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# Innocents Abroad: The Comic Odyssey of *Koop enn Bua opp Reise*

Al Reimer *University of Winnipeg*

Arnold Dyck's three comic novels in *Plautdietsch* — *Koop enn Bua opp Reise* (1942, 43), *Koop enn Bua foare no Toronto* (1948, 49), and *Koop enn Bua enn Dietschlaund* (1960, 61) — are without a doubt his most popular and best-loved works. And yet they have received even less critical attention than the rest of his work. While *Verloren in der Steppe* has by now been acknowledged as a fine *Bildungsroman* that can hold its own with other German novels of the type,<sup>1</sup> and while some of his better Low German short stories have been translated into English with critical commentaries,<sup>2</sup> the *Koop enn Bua opp Reise* series has been regarded more as light reading entertainment than as a literary achievement deserving closer study. What reader of these inimitable works has not chuckled over the comic setpieces Dyck does so superbly: Koop losing control of his car on the approach to the ferry and crashing into it; the travelers panicked by a visiting "bear" at their camp table; Bua getting hopelessly lost in the wilds of Saskatchewan; Koop being treed by a wild buffalo and refusing to come down; Bua enraptured by the monkey at Assiniboine Zoo; the *Strucklenda* eating watermelons in the middle of Chicago; and making a hilarious appearance at a church conference in Ontario — the list goes on and on.

While Dyck's inexhaustible comic scenes provide sidesplitting reading, they are also based on surprisingly sophisticated literary techniques. The *Koop enn Bua* books may seem artless, but closer reading reveals that like all good comic art they deal with human experience and behavior in ways that are at bottom serious and illuminating. My intention in this paper is to discuss the *opp Reise* books as literary art that achieves a level of thematic and symbolic significance in no way inferior to that of *Verloren in der Steppe*. Indeed, I would argue that there is in these comic masterpieces as much of the inner Dyck, of his attitudes, personal insights and ideals, as in his autobiographical *Bildungsroman*.

*Verloren in der Steppe*, moreover, provides a convenient starting point for a discussion of the *opp Reise* books. In a very real sense the comic world of *Koop enn Bua* can be thought of as a thematic development and symbolic extension of the lost village paradise so hauntingly portrayed in Dyck's High German novel. Hänschen Toews loves his little isolated steppe world, but he yearns to escape into a larger, freer world of experience where he can develop the artistic sensibility he possesses.<sup>3</sup> Now, if we regard Hänschen as a surrogate or alter ego of the author himself, we can say that he did get his chance to study art when he grew up, that he suffered the terrible trauma of war, revolution and cultural displacement, and like so many others came to the New World in hope mixed with trepidation, spending the rest of his life trying to find a viable way of living between old world lost and new world gained.

In the *Koop enn Bua* works Dyck gives us a series of characters who serve as partial surrogates or alter egos for a Hänschen grown up into Arnold Dyck: they include the "Russlenda" characters Jerje Berje and Peeta Wiens in Manitoba, Kjnals Niedarp in Ontario, Wellm Schult in Germany, and not least the ever-present ironic narrator himself. All of them, but especially Peeta Wiens, have a dark, melancholy side to their natures. They are all men who have been violently displaced from their Russian steppe homeland and are quietly trying to recover from the experience. And all have lost their innocence in the process.

Arnold Dyck was no different from other Russian-Mennonite emigré writers like Gerhard Toews, Peter J. Klassen, Peter G. Epp, Dietrich Neufeld, Fritz Senn and others, who tried to make an imaginative transition, with varying degrees of success, from their old-world culture to an alien new-world culture. If Dyck was more successful in making this transition than the other writers, it was because he found a creative way of combining nostalgic memory with living present. He used a Canadian setting for his *Koop enn Bua* series but peopled it with *Plautdietsch* — speaking characters who represented both old- and new-world Mennonite societies. Nothing is more striking in Arnold Dyck's literary works than the degree to which they grow out of the author's own experience and share common themes and central metaphors to form a remarkably homogeneous imaginative world.

