

“Derche Bloom Råde”: Arnold Dyck and the Comic Irony of the *Forstei*

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The gentle, richly evocative humor of Arnold Dyck's Low German stories and plays has captivated Mennonite readers for decades. With its dry, perfectly controlled tone, his comic irony in the vernacular seems so effortlessly right that most readers accept it with uncritical chuckles as a perfectly natural, artless form of expression, a deliciously unsophisticated way of writing indigenous to our earthy, unpretentious *Plautdietsch*. They seem unaware, those readers, that Dyck's technique consists of anything more than an entertainer's knack for cracking jokes and telling funny stories in a homespun dialect that has no literary pretensions whatsoever. The hilarious “Koop enn Bua” escapades and the warm stories and plays about life in Russia seem so directly spun out of the whole cloth of everyday experience as to dispense entirely with literary technique and intention.

A few, more discerning readers, however, have paid tribute to Dyck's comic art in a general way, and have recognized that he is much more than a peasant yarn-spinner whose only aim is to entertain. Elmer F. Suderman observes that Arnold Dyck

invites us in his Low German stories to consider the possibility that comedy is not necessarily impudent and flippant but serious (even though it may not be solemn) and important, as important as a new invention or a straightforward statement because it teases us into thought and laughter and restores some of the lost magic of life. It enhances our lives, serving as an admirable corrective against folly, dullness, unreason, undue solemnity, and sentimentality.¹

And Warren Kliewer argues that

Arnold Dyck is not a didactic writer who saws away at a feeble plot in order to prove a moral point. He is not a satirist who inveighs against contemporary vice or folly. But he is, I believe, a good deal more than a simple humorist . . . ²

Indeed he is. I agree that Dyck is not a satirist in the strict sense, but he is most assuredly a moralist, as Suderman implies, a finely tuned moralist whose comic irony is sanative and compassionate, penetrating yet urbane. Dyck uses his verbal irony not as a satiric weapon or scalpel, but as a comic reflector for the light of sanity, common sense and decency. Whether his ironic narrator adopts the wryly affectionate tone of a favorite uncle, the bluntly intimate tone of an older brother, or the gently admonishing tone of a wise old father, he is seldom abrasive and never overbearing or malicious. With his relaxed folksiness, his smiling disdain for cultural pretensions, including his own, Dyck's ironic narrator is neither patronizing nor bumptious, but unfailingly considerate and civilized. And he speaks a language as naked and vital as freshly turned earth, as expansive and vivid as a summer sky.

Dyck was far from being artless, and reveals in his comic art an impressive technique, a sure craft for lighting up his characters from within and breathing moral significance into his comic themes. He may have been an intuitive writer, but he was also a highly conscious craftsman. And the aim of this paper is to explore Arnold Dyck's comic technique, to examine the origins of his fine skill in the handling of literary irony.

An important source for Dyck's later technical facility as a writer must have been his early training as an artist.³ There is a striking congruity of style, texture and effect, for example, between his Low German works of fiction and the pen-and-ink drawings with which he illustrated them: the same clarity of line, economy of design, and the affectionate but shrewd insights into simple, sunny *Naturmenschen*, the unspoiled *Bauern* he loved to write about. His training as an artist had taught him how to perceive his subjects artistically, how to focus them so as to evoke in spare, incisive strokes the essence of their characters and souls. Looking at the sketch of Koop and Bua gazing quizzically out at the world from the covers of the *opp Reise* books, one can already hear their voices, discern their natures, and feel the gritty reality of the rustic world they inhabit. And all done with a few, deft strokes of the pen. The same economy, density and vividness is there in the language as well.

Dyck's art studies in Germany were followed by a very different kind of training that must be regarded as another important source for the kind of literary art he created later here in Canada: his alternative service on a forestry station in Russia. For twenty months, from early 1911 to October 1912, he served on the Schwarzwald Forstei (one of eight such Mennonite forestry stations). The station was situated in a vast virgin forest near Znamenko, in Kherson Province, some 150 miles north-west of the Old Colony. Unlike many other Mennonite conscripts of the time, Dyck welcomed the isolated *Forstei* experience and for the rest of his life

believed firmly in its virtues as a character-builder, a school for social discipline and order. Even in his memoirs, written when he was in his upper seventies, he records his enthusiasm for this unique Russian-Mennonite institution:

