

Critical Thought and Mennonite Literature: Mennonite Studies Engages the Mennonite Literary Voice

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This paper was given its initial generic title - "Critical Thought and Mennonite Literature"- when Royden Loewen invited me to participate in this symposium, "Mennonites and the Challenge of Multiculturalism: A 25 Year Retrospective," months ago.¹ I rather like the implied conflation of critical thinking and literature that such a title suggests, especially when we consider "literature" as we find it among Mennonites, where the "critical thinking" of creative writers has not always been welcome. I recall, in this context, the fact that when my colleague Jim Reimer, a few years ago, developed a new course on twentieth century Mennonite theology at Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo, Ontario, he unselfconsciously named the course "Contemporary Mennonite Thought," as if to claim all serious Mennonite thinking for theology alone. Indeed, there was a time when any Mennonite critical thinking that attracted serious attention, within the community or without, did originate in conventionally masculinist disciplines like theology, for example, or

history. Well, thanks to such forces as the literature courses offered by the Chair of Mennonite Studies and publications focussing on Mennonite literature published in the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, Canadian Mennonites, over the past twenty years or so, have devoted a great deal of attention to the critical - and imaginative - thinking of Mennonite creative writers, whose voices are now possibly more widely listened to than those of any other thinkers to whom the Mennonite community might lay claim. One need only consider the immense popularity of the two great Mennonite novels of 2001 - Rudy Wiebe's *Sweeter Than All the World* and Sandra Birdsell's *The Russländer* - to realize that this is so.

In 1987, early in her career, Mennonite poet Di Brandt summarized in an interview something of the trepidation she and other writers experienced in their encounters - and imagined encounters - with a Mennonite audience: "I have a sense that there is a real Mennonite audience out there," Brandt observed then, "a large, very hungry audience starved for Mennonite poetry.... On the other hand, I'm also still very scared of the Mennonite community because my [poetry] probably asks for a bigger opportunity than most of them will be willing to give."² The opportunity for writers of Mennonite heritage to speak and be heard by their own people developed, to be sure, out of an array of social, political and religious dynamics in Canada over the past several decades, but there can be no denying that the space that the founding Chair of Mennonite Studies, Harry Loewen, and his colleagues created for these voices had a discernible positive impact on the development of both Mennonite literature and a receptive Mennonite audience for this literature in Canada.

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I was intrigued when I heard, in 1978, of the inauguration of a Chair in Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg. I was familiar enough, at the time, with the initiatives of the federal government's program for multiculturalism, and would myself draw on its resources for some publishing ventures in years to come. I did not know Dr. David Friesen, though I had become acquainted with his daughters, Ruth and Vicki, when the three of us briefly overlapped at the Mennonite Brethren Collegiate Institute some twenty years before. Most intriguing for me was the identity of the Chair himself: Harry Loewen, whom I had first encountered in those years at Mennonite Brethren Collegiate Institute in Winnipeg, when I was just thirteen and he something over thirty. Harry was a great favourite among us students, displaying already then the wonderful mix of enthusiasm

and earnestness, energy and empathy that would later make him a thoroughly engaging professor, an influential - if somewhat eccentric - churchman, and a creative and effective Chair of the program the success of which we celebrate today.

By the time Harry was appointed to the Chair, both he and I had moved east. In fact, we had become friends and colleagues at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, where Harry taught German literature and I (then the mother of two infant sons), English. I remember having several occasions, then, to introduce Harry to friends. When I spoke of him as I did then (perhaps awkwardly) as "my old teacher," he would demur and say, "Oh, Hildi, not so old!" Well, maybe not. That was a quarter of a century ago, and Harry *still* isn't old! As Al Reimer, in a tribute written on the occasion of Harry's retirement, declared in 1996: "Harry Loewen retiring? Impossible. He's not old enough.... To picture Harry in a permanent state of rest is as preposterous as to imagine Niagara Falls drying up, Mt. Vesuvius collapsing in ashes, prairie grain crops blighted by frost in midsummer." ³ Niagara Falls? Mt. Vesuvius? Well, Al Reimer was never one to back away from hyperbole.