And the core of that fictive world, its metaphorical *Uhrsprung*, so to speak, is the pre-revolutionary Russian-Mennonite farm village which Dyck delineates with such subtle brushstrokes in *Verloren in der Steppe*. That serenely pious and ordered village whose everyday spiritual-ethnic language is *Plautdietsch* is in a symbolic sense a pre-lapsarian earthly Eden which represents for Dyck a social and moral ideal against which other worlds he portrays in his fiction are always measured either explicitly or implicitly. In the literary sense, it is an almost pure pastoral setting in which life is simple, purposeful and good — devoid of hypoc-

ris, pretense and material greed. Peeta Wiens, reflecting on his uncle's orchard in Russia, calls it a paradise: "Blooss daut enn disem Paradiess kjeene Schlange weare."<sup>4</sup> ("Except that in this paradise there were no snakes.") Limited and confined this village is, of course, as all Edens must be, but it is a human world perfectly integrated with the natural world around it so that land, animals and people blend into one harmonious whole.

Admittedly, Dyck's village Eden can be regarded as the sentimental, nostalgia-evoked dream typically nurtured by the emigré dispossessed of his native home and cultural womb. As such, Dyck's "world of permanent childhood and innocence," as James Urry has called it in a recent paper,<sup>5</sup> does not truly reflect the complacent Russian-Mennonite world of privilege and affluence that was so completely destroyed in the fullness of time. But as a deliberately created literary image reflecting a moral and social ideal, the pastoral village is the vital centre not only in the *opp Reise* books but in all of Dyck's fiction.

Dyck's village society is built on trust, brotherhood, honesty and hard work and provides a social order that is stable and structured and only minimally hierarchical. It's people accept God and the church without question as a natural part of their lives, but display no emotional self-indulgence or pietistical fervor in expressing their beliefs. The pastoral village distrusts the city and considers modern technology as disruptive and threatening. The rich humanity of this close-knit pastoral world is best served by the warm, familiar *Plautdietsch* of hearth and horse corral. But it is a limited paradise in a cultural sense. For the higher forms of man-made culture and art — painting, music and literature — one must go to the outside world, as Hänschen knows he must.

That is Dyck's Mennonite pastoral ideal. In the *Koop enn Bua opp Reise* books Müsdarp becomes a modified new-world vision of Dyck's village metaphor to be contrasted to the outside world of cities with their complex cultural and technological societies. Müsdarp, literally "mouse village," is a more isolated, more primitive version of the Russian-Mennonite village. But it too is a place of natural innocence inhabited by simple and unspoiled *Struckforma* like Koop enn Bua. As the narrator puts it in the introductory section of the first *opp Reise* book, "Hier'ut ess dann nu aul too seene, daut dise Lied soo gaunss dijchtbie de Natua läwe. Oppenoat soo, aus dee oola Rousseau daut habe wull." ("From this it can be seen that these folks lived very close to nature. In a way, just as old Rousseau wanted to have it.") This is said with tongue in cheek, of course, but the reference to Rousseau's ideal of the "natural man" is instructive. As a metaphor, then, Müsdarp operates as a slightly ironic new-world counterpart to the old-world pastoral village. Life in Müsdarp, with its stones, scraggly bush, swarms of mosquitoes, and wild animals, may be hard but it too is a paradise devoid of snakes.

It is from this remote and crude Eden that Koop enn Bua and their friends venture out in ever-widening circles as innocents abroad on a quest for experience and knowledge, embarking on a comic odyssey that exposes them to an alien world full of wilderness and cities and strange people, an outside world they find exotic and tantalizing, often puzzling and sometimes threatening in its overwhelming variety and diversity. With them they take their Müsdarp innocence and sense of wonder, their rustic *Plautdietsch* parochialism: Bua, always jovial and eager to see new sights, to meet more people, to immerse himself in fresh experiences; Koop, on the other hand, traveling reluctantly, full of suspicion and veiled hostility, wearing his Müsdarp prejudices and cultural illiteracy like an impenetrable protective hide. Both are innocents abroad, but in opposite ways. Bua is ever the wide-eyed, inquisitive tourist devouring new experiences with the same gusto with which he devours *Repsbää* and *Plumemoos* at his beloved *Schwienstjaste*. Koop is an innocent in the most negative sense, afraid of new experiences, smugly avoiding temptation, full of xenophobia, and unable to learn much of anything from the outside world except what to dislike and avoid.