Ich war auf der Forstei gerne . . . der Kerls wegen und der Gelegenheit wegen, hier unsere junge Menschen kennen zu lernen, wie sie wirklich sind, und nicht wie sie sonstwo viel zu oft gezwungen werden, sich vor ihren Mitmenschen zu zeigen.⁴

That statement holds the key to what his *Forstei* experience had meant to Arnold Dyck both as a man and as a writer. It was an experience that made him appreciate fully for the first time what it meant to be an ethnic Mennonite in the Russian setting. What the *Forstei* offered was a tightly knit, stripped down, all-male "survival" society which tolerated no dishonesty or hypocrisy in its members, and which frowned on and punished social pretensions and the jockeying for position prevalent in society. The *Forstei* was a para-military organization that operated under strict rules and that demanded absolute trust in and loyalty to the circle of comradeship it fostered. Tolerating no other language in their midst than the plump *Plautdietsch* which most (although not all) of the boys had learned at their mother's knee, the "*Kjiedels*" (chaps), as they liked to call themselves, preserved in simplified form the familiar family units and social customs from which they were separated through no choice of their own for up to three years.⁵ As Dyck describes it in one of his early sketches, the *Forstei* "*wea dee Hooge School, dee de junge Mensche biejsaum enn schmiedich moak, doaglich ferr'n Kommerodschaftsläwe,*"⁶ (was the higher school which make the youths adaptable and pliant and fit for a life of comradeship).

Generally, the *Forstei* functioned much like any other military organization, depending for its efficiency on strict discipline, comradeship and esprit-de-corps, but with one important difference. The *Forstei* command was run more democratically than a regular army unit because it had no elite officer corps to perpetuate a caste system. The station commander was the chief forester (always a Russian) who usually remained quite remote from the men. In effect, the camp was run by a Mennonite "*Starshi*" equivalent in rank to a sergeant, who normally had an "*Obergefreiter*" (corporal) and several "*Gefreite*" (lance-corporals) in charge of the daily work details. Thus, within the general parameters of *Forstei* policy, the day-to-day routine and camp discipline were entirely in the hands of the men themselves.

Arnold Dyck took to *Forstei* life as though he had been admitted to an exclusive club. True, he belonged to the "*Jegromde*" (educated ones) who were watched with special care in case they were inclined to put on

airs; but Dyck was smart enough to play the proper submissive role from the beginning, to be one of the boys in everything. For the first few weeks he even volunteered for the long, hard days of labor in the forest, although as a *Jegromda* he was eligible for lighter duties. He quickly graduated to the more specialized duties of gardener, then nightwatchman and male nurse, and finally assumed the dual post of camp mailman and secretary. He describes his attitudes and expectations in his memoirs:

Ich . . . hatte mir dabei vorgenommen, alles mitzumachen, was da meine andere Dienstbrüder durchzumachen hatten, einschliesslich der schweren "Rippenarbeit" im Walde. Zwar war ich ein Jegromda und hatte Anspruch auf leichtere Arbeit, ich wollte aber, wie gesagt, alles auskosten, um dann überall auch mitreden zu können und zu dürfen.⁷

In the end it was probably Arnold Dyck the future writer who learned most from the *Forstei* experience. It opened his eyes to the possibilities of comic role-playing and the kind of ironic wit that became his trademark as a humorist later. He discovered how well *Plautdietsch* could be adapted as a vehicle for a dry, gentle self-irony that moved easily and naturally between laconic understatement and hyperbolic fantasy in the form of outrageously droll stories and fables designed to point a moral or teach a lesson.

In spite of his positive attitude, Dyck soon realized that the daily routine on the *Forstei* was monotonous and dull, and that diversions were needed to make it bearable, at least, if not always pleasant. The older men knew that the secret was not to take the *Forstei* too seriously. It was important for the *Nowobranse*, the recruits, to be conditioned from the outset to see the lighter, funnier side of the *Forstei*:

. . . daut see dee gaunse Jeschicht mett onsem Soldoteschpäle fonn dee eentsje rajchte Sied too näme aunftunge, fonn'e leijchte, fonn'e sposje Sied. Daut wea daut baste waut eena doone kunn, wiels ohne Spos hilt kjeena dee Forstei ut.⁸

(so that they would begin to approach the whole business of our playing at soldiers from the right side, the light, the amusing side. That was the best thing to do, because without humor no one could endure the *Forstei*.)

