

Rebirth through Derision: Satire and the Anabaptist Discourse of Martyrdom in Miriam Toews' *A Complicated Kindness*

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Amid the sectarian bloodshed of 16th century Western Europe, Christians executed on heresy charges numbered approximately 5000, of which roughly 2000 to 2500, 40 to 50%, were Anabaptists. Historian Arnold Snyder argues that this traumatic past, as registered in discourse, literature and oral traditions still active among Hutterite, Amish and Mennonite cultures, gave Anabaptism a forceful “martyrological sensibility” that urges all aspects of life to conform, literally or metaphorically, to faith-inspired sequences of suffering, bloodshed and death (159-161, 182). I will refer to this discourse of martyrdom, operative more literally in conservative Mennonite communities, as “the orthodoxy” – not in the sense that it is the kernel of Anabaptism or of broader Christianity – but in the sense that it is understood as such by its adherents. Citing the canonical 16th century collection of Anabaptist martyr-narratives, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of Defenseless Christians*, Magdalene Redekop contends that “[the] bloody theatre and [the] ways of escaping from it are the historical and

present context for the making of Mennonite stories” (“Escape” 21). Given this theological context, it is surprising that Miriam Toews’ *A Complicated Kindness* – one of the most substantial literary successes by a contemporary Mennonite writer worldwide, and a text brimming with violently conflicted attitudes toward Mennonitism – has received only marginal attention in relation to Anabaptist paradigms of martyrdom. Nor has its complex use of rhetorical aggression been a subject of extended scholarly discussion.

Set in Manitoba’s East Village, a fictive Mennonite town steeped in martyr ethics, *A Complicated Kindness* is a first-person narrative of Nomi Nickel, a girl of sixteen, whose satire-wise voice registers the pain of living within, and the pleasures of verbally deriding an order in which “the only reason we’re not all snuffed at birth is because that would reduce our suffering by a lifetime” (5). A perfunctory reading places Toews’ text within satire’s classic functions of censure and rejection. This understanding of the satiric mode, as canonized by genre-theorists like Northrop Frye, Ronald Paulson and Robert Elliott, insists on an unrelenting moral opposition between the satirist and the satiric target (Griffin 1-2). Reflecting this critical tradition, James Neufeld condemns Toews’ satire as a bar to meaningful engagement with the Mennonite community (101-103). However, such an understanding of satire fails to accommodate Paul Tiessen’s nuanced reading of Nomi’s performance as dispensing praise alongside censure, closing as it does with a conservative desire for “an ideal and elusive fantasy... a visit home” (146). One cannot resolve these contradictions by divorcing thematic ambivalence from the satiric mode, for in Toews’ novel the satirist’s affinity with her targets is informed by, and often a product of her denunciations. Focusing on Anabaptist discourses of martyrdom, and borrowing from Fredric Bogel’s recent challenges to established satire theory, I argue that satiric utterances in Toews’ text unfold dialectically, selectively endorsing and reinventing the text’s orthodox targets. In turn, these reinventions empower and stabilize emerging heterodox Mennonite identities by providing a discursive frame that is familiar in structure, yet a potent medium for expressing and validating marginal aesthetics, ethics and ontology.

Before embarking upon a critical reading of Toews’ novel, I will situate my particular uses of the terms “satire” and “martyrdom” in their respective scholarly traditions. As Coilin Owens notes, the word “martyr” originates from the Greek term for “a first-hand witness... one whose knowledge derives from personal observation” (3). Since the early “witnesses” to Christ’s life frequently faced violent persecution, the term came to represent individuals who sacrificed life or comfort on behalf of their faith. A distinction was eventually drawn between martyrs, who died in service of faith, and confessors, who suffered