Ah, Al Reimer. His own efforts on behalf of numerous agencies committed to the nurture of Mennonite Studies (including his several years as co-editor of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*) are prodigious. He was one of the more memorable profs I encountered at the University of Winnipeg. (I graduated in the first class after the new charter, in 1968.) The University of Winnipeg English Department taught little Canadian literature then, if at all. And certainly no literature by Mennonites. In a way Al made up for that when he regularly regaled our fourth-year literary criticism seminar with stories of his wayward youth. Reimer usually devoted the first good chunk of the class to recounting the dubious pleasures of growing up male and Mennonite in a small prairie town. I'm sure he reasoned, then, that his stories of Steinbach would smooth our way to the drier stuff that was the cause of our gathering in the first place: that is, to study literary theory of the likes of I.A. Richards and Northrop Frye. I remember arriving late for class one day with fellow student Naomi Levine, now a prominent Winnipeg litigator. I was a rather demure Mennonite girl then, unlike Naomi, who, finding Reimer in full flight over Steinbach twenty minutes after the hour, put her hands on her hips and demanded: "Aren't you finished yet?" Al Reimer, it seems, was already then testing his voice before a captive audience, in anticipation of his later, much more serious work in the field of Mennonite letters, as translator, editor, critic and novelist.

Our official curriculum at the University of Winnipeg, like any English curriculum in the country in the late 1960s, included no

Mennonite texts. But I enjoyed the next best thing: Mennonite profs. Not one or two or three, but four in the English Department alone, including Professors Reimer, Unruh, Siemens, and Pauls. What a great texture of conversation we could have enjoyed in those days, had our curriculum included the study of the (albeit then sparse) literature of our people.

Over the next decade, especially during and following my years of graduate study at the University of Alberta (1969-1973), Mennonite studies (that is, Mennonite literature) became a particular interest of mine. I had come to know Rudy Wiebe (also at University of Alberta) and his work. In 1970 Wiebe's compelling Mennonite epic, *The Blue Mountains of China*, appeared. If Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, published in 1962, had left any doubt in our minds about whether Mennonite experience was suitable stuff for literature, *The Blue Mountains of China* dispelled those doubts forever. And Wiebe wasn't just writing for us, as those three important words that graced the title pages of his fiction, then, announced: "McClelland and Stewart." Canada's premier literary publisher. *Canada* was listening to what Wiebe had to say. About us. Our people. My people. Like Wiebe's parents, mine came to Canada among the fortunate eight thousand or so who, late in 1929, were allowed to leave Stalin's Russia only after waiting anxiously at the gates of Moscow in full sight of the western world. Chapter Four of *The Blue Mountains* tells their story.

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At the conference "Mennonite/s Writing in Canada" held at the University of Waterloo in 1990, the prominent Canadianist Clara Thomas (official biographer of Manitoba's own Margaret Laurence) declared that while she admired the work of Rudy Wiebe, his characters would never be able to reveal her to herself as Laurence's Hagar Shipley had done. And I thought then, "Oh yes, Professor Thomas. I am sure that is so. Go ahead and lay claim to Margaret Laurence and all the other Anglo-Presbyterian writers in Canada. Rudy Wiebe is ours!" (And, I would add, Patrick Friesen and David Waltner-Toews and Di Brandt and Armin Wiebe and Sarah Klassen and Sandra Birdsell and Andreas Schroeder and Victor Jerrett Enns and John Weier and Ed Dyck and Maurice Mierau and Jack Thiessen and Al Reimer and David Elias and David Bergen and Barbara Nickel and Miriam Toews and ...) I recognize myself and the people among whom I was nurtured in these author's stories and poems. I believe that I share with these writers a greater than usual understanding of certain sub-texts. The tastes, smells, sounds of extended family

gatherings, the inimitable rhythm of Low German and the tug of certain High German expressions of piety, the powerful force of four-part congregational singing, the paradoxical sense of belonging - while living self-consciously on the margin of the dominant culture, the ambivalence about matters relating to faith and salvation, the memories of fragments of Bible stories, the compelling revelations of Mennonite history from the martyrs to the arrival in Canada of the poor post-World War Two refugees - all of these things, among others, the writers and so many of us hold in common.

