

The Skull in the Swamp

Rudy Wiebe *University of Alberta*

The possibilities for ordering words come in many guises. When I was first approached about giving the 1987 Marjorie Ward lecture at St. John's College, Winnipeg, it seems I agreed as the result of an impulse, and a mistake. At some point I had realized that 1987 marked the 25th anniversary of the publication of my first novel ("twenty five" emits a cool, silvery sound, in keeping with my grizzled beard) so on impulse I agreed to a retrospective on *Peace Shall Destroy Many*.

That was also my mistake. As some of you may know, publishing that first novel became for me both an exhaltation and a trauma; it certainly decided the direction of the rest of my live. To say anything about it one must speak autobiographically, and to do that, to explain the beginnings of one's literate life as if it had plan and system and perhaps even personal purpose is certainly a mistake. Because words get you into trouble.

During the three years I wrote and re-wrote *Peace Shall Destroy Many* I thought I learned something about story and about words: about their kind of immoveable independence, about their inertia, about their implacable force. And then, suddenly, incredibly, the book is in your hand. Anyone can pick it up, read any line here or there, the worst or the best sentence, anything; they can even buy it (a few always do), a thousand different people can take it home and sit down and read every word of it at their leisure, study it, return to certain bits again and again, ponder; they'll lend it to their friends and you can do nothing about what it creates in their mind. The book is there, you can change nothing — and yet you are still responsible.

With my wife and two infant children, I was living in Winnipeg and editing a weekly church paper when *Peace Shall Destroy Many* was published in September, 1962. By March, 1963, I was no longer editor and by August we had left Canada. O, words have power, power beyond what I had imagined in three years of wrestling with them.

A first novel is always the purest because in order to make it you must use everything you know or can imagine. In 1959 what little I knew

about life and humanity had to be pushed to the utmost limits of my conception, and then another notch farther, and then another, towards whatever I was discovering of what was good and new and moving and beautiful. No one knows you, there seems to be no chance that the marks your pen or typewriter are tracing across blank paper will ever get beyond that paper and so you grab everything conceivable and imaginable into your hands, spin it around into one compact ball and hurl it as hard and as far as you can and you never expect to hit anyone. And then, dear God, by a miracle it gets published and you do. Hit someone. Again and again.

Further, a first novel is also the purest because it has the least chance of publication. For six hundred years the primary meaning of that English word "publication" has been "the action of making publicly known." To have a construct of whatever you know and can imagine about life "made publicly known" is a dangerous act, and once it has been done you will never be the same again; nor never so innocent.

To use a hunting, or guerilla war, image: you have once and for all blown your cover.

My mistake in speaking to you about this is, of course, that whatever shreds of cover I retained then, or have built up in 25 years of public silence, will certainly be blown now. That is, if you believe me now. And even your disbelief won't help me because, fact or not fact, I intend to make something publicly known. I never learn. So let's get on with it.

I'd like to remind you of a scene from the "Summer" section of *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. Thom and his friend Pete are cutting hay in the huge slough east of Wapiti district; they are walking to find how close to the swamp water they can cut.

. . . . After a moment they pushed back, their teams waiting, the still-cool day seeming to hesitate over the ancient lake-bottom to see what they would do with it. Thom stumbled suddenly, feeling something abrupt against his boot. He bent to see. Pete, peering with interest, said,

"Shouldn't be any rocks here in the swamp," as Thom felt the broad turn of the horn. He tugged hard and it came up with moss and roots dangling. The lower nose had rotted away; the roll of bone at the skull-top and the thick jutting horns were all that remained. "Must have been a wood-buffalo. Man, look at that, eh!" he held what was left of the skull at arm's length, a finger on each horn-tip. They looked. The top was a perfect bowline turning almost back on itself. One horn was clean, the other mud-grained, but both were scarred with rot. Below the gnarled horn only a broken suggestion of the great blade of the skull remained. Thom gripped the clean horn at the base with his hand and, huge as they were, his fingers did not go half-way round. He wished he had seen that horn when it gleamed in ponderous dignity below the massive shoulder.

"How long has it been lying here, you think, Pete?"

"Don't know. Not too long here — the water would have rotted it quick."