non-mortal consequences for the like cause. However, the link between martyrdom and death was never absolute, for confessors were alternately termed “white” martyrs, to distinguish them from “red” martyrs who sacrificed their lives (4). Since Christianity is a religion founded upon the ideology and practice of voluntary sacrifice, starting with the crucifixion of Christ and the deaths of his early followers, martyrdom is central to its ethics and aesthetics. However, with the burgeoning success of Christian proselytism over sizable populations and centres of power, culminating in the faith’s establishment as the official religion of Rome in the fourth century, a conflict emerged between the doctrinal centrality of martyrdom and the decreasing opportunities for classic forms of self-sacrifice. Reflecting this tension, sixth century theologian Gregory the Great wrote that “even though we do not bend our bodily necks to the sword, nevertheless with the spiritual sword we slay in our soul carnal desires,” and that “if, with the help of the Lord, we strive to observe the virtue of patience, even though we live in the peace of the Church, nevertheless we bear the palm of martyrdom” (Snyder 162). Such a metaphoric interpretive framework informs all modern forms of the Anabaptist martyr-discourse, though the balance between symbolism and literalism varies widely from theological community to community. Further complicating the idea of martyrdom, Owens notes that while the original term excluded secular sacrifice, by the fifteenth century “martyrdom” had broadened to cover those who suffered “for the sake of any religious or political cause” (4). Hybridizing these historic variations, I will employ the term “martyrdom” to indicate substantial suffering endured willingly for transcendental ideals. However, when I use the terms “the orthodoxy” or “the orthodox martyr-discourse,” I refer specifically to the ideology and practice of self-sacrifice dominant in conservative Mennonite communities. In the same way, my approach to satire seeks to reconcile holistic understandings with factional interpretations.

Satire, a rhetorical strategy of ridicule that awakens contempt, amusement and outrage toward a given target (Abrams 275), has been theorized primarily on two foundational assumptions: a) oppositionality, or the belief that innate and irreconcilable differences necessitate the conflict between the satirist and the satiric target, and b) referentiality, or the conviction that satire targets specific figures in historic reality (Ball 1-2). Alleging disparity between satiric literature and established satire theory, Bogel challenges both principles, starting with oppositionality. Building upon the common assertion from psychology that “energetic repulsion implies identification,” Bogel asserts that “even acts of ridicule or rejection presuppose and require connection.” Thus, “[t]o satirize effectively... is to satirize with intimate knowledge; intimate knowledge presupposes some sort of

identification, however provisional, with the object of knowledge” (32). Indeed, identity rather than difference is the psychological motivation for satiric aggression, for the satirist has “no compulsion to attack, excoriate, or distance himself from people or actions or values that he – and the community he speaks for – already had no sympathy for or connection with” (31). If the unsettling similarity between the satirist and the target is the motive for aggression, the satiric attack takes the form of manufacturing difference. In effect, satire does not rely solely on self-apparent contraries between the satirist and the target, but actively constructs difference through rhetorical art (43).

If the difference between the satirist and the target is primarily constructed, it follows that the target is largely a figment of imagination. Developing this possibility, Bogel disputes the classic idea of referentiality, alleging that “in satire, referentiality and factuality are essential conventions, products of certain rhetorical strategies” (11). Citing Mary Douglas’ study of symbolic pollution and filth in *Purity and Danger*, Bogel argues that “what is dangerous about a polluting substance or person or practice is not what it intrinsically is, but how it relationally threatens a system of cultural values.” Therefore, “ritual[s] of separation,” including religious protocols and satire, are artful efforts at “casting out ambiguity and establishing a gratifyingly idealized – but therefore false – coherence of both self and other.” The duty of the critic, then, is to unravel the construction, revealing the “initially ambiguous state... [and] modes of [its] persistence in the satiric text” (43-49). While Bogel’s skepticism toward referentiality and binarism invigorates satire theory, his almost exclusive emphasis on the constructedness of the satiric ontology may blind a critic to the full complexity of satire’s relation to historic reality. Satire does invent difference, but individual texts differ in their degrees of inventiveness, and all satiric utterances are based, however marginally, on a historic reality. Nor does Bogel’s depreciation of satiric constructions as “false” hold true within his theoretical foundation in classic deconstructionism: if all truths are constructed, then satiric truths can hardly be proven “false.” As Redekop recognizes in her review of *A Complicated Kindness*, Nomi’s satiric narration weaves between the fictive and the historic “real” (19-20), committing itself neither to journalistic fidelity, nor to solipsistic invention.

