

Speaking Redemption: Narrative Voice in David Elias's *Sunday Afternoon*

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Whatever the recent developments in narrative theology have accomplished by way of allowing Christian believers to negotiate postmodern challenges to the authority of the scriptural foundations of their beliefs, the newly emphasized parallels between theology and literature open up wonderful possibilities for reading fiction as well as the Bible itself. Catherine Wallace, for example, in "Faith and Fiction: Literature as Revelation," argues that literature "has much to offer religion that religion fails to understand and to accept" (2). With Coleridge and then Steiner, Wallace observes that faith is neither "an act of will [nor] an act of knowledge" but "a creative act, the act of imagination"; thus "art and the encounter with God share a common origin in the human spirit" (5). Since "the knowledge of God is not propositional but visionary" (5-6), the poet (or novelist or playwright) is also an "autonomous and significant theologian" (1), whose task it is "to take all the muddled disruptive incoherence of real fact and actual memory – *whether communal or personal* – and then select and arrange, reform and recast them into a coherent aesthetic whole that tells a visionary truth that facts alone cannot reveal" (10).¹ If the

truth that the poet thus reveals is to be understood, whether that poet happens to be the redactor of Scripture or a contemporary novelist, “we must first of all read properly, which is to say attentively, details regarded not as historical facts but as poetic choices” (Wallace 10).

While Wallace illustrates such “proper reading” with examples from Scripture, it seems just as reasonable, particularly when invited (implicitly as well as explicitly) to do so by the novelist or poet or playwright, to read literature through a “hermeneutics of devotion,”² paying attention to theological implications of particular “poetic choices.” It is not enough to acknowledge, with narrative theologians, that our religious faith has been given to us as stories that we participate in; I want to argue further that the way the story is told and the voice through which the story is told have much to do with what sort of faith can then be imagined. Such a connection between narrative voice and particulars of theology is of special importance to Mennonites, given their history of strong (some would say repressive) ethnic communities in which the official story of both people and religious belief has been carefully plotted and presented.

This critical issue first came to my attention through two markedly different Mennonite novels published in 2004: Miriam Toews’s *A Complicated Kindness* (well-known and much acclaimed by both critics and readers) and David Elias’s *Sunday Afternoon* (much less well-known and almost ignored critically), both of which repudiate that official religious Mennonite story, mostly through humour. My own perversely opposite reaction to the novels³ demanded further examination, particularly of the radically different narrative voices.

The two novels are set in Mennonite villages in Manitoba, close to the USA border. Both mock a parochial, viciously controlling, hypocritical, ethnically-branded Christianity that the youth of each village, and a few admirable adults, rebel against through forbidden activities (drugs and sex and rock music in Toews, television and sex and poetry in Elias). A crucial difference, however, is the possibility of redemption⁴ in each novel. *A Complicated Kindness* allows only the barest hope of redemption for the protagonist, but it depends entirely on escape from the village – no hope whatsoever remains for the church that controls its members through excommunication and threat of hellfire. *Sunday Afternoon*, although just as satirically ruthless in its treatment of the church and its small-minded leaders, offers hope to a degree implied by the hilarious improbabilities throughout and by the name of the village itself – Neustadt or New City. Neustadt is no New Jerusalem, but the novel does skirt close enough to apocalypse to suggest a tongue-in-cheek parallel. The church in Neustadt is not likely to change, nor will many of its members, least of all the minister who, for the space of half an hour or so, is actually bent on murder, but

for one brief moment on a Sunday afternoon, just after the traditional *Maddach Schlope* (afternoon nap), nearly everyone is touched by transcendent joy, a joy that is unimaginable for the characters in *A Complicated Kindness*. The possibility of epiphany in one novel and not the other is, I think, closely connected to the choice of narrative voice. For just as religious belief speaks directly of what and how we know, what we can believe, and whether we dare speak of redemption, so narrative voice determines what can be known, how it is known, and what remains believable.