Oh yes, I took an interest in the inauguration of the Chair of Mennonite Studies because of Harry Loewen and Winnipeg - and because the Chair promised to enlarge the spaces emerging then in Canada for Mennonite literary voices - voices that told our story for us and all to hear. Just a little over a decade earlier we could not have anticipated the breakthrough the Chair represented. I remember well the early 1970s visit to Alberta of the prominent eastern-Canadian literary critic Ronald Sutherland, for example, who had the temerity then to declare to us in the west that no literature that failed to address the issue of Canada's two founding peoples, the English and the French, could be called Canadian. I heard Sutherland in Edmonton, and was appalled. His message might have had some resonance in the east, I thought then (though I know better now), but surely not in the west, where Mennonites and Poles, Ukrainians and Icelanders (never mind the people of the First Nations themselves) had a presence in regions of the country more coherent and more palpable than the English or the French would ever dream of.

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Harry Loewen, in his introductory survey article on Mennonite literature in the first volume of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* (1983), makes reference to Canadian Mennonite writers who wrote - in German - in the first half of the twentieth century. Among these Arnold Dyck and Fritz Senn would receive considerable attention from scholars in the journal issues to follow. Among English-language Mennonite writers Loewen, in that earliest article, cited not only Rudy Wiebe but also children's author Barbara Smucker and poets Patrick Friesen and David Waltner-Toews - all of whom had by then published a number of works. He did not mention Sandra Birdsell, whose *Night Travellers* had just appeared months before, nor - of course - the many, mostly debut volumes of Mennonite writing that would, over the next decade or so, herald an awakening of the Mennonite literary voice: Armin Wiebe's *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* in 1984; Al Reimer's

My Harp Has Turned to Mourning and Anne Konrad's *The Blue Jar*, 1985; Audrey Poetker's *I Sing for My Dead in German*, 1986; Di Brandt's *questions I asked my mother*, 1987; Sarah Klassen's *Journey to Yalta*, 1988; Doug Reimer's *Older Than Ravens*, 1989; Jack Thiessen and Andreas Schroeder's *The Eleventh Commandment*, 1990; Rosemary Deckert Nixon's *Mostly Country*, 1991; David Elias's *Crossing the Line* and Lynette Dueck's *Sing Me No More*, 1992; David Bergen's *Sitting Opposite My Brother*, 1993; John Weier's *Steppe: A Novel*, 1995; and Miriam Toews' *Summer of My Amazing Luck*, 1996. And there were more - both along the way and later. The major Mennonite historical novels of Rudy Wiebe and Sandra Birdsell (already mentioned) were followed - perhaps most notably, if we speak of recent work - by David Bergen's national best-seller: *The Case of Lena S.*, 2002.

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In his tribute to Harry Loewen's productive service as Chair of Mennonite Studies, Al Reimer remarked on what a fortuitous choice this first Chair represented. Perhaps the positive impact of that choice was nowhere as thankfully received as among Mennonite literary scholars. Sure, Harry was an historian. But we had a long tradition of these in our Mennonite past. No question that their voices were being heard. Harry was a theologian, too. Another familiar enough voice. No question that Harry's historian and theologian colleagues would be welcome to express their discoveries and opinions in the new journal. What was truly special and timely was Harry Loewen's interest in literature. The troubled and troubling reception Rudy Wiebe's first novel had received - and the lesser but nevertheless notable discomfort registered when Patrick Friesen's *The Shunning* was published in 1980 and Di Brandt's *questions I asked my mother* seven years later - demonstrated clearly that questions related to who could speak in the Mennonite community persisted.

