look through lenses and filters and we have the experience of the past framed for us and reproduced. In an effort to show how this works, I’m going to postpone giving you images from the *Martyrs Mirror* and bring my questions closer to home and closer to my personal experience. I’m going to start with what I think was the first film I ever saw—the film made about the five missionaries who were killed by the Auca Indians of Ecuador. I want you to try to imagine the powerful impact of moving pictures on an adolescent girl who had never seen movies before. My next images are from the book based on the film. It is called *Through Gates of Splendour* and it was written by one of the widows, Elizabeth Elliott. On the back cover a blurb from *Christian Education* claims that she achieves in this telling a “singular result. Her book rips into you with all the power and fury of an Auca lance.” That’s strong advertising. The reader *is* a martyr in this hard sell publisher’s blurb. I notice the military image again. I’ve reread this book with fascination but the power of it is nothing compared to what the watching of it was for me then. What moved me were the moving images as they worked in conjunction with the soundtrack—which was the song “Be Still My Soul.” I can hear the soundtrack while I look at these pictures.

The setting is a jungle. Here is an image of an object that I do not remember from the film but which utterly terrified the Auca Indians: the airplane and near it several of the men. The one I remember most vividly as possessing in spades what I think of as a special American missionary charm was called Nate Saint. Not Friesen. Not Reimer. Yes, Nate Saint. Now I see, from the picture blurb that they called this Palm Beach but I doubt that my adolescent self, having never been out of

Manitoba, registered the irony then. I do remember that Nate Saint was the one with the camera and here is a picture he took of a woman they called Delilah. Delilah holds an upside down copy of *Time*.

I will never forget how deeply I was moved by that film. What was that deep longing that it stirred in me? The longing to be a martyr? To have the courage of your convictions? The questions are hard to articulate. When I hear that soundtrack now, it comes in a different package which is called "Finlandia." Jean Sibelius? Who's he? It is hard to articulate these questions but one thing I do know. I did not really see Delilah. Now that I am a literary critic, I can look back with detachment from that adolescent missionary zeal. Now I do a double-take and I ask: "The Lord is on thy side?" I now see that those American male heroes *were* American. They were figures of romance to me. I can see the literary pattern, the penetration into the jungle, into a heart of darkness without any of Conrad's irony. Where an army recruitment film would likely come out in the open with, for example, an image of Uncle Sam pointing his finger at you, this method of persuasion and manipulation is more hidden.

One way of making the propaganda visible is to focus on the names. Nate Saint is too true to be good. But this woman is another story. If you notice the *Time* magazine, then maybe you can begin to see her but you still can't hear her story and you never will. Why did the missionaries call her Delilah? What was her Auca name? I doubt that I asked myself these questions then. I doubt that I wondered then about the missionaries' motives when they photographed her nakedness. They were *all* saints to me then. But this Saint had a camera.

Elizabeth Elliott's book includes a film strip with several muddled photographs with the following explanation: "Out of Nate Saint's camera, found at the bottom of the river, came these last pictures of 'Delilah' and the older woman" (Elliott, 1957, 234). The name "Delilah" is in quotation marks.

Perhaps you think I go too far and that we must not stain the memories of these brave Christian men. Nothing would be gained, it is true, by using easy hindsight to condemn these men as villains instead of heroes. They were simply acting on their beliefs and were killed for believing in the literal truth of the Bible. Since then, I myself have had a nightmare that I am to be hanged for *not* believing in the literal truth of the Bible and this does give me a new perspective on the martyrdom story. As a feminist I am also more conscious now of the female desire not to be left behind when the adventure of life starts. I can imagine myself in that school auditorium in Rosenfeld, Manitoba, squirming on that hard wooden bench, my adolescent self furiously refusing to be one of the surviving widows, determined to be allowed to have the whole human adventure.