Not much work seems to have been done yet on the faith implications of the relationship between the story that (to use some of the language of narrative theology) configures events, people, and objects into a coherent whole, and the one who tells the story.⁵ However, one developing disagreement among narrative theologians about how narrative best functions to clarify and support belief offers a tantalizing possibility for further discussion. In simplified terms, story can function in two ways, either individualistically or communally; that is, the individual configures his or her experiences into a narrative that offers meaning and shapes identity (usually, though, in language and with explanations provided by a particular tradition of the Christian church – the testimonies common in evangelical churches are a good example), or the church offers an over-arching, authoritative story in which believers participate through sacrament and ritual.⁶ In other words, first-person narrators and third-person, omniscient narrators.

Each kind of narrative voice (I'm choosing for now to ignore the multiples shades of difference within each category of voice) raises particular questions about what is known and how, and what can be believed. First-person narrators offer intimacy with the reader (Ruf 805), but have limited perception and limitless opportunities for deception both of readers and themselves. Third-person narrators offer distance, a god-like perspective, but impose coherence and meaning that may be suspect and not at all disinterested. *A Complicated Kindness* is narrated in first person, by teen-age Nomi Nickel.⁷ Nomi struggles to make her voice heard in the gap between the church's master story of repentance, belief, and salvation – which everyone must experience “for herself,” subjectively, intensely, in exactly the same way – and Nomi's actual experience. That radical disconnect discredits the fake individualism of the church and its pretense to offer a factual, scientific narrative of the world in which mystery is ruled out of order, in which only right answers are permitted for a carefully selected range of questions, and in which God himself is expected to fit into systematic theology and submit to the control of the churchly authority. If Nomi's account is to be believed (and that is a crucial problem), the authority explained and exercised by her Uncle Hans is

abusive and self-interested, likely the outworking of his own insecurity. However, Nomi's attempted narrative is likewise self-interested, insecure, and largely determined for her by her dysfunctional family and by the stereotyped forms of rebellion offered by popular culture. The self at the heart of this novel is not trustworthy or coherent or even convincingly individual.

Her story raises the question whether any first-person story can adequately and convincingly articulate religious belief. The effort to shape personal experiences into a coherent narrative places too much weight on human agency and choice, and often leads to a premature and unfounded theodicy, susceptible to radical disillusionment, such as Nomi's.⁸ Yet if such a personal narrative ends too positively, it becomes unconvincing for that reason.⁹ In much Mennonite fiction at least, first-person narrative seems more suited to questioning faith than to supporting it. Those novels, such as Rudy Wiebe's *Blue Mountains of China* and *Sweeter Than All the World*, that argue the possibility of authentic religious belief, do so through third-person narrators or multiple narrators. It seems to take a community of voices or an authoritative voice separate from and above the action to articulate the possibility that God is there and is good. The problem with the third-person narrative, however, is that no narrator really is God, and is therefore open to charges of manipulation and inauthentic didacticism. Certainly Rudy Wiebe has been accused of preaching in his novels, although I have argued elsewhere that his handling of plot and symbol outweighs and even undermines the overt sermonizing.¹⁰ In this paper, I want to look at how David Elias negotiates the difficulties inherent in a third-person omniscient narrator, in order to speak redemption, even for a community very much like the one in Toews's novel.

In choosing an omniscient narrator for *Sunday Afternoon*, Elias departs from the methods of his earlier collections of linked short stories, *Crossing the Line* and *Places of Grace*, in which he shifted not only narrators but details of relationships and events. Readers were continually invited to imagine that each story might end in another way or could be told from a different perspective. Although the stories contain much abuse, control, small-mindedness, general human frailty, and even evil, grace breaks in here and there, primarily for those on the margins of the Mennonite community. The stories suggest small possibilities, but readers must look carefully to find hope, and that hope seems disconnected entirely from the church. In this first novel, however, Elias chooses a third-person, omniscient narrator. This is not a retreat to an authoritative, god-like view of the world scarcely credible in the postmodern aftermath of sustained hermeneutics of suspicion. Instead, all the troubling questions of what we can know and how we can know and what we can still believe are foregrounded

almost immediately through deliberate, and comic, translations into plot and character of the issues that David Hume raises in *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. With wonderful irony, Elias uses a philosophical document intended to discredit belief in miracles in order to develop a miracle of his own.