Such a critical position informs my reading of Toews’ satire as engaging not so much the historic particulars of a specific Mennonite community, but the overarching martyr-discourse that affects all variations of Anabaptism. Redekop argues that Nomi’s satiric voice maintains an ambivalent relation to social realism. While it achieves an “uncanny accuracy” in registering the “claustrophobia of a conservative Mennonite town,” yet it is “chock-full of outrageous

errors about Mennonite history. The notion, for example, that Mennonites are all fundamentalist and are in the habit of shunning each other for the slightest breaking of rules is simply not true... [It is] like claiming that all Jews are ultra-orthodox" (19). Redekop's contention is exemplified in the narrator's portrayal of Mennonitism as a monolithic and immutable entity that has failed to evolve since "five hundred years ago... [when] a man named Menno Simons set off to do his own peculiar religious thing." In a ludicrous dismissal of the cultural nuances and contrasts found among diverse communities and theologies, Nomi caricatures all Mennonites as "the most embarrassing sub-sect of people to belong to if you're a teenager" and "a breakaway clique of people whose manifesto includes a ban on the media, dancing, smoking, temperate climates, movies, drinking, rock 'n' roll, having sex for fun, swimming, make-up, jewellery, playing pool, going to cities, or staying up past nine o'clock" (5). Articulating a deconstructive vision amenable to Bogel's, Redekop contends that Nomi's satiric performance "is not a representation so much as it is about representation" and that it is "impossible to do justice to Toews' achievement if we assume that the novel is realistic" (20). Similarly, Tiessen argues that Toews and Sandra Birdsell "have found a way to tell, not *the* Mennonite story as some master narrative, whether of spiritual heroism or of moral decrepitude, but Mennonite *stories* that are informed by postmodern irony that opens up new spaces" (146). Tiessen's "new spaces" seem compatible with Redekop's reading of Toews' satiric excesses as metafictional falsehoods that reveal greater truths about the artifice of ethnic self-representation (20). While I agree with Redekop and Tiessen's nuanced skepticism concerning the text's realism, I am convinced that a greater critical emphasis needs to be placed on the mutually-informing relationship between satiric performance and its ethno-theological context. While Nomi's narrative consciously veers away from the journalistic record of particular truths – truths that can hardly be captured faithfully through the distorting vision of satire – it nevertheless engages ethically with the Mennonite faith and sociality through its ambivalent assault on the martyr-discourse.

Originating from a member of the orthodox collective, the satiric discourse in *A Complicated Kindness* synchronously illustrates and complicates Bogel's deconstructive vision of satire. Despite its exuberant rebelliousness, Nomi's narrative relies heavily on Anabaptist aesthetics, foremost among which is the symbolic conflation of martyrdom and baptism. Snyder argues that within the Anabaptist teleology, baptism in water is not a completion, but a catalyst that produces the process-proper of suffering and dying for the faith (170). The Anabaptist rejection of child baptism in favour of believer's

baptism, or the baptism of adults who consent to give their lives to Christ, buttresses the rite's spiritual centrality and its defining ties to voluntary sacrifice. Snyder's identification of water- baptism as a process of the subject's becoming "a living member... of the incarnated Body of Christ" which must face "a baptism of blood" (170) manifests clearly in the writings of early Anabaptists: Before being executed by drowning in Rotterdam in 1539, Anna Jansz wrote her son that she will "go the way of the prophets, apostles, and martyrs, to drink the cup they all drink," thereby framing martyrdom as a defining mark of the saved. Moreover, mixing baptism and martyrdom, Jansz refers to her execution as "a cup to drink, and a baptism to be baptized with" (169).