Over the years the *Forstei* lads had developed their own social rituals complete with a ritual language that expressed everything in ironic terms. That ironic conversational style was referred to as "*derche Bloom räde*," literally, "speaking through the flower" in a bland tone of understated philosophical resignation, voicing mock-innocent acceptance of everything connected with *Forstei* life no matter how odious, irksome or stupid. "*Derche Bloom räde*" was only for the initiated, in a sense a sort of anti-language. By expressing their feelings and attitudes as self-deprecating nonsense, the young men could objectify and control

them, thus keeping themselves critically alert and sane in the stultifying forest world. Naive illusions and self-deceptions, they knew, could best be nullified through irony. When the raw recruit in Dyck's *Welkom opp'e Forstei!* claims that he has come to the *Forstei* to "serve," Winta, the wise third-year man, sets him right:

Jung, Jung, wan du mau wist waut daut ess — deene. Du weetst woll nich, wää hää kjemt deene, dee kjemt läwendich uck aul nich mea wajch. Mau gauns selde eena. Wie kome hia soo langsom aula too Dood."

(My boy, if you only knew what it means — to serve. You likely don't know that anybody who comes here to serve will never escape alive. Maybe just the odd one. We're all condemned to a slow death here.

No matter how valid his complaint, the recruit was always given the same terse advice: "Na, mau stell senne enn hiele," (Just shut up and cry). When the rookie "*Scheewpans*" (crookbelly) tried with clumsy fingers to sew up the end of the mattress he had just stuffed with "*Kolniesfadre*" (colony feathers), namely straw, an amiable older hand was there with a bucket of cold water so that the recruit could dip in his "hot" needle and prevent the fire that would burn down colony property. And if some stubborn soul insisted on speaking High German or Russian, he was warned that the strain on his chest might require his friends to rub his breast-bone with ointment.

"Derche Bloom räde," however, could work effectively as an anti-language only if it was held in tension with a simpler, more basic language of candor and literal truth-telling; "*fresch fonn'e Plüts räde*," the *Kjiedels* called it, that is, speaking straight from the shoulder, without affectation, hypocrisy or lying, especially when referring to personal matters or to one's relations with others. One of the first questions put to the new recruit during the mock-interrogation at his initiation was, "You aren't a liar, are you?" And the question was asked in deadly earnest. "*Jung du lijchst*" (you're lying, pal) was a serious indictment at any time. In serious conversation the men of the *Forstei* would not tolerate anything short of total honesty and candor. And only *Plautdietsch*, the *Muttasproak*, would serve for that. High German and Russian were associated with social snobbery and class pretensions. When Kron, another recruit in Dyck's *Forstei* plays, keeps insisting that he can't speak any *Plautdietsch* he is threatened and harassed into hysterics.

"Derche Bloom räde" was not a species of lying because there was no intent to deceive. On the contrary, it was a form of truth-telling that went beyond the literal truth, just as literary irony characteristically does. It brought out more imaginative and subtle dimensions of the truth. In tension with "*fonn'e Plüts*" candor, "*derche Bloom*" irony had a cathartic effect. It flushed out vanity, hypocrisy, naiveté, false piety and other

forms of self-deception. It was a playful anti-language that helped to put things in proper perspective. It provided a shared fantasy world which not only offered relief from the tedious reality of the *Forstei*, but enabled the men to preserve a dignity and humanity which they might otherwise have lost. Finally, "derche Bloom" irony provided daily stimulus for the creative imagination, a most important stimulus for Arnold Dyck the future writer.

Interestingly enough, the ironic fantasy of the *Forsteier* was not restricted to language. They also created parodic versions of such basic social units as the family. Without embarrassment or inhibitions the men created family units consisting of a "Mame" and "Paupe," usually second-year men, and their "*Kjinja*," usually first-year recruits. The third-year men were often designated as the "grandparents." Dyck gives a tongue-in-cheek description of how these surrogate families formed themselves:

Jeweenlich ess daut soo, daut fonn twee Frind eena mett menliche Karaktaeejenschofte (goode enn schlaachte) behaust ess, enn dee aundra mett eenje weibliche (schlaachte enn goode). Soone Jääjensatse funge sitj opp'e Forstei dan toop, enn dan wort jemeensaume Ätemoakerie jedräwe. Doabie haud eena dan aus Paupe daut mea mett dem Kopp, aulsoo mett dem Kommendeere enn Tootjitje, enn dee aundra aus Mame mea mett dem Tooreede . . .