One of the illustrations in Elliott's book is a picture of rows and rows of diapers, taken during the days following the five murders. The picture is quite small and a little blurred. At four dollars a transparency the decision to have this made was some kind of a test. I had my reward. I had not noticed the woman standing there until she was enlarged for the transparency and then I experienced recognition. There she is. The survivor. The missionaries' wives all had small children and at

least one of the wives was pregnant. I may have noticed that then but I was too busy doing what feminists call identifying against yourself—identifying with the adventuring male heroes against the world of female passivity and drudgery. The truth now seems to me that to do so is to identify with a movement towards death. I would far rather be with this woman and take refuge in a mother-tongue-twister: *Vie vitte Vieva velle vitte vinjle vausche....* (We white wives want white diapers to wash....)

I am acutely conscious of the danger of trivializing these deaths. Hindsight is always so easy. It's easier now to imagine how it might have seemed to the Aucas. From my work on E. J. Pratt's "Brébeuf and his Brethren," I know that one person's priest can be another person's devil. The Iroquois were terrified by the black robes of the Catholic priests. When Elliot describes how Nate Saint circled the plane over the jungle and "gunned the engine" (1957, 106), and when she later describes the "savage" destruction of the plane, we can at least speculate on what they imagined an airplane to be. But it's all part of a story that won't ever be told. Even if I turn this image of "Delilah" upside down we still don't know her name or her story. *Time* (in more ways than one) doesn't go away. It stands in the way.

I think this relatively recent example of "martyrdom" is helpful to dwell on because we can more easily see how our perspective has changed and we can more easily observe the "bias of communication." How times have changed since 1957, we think to ourselves. Times haven't changed since Anabaptist times? What I find exciting about Arnold Snyder's work on orality is that it promises to unfix some of our ideas about those martyr stories. Why should we think that the interpretation of those martyrdoms are more fixed than the more recent ones? The world of Elliot's book was a world before Vietnam, a world (for Americans) of a conviction that the Lord *was* on their side. Now, in 1992, we view martyrs with barely concealed contempt. You must be mad these days to die for one narrow point of view. And yet the image is central to the writings of contemporary Mennonites—at least the writing of men. Books like *Saint Joan* and *Murder in the Cathedral* still are very important for us to read as an aid to understanding books like *The Temptations of Big Bear*, in which Rudy Wiebe tells the story of Big Bear and turns him (in my view) into a Mennonite martyr.

I come, then, to images from the *Martyrs Mirror*. To turn the clock back so many centuries is momentarily disorienting and as I begin to page through my copy of the *Martyrs Mirror*, these images make the ones in Elliot's book seem more familiar by contrast. Her book includes a photograph, for example, of a boat towing the "body of one of the missionaries." It floats, head down, and is not specifically identified. It is reduced to anonymity and could be one of those upside down bodies you see multiplied many thousands of times in television coverage of wars.

The illustrations to the *Martyrs Mirror* are a strong contrast to this. They are engravings by Jan Luyken—images made by a process much more laborious than that of the camera. We ought to be much more aware of the graven image. An engraver might find a way of making Nate Saint's death look like a stage in a crucifixion. Although the camera, by contrast, captures a random moment, this



Maeyken Wens was burned at Antwerp with a tongue screw in her mouth. Here her sons search and find the screw to keep in memory of their mother's Christian witness, AD 1573

obviously did not stop the missionaries' wives or me as an adolescent spectator from constructing the mental picture of a cross.

The image of the cross, in fact, is a reassuring shape that is repeated in many of the engravings. Take for example the engraving of Saint Peter, crucified upside down. Even women were allowed this imitation of Christ. The caption for another engraving tells us of "Two young ladies executed ...in 1550." Van Braght's story says that "when they were led out to execution, their persecutors, by way of reproach and mockery, placed wreaths of straw upon their heads" (van Braght, 1660, 1950, 500). The pointing fingers of derision in this engraving point to the promise of the crown and are a reminder of the faith that they will be rewarded in the apocalypse.