In Toews' text, this poetic conflation of martyrdom and baptism is at once derided and reconstructed to serve heterodox ends. At the outset of the narrative, Nomi registers a traumatic rupture in her life involving the sudden departure from East Village of her mother Trudie and sister Tasha. Against this background of profane suffering, informed not by devotion to divinity but to earthly, familial ties, Nomi observes that she started menstruating, and at one point in the narrative notes that she passed the cycle thirty-six times (3-4). Here, initiation into the menstrual process, conceived within the Judeo-Christian tradition as a form of pollution, aligns itself with bleeding and secular suffering to parody the conflation of purifying baptism and sacred martyrdom. Desecration of biblical aesthetics, it seems, is the only result of such mimicry. However, the juxtaposition within Nomi's voice between the sacred and the impure also serves to expand the category of martyrdom, and its implicit validation of pain, to redeem and recognize profane suffering. Such a process culminates in the subtext of a possible suicide that haunts much of Nomi's narrative. On the verge of being "shunned," or excommunicated by the community, Nomi's mother Trudie leaves her home, family and possessions only days before the sighting of an unidentified corpse in a local river. When Nomi finally starts writing her trauma in the final chapters, she suggests that her mother's self-willed disappearance was informed by her desire to "spare my dad the pain of having to choose between the church or her, knowing it would kill him" (244). Through the agony of voluntary exile or watery death, Trudie asserts ethical commitment to a vision of marital and familial loyalty that lies beyond, yet is imagistically implicated in the martyr-baptismal framework maintained by the East Village ecclesia. Parodying the poetics of water and sacrifice, the subtext of drowning appears to degrade martyrdom by mirroring it in an act of mortal sin, only to use the juxtaposition as a means of recognizing the ethical continuities between the profane and sacred rites, and by this association, to offer a tentative reconciliation between the orthodoxy and its discontents.

Toews' satiric dialectic is not limited to imagery, however, for it synchronously subverts and makes anew the social practice of martyrdom. Nomi's cutting ridicule of the supposed death-wish in Mennonite culture often makes such a process seem unlikely. For instance, she observes wryly that: "We are supposed to be cheerfully yearning for death and in the meantime, until that blessed day, our lives are meant to be facsimiles of death or at least the dying process." In one of her moments of wild invention, she supposes that "a Mennonite telephone survey might consist of questions like, would you prefer to live or die a cruel death, and if you answer 'live' the Menno doing the survey hangs up on *you*" (5). Yet as Bogel insists, a satirist finds "no compulsion to attack, excoriate, or distance [her]self from people or actions or values that [she] – and the community [she] speaks for – already had no sympathy or connection with" (31). Rather, the satiric target is something that "is both unattractive and curiously or dangerously like [the satirist] or like the culture [she identifies] with...sympathetic even as it is repellent – something, then that is not alien enough" (41). It is not surprising, then, that the practices of martyrdom in Toews' text and in the history of early Anabaptism share striking similarities, for Nomi's forbearers install a sacred precedent for her profane practice. In the terror campaigns waged through the 16th century, the Anabaptist faithful were often tortured for the names and places of their co-religionists in hiding. For instance, Jan Wouteress was stripped, tied, and beaten during the interrogation. While victims of this category faced ordeals to shield their peers, rather than their theology, they conceptualized their pain within the classic martyr-discourse. For instance, Wouteress recounts that "though I had drank that cup.... I prayed within myself that the Lord should not suffer me to be tempted above that I was able" (Snyder 174).

At once mirroring and subverting Anabaptist history, the members of the Nickel family voluntarily accept various degrees of suffering, including separation, exile, and possibly death, in order to spare their kin. The ambiguous, yet symbiotic links between martyrdom and the ideals of secular loyalty are crystallized in the farewell letter of Nomi's father, Ray Nickel, who subtly denounces the ecclesia before leaving East Village. Formally, Ray's letter reiterates the textual practices of early Anabaptist martyrs who wrote to their family and friends before imprisonment or death, urging steadfast faith. Specifically, it inherits the martyr-letter's formal emphasis on the legitimacy of the writer's sacrifice, for as Redekop argues, "the success of the rhetorical form – persuasion of coming generations by means of a letter of farewell... depends upon the acceptance of the theology of martyrdom" (17). Investing the sameness of textual form with a contrary ideology, Ray instructs his daughter to "remember, when you are leaving, to brush the dust from your feet as a testimony against them" (240), echoing

