Postmodern Mennonite Identification(s): A Review of Robert Zacharias's *Rewriting the Break Event*

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Robert Zacharias, *Rewriting the Break Event: Mennonites & Migration in Canadian Literature*, Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2013. Pp. xii + 227. Softcover, $31.

Robert Zacharias's study of Canadian Mennonite literary writing introduces a new, more thematic, interdisciplinary and intertextual approach than has been the case in Mennonite literary scholarship to date. In this first comparative monograph on the new Mennonite literary writing in Canada, Zacharias champions novels which chronicle what happened to the Mennonites caught in the Ukrainian uprising (his term) led by Nestor Makhno that followed the Russian Revolution in the early 20th century. Some 20,000 Mennonites (out of an estimated 100,000) escaped murder, or deportation to Siberia, and managed to emigrate to Canada. This event was of course part of the successive and much larger world historical event of the violent establishment of Communism in eastern Europe, which saw the death or displacement

of millions of people from their ancestral and chosen homelands, and resulted in the migration of hundreds of thousands of them to the Americas. The different ways the Canadian Mennonite version of this historical trauma has been fictionalized in novels by Arnold Dyck, Al Reimer, Rudy Wiebe and Sandra Birdsell is the subject under study here.

It is brilliant of Zacharias to have identified a particular narrative across the whole oeuvre of Mennonite literary writing, and to have found a way to read these texts as both fictional and socio-historical commentaries. In so doing, Zacharias has moved critical discussion of Mennonite writing from its usual literary and aesthetic locus to a much broader interdisciplinary cultural context. This move will, one hopes, enable a more fruitful discussion between historians, theologians, general readers and critics in the community than has been possible until now, at least in Manitoba, where the interests of these different groups have often been pitted against each other, presumably by an old agenda of narrative control of the people from the pulpit (or historians' desks).

The Mennonite "exodus" experience profoundly marked Canadian Mennonite culture, and it is impressive to see this scholar devoting such energy and insight into parsing out its imaginative lineaments in some of our most accomplished fictions. For Zacharias, this experience signifies the kind of "break event" that according to theorists of political diaspora such as Vijay Mishra utterly changes a people and initiates a new understanding of its identity. Within this core story, Zacharias finds interesting creative variations offered by the writers who have imagined it into vivid and celebrated fictions. It is highly doubtful, though, that this particular story could become (or ever was) the normative, unifying story of all Canadian Mennonites, even with its creative variations, as Zacharias imagines. There are simply too many differences between the historical experience of the Russländer and their (sometimes called) Kanadier cousins, who came to Canada under very different circumstances fifty years earlier, with radically different cultural values and orientation (the Kanadier being considerably more "indigenous-minded" in their plainstyle traditionalism, orality, and peasant land practices).

Then, too, the Russländer were not coming to a completely new country from ancestral homelands, as Mishra's theory presupposes. They were already practiced immigrants in Russia/Ukraine, adept at preserving their language, customs and affiliative networks intact in a foreign land, and were brought to Canada through the lobbying and sponsorship of the Kanadier, who were well settled here by then and numbering well over a hundred thousand, the majority of them in rural Manitoba. In this way, Mennonite identity resembles more closely

the nomadic identity of modern Jews, our identity, after centuries of wandering from one country and landscape to another, having become a narrative communal identity, part tribal group, part utopian religious community, part pre-modern "nation," portable in suitcases, and demonstrating remarkable solidarity and coherence across modern national boundaries, despite marked sectarian differences.

Zacharias's valorization of the Russian Mennonite "break event" as the main generative influence in the development of our Canadian Mennonite literature is also questionable (even though he quotes several prominent Mennonite scholars in saying so), unless we consider the innovative cultural identifications made possible and necessary in the new country as its main aspect. The fact is that Canadian Mennonite writing came into being in the unusually fertile multicultural milieu of Manitoba, which was widely acknowledged as the "cultural center of Canada" for much of the 20th century. Winnipeg and rural Manitoba were, astonishingly, the birthplace of not only the modern Canadian novel (in the work of Frederick Philip Grove, Martha Ostenso and others), but also of modernist poetry (through Florence Randall Livesay and Dorothy Livesay), influential suffragist fiction and political writing (by Nellie McClung and Francis Beynon), and formative thinking by the leaders of the Canadian socialist movement (Tommy Douglas and Stanley Knowles began working together as undergraduate students at Brandon College, now Brandon University). And the list goes on.