Just after this entry we are told also that a "lad of fifteen years was put to death, suffering it with great steadfastness" (501). That lad, the one who accepted martyrdom, made me think of the one in the picture, on page 980 of the *Martyrs Mirror*. I will spend some time on this engraving because, to put it simply, my heart went out to this boy. I want, in a sense, to suggest a maternal reading of the image. Here is the story. Maeyken Wens, the "wife of a faithful minister of the church of God" was apprehended and this sentence was passed: "that she should, with her mouth screwed up, be burnt to ashes as a heretic...." Van Braght adds:

The oldest son of the afore-mentioned martyress...aged about fifteen years, could not stay away from the place of execution...hence he took his youngest little brother, named Hans...who was about three years old, upon his arm and went and stood with him somewhere upon a bench, not far from the stakes...to behold his mother's death. But when she was brought forth...he lost consciousness, fell to the ground and remained in this condition until his mother and the rest were burned. Afterwards, when the people had gone away, having regained consciousness, he went to the place where his mother had been burnt, and hunted in the ashes, in which he found the screw with which her tongue had been screwed fast, which he kept in remembrance of her (van Braught, 1660, 1950, 980).

Torture was frequently directed at the mouth. Here the silencing of the voice makes us feel with increased intensity the power of the visual image. But the icon is left out of this picture. It moves by what is left out of the frame, not by what is in it. We can't see the face of the older son, although we can see the face of the little one. We see the back of the mob going about their business. The spectacle is over and this is just a salvage operation but it's not a picture that you will easily get out of your mind. It's disturbing because we are like reluctant voyeurs at a scene of torment. Simply to look at the picture is to join Adriaen in feeling survivor's guilt.

We do hear Maeyken Wens's voice. Her confession is written in a letter to her son. As I intercept the letter from mother to son, knowing that I'm meant to do so but feeling intrusive, I see that the success of the rhetorical form—persuasion of the coming generations by means of a letter of farewell to her son—depends upon the acceptance of the theology of martyrdom. We cannot judge her for abandoning her son if we assume that he will join her in eternity. But will he join her if he himself has rejected martyrdom? Will the circle be unbroken? Her letters refer to her son's letters to her while she is in prison awaiting death. Two of them, she chides him, are not much good but one is not too bad. She is judging him, of course, by a very high standard. To please her he must fight down his love for her and subordinate it to their shared faith in higher values.

Adriaen's letters are not included by Van Braught so we can't judge for ourselves whether they are good or bad. If we imagine *his* story, we have to do it in the blank spaces. His story has *escaped* just as he himself escapes martyrdom. There is some pain in that but there is also respect—respect for the reality of all the lives involved here. To respect Maeyken Wens's choice, however, is not the same as closing your mind. One of the questions I want to ask is why the comfort in hymns should so often celebrate martyrdom. Why can't there be comfort in survival, in life itself? The situation has changed, of course, since the *Ausbund*, but a sublimated death wish still survives in many of our hymns.

Stauffer sees the deepest expression of comfort in the old Mennonite hymns which, he says, reveal a "great passion for martyrdom."

It is the common religious attitude, the mood of passion in the martyrs' church, which makes all these hymns one in style and spirit although coming from very different sections, countries, and times. The majority of all the hymns are martyr's hymns.... By using these hymns... the church became strongly aware of being surrounded by a host of great martyrs and of living in an atmosphere of witnessing.... (Stauffer, 1945, 185).

If I seek comfort elsewhere—in more details about Maeyken Wens's life, if I see some hope in the possibility that a study of oral records might tell us something about her, is this hope and this comfort any more suspect than the comfort contained in those old hymns? Just asking.

I find this image arresting because of the way we are so conscious of Jan Luyken in the act of making it. We see this because he has arrested the action. It is a problem in all representations of spectacles of torture. Where do you fix the action—before or after the beheading? Black humour threatens. We now can't imagine reading martyrs' stories in our spare time and yet Warren Woodes notes that Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* was "on the best-seller list from the sixteenth century to the close of the nineteenth" (Woodes, 1983, 28).