Christ's injunction to his disciples on preaching to communities that "shall not receive you, nor hear your words." The injunction, quoted in *Matthew* 10:14-15 and repeated in *Mark* 6:11, decrees that "it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrha in the day of judgment than for that city." While the absence of the apocalyptic decree in Ray's letter suggests his resistance to the punitive aspects of the Christian tradition, the moral judgment haunts the letter even in the decree's absence, likening the puritanical excesses of East Village authorities to the mythic debaucheries of Sodom and Gomorrah. Appropriating the orthodox form and narrative, Nomi's father symbolically reverses the moral hierarchy between the orthodoxy and its dissenters, rejecting the authority of the East Village ecclesia while appropriating its vision of martyrs rejected by the world. The result is a new, heterodox sociality which derives stability from structural continuities with the Biblical orthodoxy and the Mennonite martyr-ethics that arose from it.

Further informing Nomi's poetics of dissent are the orthodox mythologies, foremost among which is the linear and progressivist plot of the divine comedy, or the eventual triumph of God over evil and the salvation of the faithful. Linda Hutcheon argues that postmodernism challenges the establishment by disrupting the patriarchal, Eurocentric notions of linear time, and the association of time with progress (15). Toews's fiction is consistent with deconstructive postmodernism in its rejection of linear time and unified action, in place of which are employed chronologically-arbitrary sketches of isolated events. In her interview with the *New Winnipeg* magazine, Toews consciously distances her text from the "novel," calling it "a series of vignettes" (5). What is surprising, however, is that Toews' aesthetic often progresses beyond postmodern deconstruction in order to embody orthodox teleology. This may be an illustration of Hutcheon's view that marginal groups often face the necessity of appropriating the art forms of the centre before they develop the capacity to disown and challenge them (4-6). In effect, imitation, parody and comprehension are necessary before the overthrow.

In *A Complicated Kindness*, parody serves a vital role in the genesis of a counter-discourse that sees a heretical ideology grafted onto the familiar Christian telos. Referring to a television program that her father watches, Nomi states that "in *Hymn Sing* the words bounce along on the bottom of the screen in case you want to sing along, but my dad never does. He just watches. But why would you want to sing along to 'He Was Nailed to the Cross for Me?'" Aligning the *gravitas* of the hymn title with the frivolity of the suggestion "sing along," Nomi unsettles the stylistic hierarchy, while also making a point about the absurdity of expecting enthusiasm for unending images of death. However, Nomi's

derogation also prompts her to go to her room, “put on a Bob Marley album... [and play] ‘Redemption Song’ about twenty times” (143). Holistically, Nomi’s thoughts and actions do not suggest rejection, but a creative redirection and adaptation of the orthodox teleology. When the final fragmentation of the Nickel family ensues, with Nomi’s father leaving town in order to keep his orthodox faith while avoiding the shunning order placed against his daughter, Nomi states uncannily that “the stories that I have told myself are bleeding into a dream, finally, that is slowly coming true” (245). That her “dream” refers to her desire for an earthly familial reunion, a parody of the sacred union of the faithful in heaven, makes her claim seem painfully irrational. However, the statement is ambivalent, for the process of “coming true” may not signify factual realization, but a psychological fruition, by which a “dream” – which implies unrealism – may become an ontological system that rivals, parodies and appropriates the power of the sacred teleology of salvation.