"These haven't been around for at least fifty years. Must have worked its way in with the spring run-off, year by year. Odd you haven't

hit it with the mower." Staring at the broken skull, its heft heavy in his hands, a vista opened for Thom. Why was Canada called a "young" country? White men reckoned places young or old as they had had time to re-mould them to their own satisfaction. As often, to ruin. The memory of the half-Indian woman he had met last winter in a house where he would never have dreamt to find her forced itself upon him. As he thought unwillingly, the aura of impenetrable consciousness of her own being that she carried like a garment somehow enveloped him, now as then. His enforced habit of avoiding that scene asserted itself and, still holding the skull, he welcomed the thought of Two Poles at the picnic. Perhaps some lone ancestor of his had lain all day under the willows with the insects and bugs, spear or gun in hand, waiting for this buffalo to graze closer.

Pete moved forward and Thom followed. The horses were shaking their heads as the sun tipped higher over the meadow.

"You know, Pete, it's funny. There are stacks of European history books to read, yet the Indians — a people living in nearly half the world — lived here for thousands of years, and we don't know a single thing that happened to them except some old legend muddled in the memory of an old crone. A whole world lost. Not one remembered word of how generations upon generations lived and died."

"If you look at what's left on the reserve, we haven't missed much. A couple o' them came to buy eggs yesterday. Told Papa they were out digging seneca roots. This morning we were missing five chickens. Just a bunch of thieves now. Until the law came West, Papa says they were nothing but packs of cut-throats; whoever killed most was greatest. They would kill now too, only they're scared of the Mounties."

They were beside Pete's mower then. Abruptly, Thom hurled the skull as far as he could into their own quarter where the hay quivered untouched.

Pete said, "You'll run into it with your mower now. Why did you do that?"

"That's okay." He strode to his waiting team. "I better get cutting."

Thom's anger is clear: he appropriates the skull for himself, hurling it into the Wiens' hay lease.

The skull in the swamp is memorial fact/artefact. Only the heaviest horn and massive roll of forehead bone remain, and even these are eroded by rot, but this is indelible fact suggesting far more than merely itself. It is also "the broken suggestion of the great blade of the skull:" the rest of that massive body moving through that landscape; it is there in his hands, visible to the one who has eyes to see. Oddly enough, the body and landscape of *Peace Shall Destroy Many* in 1959 grew out of just such broken suggestions of stories, sketches I had written earlier: rolls of bone that resisted the short teeth of time and retained their artefactual power three and four years after I had written them in F. M. Salter's English 65 Writing class at the University of Alberta.

These artefacts were there in the very first words of the novel: The Spring, 1944 *Prelude* where the two boys play hookey from school and go looking for frogs' eggs. Perhaps only those who have lived through the

cold, the darkness of a northern prairie winter can comprehend the miracle of warm earth and water and spring green leaves and frogs singing; can comprehend the incredible feeling that the bright morning spring air fondling your nostrils releases you into.

The largest artefact, truly the bone skull of the fiction that determines the entire body of the novel, is the story of Elizabeth and her father. They first appear (the family is then named Wiens) in a story I wrote in the last weeks of October, 1955 for *English 65*. In that course we had to write a complete piece every week, but I managed to persuade Salter that the 38 pages of "Unto the Third and Fourth Generation" (my biblical title) should fill the requirements for two weeks. I then had another go at it in early November when I cut the story down to 23 pages. But that skull still haunted me and in March, 1956, I tried another version of 20 pages. Salter, who found the original story "remarkable", had encouraged all these revisions; he had been writing his usual cryptic or extensive comments all over any available space ("I think you might omit this whole scene"; "too much is almost worse than too little"; or "a situation strong in itself is weakened by too much gab about it.") Now suddenly he commented: "this story was better before." It could not be chopped down to skull only. I did not work on it again for three years, and I certainly had no idea of the body of the beast that would emerge to carry that skull into the soggy mosquito-burdened hayslough of Canadian fiction where, it seemed to me, the dazzling gleam of bright water was then only very occasionally visible.