Elias's narrator is, from the very beginning, deliberately conscious of his function as an omniscient narrator, although he never intrudes or addresses the reader directly. He does not obviously claim authority. His voice is known through what he narrates and the tone in which he does so. The events of the plot and the characters who act within it – or are acted upon, as most of them are – are stereotypical to the point of parody and then beyond into fairy tale that morphs into myth. Character types are underlined with repeated tag lines, such as Katie Klassen's beautiful "apple-green eyes" and "silky blonde hair." Implausible or tired plot lines are directly referred to. The young poet, romantically reclusive yet determined to experience all of life, including women, carries a little cigarette case with paper and a pencil so that, just before the expected nuclear explosion incinerates him, he can write his last "few precious lines of poetry" with such "compelling" imagery, "stunning" metaphors, and "terrifyingly beautiful words" that "all who read them" will weep (140). Katie Klassen, such a success in Hollywood that Marilyn Munroe envies her innocence, observes her own inexplicable return to Neustadt as if she were a screenwriter: "[But] no producer in his right mind would buy [such a script]. Rising young starlet returns to the small Mennonite village [. . .] where she was born. He'd laugh it out of his office as too unlikely, too wildly contrived" (42). By the end of the novel, however, that bit of contrived plot looks positively normal compared to the glorious and apocalyptic *deus ex machina* that resolves everything, yet not very much.

The self-consciously contrived plot is matched by the narrator's language and tone. He begins often with realistic, even philosophical, observation that then becomes deliberate exaggeration, and finally, the declarative prose of myth itself, his abundant sentence fragments sounding much like the flat, not-to-be-argued-with statements so characteristic of Low German, which Elias frequently transliterates. Abe Wiebe and Katie Klassen, for example, are superlative in every way. The word "protagonists" is too small for them. They are heroes, and together, they are "a couple like no other. If you subscribed at all to the notion that God made people for each other, then here was undeniable proof. If you wanted to get an idea of what Adam and Eve might have looked like, then you need only look at these two. It was as if they had been made by the hand of God himself. Moulded in the image of his perfection. Flawless specimens of the human form" (183).

The tone throughout is a mixture of philosophy, scientific observation, and unruffled acceptance of mystery. And over all that, he adds love. This narrator truly loves his characters, delights in the oddities of their behavior, and lingers tenderly over analyses and descriptions, whether it be the death by auger of retarded Dickie's father while Dickie watches, or Martha's black-and-white photos that give even the unbelievably ugly Martens brothers their "short, bright moment of dignity" (155). Dickie's violent and abusive stepfather is succinctly summarized: "he was a monster, really, and, as with all such creatures, had allowed himself to become one. [...] he had given himself permission. He was really a failure as a human being" (86). The even-handed, dispassionate treatment of all characters and their worst or best behavior develops trust in readers despite the implausible march toward apocalypse, because the narrator balances and interweaves actions that are willed by choosing human beings and actions that are simply the expression of essential being or the carrying out of a job for which the actor (animate or inanimate) was designed. Gradually, he develops a clear distinction between a mechanical view of the universe in which rockets, men, nations, and lightning bolts discharge energy because that's what they have to do, and an open-ended, less controlled view of the universe that permits both choices and miracles. Grace and rejoicing require a willingness to relinquish control, which is why the release of energy through lightning or sex becomes such a dominant metaphor in the novel.

Redemptive joy thus always remains a legitimate possibility, not a manipulation or a refusal of reality because the outrageous events are a comic translation of philosophical questions: what we know, how we know it, and whom we should listen to. The provisional nature and experiential basis of human knowing is introduced early in the novel with Katie Klassen's discovery of David Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* after which she abandons romance novels (whose plots are generally at least as preposterous as what takes place in *Sunday Afternoon*) in favor of philosophy:

The discourse of metaphysics and epistemology had become a kind of refuge for her now. A sanctuary. She found herself fascinated with the approach to life where human foibles and frailty were not allowed to be part of the equation.

The more she read the more it confirmed what she'd suspected all along: that in many ways the constructs of her existence, of everyone's existence, were not all that solid. It might have been this that attracted her to the movie business in the first place. She'd always had the nagging sense, even early on, that the world was a place built on illusion. (43)

Readers are thus forewarned. In the best tradition of metafiction, *Sunday Afternoon* is a self-conscious construction of an illusion,¹¹ a fantasy in which most of its characters likewise construct their perceptions of reality and their fantasies according to their experiences, as Hume had explained, and in order to avoid their fears.