In its psychological growth, Nomi’s poetics of dissent reaches beyond the salvation narrative to engage the Biblical notion of heaven, an ideal central to the vitality of the martyr-discourse. In Toews’ text, Nomi’s repeated mockery of heaven through oxymoron, anticlimax and literalization not only derogates the ideal, but also strengthens its narrative presence. Answering the orthodox premise that “if we can successfully deny ourselves the pleasures of this world, we’ll be first in line to enjoy the pleasures of the next world, forever,” Nomi observes that: “I didn’t know what the big deal was about eternal life anyway. It seemed creepy to want to live forever,” therein situating the emergent heterodoxy within an ontological negation of heaven. Nomi’s observation denies the orthodox myth its familiar climax of an ideal life in heaven, while stylistically disrupting its high solemnity by qualifying the sacred eternal with a ludicrously informal and juvenile adjective, “creepy.” Nomi defamiliarizes heaven further by emphasizing the unknowability of its pleasures, of which “[n]obody’s ever come right out and told me.” Inventively infantilizing the sacred, she supposes “that we’ll be able to float around asking people to punch us in the stomach as hard as they can and not experience any pain, which could be fun for one afternoon,” therein derogating the promise of “eternity” through the diminution of its pleasurable worth to “one afternoon.” Finally, contextualizing the multiple departure plots of her heterodox narrative, she absurdly situates East Village as “a town that exists in the world based on the idea of it not existing in the world” (48-49), the departure from which will cause one to “forfeit [one’s] place in heaven’s lineup” (58).

Heaven’s narrative centrality, despite its saturation in satiric ridicule, informs Nomi’s subjective ideal of earthly reunion for her family,

the practical possibility of which is nullified by considerable evidence to the contrary. However, like the concept of heaven, the unreal vision offers hope beyond the sphere of rationality, enabling her survival against the harrowing pressures of her social context. Such survival is enforced partly through an exclusionary narrative focus on disembodied ideals, both biblical and heterodox, which allows a psychological marginalization of rationally-conceived horrors. For instance, Nomi attests that: "I've learned, from living in this town, that stories are what matter, and that if we can believe them, I mean really believe them, we have a chance at redemption" (245). Weighing the two possibilities of her father having left East Village to avoid shunning his daughter, or having committed suicide following the departure from his native community, she privileges "the first story, the one about sacrifice and pain" on the basis that "it presented opportunities, of being reunited, of being happy again, somewhere in the real world... and that's what I like to believe in" (245). Here, the ideal enjoys epistemological monopoly, achieved through a narratorial refusal to recognize the dividing line between the desired and the "real."

However, Nomi's heterodox ontology is hardly dependent on escapism, for it survives numerous confrontations with harrowing, potentially traumatic aspects of the Nickel family history. While admitting the overwhelming probability of her mother's suicide, Nomi negates its psychological burden by mobilizing the orthodox category of sacred and unverifiable truths for her own heterodox needs. Notably, Nomi asks and answers thus: "Did she pack any clothes for herself when she left? No, she did not. A detail that falls into the same disturbing category as the one about her passport still being in her dresser drawer." However, the menace of rationality, framed here in a parody of judicial cross-questioning, is countered by her faith-driven reply that: "I'm only mentioning these things because they *weigh* on me. Not because I let them control my life. Or this story. Who cares about facts, right? ... Jesus died on a cross to save our sins, and three days later he rose up from the grave" (54-55). Revivifying the resurrection story to affirm her profane ideal of familial reunion, Nomi appropriates orthodox notions of heaven and sacred truth to secure her heterodox ontology. Finalizing this trajectory, she contends near the end of her narrative that "the stories that I have told myself are bleeding into a dream, finally, that is slowly coming true... East Village has given me the faith to believe in the possibility of a happy family reunion someday. Is it wrong to trust in a beautiful lie if it helps you get through life" (245-46). Completing her utterance with a fullstop rather than a question mark, Nomi recognizes the irrationality of the "lie," only to dismiss the latter in a self-assured affirmation of the lie's mythopoetic "truth." In doing so, she entrusts the survival of her heterodox mythology not in a

denial of “reality,” but in a consciously artful blurring of the boundaries between the timeless “mythic” and the historic “real.”