Soo kaum daut dan, daut wie opp'e Forstei uck enn Femielje läwde. Dee Oole haude je dan uck aul Kjinja.¹⁰

(Usually it happens that of two friends one is blessed with masculine character traits (good and bad), and the other with some feminine ones (bad and good). Such opposites joined forces on the *Forstei*, and then cooked their meals in common. In the process the one who acted as father was more concerned with the head, that is with giving orders and looking on, and the other, as mother, more with the preparations . . .

That's how it came about that we also lived as families on the *Forstei*. And, of course, the "old folks" also had children).

There were also frequent "intermarriages" in these families, "marriages" that really constituted symbolic bondings between buddies. Invariably, the fresh recruit was asked if he had any sisters or other unmarried female relatives. If he acquitted himself satisfactorily during the initiation, one of the veterans would claim the recruit's sister (or niece or cousin) as his "betrothed" and thus recruit and veteran would become "brothers-in-law" and henceforth call each other "*Schwoaga*," as a term of special friendship and comradely acceptance.

Quite intuitively, then, by means of ironic fantasy and social parody, the *Forstei* boys created a stable albeit fragile moral and social mock-order in their forest world, a society stripped down to simple values and instinctive ideals similar to those preserved in Christian ethics and celebrated in pastoral literature through the ages. The *Forstei* was a Men-

nonite society in miniature which preserved the best and most basic elements of the more complex and competitive village world at home. And to make this little society complete there was another set of parents — the spiritual parents — in the form of the *Prediger-Oekonom* and his wife, who were assigned to the *Forstei* by the colony to take care of the spiritual needs of its male inhabitants. The special, paternal status of “*Paupe*”, the minister, even allowed him, in his services, to preach in High German to the men.

Needless to say, it was not a perfect society. There were transgressors who defied the law and order of the *Forstei*, but not many. The rare cases of theft were promptly punished by means of the dreaded “*Schinelleborsch*,” a beating by anonymous hands with a water-soaked rope. There were occasional cases of drunkenness and absence without leave. There were also those who sank into habitual depression because they simply could not get used to the rigors and isolation of *Forstei* life, and there were even a few cases of suicide. And once in a while a recruit was “broken” so brutally during his initiation that he was left psychologically scarred for life.

Arnold Dyck’s first attempts to write about the *Forstei* and to analyze what it had meant to him and other Russian-Mennonite youths of his generation were the “*Forsteijesichte*” he wrote for the four issues of his *Warte* in 1937.¹¹ That Dyck conceived it as a lengthy, on-going series can be seen from the fact that by the end of the fourth sketch Hauns, the narrator (Dyck’s surrogate), is still a recruit trying to win acceptance from the older chaps. But the series ended abruptly with that fourth sketch.

In the 1938 *Warte* Dyck went back to his “*Koop enn Bua*” series instead, in all likelihood because the *Forstei* stories had found less favor with readers than the lively and more topical “*Koop enn Bua*” sketches they had replaced. Dyck’s reluctance to abandon the *Forstei* series is reflected in the first “*Koop enn Bua*” episode that followed in 1938. In it, Jerje Berje, another of Dyck’s Russian-Mennonite surrogate characters, expresses his anger and frustration at the way Mennonites in general have misunderstood and undervalued the *Forstei* experience, including some of the former *Forsteier* themselves. Berje passionately defends the defunct institution as a character-builder and insists that “*onse Junges habe fonn dort mea Goodet metjebrocht aus Schljachtet*,”¹² (our boys brought from there more good things than bad). And once again he stresses that the *Forstei* lads had no need to pretend or dissimulate, and that they had nothing to gain from practising hypocrisy.¹³

As it happened this was not Dyck’s final word on the *Forstei*. A dozen years later, in 1950, he brought out his play *Welkom opp’e Forstei!* and in the following year its continuation *De Opnom*. Both plays were well received and Dyck must have felt vindicated. It is in these two plays

that "derche Bloom råde" as a technique of comic irony is most fully elaborated. The chief ironist and moral spokesman in both plays is Winta, the shrewd, unflappable third-year man who can spin the wildest yarns and fantasies without ever raising his voice or cracking a smile. While Winta assumes the role of ironic mentor, however, he is not the protagonist or "hero" of the plays. That role is given to Friese, an educated young recruit who, like Dyck himself, plays it smart by remaining humble and submissive towards the older men. Friese closely resembles Hauns in the earlier prose sketches and is again used to relive Dyck's own experiences. In a general way the plays begin where the earlier prose sketches leave off, so that the "*Forsteijeschichte*" form a sort of introduction to the plays.