What made this part of the country so unusually productive and innovative in the creative and literary arts? Was it the confluence of First Nations peoples with English and French colonists, which produced among other things the robust, lively and widely influential Métis culture? Was it the meeting of traumatized immigrants from many countries, suddenly thrust together in the vast prairie landscape? Was it the duress of living in a new country, which required both creative self-reliance and community of its citizens? Whatever the case, Manitoba was an extraordinarily welcoming place for the development of new, widely received literatures of many cultural backgrounds and affiliations. By mid-century, there were regional presses, journals and writers' guilds on the prairies, active mentorship of new writers by such literary giants as Dorothy Livesay and Robert Kroetsch, and a growing national and international readership through Canadian Studies and international award programs. This is the cosmopolitan milieu in which 20th century Mennonite writing came into being.

There was, to be sure, a prior, more exclusively Mennonite literary oeuvre created in German and Plautdietsch by newly arrived Russländers such as Arnold Dyck, Jacob H. Janzen, Fritz Senn and Elisabeth Peters, as Zacharias notes – just as there was a robust

homegrown Plautidetsche literary tradition of long standing among the Kanadier. (This latter has not been studied very much in our critical scholarship and deserves more attention.) There was also, for a brief time in the 70s and 80s, an English language Winnipeg-based Mennonite literary journal, *The Mennonite Mirror*, forerunner of today's *Rhubarb* Mennonite literary magazine. Of this more traditional oeuvre only Arnold Dyck is represented in Zacharias's study, whose five part Bildungsroman *Verloren in der Steppe* was collected and translated into English as *Lost in the Steppe* in 1974, which is presumably why it is being read in relation to more contemporary Mennonite literary texts here.

The new Mennonite literature, as it developed in Winnipeg and southern Manitoba in English over the past half century, was created by both Kanadier and Russländer, all of them modern English school educated, in roughly equal proportions. Al Reimer, Patrick Friesen, Di Brandt, Audrey Thiessen, Armin Wiebe, Doug Reimer, and Miriam Toews are all of Kanadier descent. Rudy Wiebe, Sarah Klassen, Maurice Mierau, Lois Braun, John Weier and Dora Dueck are of Russländer descent. David Bergen and Vic Enns, poet and editor of *Rhubarb Mennonite Literary Magazine* and influential founder of the Manitoba Writers' Guild, is half Russländer, half Kanadier; Sandra Birdsell is half Russländer, half Métis – though these cultural and sectarian differences have been largely ignored by the writers who share the common project of creating a written literature out of a predominantly oral cultural heritage, and who took most of their professional literary cues from the much larger surrounding literary scene. Zacharias himself comes from a Kanadier family with numerous professional artists in the current generations, including a writer, a translator, a painter and filmmaker, a dancer, a fashion designer, an architect, and a dozen musicians: cellists, violinists, pianists, singers and choral conductors.

Indeed, we could argue that it was the Kanadier interest in traditionalist folk art, folk music, hymn singing, poetry, playwriting and storytelling that nurtured the new writing more directly than the more modern, educated historical and classical music interests of the Russländer. Or perhaps it was the confluence of the two traditions, thrust together as they were in the thoroughly inventive situation of a new country, that sparked the requisite synapses to bring about the new Mennonite writing. Nevertheless, almost all of our significant Mennonite literature has been published by non-Mennonite Canadian and American presses, and would not have come about without their support, given the reluctance and indeed hostility with which much of the new writing was greeted by the church-based communities. Then too, most of the new Mennonite writers and their critics have written about many

other subjects than the Russländer experience in Russia, including the writers under scrutiny for their rendition of that story here. It is simply not true that this is the most written about Mennonite story in Canada.

There is another more inclusive genealogy of Canadian Mennonite writing waiting to be written, that acknowledges the extraordinary flowering of our literary culture in its richly diverse, internationally celebrated dimensions, a genealogy that also looks more directly at the fraught and disruptive relations that have existed, for the most part, between the creative writers and their readers, and the historians and the churches and church-based schools, especially in Manitoba. (The American experience has been quite different, where the church-based schools have carried modern American education-based liberal arts curricula in English for over a century, and therefore have been able to accept the new American Mennonite writing, and even the new Canadian Mennonite writing -- which has been hugely generative and galvanizing for them too -- with much less of a sense of imminent threat to the community's identity.) If it is necessary to identify a single story in all this profusion of narratives, let me propose it is the struggle to maintain a coherent identity in the face of encroaching modernity in its many attractive and inescapable guises, a more pervasive and sustaining "break event" that has profoundly troubled the life of our people this past half century.