When I look at those manuscripts and recreate in my mind how I groped about trying to discover the shape of Elizabeth's story, I am not surprised at the fumbling, clumsy mass of it. It is, in fact, so long ago that I can consider it the effort of a disinterested third party: a young man of barely 21 who cannot bring that woman into the foreground, who must begin the story with a debate between a young man and her father, the preacher of the community. In many ways this young writer cannot see how all-too obvious and really **surface** Elizabeth's story is; he tries by careful parallels (which totally disappear in the later novel) to find some depth in these people, father/daughter/young man. In the story Elizabeth is 19, an only child, and her father before her had once been a wild Mennonite youth who on a dark one night rode into a Russian village and was quickly seduced by a Russian prostitute. This act is instantly known to everyone in the Mennonite community and, alone and humiliated, Peter Wiens flees to Canada and eventually establishes a small Mennonite settlement on the prairie which he dominates and where the sexes are, of course, kept separated to a ludicrous extent. Indeed, he himself "had not talked ten words to his wife before he asked her father for her in marriage." Now, his only daughter becomes pregnant by his own halfbreed farm worker Joe Brair, and she dies in childbirth much the same way the

older Elizabeth dies in *Peace* Wiens' youthful seduction, when he discovers himself "alone in a room with an animal woman," is described in strictly those terms: "he could feel the present in his limbs and in his own animal body," but Elizabeth dying beside her aborted four-month-old foetus, recalls her seduction quite differently:

The living smells of blood and birth and death were mingled inextricably in that terrible, half-shaded room [. . .] "father," the sound seemed almost voiceless [. . .] slowly, dreamily in pain she talked, "He said such nice things to me — so gentle — so kind. He smiled when he saw me. . . . I knew you'd beat me if you knew, but it was so nice — you never told me that was wrong — you never told me anything [. . .] When I was with him I didn't care about you or anything When he touched me — he did what he wished — it was so beautiful under the black spruce in the spring night."

Whatever my understanding of the differences between male and female sexuality was then (and to get their full minimal range you'd have to read the entire clumsy manuscript), there is some possible, if obvious direction here. As there is when Wiens, again in a scene not retained in the novel, walks blindly out of the house of death:

[. . .] he did not see the patiently waiting horses or the half-filled hayrack — it was as if the farmyard were suddenly filled, crowded, with the whole settlement — the grazing red cattle, the small green-gold fields, the little log houses filled with people — the mental Utopia he had built where the strength of his will protected them all from evil and the world. And suddenly the people came out and looked at him, they saw him as he stood in the yard, and then they lifted long, terrible, accusing fingers and pointed. Slowly, the pointing fingers grew and grew together into one massive finger pointing at him and it came slowly toward him [. . .] and he was terrified to his soul [. . .] He had judged, forbidden, condemned! Was he a God?

I had struggled with three variations in six months, and I still had no more than a presentiment of what Elizabeth's story could actually be. For over three years I left that, but there was a great deal of body attached to this skull.

Similarly, the last chapter of *Peace* . . . was based on another short story, one I wrote while in Graduate School in 1958. It is called "To Cry Peace" and concerns a young man sitting on his skis one winter night and staring at a one-room school, remembering the school Christmas program just past. There are a number of other necessary Canadian content items: standard temporal indicators (Gracie Fields on the radio singing "O we're gonna 'ang ol' 'titler/To the very highest bough/of the biggest aspidestra in the . . ."), standard ethnic indicators: people eating borscht; but the most interesting non-standard item is that Helmut Block is a conscientious objector to military service in World War II and he's fallen for the non-Mennonite beauty of a teacher who is in turn enam-

oured of the Air Force blue of a lapsed Mennonite Hank Braun just home from eight missions over Germany, wounded and healed. The inevitable fight in the barn develops much as in *Peace . . .*, and Helmut is left to ponder his pacifist convictions in the winter snow, those he has in the barn "unhesitatingly denied."

The story placed second in a Canada-wide writing contest for students, but Salter's spidery notations here took a drastic turn. After a lapse of three years, he laid down the law: "For the health of your soul," he wrote "you *must stop reading Faulkner*. For the next ten years you must take total abstinence [. . .] otherwise, your style will become more and more sloppy, slipshod, sleazy and formless."