I found that I had a rather low tolerance for these images and I started to take refuge in digression. I was wondering how the handling of temporality here related to prolonged scenes of death in opera. You know the ones I mean: where the soprano keeps collapsing and then getting up again to sing in a piercing voice as she dies in noisy stages. As I was asking myself such questions, I happened to see a cartoon by Chris Burke in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and I found myself laughing hysterically. The cartoon shows a swimmer's body suspended in midair above a pool and the caption beneath it says: "Alarming, after five minutes, the pool had come no closer." My problem was that I could not figure out why I was laughing. I did recently fall off a ladder so it may be just the image of falling that got me going. As I'm sure you all know, if you don't know why you are laughing there is a very real danger that you might never stop. I don't know about you, but in such a crisis I turn to my husband. When I showed the cartoon to him he laughed—a little. Not as hard as he laughs at all those "Far side" cartoons that make no sense to me, but he definitely did laugh. He also had no trouble coming up, instantly, with a credible explanation. It's a kind of physicist's joke, he says, and it's funny because it's an understatement. If in fact the law of gravity were suspended even for five minutes, then there would be no such thing as five minutes. There would be no time, no solar system You get the picture, I'm sure.

If you have followed me through all this you will notice that I have made a very big leap, jumping from a 1957 missionary martyrdom over the centuries back to the martyrdoms of the Reformation. I have skipped over all kinds of issues and stories, not the least of these being the depth and breadth of contributions made by some missionaries. I have jumped over the horrors of the Mennonite experience in Russia. One reason I did so is that I was looking for images and found so few for that period. If you ask yourself what images there are to record the suffering in Russia, you won't find it very easy. I'm sure there are historical reasons for this that I am not qualified to examine but I do wonder if the absence of graphic images might not be partly the simple result of trauma. When you talk with elderly Russian Mennonites who actually were in Russia, you find that the story-telling often takes you just to the threshold of that experience and then stops. The horrors are experienced, literally, as unspeakable. The faith, miraculously, survives and is often expressed in hymns as a passion for martyrdom or a belief in the coming apocalypse.

The absence of images, however, should also remind us that the Anabaptist story and the Russian story are not, after all, the same story of a cycle of martyrdom. The making of the story of the Russian Mennonites is painfully split between those who made their escape and those who did not. That split cannot be interpreted so easily in the context of the theology of martyrdom. From the perspective of Canada, the place of escape, it is a refugee story. To tell it as a story of exodus helps but it cannot hide the tension between the survival story and that other one, the one that pulls towards the spectacle of torture and death.

It is not disrespect for our Russian Mennonite ancestors to show (as Al Reimer does in *My Harp is Turned to Mourning*) that when that same experience is told from the point of view of the Russian peasant, it will not be the story of exodus. If that is revealed to us by God, then what did God reveal to the Russian peasants? Asking that we make ourselves aware of the story-making process is not the same as urging repudiation of the old myths—as if that were ever possible.

When contemporary poets and novelists make stories, they still work with the old patterns and formulas, even if it is in order to subvert them. I'm going to show you a final set of images from Patrick Friesen's *The Shunning* to show you what I mean. What I have been doing here is mainly suggesting some new ways of looking at the *contexts* for the texts being written today. I focus on one text now partly in despair at being able to do justice to the richness of story-making that is taking place. I also choose it because it will be familiar to many of you as a dramatic performance and so I can move from the image of a *bloody theatre* as an arena for battle to the *bloody theatre* as an art form not easily accepted by Mennonites.

Patrick Friesen is a Mennonite who is a trickster writing in the tradition of the escape artist. In "song of the sly one" he poses as a slippery fish, the one that gets away:

I am a sly one
who slides through the net
that every Jesus cast
show me an icon
show me the text

I will show you where I passed (Friesen, 1987, p. 11)

I'm going to show Patrick Friesen an icon in *The Shunning* and although I know he will feel free to pass, the icon may be what an audience is left with. Lorraine Janzen Kooistra has recently described that book as "reinscribing the original revolutionary nature of the Anabaptist vision" (1990, 158). It does so but the image appears reversed, as in a new kind of martyr's mirror. The story of Peter reflects back to us, in reverse, the very heart of our theology of martyrdom and challenges it. It's a kind of parody because it turns that story upside down.