The three recruits who arrive on the *Forstei* as *Welkom opp'e Forstei!* opens have been carefully selected for their contrasting characteristics. Hilbraund is a gangling country hick, naive and gullible, and almost pathetically eager to please and become one of the boys. It doesn't require much intimidation for him to accept the older men's authority over him. Friese's case is more interesting. Not only is he "*een Jegromda*," but he is from the Old Colony in a camp manned almost exclusively by Molochnayers and Crimeans. That makes Friese a marked man in a double sense: as a member of the despised educated class and as one of the Old Colonists, whom the Molochnayers tended to look down on as less civilized. Friese, however, knows exactly how to overcome these two handicaps and his initiation goes smoothly.

The third recruit, Kron, the haughty factory owner's son, however, poses a special problem that calls for rather drastic treatment. Kron insists on speaking only High German and airily denies any knowledge of *Plautdietsch*. Even Winta's gently ironic persuasive powers fail to move him, and he is forced to undergo more primitive forms of persuasive intimidation by the "welcome commission" that comes to administer the initiation. Kron proves to be a tough nut to crack. In the end he does crack, although not quite in the way Winta had in mind.

To trace Winta's role in the two plays is to lay bare Arnold Dyck's "derche Bloom" irony at its finest and most effective. Winta, a shrewd judge of character, knows how to use the most effective technique with each of the three recruits. With Hilbraund he is blunt and to the point. Winta confronts the trembling young giant with an axe and calmly asks him which of his two ends he wants to have shortened so as to make him the right size for the *Forstei*. Before the cowed recruit can answer, Winta drawls his advice: "Etj wudd saje bowe, den Kopp brukst du hia opp'e Forstei soowiesoo nich, hia ess daut soo: je domma, je bāta. Soo fāl dolla woascht du oba de Been brucke."¹⁴ (I'd say the upper end, you won't need your head here on the *Forstei* anyway and here it's the dumber the better. But that means you'll need your legs all the more).

With Friese, Winta adopts a more oblique, more sophisticated "derche Bloom." After expressing his amazement at finally getting to meet a real live Old Colonist, Winta feels out his victim by mockingly asking him why the Old Colonists bake their *Tweeback* as large as pumpkins.¹⁵ But this time Winta has met his match. Friese retorts with a witty little story about how the Old Colonists had at one time baked their *Tweeback* small and dainty too, and adds, "Daut wea aus 'et noch kjeene Moloschna opp'e Welt gauf," (That was before Molochnayers even existed), thus slyly reminding Winta that the Old Colonists were on the scene first. Friese then goes on to relate how the Old Colonists harbored and fed the first group of Molochnaya immigrants through their first winter in Russia, and how their guests, before leaving for their tract in spring, stuffed their pockets full of Old Colony *Tweeback* "daut de Näd aun'e Betjse plautste,"¹⁶ (until the seams of their pants burst). After that, the Old Colony ladies got smart and began to bake outsized *Tweeback* that could not be so handily tucked away.

Winta amiably acknowledges Friese's put-down and counters by asking Friese whether it is true that Old Colonist teachers cannot even speak High German, and whether Old Colonists still eat with a penknife and devour fried beans from a spoon. Friese answers simply, "Jo, daut ess soo, oba wie weete nich bāta,"¹⁷ (Yes, it's true, but we don't know any better). His good-natured answer not only defuses the situation but signals to the alert Winta that this recruit knows exactly how to play the game and when to submit. After one further exchange, in which Friese again lets Winta know that he is willing to parry in jest but without trying to get the upperhand, Winta is satisfied. To show his approval Winta "offers" Friese his niece Dagmar, still a gymnasium student, as his "betrothed." Winta says he is curious to see the kind of offspring that will come from "een jegromda ooltkolnische Soldot een 'ne jegromde Moloschna-Merjal,"¹⁸ (an educated Old Colony soldier and an educated Molochnaya gal). Friese extends his hand in acceptance and the two become united as "uncle" and "nephew."