Those were orders, all right. Three years before he had told me he "had often found me impossible to teach" and I certainly did not now abstain from Faulkner, may my soul rot as it will. And the fact also remains that it was Salter himself who placed the ultimate temptation before me soon after I completed that story. The University of Alberta had a novel option for an M.A. thesis (Salter had initiated it himself). It wasn't until 1982 that I finally dared to accuse him of this ultimate temptation; in an article printed 20 years after *Peace Shall Destroy Many* was published, 20 years after Salter's death. I wrote (and you might note the style):

"I was perfectly resigned that summer of 1959 to a job as an insurance investigator and then you got me listed as top alternate for a Queen Elizabeth scholarship and sure enough one of the top ten winners didn't accept theirs and I got it and needed to do nothing all summer but start on a thesis and I told you I wanted to do an M.A. in Shakespeare of course — a perfectly acceptable subject, to investigate, reveal, analyse maybe destroy Shakespeare's attitude on war, whatever it was I said — and you just sat there, 'yes, yes', while I got carried away or carried myself there, who knows you weren't even in your office then, we were sitting in the June sunlight of your porch, your house which the University has now destroyed and levelled into a parking lot, 'yes, yes,' with all those stacks of thick books piled around you *in your porch* and letters from scholars and thinkers and writers from all over the world lying everywhere like gold, 'yes, Mr. Wiebe, yes, a great many people can write perfectly acceptable, or dreadful, theses on Shakespeare, but perhaps only you can write a fine novel about Mennonites.' Leaking that into me like . . . poison."

Ahh, what a poison; the poisonous temptation of the possibility of fiction. No matter how carefully you sip, no lifetime is long enough to build up a permanent immunity to that. In 1958, in the underground vaults of the Rutherford Library, among the dry backfiles of newspapers and magazines sprouted some strange summer mushrooms: Thom, Deacon Block, Elizabeth, Mrs. Wiens, Herb Unger, Hal, Razia Tantamount — drawn out of such unlikely soil, I suppose, by the intermittant rain and lightning of imagined character and Wapiti landscape and Mennonite beliefs and sensuality and language and an enormous amount of blind,

ignorant bullheadedness. Those catacomb notes and lists of names, characters, plot outlines, books read, chapter headings, 1944 news items, incidents, weather reports, scene ideas, various dead-end directions (a whole "animalistic" family named Wolfe was to provide Thom with some alternatives to his heavy religious thoughts: according to a Salter note, even in 1959 my favorite word remained 'animalistic'!) — for me to try and remember that summer is to imagine happiness. I had worked my way through university with labouring jobs; now I was being paid to imagine, to write. Salter had once suggested, with his wry cynical wit, that if I as a Canadian really wanted to write quality fiction I had best go to London and find a rich publishing heiress and marry her quick. Certainly his spidery comments in the margins of my manuscript remained as caustic as ever; one on an overwritten paragraph is indelibly carved on my memory: "Mr. Wiebe, you are exuding — poplar trees exude but writers write, carefully." That first draft was completed by September and I have no idea where it has vanished to. Perhaps in a Salter-provoked rage I shredded and fried it in liver, onions and gall and ate it.

The dated folder of the second draft is extant, the manuscript written in the bathroom of our small apartment because that room had the only door that could be closed against our highly mobile eight-month-old daughter. There I placed my typewriter on a board laid between the bathtub and the book-raised toilet seat; the plumbing helped nothing, but the blank windowless walls did. I lived inside my head from October 5, 1959 when the very last chapter of the book was finished first, then five chapters of *Spring* and four of *Summer* were completed by November 25, and then a true frenzy of writing: the four chapters of *Autumn* (Elizabeth's story) completed by December 8 and on December 23 the last of *Winter*, chapter four. The whole second draft, 90,000 words, hammered out in not quite three months. 25 years later that still seems an extraordinary pace for the formative draft of a novel.

By early March, 1960, the third draft was done and on March 30, 1960 the 257 page manuscript was examined by a proper university committee and found "acceptable" as an M.A. thesis. It is typical of Salter that for my outside examiner he chose the historian L. G. Thomas, the man who earlier in his Canadian history course had given me the lowest mark I ever received at any university.

This presentation seems to be dominated by F. M. Salter; so be it. He was also significant in the publication of *Peace* Let me quote in full a letter he sent me on May 30, 1960, after I had left Edmonton:

Dear Mr. Wiebe, Thank you very much for your letter, You do 'kiss the rod.' I trust that what you really mean to say is that I am forgiven.

