‘[T]here are certain things Mennonite children are kept from seeing’: Sexuality, Seeing and Saying in Rudy Wiebe’s *Of this earth* and *Peace Shall Destroy Many*

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In his recent memoir *Of this earth* (2006), as in his novels about Mennonites, Rudy Wiebe speaks often to the topic of the October 2007 conference “Family & Sexuality in Mennonite History.”[1] He records and foregrounds variations of family – and of the idea of family extended into the broader zones of kinship, community, congregation, neighbourhood, nation – and, in relation to family, of sex. Indeed, through his treatment of sex he sheds light on the nature and dynamics of family – on the mysterious and sometimes dark ways, on the rigidity and paranoia, also on the resilience and flexibility of family.

But throughout his work Wiebe is interested as much in language and, given our attention here to sex, in the place of sex in relation to language. Whether it is questions of the family-and-sex bond that are

at stake or whether other questions are raised, he is interested in the operations and uses of language, of the word.

For the poet in Wiebe the word 'sex' can be endlessly evocative of the mundane and everyday or, at another end of the scale, of mystery and miracle; yet it can also, suddenly and brutally, or subtly and slyly, shift its meaning or value or usefulness – perhaps when context or speaker or audience or tone shifts. He comes back time and again to the uses of language, of words spoken, words withheld, of words as manifestations of dark treachery or of sweetest love. He explores the spoken word in its sensual materiality and its denotative and connotative suggestiveness, but also, by extension, the written word. He is interested in the capacity of the word – for example, in what a thing has been named, or in how a word sounds – to carry or to contain story within its sensual and linguistic membrane, and not only story but also counter-story. Words represent power, and so Wiebe reminds us of ways in which words can be manipulated, exploited, manhandled for specific and often treacherous gain, as when the meanings of words, especially in particular social or political situations, are tightly controlled and narrowly regulated, insidiously reduced. In the hands of a powerful man or government, the word turns into a dangerous tool or weapon. Words that are suppressed – such as words about sex in Wiebe's first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962) – such words hide or disallow meaning, and become all the more dangerous because of the ways in which they fall into ruthless and calculating hands.

But in his 2006 memoir *Of this earth* there is no such panic, no such anxiety about the word or, for that matter, about sex. In this, his latest major work, when it comes to sex things are easy-going, Mennonite families relaxed and loving, free of the controlled and closed and closely-monitored Mennonite universe of his first novel. If anything, this memoir sends us back to take a look at *Peace Shall Destroy Many* from a new angle; it reminds us to look again at that controversial work, and take note there of a serenity that we might have overlooked. We are taken again to lovely, lingering passages in *Peace Shall Destroy Many* – especially those where the young child Hal Wiens comes to the fore – that offer a counterpoint to, indeed almost bypass the taut tension that dominates so much of that early and iconoclastic work. The brightly lit world of the young Hal Wiens is illumined mainly by the carefree concerns of a child at ease with his surroundings, surroundings that for him do not involve manifestations of sex, however much sex and the suppression of sex define the world of his elders – from his brother Thom to anyone as old or older.

In both the 1962 novel and the 2006 memoir sex happens, no matter what anyone says, and in both works, though for different reasons, language cannot keep up with what happens. Language, among Wiebe's

Mennonites in these two works, seems designed to obscure the realities of sex – and with quite different results in novel and memoir. Wiebe investigates the gap between acts of sex and acts of language about sex – urgently, as "a young theologian writ[ing] of prejudice and bigotry erupting to destroy the people of a small Canadian community" (as the jacket blurb puts it) in the novel, and comically in the "boy's coming of age" (as the jacket blurb puts the conventional trope) in the memoir.[2]

Indeed, Wiebe's treatment of family and sex, between 1962 and 2006, has changed enormously. How might we explain the transformation? Is this difference – in tone, in attitude, in content – simply a function of the passage of time, especially of the vastly different attitudes toward sex from the pre-1960s (if we think of the "sixties" as running from about 1964 to about 1974) to the 1960s and post-60s worlds? Or, perhaps, is this difference related to change in genre from novel to memoir, to memoir as a place for what the author wants to say about his originary condition and circumstance, his essential self? Or is it related, simply, to the change in the age of central characters, the memoir centring on a very young boy, the novel on an older teen-aged boy, Hal's older brother Thom Wiens? Does this difference, perhaps, have something to do with Wiebe himself having graduated from the role (to quote again from jacket blurbs) of a "young theologian" in his twenties when he wrote his first novel to what reviewers regularly call "one of Canada's most gifted writers," one who is now in his seventies, and, to be sure, one known for the established presence of the topic of family-and-sex in his work? Speaking as a master artist – now easy with certain kinds of private disclosure – is Wiebe simply taking pleasure in writing of a life breathtakingly free of rancour and tension, one in which sex follows the gentle rhythms of his reflections in the memoir? Perhaps all of the above possibilities might speak to the differences.