Winta has more trouble than he is prepared for with the supercilious Kron. In his case the veteran employs a technique of irony that is at first casually circumspect, then more pointed, and in the end becomes mordant. When "derche Bloom" needling of Kron does nothing to render him more tractable, Winta resorts to elaborate fantasy-fables designed to put Kron in his proper place and to teach him some necessary lessons. Winta leads into the first fable by insisting that Hilbraund and Kron are in fact twins, thus cleverly implying that the class-conscious Kron has much more in common with a simple peasant like Hilbraund than the mere fact that both are recruits on the *Forstei*.

In his dry manner, Winta then relates his outrageous tale of how the

two came to be twins through a comedy of errors at their birth. It all happened, it seems, just after the Crimean War when everything was in a state of confusion and anarchy anyway. Since the powers that be could find a stork only for little Hilbraund, they had to press into service a reluctant crane to deliver the infant Kron. On their way to the two Molochnaya villages where they were to deliver their charges, the stork and the crane decided to interrupt their flight to find a breakfast of frogs. The upshot was that the irresponsible crane simply abandoned his charge and disappeared. So the stork was stuck with delivering both infants; but by the time he got to Hilbraund's village he was tired from carrying the double load and decided to drop both bundles at the same doof. And so Hilbraund and Kron became twins. Thus, the sheer arbitrariness of Kron's birth is designed to expose the absurdity of his family and class pretensions.

The fable of the twins makes no impression on the obtuse Kron. Winta is forced to adopt a more direct tactical irony. He insists on addressing Kron as the "*Russejung*" who does not know any *Plautdietsch* and will have to have everything translated for him. When Kron boasts (in High German, of course) that his father employs 160 workers, Winta pretends to be overawed and says that he will have to use the polite form of address to him ("*Jie*" instead of "*Du*"). If he were as rich and powerful as Kron, Winta says, he would be sitting at home in comfort instead of serving here. Kron jumps at the bait. There has been a terrible mistake. He should not be here at all. Winta advises Kron to go and see the chief forester at once to get the misunderstanding straightened out. Winta sends the unsuspecting lad on one wild goose chase after another in search of some authority who will rescue him from the *Forstei*.

Meanwhile, Winta continues to educate the other two recruits through his fanciful "*derche Bloom*" irony. Solemnly, he defends everything on and about the *Forstei* including the very bedbugs, which are to be cherished because they will never forsake the boys and are the only creatures here which can be depended on to remain faithful through joy and sorrow:

Nä Junges, etj saj jü, schoont june poa Waumstje. Daut ess hia opp'e Forstei de eenstje Kjreatua, dee eenem nich felat, dee eenem trü blift, woo daut enn dem Leed soo scheen heet: In Freid und in Leid, in Triebzal und Schmerz, in beesen und in guten Tagen . . . (wischt sich mit dem Aermel über die Augen).¹⁹

In *De Opnom* the "welcome commission" comes to carry out the initiation. Hilbraund and Friese get off lightly, but not Kron. He is terrorized to the point where he screams (still in High German), "Kill me, go ahead, kill me." After the commission leaves, however, Kron, like the

Egyptian pharaoh, hardens in his intransigence. And once again the patient Winta appears on the scene with his colorful irony. This time he relates, again primarily for Kron's benefit, the fantasy-fable of "oole Steewel-Jaunse" and the Tower of Babel. In the story, Winta has run away from the *Forstei* and made his way to Mesopotamia, where he runs into his old neighbor Steewel-Jaunse from Pordenau. Jaunse tells Winta that the tower-building at Babel has just broken up in confusion. Because Jaunse had been such a diligent worker, lugging the biggest stones up the tower, he got first choice of the languages in the language sack. Naturally, he had chosen *Plautdietsch*, which he knew to be the best of the lot. On their way home, as they sit at the foot of Mt. Ararat eating their lunch of "Schnetje enn Arbusesieropp," Jaunse tells Winta that anyone who forgets that *Plautdietsch* is the best language of all deserves a good beating.