I have just written to Mr. Jack McClelland and hope he will give your novel the careful consideration it deserves. Sincerely yours, F. M. Salter.

I don't remember what my letter had said. What did I have to forgive him for? Probably plenty, if my own supervision of graduate theses is any indication. But whatever that tongue-in-cheek comment meant, his recommendation to Jack McClelland was crucial. On the same day, May 30, 1960 McClelland and Stewart acknowledged receipt of my manuscript; on August 18 McClelland himself sent me a 2-page letter explaining they wanted to work with me to make it into a novel they would be happy to publish. A stunning letter.

When I read McClelland's letter now, it is clear that Salter's recommendation (which I have never seen) made all the difference. It was Salter in the middle '50's who convinced McClelland to publish Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook*. That publication in 1959 gave McClelland and Stewart the distinction of having published the first modernist novel in Canada, though at the time McClelland was so apprehensive he had Salter write a "Preface" by way of introduction. (In 1956 Salter read aloud the first two pages of that incredible work to our writing class; we could make nothing of it until he explained, line by line, its overwhelming simplicity). Salter had also introduced W. O. Mitchell to Edward Weeks, editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, and the first two Mitchell stories published there in 1945 grew into *Who Has Seen the Wind* by 1947. So when Jack McClelland in 1960-61 paid two editors, Claire Pratt and Joyce Marshall, to work with me on a total re-write of *Peace*. . . , he was gambling on Salter's perceptions honed by 20 years of reading new student writing.

In September, 1962, the book was published and I immediately sent one copy from Winnipeg to Salter in Edmonton; his daughter Elizabeth wrote back to tell me he had died on August 25. I still believe what I wrote to her then:

"[he] influenced me the most in my first six years at university. He had the enviable quality of driving the best in a student to the surface; if praise would not do it, certainly his knife-edged criticism would. . . ."

The first jacket of the new book announced in dramatic red and black:

"In his first novel, Rudy Wiebe, a young theologian writes of prejudice and bigotry erupting to destroy the people of a small Canadian community."

I had argued as much as any first novelist can about that cover; I thought "theologian" pretentious and still do. For about a year and a half, in keeping with my position as editor of the largest Mennonite English paper in Canada, I had preached in most of the twenty Mennonite Brethren churches in Winnipeg and a few beyond; I was widely known for my sometimes critical (some said 'unspiritual') editorials. I could probably have weathered the various storms my editorship raised among very conservative church members (many had never read English

before), but now *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, the first realistic novel written in English about the Mennonite experience, brought an inevitable explosion. I had been naive about that too.

Let me draw a thin, quick path through the wide range of letters from Mennonite people that I received, from January to June in 1963:

— **a woman from Saskatoon:**

Thanks be to God! Finally something has been written about which we can't say, 'Now wasn't that a nice book!' We are talking and wondering and feeling vaguely uncomfortable.

— **a man in Minnesota:**

As far as I know, it is the first novel in a totally Mennonite setting, and written by someone combining sympathy and honesty. Much of what is in the book has needed to be said a long time, and you have said it well, [. . .] to make our people consistent with the obligations of their heritage.

There were many other letters like that from people I had never met, but the ministers who finally wrote (some after months of pressure from constituents about "Wiebe's dirty book") had quite a different tone.

— **a minister from Snowflake, Manitoba:**

. . . what prompted you to write as you did [?][everything] portrayed in the negative sense, backward, isolationist, language barrier, and outwardly a pacifist, but underneath beware! [. . .] And the level to which you reduce the women is scandalous, portrayed as pure animalism [!], I'm sure that the same subject gets better treatment in "shunt literature" [junk literature].

— **a minister in B.C. (who had officiated at my wedding):**

The spirit of the book from its first page to the last one is a purely negative one. You have pointed out some of the dark spots in the history of our people, leaving the reader under the impression, that this is the general situation. Nothing is being said in defence of our people. It is like washing ones dirty wash in the front yard of a neighbour. [. . .] I may tell you this, that in Mennonite circles the idea prevails that you have described the Coaldale [Alberta] Church. It is possible, because you grew up in that community and no doubt have suffered a lot under a certain legalistic spirit, which was predominant there in the past. It is not the same anymore. Now it seems you are pouring out all the bitterness which has accumulated in your heart in your book.