The title for this paper –"[T]here are certain things Mennonite children are kept from seeing" – comes from Wiebe's memoir.[3] Here Wiebe is using those words not as caustic criticism, but benignly, gently, philosophically. Wiebe, sifting through his memories from sixty years ago, demonstrates that there are certain things that as a Mennonite child he did see, though without truly seeing. It was a seeing without the benefit of words to inform and respond to what he saw, for words involve the added complication of audience, of communication with another. With his comment about what Mennonite children did or did not see (or say), Wiebe is thinking of the sexual behaviour – what he recalls as the "ludicrous things" – of farm animals, especially the "ridiculous mounting" of a bull let loose in a herd of cows. "It was what cattle did to each other," he realized well enough. But beyond that what was it all about? He ruminates in his memoir on the quality of childish experience in the face of such matters: "So a child asks why,

and a cryptic answer is easily caught; an adult evasion is always more intriguing than relaxed information." When the child asks about what he takes to be a "grotesque attack" of a farmyard rooster on a hen, the child, Wiebe playfully reflects, has a right to wonder when his mother replies with the unlikely response, "'He's just saying hello to her.' … Hello? Clawing himself onto her, squashing her down and biting her head?"[4]

Further in that same chapter, a chapter that carries rather casually the blunt title "Stud," Wiebe presents the tenuous status of language in discussions about sex. When Wiebe's non-Mennonite brother-in-law tries to describe """the way of a man with a maid" ... Even the wisest man in the Bible can't explain it, it's so wonderful,"""[5] the very young Wiebe is astounded, aghast: "Wonderful?"[6] How, Wiebe the memoirist ponders in a light and jesting spirit, could something so "stupid," so "abominable," be wonderful? He remembers his mind wandering through strange animal and human images of sex that hardly seemed wonderful at the time. When another little boy tries to tell the then-six-year-old narrator "what a man and a woman do between each other's legs when they are alone together," Wiebe the elder finally ponders whether it was, among other factors, the inadequacy of language that kept him from explaining "the incomprehensibly ridiculous act" of sex.[7] Here he, as self-reflexive memoirist, drops his light mockery and more soberly starts to consider at length "how we grow into language." He points to "the immersion of words a baby falls into at birth, of the giants that surround you laying a sheen of seeming order over endless confusion by making sounds with their mouths.... For a child, language may be less a learning than it is a ceaseless circulation of blood through flesh and brain and bone, caught like an apprehension, perhaps an instinct that develops all the more powerfully before you are conscious of it."[8] It is language that draws Wiebe's attention in these languidly explored and spacious reaches of the memoir of a child to age 12, set during the 1930s and early forties.

More subtly perhaps than in his 1962 novel, in his 2006 memoir Wiebe draws deeply on his understanding of childhood as a privileged entry point into what Carolyn Steedman calls "the human subject, of locating it in time and chronology, and 'explaining' it."[9] And through his 2006 exploration of a Mennonite childhood, Wiebe finds a means of connecting subjectivity – and his own history of subjectivity – to the broader culture, a specific Mennonite culture.[10] He finds, too, a means of inserting one strand of Mennonite manifestations of identity – with respect to family and sexuality – into the Canadian literary landscape.