In the meantime, Zacharias's study is a remarkable example of how to bring together theological/philosophical, cultural/social and imaginative/artistic interests in the reading of our new and growing literature, in order to interpret its narrative relevance to our people now. It is one of the emergent heirs to Ontario-based critic Hildi Froese Tiessen's Mennonite/s Writing project over the past several decades, where she graciously hosted and edited numerous conferences and publications to celebrate the wide array of the new Mennonite writing in an academic Mennonite context. She sometimes worried publicly that its diversity might be undermining the possibility of an ongoing, coherent, commonly held Mennonite identity. Zacharias's study is the strongest recuperative answer to that concern to date, though it is exclusionary in a problematic way from the point of view of the literature as a whole -- which has garnered a readership far beyond Mennonite borders, and therefore does not strictly "belong" to this single heritage in any case.

Here are some highlights from Zacharias's readings of the four fictional variations of the Russländer break event he has chosen to analyze in the four chapters following his longish, theoretically inflected Introduction, in the (non-chronological) order of his lively and often sophisticated analysis:

Al Reimer's telling of it in *My Harp Has Turned to Mourning* offers what Zacharias terms a "theo-pedagogical narrative," linking the collapse of the Mennonite "Commonwealth" (James Urry's term) in Russia with both the 16th century martyrdom of the European Mennonites caught up in the Spanish Inquisition, and the "eschatological violence of a coming apocalypse," in other words, as a repeating historical event whose inevitability signifies theological meaning. (Does this archetypalist/theological reading undermine to some extent the notion of the break event as a unique historical moment with radically transformative effects? It would be interesting and fruitful to read our literature on this subject comparatively with that of other cultural groups caught up in the same events, in Jewish and Ukrainian Canadian writing, for example.) Arnold Dyck's version in *Lost in the Steppes,* by contrast, is more ethnically inclined, and focuses on the fullness and goodness of life in Russia for the wealthy and well-established Russländer before the revolution, invoking a God who endorses happiness rather than suffering.

Zacharias is more critical of Dyck's comedic ethnographic interpretation than of Reimer's tragic theological one, suggesting that it risks the kind of ethnic (and even "racialized" [113]) self-centredness which turns a blind eye to the suffering of others: Dyck glosses over, for example, the impoverishment and economic enslavement of the Ukrainian people which served the Russländers' success, and became a contributing factor to the violent events of the revolution. But after all Reimer's theological interpretation does the same, in valorizing the suffering of the Russländer during the revolution as divinely ordered rather than socially consequential on some level (and part of a much larger historical event that would be illuminating to analyze further in this context). Dyck's novel, on the other hand, it seems to me, more accurately illustrates Zacharias's notion of the cultural "break event" that revises a people's practical self-understanding, even if Dyck stops short of describing either the break event itself or its redefining characteristics in the ongoing.

Sandra Birdsell's version in her more recent, celebrated novel *The Russländer,* Zacharias observes, challenges both of these versions of the story, through the lens of intergenerational and personal trauma and healing in the contemporary Canadian context. This is perhaps Zacharias's least convincing chapter, in that he overlooks the prominent role of gender and the crucial passing of time in the telling of the story, identifying Birdsell's challenge to the collective Mennonite mythology as individualist rather than feminist and intergenerational, and in misinterpreting the function of trauma theory and trauma narrative in the construction of identity as pathologizing, rather than therapeutic. Had he taken the therapeutic and feminist aspects of trauma theory

and storytelling more seriously, he could have highlighted how Birdsell's challenge to the valorization of suffering, and accompanying repression of the effects and causes of suffering, offers a release from our PTSD (suffering identified) Mennonite cultural identity into a healthier and more wholesome, responsible, engendered sense of who we are in the present, in this time and place, and who we would like to become in the future. Judith Hermann's landmark study *Trauma and Recovery,* which links domestic and political trauma with each other and with both mental, emotional, physical and social illness, outlining effective modes of holistic recovery, could have proved most useful here.

One also wonders why Zacharias didn't include Annie Jacobsen's award-winning novel *Watermelon Syrup* in this study, which could have helped him understand and theorize the gendered and therapeutic aspects of how we remember and tell our cultural stories of trauma and recovery further. This novel, based in part on Jacobsen's mother's and brother's stories and journals and published posthumously after her untimely death a few years ago, offers another insightful woman's analysis of how the personal and the political, the individual and the communal, the historical and the contemporary, trauma and healing, wrongdoing, truth telling and forgiveness intersect to become the story of a person, a family, a heritage and a people in a new place, in a happier, more loving way, over time. (Neither Birdsell nor Jacobsen were affiliated with any Mennonite church or community in their adult lives, bringing a thoroughly hybrid view to their subjects, a fact Zacharias might have been more interested in, given his concern for the cultural coordinates of our literature.)