The final, necessary, quote is from the leading minister in the Coaldale church, where I grew up:

For some time I had been urged by members of our church to read the book. Younger and older members had read the book and classified it as "filth". [. . .] I have read the book from cover to cover [. . .] our Mennonite people, the M.B. church and authoritative men have been degraded, and sorry to say, our young people plastered with shame.

For some time I wrote lengthy responses to these lengthy letters. As a

friend has since pointed out, perhaps it had seemed that I would become an "authoritative man" in our church; with this book, however, that possibility was betrayed. The last time I preached in an M.B. church in Winnipeg for at least twelve years was on New Year's Day, 1963. On March 21, 1963 I sent the following note to the Conference Publications Committee which was my employer:

Since I understand that I no longer have the confidence of the Publications Committee, I would herewith tender my resignation as editor [. . .] I should like to thank the Committee for the original trust that was shown me when I was appointed to this position . . .

About that time an acquaintance in Elkhart, Indiana, a true theologian wrote me:

If you feel that you have acted responsibly in the publication of this book (my own evaluation of it is quite irrelevant here) you will be tempted on the one hand, to justify yourself, and, on the other, to become bitter and resentful against your critics.

It is at this point that I wish to register my concern that you have the grace to retain your own personal integrity, realizing that what is true need not be defended, and that sometimes it is better to let "error" live than love die.

Besides the leading minister, only two people from Coaldale, my old home community some thought was portrayed in the novel, wrote me; both of them were women. In fact, all the many women who wrote me were, with one exception, totally commendatory. An unmarried woman (she identified herself as such) from Kitchener, Ontario, wrote "I especially liked the insight which the Elizabeth-Louis affair revealed," and a high school girl from Dalmeny, Saskatchewan, added to her church report "how thoroughly I enjoyed [your novel]." The Coaldale letters, however, were the most revealing. One unmarried woman wrote at some length:

I want you to know that I have had some interesting times defending it [the novel] before relatives and friends. The sentiments expressed by one friend seem to be prevalent: "Why does he portray the negative so vividly? What kind of a mind does he have to dwell on such immorality?" [But I say] please don't bury any of your talents because of this.

The most interesting letter was from a woman whose daughter I had known at the small Mennonite High School in Coaldale ten years before. This letter needs to be quoted completely because there is an intensity and high seriousness in it which cannot be evaded:

Coaldale, Feb. 9th, 1963

Dear Rudy.

When [my former classmate] came home at Christmas she asked

where she could buy your book *Peace* shall destroy many. I told here as soon as we had one and read it we would buy all our children one. Now Grandpa R [. . .] gave me his to read. I had such big hopes for that story since the person who wrote it we knew. When I started the book there were so many people mixed up in it that it was not interesting. Finally I made up my mind to read it anyway but many times I felt like throwing it in the fire (and would have had not you been the writer). You must have heard stories in your home which puts your parents on a low level. If you had not been a church member when you wrote this book things would be different. I also know that the young people in Coaldale did not have a chance like they should have. We both me and you promised before *God* and people not to *talk* about church happenings to the world but take them in prayer before *God*. With this book you scattered it like opening a pillow with feathers and worse, hanging it on a pole. My parents taught me *man plaudert nicht aus der Schule, wie viel mehr aus der Gemeinde* [one does not gossip out of school, how much more out of church]. Some day when your children will read that book will surely be ashamed of it as I am. To think such things are horrible but to put them in book form is more than I can understand. As you know and will see by this letter I have had not much schooling but I always was proud of our young people that went to University and came back and give testimonies for our Lord and Saviour. There are so many nice things to write about and the Bible tells us what to talk about was *wohllautet* [things of good repute]. So many people talk about your book that I thought it would be best if I let you know how I feel about it.