The limitations of human knowledge are everywhere underlined, from literal-minded Isaac Wiebe who can't figure out how those small people can get into the television set and move around, to the little girls who wonder if a nuclear explosion could kill Jesus and if that would nullify their salvation. In fact, the chief kind of knowing in both the village of Neustadt and the missile site just across the border is simply an obedient acceptance of authority. The soldiers have been trained not to think; the Mennonite people have been likewise taught not to think. Everything that does not fit their preauthorized view of the world must be ignored as if it didn't exist. Experience is reshaped to fit available data and language; reality is reconstructed to fit a desired illusion. The connection between fantasy and authoritative narrative, such as the Mennonite elders' view of the world, is thus clearly established; both are motivated by a fearful effort to control what cannot be and should not be controlled.

In the most benign of such fantasies, characters are more or less aware of their need to reshape reality according to their unfulfilled desires. Peter Giesbrecht, the uninteresting school teacher who provides Katie with her initial escape from the village, persists in fantasizing about marrying Katie and producing a brood of intelligent, beautiful children who will enter Winnipeg's cultural world (114). The young poet, who is being seduced by the rather simple-minded Betty Unger (who is herself, the narrator blandly notes, "the ultimate male fantasy" {138}), is quite aware that he has contrived their encounter and, in his mind, replaced the actual Betty with "a construct in a manufactured reality" (91). In more sinister fashion, the three witch-like Zacharias sisters project onto the heroes, Abe and Katie, all their own perverted sexual imaginings, while the minister, terrified of losing control of his brow-beaten congregation, imagines Abe as the locus of threatening forces he doesn't understand. Even Vice-President Johnson, extrapolating from his Texan experiences, fantasizes about wiping out the Russian commies in one fell nuclear swoop and proving American supremacy. (The novel exploits all possible stereotypes.)

In the end, even the human knowing and imagining most informed by experience or science is set aside by divine intervention through the transmission and direction of energies too great for control or understanding. Initially, in hilarious parody of what is to come, messages are aimed through various media. The minister preaches judgment on all worldliness to his congregation; later they secretly watch television

in their bedrooms. Advertisements are beamed through airwaves by television towers and, through a fluke of dentistry, Cornie Martens' mouth. President Kennedy will speak directly to the entire nation about the Cuban threat, preempting other television programs, which have their own subtle influence on human grasp of reality, or illusion. Then comes the little thunder cloud that sneaks up on the valley from behind the Pembina Hills and swoops down on unsuspecting valley inhabitants, who have been taught by frequent sonic booms to ignore thunderclaps. That little cloud harbors three little lightning bolts that just "do their job" and yet solve more problems than any thunderbolt Zeus ever released. In an astounding series of coincidences, one lightning bolt releases from the mute Dickie Derksen an incredible note just as the TV antenna has a power surge and Cornie Martens' mouth is agape far enough to amplify "Dickie's elixir of joy" all the way through the valley and into the President of the United States' office via the telephone. That B^b note "[hangs] there. One note. Impossibly long. Impossibly loud. Growing ever richer, ever stronger – the sweetest note of music ever heard in the valley. In the country. In the entire world." (169). Human ways of knowing can only be suspended:

Even epistemology and metaphysics had been temporarily suspended. Everything Katie, or anyone else for that matter, had read on those two subjects was suddenly of no consequence. The idea of knowing something became meaningless. The same for belief. For faith. To say of an idea that it was a fact, a belief, an opinion, ceased to have meaning. Ideas about particular or individual pieces of knowledge vapourized. To speak of that which was possible as opposed to that which was not made no sense. Truth, for the moment, rested not in knowledge or belief, not in the abstract or the concrete, not in black and white or colour, nor in pleasure or pain, because Dickie's note had put a moratorium on all such phenomena.

People were really all just thinking one thing. The same thing Mr. Beethoven had tried so hard to explain to the world in his ninth symphony. The one he wrote after his dysfunctional hearing apparatus had been invaded by cosmic beams. *Seit [Seid] umschlungen, millionen*, he wrote. *Diesen kuss der ganzen welt* (214-215) [Be embraced, Millions! / This kiss is for all the world]

Given all the previous playful discussions of the way scientific people could explain causes and effects and thus rule out miracles, this scene is an outrageous slight-of-hand. Grace is exactly such a wonderful

impossibility, the narrator implies, that is gloriously possible and totally necessary.