Martyrdom’s potential as a counter-discourse is perhaps most cogently expressed in its constitution of affective communities. As historian Carole Straw notes in her study of early martyr-theology and its Classical contexts, Christian martyrdom was born as a marginal discourse of communal solidarity in the wake of widespread violence directed against Christ’s early followers from traditional Greco-Roman centers of power (41-43). Straw adheres to a reverse dialectic reminiscent of Bogel’s deconstructive insistence on uncovering “the initially ambiguous state” preceding satiric differentiation, and “[its] persistence in the satiric text” (49). Observing that modern historiography of the antiquities is often distorted by Christianity’s practice of “cleansing the world and establishing sharp categories of good and evil, sacred and profane,” Straw contends that historians must question doctrinal categories, exploring the cultural ambiguities preceding the solidification of clear distinctions between “the categories of pagan and Christian, sacred and profane, victim and victor” (50). From this theoretical basis, Straw argues that early Christians envisioned martyrdom through a syncretistic melding of Christian theology and mainstream pagan warrior-ethic. The early martyr-narratives reflect this dialectic, appropriating the Greco-Roman “language of honor and heroic death,” even while rejecting the “fundamental pagan attitudes toward death and the supernatural.” In maintaining this discursive tension, early Christians sought to “defeat the pagans on their own terms,” appropriating mainstream rhetorical traditions to express their marginal ideals of sacred suffering, patience and pacifism (39-43). In the Anabaptist context, the martyr-discourse developed further as a communal resistance strategy against persecutions from Catholic and better-established Protestant churches, displaying a remarkable flexibility in trans-historical adaptation. It is this ideological mutability of the martyr-paradigm that enables Nomi’s poetic invention of a heterodox community.

As an intermediary between the marginal and the centric, the martyr-discourse provides the basis for Nomi’s identification with, as well as her separation from, the orthodox Mennonite community. In the opening pages of her narrative, Nomi presents an implausible, yet rhetorically compelling allegory: “The town office building has a giant filing cabinet full of death certificates that say choked to death on his own anger, or suffocated from unexpressed feelings of unhappiness” (4). While highlighting the absurdity of the orthodox order, and by extension, its members, the satiric allegory also accommodates a tragic, empathetic discourse that preludes community-formation. The terms “choked to death on... anger,” “suffocated,” and “unexpressed

feelings of unhappiness” lean away from satiric irony to empathetic earnestness, suggesting that the narrator’s own fears are projected onto her community. Even more ambiguously, in a seeming reference to martyr-ethics, Nomi speaks of “an invisible force that exerts a steady pressure on our words like a hand to an open, spurting wound” (4). While the “invisible force” imposes limits on the free outpouring of words, it is also a benevolent agent that stems bleeding, thereby acting as a buffer between death and the living sufferer.

The ambiguous bleeding and the stopping of blood recurs in Nomi’s description of a particularly poignant scene with her conservative father in which: “He lifted his hand and put it on mine and we held our two hands there together on the side of his head, near his ear, as though we were attempting to prevent blood loss while waiting for an ambulance to arrive” (28). Here the identity between the satirist and the satiric target reaches a subversive climax, for Nomi’s actions imagistically parody the functions of the martyr-discourse, an “invisible force” that condemns, redeems and defines the East Village community. Immersive involvement in the martyr-paradigm renders Nomi an active participant in the orthodox process of community-constitution through the shared experience of principled suffering. Through satire, she appropriates this social process to envision ethical solidarity among the victims of an authoritarian ecclesia that insists on literalist enforcements of the Anabaptist martyr-theology. The inclusivity of her affective community, encompassing both the orthodox and the heterodox Mennonites, challenges the orthodoxy’s insistence on the exclusivity of the community of the saved, encapsulated in its practice of shunning, its conviction that “the *entire world* was evil,” and its desire to create “a town that exists in the world based on the idea of it not existing in the world” (48). Holistically, martyr-discourse figures as a mythic, affective and ethical landscape from which dissent and liberation from its own tyranny are engendered through the dialectic art of satire.