Harry's writing and teaching created space for creative writers, particularly for those whose early, tentative forays into the liberal arts during the 1920s, 30s, and 40s had marked a territory in German that the new generation of Mennonite writers would cultivate in the language of English Canada. Like the scholars who accompanied feminism's second wave in the last century - feminist critics who sought their antecedents in history and brought early women writers into the spotlight as if to say "Women were there all the time; it's just that their voices were consistently muted" - the editors of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* laid the base structure upon which the role of

the creative writer within the Mennonite community could begin to be understood. To be sure, German-speaking Arnold Dyck and Fritz Senn had no noticeable direct impact on the Mennonite writers we read now in English, but the fact that they were there, struggling to express what lay in the hearts of their people, serves to objectify and illumine the role of the Mennonite literary artist today.

The Journal of Mennonite Studies was the first among the serious Mennonite journals (I refer here to the *Mennonite Quarterly Review* and the *Conrad Grebel Review* as well) to take seriously the Mennonite literary community - and to encourage its reading audience to do the same. This is not necessarily a given. As the Mennonites well know, communities are not uniformly eager to hear what their writers have to say. For literature reveals a community to itself as no other field or discipline is likely to do. Because it takes liberties in pursuing so freely what we conventionally refer to as truth. Because literature is, by its very nature, unruly. Because it presumes to enter the territory of human intimacy. Rudy Wiebe observed in 1990: "I see no point in writing imaginatively unless it is done with both a critical coldness and an intense compassion, the simultaneous brilliance and stupidity of human beings deserves nothing less."⁽⁴⁾ Indeed.

The sociologist might tell us how it seems we tend to function as a group; the historian or anthropologist might remark on how Mennonites in general - or even certain individuals - have comported themselves in times past. The theologian might write descriptively or prescriptively about the manner in which we might encounter God. But the novelist and the poet presume to utter our innermost thoughts: our desires and fears, anticipations and disappointments. The writer foregrounds the individual close up and often invites the identification of his or her audience in a way none of the other commentators on the nature of experience can do.

In his influential study of nationalism first published in 1983, Benedict Anderson identifies what he calls the "deep, horizontal comradeship" we call community. He speaks of nations in particular as *imagined* communities and observes: they are imagined "because the members of even the smallest [group] will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."⁽⁵⁾ A journal like the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* and the programs of the Chair have contributed in significant ways to helping Canadian ethnic Mennonites in particular formulate the "image of their communion," to realize their commonalities, to construct their identity as a group of people with a common heritage and as individuals negotiating similar cultural dynamics.

I could comfortably stop here, if this were thirty years ago. There was little need then to qualify or explain the fact that the Mennonite world addressed by the Chair and the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* is, in fact, a Mennonite world narrowly defined. That world encompasses predominantly Russian Mennonites first of all (as opposed to what we call the Old Mennonites, or the Swiss, for example - to cite the two most prominent groups in Canada). But the Mennonites themselves are a multicultural people. We need only consider, just for a moment, the thousands of Mennonites from all parts of the world who met in Zimbabwe last summer for the 2003 Mennonite World Conference to realize that the Mennonite community reaches well beyond our own extended families. But we don't need to look to other continents to take stock of the Mennonites as a multicultural people, for we encounter this phenomenon every day among and within the Mennonite communities of Canada itself. Indeed, it would be possible to focus on a subject like "Mennonites and the challenge of multiculturalism" - the focus of this symposium - without looking outside our domestic Mennonite communities at all. In fact, we risk mimicking the limited and limiting vision of Ronald Sutherland (who spoke of "Canadian" as comprised of only the English and the French) if we persist in imagining "Mennonite" as comprised of only the Russian and the Swiss. Unless, of course, we think of ourselves only as an ethnic group. Ah, there's a quagmire I have no desire to wade into.