However, a problem remains – that narrative voice. Who is this narrator and how does he know what he knows? He has, with insouciant omniscience, guided us through the complex events of one Sunday afternoon, filling in past and future to offer a fully coherent now. Everywhere he exercises complete authority, giving us the single-voiced narrative that used to be so popular and that postmodern thought has so thoroughly discredited. But at the same time, over and over again, the novel demonstrates how completely inadequate all forms of human knowing are, including scientific knowing. So the authoritative narrator keeps coaching us to dismiss authority and to realize that knowledge is more an illusion than not, that the selection of facts and their interpretation is ultimately a form of story-telling. Which leaves the door open for miracles after all.

In fact, the most delightful irony of the novel is that it is, itself, a great piece of fantastic wish fulfillment. Most of the characters repeatedly view the world through fantasies and illusions. Several of them indulge in wishful scenarios that are then crushed by the reality that follows. Isaac Wiebe, for example, hears Dickie's note and imagines that the angels are coming for him. To his disappointment – and his daughter's, no doubt – he continues to live. The stupid private at the border fantasizes about the gorgeous Katie and is instead knocked out by an impatient Abe Wiebe. And so on.

But none of these fantasies is so obviously the expression of human desire as the plot of *Sunday Afternoon*. Nearly every twist coincides with what readers would want. This is especially clear in light of what doesn't happen in Elias's *Places of Grace*, the linked short stories that first introduce us to several characters in *Sunday Afternoon*. In those stories, Katie does marry the insipid Peter Giesbrecht after a quarrel with Abe Wiebe and stays in the village as an unhappy Mrs. Giesbrecht, getting ready to become a missionary to Africa (a stereotypical plot in another genre of fiction). In *Sunday Afternoon*, however, the story turns out much better. Katie brushes Peter aside, goes to Hollywood, becomes successful, and then comes back to Neustadt because she can see through tinsel town. It's better to come back to the Edenic valley where Abe waits and transformation is possible.

Not only are the good characters rewarded with happiness, with epiphanies that take them beyond their fears to unspeakable joy, even if briefly. Even the vindictive preacher gives up his murderous impulses and turns to good sex with his wife instead. He receives grace because his wife deserves it, not he. And poetic justice is also meted out, measure upon measure, pressed down and running over. Three wretched characters are nicely done away with in an accident more

coincidental than the production of Dickie's note of rejoicing. Even the impending nuclear war is averted because Dickie can finally sing, even in his moment of death.

An ending with joy enough to stop the heart – if we can believe it. But what prevents us from dismissing it all as mere linguistic play or yet another fantasy? Hasn't Elias been at some pains to develop a wryly self-aware narrator who is not above turning his story into a Mennonite tall tale, in spite of – or because of? – his evident love for his characters? I propose two solutions that will let us hang onto the laughter and joy. First, Elias has throughout, in the person of his witty, philosophical narrator, supported David Hume's argument that fantasies, no matter how seemingly divorced from reality, are always rooted in experience. If Elias can then imagine grace, it is because at some level he has known it. That alone gives hope. To return to the essay of Catherine Wallace with which I began, "Literature convinces us of its own reality despite its capacity utterly to transcend all that is not just 'solitary, nasty, brutish, and short' but also ambiguous, uncertain, and despairing. And in that capacity to transcend all the chaos of real experience, literature can reveal a transcendent God who is also blazingly, potently immanent" (9). The last phrase could have been written specifically of *Sunday Afternoon*.