Sincerely
[signed]

There are so many double meanings in this letter; every line echoes with far more than is overtly said, and at the time it made me very angry. Especially infuriating was the reference to my parents and the kind of smutty gossip they must have promoted in our home. I do know that my parents (who never read *Peace* . . . because they never learned to read English) suffered a great deal from implications like that and for years this made me bitter toward that community where they continued to live until their deaths. I do not believe my parents ever doubted me, in fact, my father told me once he was proud that I, the son of someone as unimportant as he, had created such a flap among all those "groute Mann" [big men]. The idea that my children years hence would be so ignorant as to be ashamed of what happens in the novel — in contrast, say, to how it is written, which is quite a different matter — struck me even then as ludicrous. But the letter is transparently, intensely honest; the woman writes to me, while "so many" only talk, and the most revealing element is that she does not argue about the believability of the events in *Peace* Clearly such things happen, **but** they should not be spoken of in public.

And I then remember clearly an old lady phoning me one miserable winter day in Winnipeg and telling me in Low German that I shouldn't let all this silly talk bother me: things like I'd written about, and worse,

happened among Mennonites all the time, both in Canada and Russia. She herself could tell me a lot worse, and she laughed her lovely grandmother laughter. I'd written a good book, I shouldn't worry about it.

I did not, of course, carry any of this controversy in the paper I was editing. Frank Epp of *The Canadian Mennonite* did, and a reply to certain critics I wrote for him at that time has since been reprinted in *A Voice in the Land*. I received a great deal of support from numerous people (many of whom are friends to this day), though in the end the best revenge, no doubt, is to write better. Or outlive them — which is perhaps the same thing. But to continue working for a church organization was clearly impossible, and I never argued with anyone on the Publications Committee about retaining my job.

In May that year I accepted an offer from Goshen College in Indiana to teach literature and writing at the Mennonite liberal arts college; what some found offensive, others found creative. On June 17, 1963 we were given a surprise dinner: over 70 friends came to the Oak Room, the St. Regis Hotel to eat, sing, talk, and wish us happier days in the United States. The *Winnipeg Free Press Weekly* was condensing *Peace* . . . for its magazine section, but at the end of September, when I'd been teaching at Goshen for a month, the editor called me. Problems had developed with certain large Steinbach and Winnipeg Mennonite advertisers when they announced publication of the novel, and actually a three-man delegation had come in to have a serious talk. The upshot was the serialization did not run; then. But the *Free Press* had paid a few hundred dollars (they doubtless paid the condenser more than me) and five years later they ran it in seven installments: November 30, 1968 to January 11, 1969. As far as I heard, not a word was said about it then, one way or the other. Perhaps no one read it; they merely glanced at the illustrations by Peter Kuch.

Before I began editing the *Herald*, in November, 1961, I had received a letter from a gentle old man in Coaldale I distantly knew. He congratulated me on my announced appointment and said (I translate) "in your work you will get to know many people, and will also learn to know their weaknesses thoroughly . . . I would wish for you a Jonathan, to whom you can empty your heart when it all becomes too heavy."

There is perhaps no more thorough way to learn to know the weaknesses of others — and oneself — than by editing a church paper and by publishing a passionately-felt novel at the same time. I do not believe I have ever had a single Jonathan, though at times different individuals played some of that role. On the other hand, perhaps David did not need a Jonathan to be a poet; perhaps he only needed one to be a king. Certainly solitariness is necessary for some people; perhaps that too is part of the effect of a lifelong indulgence in the subtle, lovely poisons of fiction.

To return to the original scene I read from the novel: Thom Wiens is

still standing in that hay slough, the swamp water seeping about his feet, and contemplating the buffalo skull. He cannot say, "Alas, poor Bison, I knew him well" — he has never known him in the flesh and he never will. Nevertheless, that half-rotted skull does suggest greater possibilities: the rest of the head, the shoulders, the great humped body of the beast, suggest its startling and absolute discreteness. This very discreteness, this particularity empowers Thom to see beyond the mere bone he holds in his hand, to see into that surrounding landscape, that air, those particular people with their desires, their endless human necessities. Thom in the swamp does what a novelist can do: lends us eyes, ears, tongue to go beyond fact into artefact. Because clearly the skull is not the artefact; the word 'artefact' comes from the Latin 'arte' meaning art and 'factus' meaning to make, that is, artefact is *that which is made by art*. The novel, not the skull, is the artefact. It is the thing made through the art of and with words, and when you order words that way and publish them, that is, make such artefacts public, you better beware. A lot of people like Pete won't be able to see past their five missing chickens. But you, for the health of your soul, you better be.