In all three works — *Koop enn Bua opp Reise*, *Koop enn Bua foare no Toronto*, and *Koop enn Bua enn Dietschlaund* — the quest motif is dominant and determines not only thematic and symbolic patterns but narrative structure as well. That means that the “plot” of each work consists of the trip itself, which is structured as a series of episodes, things that happen to the travelers on the road. An episodic structure is, of course, made to order for Dyck’s lively comic scenes, his ironic, even satiric set pieces. In symbolic terms, the first two books explore the New World (Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Chicago, Detroit, Kansas) in a pastoral context, that is, by taking Müsdarp and its values out into the world and measuring them against the prairies, parks, wildernesses, cities and people of the new world. In the third book, the trip to Germany, both Müsdarp and the New World are measured against the Old World. Germany, the cultural birthplace of the Mennonites, exposes all the naiveté, insularity and superficial culture of Koop enn Bua and the new world Mennonite society they represent. In the end even the innocence, vitality and potential of Müsdarp and the New World seem somehow diminished and dimmed by the comparison.

The first book, *Koop enn Bua opp Reise*, comes closest in form and spirit to the classic form of romantic pastoral comedy. The trip to Herbert, Saskatchewan, or “*Weltreis*” (journey round the world) as Bua calls it, is suffused with the sunny, spontaneous and energetic spirit of pure comedy. From beginning to end the trip unfolds in a benign pastoral setting with only occasional glimpses of darker wilderness and city worlds. The main problem for the travelers is their own ignorance of the world and how it works. They tend to be hampered by physical difficulties, usually

stemming from Koop's ineptitude or Bua's brash self-confidence: Koop can't negotiate the approach to the ferry, Bua stubbornly takes the wrong road and gets them hopelessly lost, they run out of gas on the empty prairies, they can't find a cabin for the night and get panicked by a "bear" — that sort of thing.

But the accidents and misadventures of the road are more than compensated for by the joys of discovery and the pleasant things that happen: experiencing the beauties of nature, picnicking by the wayside, swimming at resort spots, visiting their relatives in Herbert, exploring cities and parks, and so on. And always there is the sheer wonder of innocents abroad exploring the world for the first time. Crossing the border into Saskatchewan is like entering an exotic foreign country for them: they stand on the boundary staring in awe at the provincial road sign with its three sheaves of wheat. Even the cities, like Moose Jaw and Regina, are non-threatening and seem more like extensions of the green pastoral world than like the vast urban traps they blunder into on their second trip. When they enter Moose Jaw going the wrong way on a one-way street they are personally escorted to a safe street by a friendly policeman. In Regina, Bua, the driver, blunders into a funeral procession (he is convinced that it is a welcome parade just for them) and they wind up in a cemetery. Driving around with happy abandon, Bua takes them to the backdoor of the legislative building: "leewa too de Hinjadää emm Parlament aus too de Fäadää emm Jail" ("better through the back door into parliament, than through the front door into jail"), he quips, and is immediately ready to back up his words.