Friesen makes this inversion by one big and obvious change. Peter Neufeld dies by his own hand. Suicide is a form of escape that issues a radical challenge to martyrdom. Can a suicide be a martyrdom? (Questions posed by suicide to the old theology of martyrdom are implicit in Rudy Wiebe's *Playing Dead*.) Peter Neufeld is denied whereas the Biblical Peter denies Christ—another inversion. Friesen's

Peter is denied the right to give his own suffering meaning by reading it as an imitation of Christ. Our emotions are stirred but we too are denied. We *feel* it as a martyrdom. And yet the suicide doesn't fit the old pattern. This Peter refuses to be a rock on which the church is built. Instead, he becomes the swampy confused place where Friesen rocks our old assumptions.

The movement from poetry on the page to a dramatized performance has reinforced the inverted pattern I have described. In an interview preceding the dramatization, Friesen himself talked about how he saw the title as a "sell-out title... because it cashes in on a big thing" (Loewen, Reimer 1985, 250). That big thing, I would argue, is not just the scandal of the shunning. It is the old martyrdom story. Even though the pattern is reversed, the acting out of it and the emotions stirred up by the acting of it may simply funnel back into a reinforcement of the old patterns, rather than a challenge. "To me," said Friesen then to his interviewer, "the most important part of the book is the second half, not the first. All the love and eroticism is in the second half. The scenes of the shunning are insignificant" (p. 251). This is a surprising comment if you consider that the script of the play he subsequently wrote focusses on the first half. I see this as the place where we experience the tension between stories of survival and stories of martyrdom. I share Patrick's uneasiness about cashing in on the incredible power of the old pattern, especially as it is reinforced by music and embodiments on the stage. You may turn the old image of Peter crucified upside down but when you do the old pattern may be strengthened rather than challenged.

Neither suicide nor martyrdom, apparently, are an escape. Perhaps we make progress simply if we realize that there is no escape from our full participation in humanity, from a world that is, willy-nilly, sometimes violent and sometimes peaceful. Watching the performance of a play like *The Shunning* is not so different from a religious experience. Drama has its origins in religious ritual and the catharsis we experience after imagining the death of Peter is impossible to extricate from ancient scapegoat rituals. Rene Girard notes that there is "hardly any form of violence that cannot be described in terms of sacrifice" (Girard, 1972, 1).

How then should a writer respond to the dangers of just cashing in on the old tricks? Here is an image from *The Shunning* that may provide a clue. There is in the book a photograph of a little boy who points a toy gun at the camera. There is no indication in the text of the poem about what is being illustrated as Lorraine Janzen Kooistra has noted in her perceptive reading (1990, 150-164). Unlike the illustrations in the *Martyrs Mirror*, you can't complete the narrative in the story by invoking the scriptural story, by remembering the crucifixion and anticipating the apocalypse. Here there is no past and future unless you see the photograph as another kind of mirror—as a representation of the voice of the poet. The picture can be seen as a graphic image of Friesen's own description of himself as *jehn on*—a Low German phrase that Rudy Wiebe defined as meaning that "you push against something all the time. You're always pushing against a thing" (in Enright, 1986, 28).

I don't know if in fact this is a picture of Pat. I hope it is. I think it looks a bit like he might look if he were still a little boy. Of course if he were my little boy I

wouldn't let him play with that gun. Violence here invades the place where nostalgia says there should be childhood innocence; the aggression is acknowledged as a fact where the Mennonite thing to do would be to deny it. The photograph, underneath which I have pencilled *je-hm on*, makes me think of a passage by Wallace Stevens in which he tries to define the nature of the imagination.

We are confronting, therefore, a set of events not only beyond our power to tranquillize them in the mind, beyond our power to reduce them and metamorphose them, but events that stir the emotions to violence.... These are the things that I had in mind when I spoke of the pressure of reality (Stevens, 1942, 22).

Stevens defines the imagination as a "violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality" (p. 36). If some of the stories and images I have presented here seem gruesome, we should remember that this bloody theatre and these ways of escaping from it are the historical and present context for the making of Mennonite stories.

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