These observations raise all kinds of questions, many of which I, as someone who writes about Mennonite literature, have encountered over the last three decades: Who is a Mennonite? How do you define the Mennonite writer? Can you call yourself a Mennonite if you are not a believer? Is a novel about a Mennonite community, composed by a Mennonite unbeliever, a Mennonite novel? I can't help but think that the sorts of questions that dog members of the literary community must find their parallel in Mennonite studies generally. Who *are* the Mennonites now? How might we describe our newly configured communities? And that persistent, troubling line between ethnicity and religion: where does it belong? Is it ever fixed? Does it matter?

The latter-twentieth century construction of multiculturalism which encouraged the Mennonites and other settlers to reconstruct imaginatively their own communities in Canada has encouraged other immigrant groups, too, to record imaginatively their transition from one world to another. The Mennonites, one of the earliest groups to immigrate to Canada during the last 150 years and among the most prominent documentarists of the migrant experience, have provided a model for other emerging Canadian minority-culture literary traditions. My own experience teaching multicultural literature

suggests that this is so: our stories not only reveal us to ourselves, but serve to inform and objectify all immigrant experience in this country. We Mennonites need to read each others' stories AND the stories of others who have travelled a path somehow similar to our own, as we continue to document our imaginative *becoming* as a community within the multicultural framework of this country. By listening to each other, all Canadians will, presumably, come to realize also the structure of the "imagined community" we call Canada.

Finally, when we talk about Mennonite thought and writing, we will do well to realize that the texture of our communal and personal existence as Mennonites and Canadians is nowhere more evocatively (and sometimes, also, provocatively) registered than in the published work of the creative writers our communities have produced. Even one individual's struggle to abandon much of what we are, as David Bergen, for example, has seemed in recent years to do, informs us about ourselves. The writers among us recreate and redefine community ceremonies and family relationships that are suggestive of our identity as individuals and as a group. Some of their stories evoke, with a poignant sense of loss, what the particular Mennonite world we once knew had to offer that was gentle, generous, and kind. Others challenge and interrogate the values, dogmas, and traditions that have for many years formed the base of traditional Mennonite community consciousness.

Our writers reveal the dissonances inevitably perceptible in communities under the stress of constant change. They probe ironies and contradictions that reveal the shadows that have fallen, in the Mennonite world, between desire and actuality. Their work suggests, for the most part, that a community can never afford to stop making thoughtful decisions about its place and role in the context of complex environments that never remain the same. What a gift our writers have given, and continue to give, us - about the complex and compelling nature of "the image of our communion." In his Preface to Volume One of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, Harry Loewen wrote: "We believe there is a *need* [emphasis mine] for a journal which will reflect, support, and evaluate the emerging and developing literature, art, and culture among Mennonites, with a focus on Canadian Mennonites."⁽⁶⁾

This vision has guided the program in Mennonite Studies we celebrate today. But we mustn't stop here: the *need* for the complex engagement of our artists in our communities persists, as the challenges of multiculturalism - within our communities and without - multiply.

Notes

- ¹ The conference was held on 18 October 2003 at the University of Winnipeg.
- ² Di Brandt, "The sadness in this book is that I'm reaching for this story ...," in Janice Williamson, ed., *Sounding Differences: Conversations with Seventeen Canadian Women Writers* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 31.
- ³ Al Reimer, "Founding Editor Harry Loewen 'im Ruhestand': a Tribute," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 14 (1996), 7.
- ⁴ Rudy Wiebe, "Writing Words," *Prairie Fire (A Special Issue on Canadian Mennonite Writing)* 11.2 (1990), 96.
- ⁵ Benedict R.O'G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991).
- ⁶ Harry Loewen, "The Birth of a New Journal," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 1 (1983), 4.