Again Kron ignores Winta's tale but accuses him of having set the welcome commission on him: "Grade du mit deinem Plattdeutsch, dieser plumpen, ungehobelten Bauernsprache."²⁰ Winta finally loses patience. He drops his "derche Bloom" manner and bluntly calls Kron's father an ass for not having taught his son any *Plautdietsch*. Winta has to admit defeat. But after he leaves, first Frieze and then Hilbraund have stern talks with Kron and finally succeed in bringing him to his senses by persuading him that his only chance of surviving on the *Forstei* is to learn Low German as quickly as possible. By themselves, neither the threat of violence by the welcome commission nor the elaborate irony of Winta had been able to convert Kron into a sensible and useful member of the *Forstei* family. But Winta's "derche Bloom" is a powerful catalyst that now works through the "converted" recruits Frieze and Hilbraund with a "fresch fonn'e Plüts" directness that eventually succeeds in changing Kron's attitude.

The techniques of comic irony and tonal control Arnold Dyck found in "derche Bloom räde," the anti-language of the *Forstei*, served him well in all his humorous writing in *Plautdietsch*. They are lavishly employed in the "Koop enn Bua" stories. With his ever-ebullient nature, Bua loves to take off on wild flights of ironic fancy, especially at Koop's expense.²¹ Ironic hyperbole is Bua's favorite form of expression. Koop, on the other hand, goes in for peevish understatement, although he is not on the whole an accomplished ironist. A master of understatement is "Inspacta" Toews, the laconic, pipe-smoking friend of Koop and Bua in *Músdarp*. And so are Dyck's "*Russlenda*" characters in the series; Jerje Berje in the early sketches, and Wiens in the *opp Reise* books. All of these characters frequently use "derche Bloom" irony not merely as a comic device but as a form or moral or didactic irony. In short stories like "Dee Millionäa fonn Kosefeld" and "Runde Kuake" it is the narrator himself who controls the

tone and focuses the moral nuances through "derche Bloom" techniques of verbal irony.

When used by a good writer, the language of irony can wash language clean and make it shine more significantly. For the alert reader it sharpens perceptions so that he may see more of inner reality and truth than he did before. At its best, literary irony has a subtle but diamond-hard cutting edge. Arnold Dyck's comic irony has that fine cutting edge, and with it he created Low German humor designed not only to amuse his Mennonite readers but to etch itself into their moral natures as well.

Notes

¹ Elmer F. Suderman, "The Comic Spirit of Arnold Dyck," *Mennonite Life* (October, 1969), pp. 169-70.

² Warren Kliever, "Arnold Dyck as a Literary Artist," *Mennonite Life* (April, 1959), p. 87.

³ Dyck studied fine art in Munich and Stuttgart 1909-10, and in St. Petersburg 1913-14.

⁴ Arnold Dyck, "Aus Meinem Leben," unpublished memoir, 1966, p. 17.

⁵ Up to 1907 the term of service was four years.

⁶ Arnold Dyck, "Forsteijeschichte": 3. "De Opnom," *Warte* (Summer, 1937), p. 141.

⁷ "Aus Meinem Leben," p. 16.

⁸ "Forsteijeschichte": 2. "Dee Scheewe Kome," *Warte* (Spring, 1937) p. 88.

⁹ Arnold Dyck, *Welkom opp'e Forstei!* (North Kildonan, 1950), p. 42.

¹⁰ "Forsteijeschichte": 4. "Borotzi," *Warte* (Autumn, 1937), p. 229-30.

¹¹ Arnold Dyck's *Warte* was a literary journal published from 1935-38. It appeared monthly except in 1937, when it was published as a quarterly.

¹² Arnold Dyck, "Koop enn Bua enn uck sest noch een enn dee aundra," No. 42, *Warte* (January, 1938), p. 54.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹⁴ *Welkom opp'e Forstei!*, p. 32.

¹⁵ In the Molochnaya the *Tweeback* were smaller and daintier.

¹⁶ *Welkom opp'e Forstei!*, p. 35. The first group of Molochnaya settlers arrived in the Old Country from Prussia in the fall of 1803, and spent the winter there before laying claim to their land 100 miles south.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 36; ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38; ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

²⁰ Arnold Dyck, *De Opnom* (Steinbach, 1951), p. 51.

²¹ See for example the satiric "dream" Bua has about Koop in "Belauschte Gespräche" No. 14, *Steinbach Post*, Nov., 1933.