The 2006 memoir simultaneously recalls and distances itself from the 1962 novel. In *Of this earth*, as an internationally known master

novelist looking back in a work that will win him many accolades, Wiebe vividly brings to life an innocent and curious child who at age five or six is, within the assurances of his mother's warm eyes, a "tjleena Schnaatjat, little rascal." And this child is not unlike the exuberant and spirited young Hal Wiens growing up in the few safe spaces available in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. But at the same time this child of the memoir is some way off from the nineteen-year-old Thom Wiens. In the memoir the young child presumably gathers up some of the language keys that will eventually make sexuality comprehensible to him in linguistic and objectifying terms. But it is a circuitous and leisurely route, wittily inviting today's adult reader to chuckle knowingly at the touches of sex that the reader, but not the boy, can understand. It is a route that is unlikely to bring the boy into the tense confines of a Thom Wiens. In the memoir a conversational Wiebe, offering up his own deep sense of personal being, of spiritual and material rootedness, trusts his audience with his memoir and finds it unnecessary to burden them with dark views of sex, though his story is not without darkness and tragedy in the family. In the 1962 novel, on the other hand, though the young Hal might be protected from the fallout of sexual knowledge, for his older brother the route to knowledge is brutal, confrontational, filled with shock and disgust.

Individual and collective identity and knowledge are structurally affected by the tacit and open suppression and the rationed control of language about sex in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. What is so eminently there in the actual life of the novel's characters and the community, but cannot be talked about, described, or commented on by the characters, provides a corpus of knowledge that is laced with a sense of taboo, a fear of transgression where "seeing" must not and cannot lead to "saying." Wiebe is arguing in his first novel, as he often does in subsequent works, that ways of knowing that are attached to the suppression of language – the suppression of honest uses of language that is open to all members of a well-intentioned community – should be considered suspect. That sexual language usage can be acquired and distributed and controlled by a central arbiter leads to a situation where sexual language, like sex, can be treated like a commodity, like private property, like pornography.

Words about sex in *Peace Shall Destroy Many* emerge, when they emerge at all, only indirectly, in fits and starts, sometimes furtively and slyly, sometimes obscenely and vulgarly. Any tender words about sex, about sexual attraction, are sought in vain by the protagonist Thom Wiens, for the language of tender expression remains an inexpressible fantasy. When Thom wants to speak with his pal about a girl he finds attractive, "to merely talk about her in an uninhibited manner as about anyone else," he finds that the social presuppositions of his world do

not admit the structuring or expression of that kind of talk: "If people would just mention things about her," he thinks to himself, his mind on the beautiful Annamarie Lepp; "but single Mennonite men did not talk at length about girls to one another." Though "longing desperately" to speak of girls, the two male friends, automatically censoring what they say, turn quickly to "talking casually about the harvest."[11] In this first of his major works, beginning to write a Mennonite history of sex as a word, a word that can not be spoken, Wiebe represents the word with a dash, the dash – cold, stiff, detached – providing a chasm representing that which cannot be said. There is, here, no revelling in a liberated sense of the spirit or the senses.

We come in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, as in his memoir, to Wiebe's word "stud." In his 1962 use of the word Wiebe does not engage the playful teasing of his memoir, but rather a cynical and cryptic taunting. The word "stud" is associated in the novel with vulgarity, tension, conflict, distress, urgency. The association of human sexuality and animal sexuality produces a frightening shudder in Thom Wiens, whom Wiebe designates as a sexual being, but within the strangling pressure of the community one always suppressed and silenced. At the Christmas program at the school, Herb Unger sees Thom Wiens sneaking glances at Annamarie Lepp, whose beauty, Thom had always felt, was a beauty grounded in her moral purity. Herb leans over to whisper obscenely to Thom: "'Easy on the heat, boy – only one apiece. Wanna start a whole stud?'"[12] To Thom, Herb, like Herb's brother Hank who arrives at the Christmas program in his armed forces uniform, is worse than an animal: "Worse, for he could think of no animal that, at the mere sight of a female, could only slaver in anticipation."[13]

When at the Christmas program raw sexual attraction leads Hank Unger and the schoolteacher Razia Tantamount out to the barn behind the schoolhouse, the community, or at least its male half, suddenly follows: "On the instant the barn was full of men, hundreds it seemed, with more jamming and craning in the doorway. Lights probed.... [Razia] saw the light of a dozen flashlights poking at every wrinkle on her dress, the shadowed men, faces blank in staring silent amazement." The men have no words for what they see. The only explanation is uttered as a taunt by Razia, who tells the "dumbfounded men" that they are already "'too late for this show,'" a show, she says knowingly – for she has come to know the culture that surrounds her – that was "'not quite Mennonite!'"[14] The men of the community, standing silent in the old barn, now hear a loud weeping from the one man who until this moment has determined the sexual conduct and the sexual language of the community; they hear "the sobs of a great strong man, suddenly bereft, and broken. They heard, terrified."[15] They are terrified, perhaps, because liberation itself may seem frightening now.