Second, in one of the many sober moments in the novel, Martha (the wise photographer of truth) ponders her chief reason for staying in Neustadt: she can nurture someone like the young poet since "It was very important for him to stay, at least a little longer. For him to leave the valley now, divorce himself from it entirely, would result in writing that was merely full of anger, or spite, or worse – if he got himself an education – self-superiority" (149). He needed to stay long enough "to become an individual, with a mind of his own, with courage, conviction, and yet to have been nurtured by the place" (149). In these brief sentences, Elias explains the compelling power of characters like Abe, Katie, and Martha; they have grown beyond the narrowness of the valley, but they have absorbed its security and its ideals, and through experience and acceptance of various ways of knowing, they have learned to embody goodness – although it's not recognized by the church elders. Something about these characters rings true, as does Martha's perception that the "becom[ing] of an individual" has to be balanced with "nurture [. . .] of the place."¹² In other words, a fictional character who seems to make credible, even daring choices (all for the purposes of the omniscient narrator who controls the story) suggests that human beings are somehow both scripted and self-authored, a view that is as theological as it is literary, not to mention psychologically accurate. In that "visionary truth" (to use Wallace's phrase) lies hope for the inhabitants of Neustadt, although they will have to

acknowledge a wider experience that they have heretofore. However, their brief epiphany, with its consequences, is a beginning of greater knowledge and wisdom.

I end with a personal observation in keeping with the hermeneutics of devotion. Martha's warning that the young poet shouldn't leave too soon, should remain until he had faced all that Neustadt had to offer helps me to understand why it has been so difficult for me to achieve Elias's compassionate reconciliation between the place that nurtured me and the place I now live. I left my Mennonite town too soon. My memories are incomplete, frozen in the teen-age, first-person perspective that has no distance, no adult perception of multiple ways of seeing. Like Nomi in Toews's *A Complicated Kindness*, I still have difficulty grasping the both/and balance of individual perception and the communally shaped story. To reach that balance, I need to read both Toews and Elias, the personal and the communal, "select[ed] and arrang[ed], reform[ed] and recast [. . .] into a coherent and aesthetic whole that tells a visionary truth that facts alone cannot reveal" (Wallace 10). The very act of sorting out what the effects of narrative voice might be has offered understanding that would not have been available without both novels.

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Notes

- ¹ Italics are mine. The reason for that emphasis will become clear later in the essay.
- ² The phrase is mine, and I use it to describe a willingness to let texts teach me how to live better (to use Adele Wiseman's argument for art in *Memoirs*) and how to understand what might be known of God. I do not intend to advocate an imposed didactic lens through which to read all texts, just an openness to recognizing the sacred where it appears and a readiness to enter the theological worldview so often implied in literature.
- ³ My review of *ACK* for *JMS* was considerably less laudatory than most reviews, and after two essays on *SA*, I remain charmed by the novel.
- ⁴ The term "redemption" may be problematic for many readers. I'm using it partially as shorthand for the salvific ticket to heaven that is so crucial to the theology of the conservative Mennonite villages depicted in these novels, but also to name the possibility of life-affirming change. To redeem is to rescue from oppression and set free. I think of redemption here for both protagonist and village. Hope for positive change is a simple summary of the word, but I want to keep the theological overtones.
- ⁵ See Frederick Ruf's "The Consequences of Genre: Narrative, Lyric, and Dramatic Intelligibility" which begins the process by distinguishing narrative (third-person narrator) from lyric (first-person) and drama.
- ⁶ Alan Jacobs outlines this distinction between the two views of narrative in "What Narrative Theology Forgot" which is a defense of the individualistic function of narrative.
- ⁷ The choice of first-person here is devastatingly effective in parodying the favorite narrative of the evangelical Mennonite framework of reference – the personal testimony.
- ⁸ See Jacobs and Allik. Allik, particularly, notes "the permanent vulnerability of human agency in the area of the appropriation of narratives" (305).
- ⁹ Jacobs deftly points out the weakness of Christian testimonies that contain only "the airbrushed past and the sugarcoated future" (8), all in conformity with a communally determined form of narrative.
- ¹⁰ In "To Write or To Belong: The Dilemma of Canadian Mennonite StoryTellers" (PhD diss., University of Saskatchewan, 1996) and "Adam, Where Are You?": A Genealogy of Rudy Wiebe's Mennonite Protagonists," I examine Wiebe's techniques of multiple voices and extensive metaphors, through which Wiebe affirms the continued possibility of believing that "God is good."
- ¹¹ While Katie is the character who is most aware of her constructions of illusion, it is narrator himself who is most self-conscious and deliberate about his construction of the fantasy that is *Sunday Afternoon*.
- ¹² Note that Elias here depicts the same balance of the "communal and personal" that Wallace noted in the passage I quoted near the beginning of this essay.