An uncritical application of classic satire theory reduces Nomi’s performance into a crude moral binary, pitting the narrator’s righteous wit against the monolithic savagery of religion. However, redemption in Toews’ text derives even from the most repressive aspects of the martyr-discourse, for the poetics and ethics of martyrdom underlie the formation and agency of Nomi’s heterodox ontology. Likewise, Nomi’s rhetorical aggression articulates an ambivalent kindness, for it not only assaults and refutes orthodox readings of the martyr-discourse, but recreates and resurrects the seemingly irredeemable through the transformative art of satire. In turn, satiric reinventions empower and stabilize emerging heterodox identities by providing a discursive frame which is formally conservative, yet a potent medium

for expressing an emergent world of heterodox aesthetics, ethics and myth. While stressing the tension between Mennonitism's heterodox and orthodox constituents, Nomi's performance also highlights their mutual groundedness in the Anabaptist theology of martyrdom. Such a reading affirms Bogel's vision of satire as a "ritual of separation" aimed at "casting out ambiguity and establishing a gratifyingly idealized... coherence of both self and other," and his demand that criticism unearth "the initially ambiguous state... [and] modes of [its] persistence in the satiric text" (43-49).

However, *A Complicated Kindness* troubles Bogel's suggestion that satiric dialectic is an unconsciously creative process, the aesthetic worth of which awaits revelation through critical intervention, for Nomi's narrative consciously questions the very possibility of demarcating clear "orthodox" and "heterodox" positions. The fundamental nature of the satiric binary implies that the two categories, while opposed, are also codependent on one another for signification. Moreover, Nomi's rhetorical negotiation of both positions through her appropriation of the Anabaptist martyr-discourse refutes the conventional opposition between the faithful orthodox-insider and the faithless heterodox-outsider, suggesting that the two are divergent branches of a common ethno-theological system. Indeed, the heterodox identity that Nomi asserts through her narrative is politically as well as aesthetically Mennonite, informed as it is by Nomi's awareness of her ethnically-determined membership in the satirized order. Speaking of her "personal yearning to be in New York City, wandering around with Lou Reed in Greenwich Village," Nomi observes that: "When you're a Mennonite you can't even yearn properly for the world because the world turns that yearning into a comedy. It's a funny premise for a movie, that's all. Mennonite girl in New York City. Amish family goes to Soho. It's terribly depressing to realize that your innermost desires are being tested in Hollywood for laughs per minute" (135). Even in the act of asserting earthly liberty against a discourse of Divine regulation, Nomi expresses an awareness of her alienation from non-Mennonite centres of worldly power, exemplified in the liberal-capitalist metropolis of New York. Holistically, Nomi's conscious refusal of East Village's singular definitions of Mennonitism and the Anabaptist martyr-discourse facilitates her continuing self-identification as a Mennonite subject.

It is this creative affinity, I believe, that motivates Nomi's persistent deferral on her plans to leave East Village, even after the exodus of her entire family. At the close of her narrative, Nomi remarks that "[t] ruthfully, this story ends with me still sitting on the floor of my room wondering who I'll become if I leave this town and remembering when I was a little kid and how I loved to fall asleep in my bed breathing in

the smell of freshly cut grass and listening to the voices of my sister and my mother talking and laughing in the kitchen and the sounds of my dad poking around in the yard, making things beautiful right outside my bedroom window” (246). Through her continuing presence upon the orthodox landscape, scarred as it is by the traumatic fragmentation of her family and the tyrannical regulations of the East Village ecclesia, Nomi articulates the often painful difficulty of maintaining an ethical and self-affirming balance of affinity with, and separation from the satirized communal order. Articulating this dilemma, *A Complicated Kindness* foregrounds the necessity of recognizing satire’s potential to voice questions of ethical urgency that partially refute, and synchronously exceed Bogel’s skepticism concerning satiric referentiality, and deconstructive postmodernism’s limiting focus on the “unreal” artificiality of discursive difference, affinity and reconstruction.

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