Liberation into new truths may force these men into new forms of language, a language outside their comfortable patriarchy, and they are men who are unused to speaking anything but what they are told, and nothing about sex.

Sprinkled among these Mennonite men are Métis, complicating and perhaps reinforcing the wordless encounter that here is fraught with sexual explicitness. The Métis men stand outside the Mennonite world in most of the novel like a chorus of outsiders, watching the Mennonite society with astonishment, amazed at its sexual anxiety and laughing at it. As the narrator puts it: "Knowing the Mennonites' rigidity regarding man-woman relations, the breeds had probably had many a laugh at Mennonite expense...."[16]

The great strong man who is weeping at the end of the novel is Deacon Peter Block. Ironically, his stubborn faith in and assumptions about sexual and family behaviour affect the course of events when his unmarried daughter gives birth to a still-born male child and herself dies of a hemorrhage; no one (because they have no structure of discourse for so saying, or seeing) was ever aware that she had been pregnant for more than half a year.

The doctor, who arrives too late to be of practical use, is a non-Mennonite who, as Wiebe's narrator says,

> knew [Deacon] Block as none of the Mennonites could. … 'What do you have to say?' [the deacon enquires of the doctor]. … "The official report has to state everything. But nobody here sees that. Otherwise, I don't have to say a thing. She's gone now; there's no need to drag her through the mud. That – man – shouldn't talk much." "What do we say?" [asks the deacon, aware that only he, his wife, and their friend Mrs. Wiens (Thom's mom), who had promised to say nothing, knew the truth]. … 'Whatever they believe.' [17]

The deacon was, as we learn elsewhere, in Thom's view "one of those mind-scientists" treating the community like experimental rats in a cage, a person who completely anticipated and appropriated language concerning all of the community's self-understanding: "everyone's quiet ... when he speaks. … [O]n every subject he must place the only word in every man's mouth and they go home and re-chew it for their family."[18]

Outside the deacon's house, in the yard, the doctor says to Thom Wiens, "'It was just an internal disorder that got out of control. The thread of life is sometimes very thin.'" Here, rather than a stream of language, the narrator's long dash – to which I have already alluded – hides true but unspeakable and unspoken words.[19]

Block controls not only the language but also the silences, so that his daughter Elizabeth's death not only cannot be attributed to her mixing "her sacred Mennonite blood" with that of Louis Moosomim, but also cannot be openly associated – though Thom sees that it should – with the strict rule of her father.

Block – essentially anxious, fearful, insecure about his identity, his past and his future – knows that personal power can be effected through the power of words, and particularly through the control of their many uses: their contexts, their connotations, the taboos that they contain, the fears that they evoke, their explosive power when they can be made to intrude into sensitively defined territory. He makes his community subservient to him by prescribing the categories available for discussion. He makes his co-religionists talk his language, so to speak, and he makes himself master of how that language might be used. He even hijacks the agenda, and makes others accountable to his reading, to his assignment of meaning. By rigidly controlling every corner of the social and political, the economic and the religious, by pronouncing the milieu sacrosanct, by determining the community's secrets, he tries (though unsuccessfully, as we have noted) to hold hostage anyone who comes into his enclosed world. By determining the course and the categories of language, the locations for its expression, the determinants of who can say what to whom, his system of rhetoric and control – of the language of family, a language that suppresses and destabilizes attentiveness to sex – inevitably grows at odds with the reality that keeps threatening to break in.

Thom, who feels he cannot say what he has seen when he encounters and uncovers Herman Paetkau's secret relationship with Madeleine Moosomim, comes to feel the effect of Deacon Block's power to keep people silent, to prohibit conversation and community, to haul whom he will "through the mud."[20] The isolation and alienation that Thom experiences – for example, when he, although almost twenty, is deemed six months too young to attend the church meeting about what he has already fully seen with his own eyes, the "intimate affairs" of Herman Paetkau, who for fourteen years has lived alone in the bush[21] – represent a variant of the more full-fledged shunning that keeps Herman in exile from the community. At the same time, Thom's lonely and desperate struggle with his conscience, his revulsion at what Herman's sexual liaison with Madeleine Moosomim embodies (for she was, to put it in the prejudiced terms that Thom has absorbed without daring to speak the words, "a half-breed, and a Mennonite just did not marry such a person, even if she was a Christian"[22]), only contributes to the exiling of Herman. The community, on the other hand, is goaded and guided by Block into a religiously sanctioned negotiation at a church meeting where "private affairs were scratched