Zacharias's concluding chapter on Rudy Wiebe's *Blue Mountains of China* enacts a complex dance, on the one hand championing Wiebe's vision of a "new society" based in "thinking different" about everything, embracing and cultivating a "new attitude toward everything, toward everybody. Toward nature, toward the state in which you happen to live, toward women, toward slaves, toward all and every single thing"; and on the other hand, tracing these values back through the very cultural traditions that have kept this vision of spiritual renewal alive, from the time of Jesus (whom Wiebe evokes) to the present. His identification of Wiebe's "thinking different" with the postmodern championing of *différence* and polyvocality (instead of a single master narrative) is insightful, given Wiebe's classic po/mo list of differences to be celebrated. But it does not, ultimately, capture the depth of Wiebe's promise of profound imaginative transformation through "repentance" and "forgiveness," that is, radical imaginative letting go and rethinking (making, doing) of "everything." (Healing from past trauma so as to release us into a vastly improved future is

another way of naming what he's talking about, and is not far from Birdsell's and Jacobsen's equally revisionary fictions.)

Ultimately, Zacharias denies, or at least modifies, the "new" possibilities of Wiebe's vision – what would it mean, really, to allow in the radically transformative possibilities evoked by Wiebe's exuberant proposal of rethinking literally everything? – by locating his story firmly back within a very particular communal heritage, with very particular historical parameters, whose meaning cannot be changed or reshaped beyond a (mysteriously arrived at) point: "it turns out you simply cannot write your way out of a communal story." Is there a contradiction to be detected here between Zacharias's notion of a defining "break event" and his denial of the possibility of stepping out of one story and into another? Are significant cultural break events always externally imposed or can they also be chosen? Wasn't the scandal of Wiebe's "breakout" novel *Peace Shall Destroy Many* precisely the spotlight he shone on wrongdoing inside the community, instead of pointing the finger at externally imposed violence? Hasn't the scandal of much of the new Mennonite writing been its disregard for communally imposed rules of submission to a previously agreed upon story, which privileged suffering over liberatory changes to our self-understanding and external relations? Perhaps, it occurs to this reader, internally imagined "break events" carry even greater meaning than externally imposed ones, in that they signal the growing up, the ethical turn, for people tempted – and who isn't? – by nostalgia, and the innocence and drama of victimhood over calm moral responsibility and respectful gratitude toward others in the present.

What if we took Zacharias's claim seriously, that the creatively imagined, written literature of a people is its most important site of cultural identification and negotiation in the modern era? It is this claim, sustained throughout the adeptly managed dialogue between contemporary cultural and literary theory, traditional Mennonite religious and cultural thinking and practice, and the new Mennonite writing with its imaginative and often startling surprises, that gives this book its greatest worth. Zacharias exerts an extraordinary proposition here, to take us through the numerous misunderstandings and contradictions these different intellectual paradigms and ways of thinking, in the ever more rapidly changing era of post-modernity, to a place of rapprochement, where they can shake hands and speak to each other to their mutual benefit. It's an ambitious project, and touches the core of the Mennonite identity struggles in Canada at this time.

It speaks also to the larger question of how cultural groups, however defined, can resist the high pressure homogenizing, globalizing environment of the twenty-first century without becoming regressive, incestuous and inward-looking, or bifurcated in their cultural practice,

practicing one kind of identity and self-understanding with each other and another with the rest of the world – which is a good and necessary strategy in startlingly new or oppressive situations, but not a good way to practice self-understanding in the long term, risking as it does the intentional repetition of past traumas to shore up its violence induced internal parameters. (The shunning or setting aside of our most imaginative and forward-looking writers and writing in the name of preserving a narrow, more backward-looking conception of Mennonite identity would be part of such a move, and I am happy to see Zacharias wrestling energetically against this inherent temptation throughout his study.)

I'm eager to see how Zacharias develops his vision and talent further, given his extraordinary capacity for synthesizing large ideas and complex bodies of writing, his beautiful concern for the ongoing cultural and spiritual vitality of our people, and his creative verve in bringing together all kinds of differences in the name of community. One thinks of Northrop Frye, who exemplified this kind of extraordinary synthesizing across large differences in texts and locales and cultural investments in the Canadian context, and I can't think of a higher compliment to give him than a place in the venerable Frygian lineage. It's a relief, though, to see Zacharias embracing polyvocality and creative multiplicity after so much insistence on narrative unity, revised here to mean a complicated kind of continuity, both biologically and spiritually/ imaginatively based, that can – maybe? – reach across even traumatic "break events" and revisionary "new" choices in the life of a people, in the multiply inflected lives of people. Here is his eloquent closing statement, quoting from John Weier's *Steppe*: "'A story, once started, takes a million shapes. It lives in blood and bone, in mind and matter. One story builds another story.'"