open until only enough was left hidden to provide certain imaginations with lurid possibilities."[23] After the meeting, Thom's parents ask him about "seeing" and "saying": "'but how could you see all this – ... and never mention anything to us? … Well boy, what possessed you to put on you knew nothing?'"[24] Deep down, Thom realizes that it was the incredible narrative that Madeleine has told him about her ancestors, including the great Indian Big Bear, "who had ruled the Plain Crees as a true monarch,"[25] an epic story for which the categories that he had been taught by his Mennonite community offered no commensurate match, that had rendered him fully silent, with nothing to say.

In the strained society of an immigrant group of Russian Mennonites in a northern Saskatchewan boreal forest, "[s]exual immorality was for all Mennonites the nadir of sin," as the deacon Peter Block would like to have it: "it was equivalent to murder."[26] The deacon's assumption that the pregnancy of his unmarried daughter was not from a relationship with a Mennonite reflected another unchallenged social imperative; that a young Mennonite man would not have "fallen so low as to accept the embraces of – as they all considered her in their Mennonite way – his elderly daughter."[27] As the non-Mennonite schoolteacher has noticed, "if a Mennonite woman was not married by twenty-five, she could look forward to nothing but spinsterhood."[27]

Deacon Block's is, as the narrator says, "one man's misguided interpretation of tradition," yet it is to this man that each man of the Mennonite community "had contributed the corpse of his silent agreement."[29] At the end of the novel, when Thom's younger brother Hal asks his mother "'what happened in the barn?'" she cannot utter any answer: "Her voice was old. 'You'll know, some day.'"[30]

In the tightness of Wiebe's 1962 novel she cannot, of course, allow herself to say, as the mother in another context can say to the young boy of Wiebe's 2006 memoir, "'He's just saying hello to her.'"

Yet, the spaces of *Peace Shall Destroy Many* include a delicate lyricism writ large, particularly in the four prefaces to the four seasons, and interspersed also at moments along the way. Many of these lyrical rejoicings point either to Hal's world of innocence or Thom's memory of his own earlier life, when he too was once like Hal, or like the young Wiebe in *Of this earth*, a child. In these moments, as in so many glorious and rhythmic moments in Wiebe's texts, we find that the language of a beautiful lyricism leads to and anticipates and (if we can say so, for Wiebe is, of course, still writing) culminates in the language of *Of this earth*, and blocks the monologic language like that of the desperate deacon.

Notes

1 I first presented this paper at the "Family & Sexuality in Mennonite History: an academic and community education conference" sponsored by the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada (Divergent Voices of Canadian Mennonites project) and held at Conrad Grebel University College, 12-13 October 2007.

2 *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1968 [Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1962]); *Of this earth: a Mennonite boyhood in the boreal forest* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2006). For a detailed study of Wiebe's language, especially his interest in "monoglossic" and "heteroglossic" discourses, see Penny van Toorn, *Rudy Wiebe and the Historicity of the Word* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1995).

3 *Of this earth*, 144.

4 Ibid., 144-46.

5 Ibid., 152; for the biblical reference, see Proverbs 30: 19.

6 Ibid., 152.

7 Ibid., 130-31.

8 Ibid., 131.

9 Carolyn Steedman, *Past Tenses: Essays on writing, autobiography and history* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1992), 11

10 See ibid., 13.

11 *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, 140.

12 Ibid., 226.

13 Ibid., 227.

14 Ibid., 235-36.

15 Ibid., 237.

16 Ibid., 104; see also 31, 185.

17 Ibid., 147.

18 Ibid., 218.

19 Ibid., 148. See also, for example, ibid., 142, 143, 180, 181, 218.

20 Ibid., 112.

21 Ibid., 103-08.

22 Ibid., 110.

23 Ibid., 103.

24 Ibid., 110.

25 Ibid., 111.

26 Ibid., 180.

27 Ibid., 180.

28 Ibid., 151.

29 Ibid., 237.

30 Ibid., 238.