Coming back, they look forward eagerly to visiting Riding Mountain National Park and Clear Lake. Bua is convinced that he will finally get to see his first live monkey: "Bie am dreid dee gaunsse Park sitj omm siene Op" ("For him the whole park revolved around his monkey"). Koop, on the other hand, is once again bracing himself for disaster: "Hee jleewd nijch aundasch, aus daut doa sejcha wada irjend enn Jauma opp am lure deed" ("He could not believe otherwise than that once again some disaster or other was waiting for him"). Koop's expectation is realized, Bua's is not. Koop is stampeded up a tree when he meets a buffalo face-to-face, and has to be lassoed down by force. Bua has to wait until they visit Assiniboine Park in Winnipeg to see his monkey. But when he does he is moved to a sort of religious ecstasy: "Enn Bua stunt enn wea deep erjräpe" ("And Bua stood there and was deeply moved"). Indeed, the scene can be regarded as the symbolic climax of the trip, in which the female monkey and her baby, the city and the Müsdarp travelers, are integrated into a complex symbol of the pastoral vision that unites and sanctifies all creatures great and small.

*Koop enn Bua foare no Toronto* opens with the same four travelers again in a green pastoral setting, this time in the rugged, majestic land-

scape of northwestern Ontario. In the opening scene Bua is observed from a distance by two young students who can only conclude from his shape that he is some type of giant toad, that is, in a symbolic sense a natural if somewhat grotesque part of the setting. But the comic atmosphere here gradually darkens, becomes more serious and mildly threatening as they drive into the U.S., where they are swallowed up by the sprawling megalopolis of Chicago — Bua calls it “ditt fedaumde Baubel” (“this damned Babel”) — seemingly forever. They are overwhelmed by a tangle of skyscrapers, “medde mank dee lange Hiesa, dee doa Kopptje stunde enn mett’e Feet aun’e Woltje krautste” (“in the midst of those long buildings which stood on their heads and scratched the clouds with their feet”). They try desperately to relate these weird structures to the normal world of Müsdarp from which they come: “dee stunde nijch aus sest Jebieda stone, dee stunde äwarenj, opp’ne Oat aus wann eena Wonhus, Staul enn Schien opprejchte enn mett’m Schienenj no unje hanstale wurd” (“they didn’t stand the way buildings normally do, they stood up on end as though one would raise up house, barn and granary and set them up [in a line] with the granary end at the bottom”). It’s a topsy-turvy, crazy world that disorients them. As Bua proceeds nervously, Koop suddenly panics: “‘Jasch, Jasch, wieda auf!’ brellt hee uck aul looss, ‘wieda auf, Jasch, dee faule omm, dee Hiesa, dee stone aul gaunss scheef!’” (“‘Jasch, Jasch, move back!’ he roars suddenly, ‘get back, Jasch, they’re toppling over, the buildings, they’re leaning over already!’”).

The noise and density of the traffic also frightens them, but at least all the lines of traffic around them are flowing one way. Bua reasons that today must be the day when all the cars are driving south, and that tomorrow they will all come back again. The Müsdarp travelers simply cannot comprehend the complex order of the city. But just when they reach a point of near despair over this urban hell, lo and behold they spot something familiar, something that belongs to their pastoral world after all — watermelons. Their sanity is saved by watermelons! They stop and gorge themselves on the “fruit of paradise” as only Mennonites can. And Dyck underscores this unifying pastoral symbol with some gentle satire:

Wann daut too Arbuse kjemt, dann ess daut gaunss eendoont  
 wannea wää fonn Russlaund no Kanada jekome ess — 75 Joa, 25 Joa, 5  
 Doag; daut ess uck gaunss eendoont too woone Kjoatj wää aum Sinndach  
 jeit, Nuad-Kjoatj, Wast-Kjoatj, Süd-Kjoatj, Oost-Kjoatj — eendoont ess  
 uck, woo wää jedeept ess, Japs, Fluss, Schmaundkauntje — dee Arbus, dee  
 jlitjt aules ut enn fereenijcht aules.

(When it comes to watermelons, it doesn’t matter when you came from Russia to Canada — 75 years ago, 25 years, or 5 days; and it doesn’t matter to which church you go on Sunday, north-church, west-church, south-church, east-church — it doesn’t even matter how you were baptized, by hand, river or cream jug — the watermelon equalizes and reconciles everything.)

In the second half of the Toronto book Dyck's comic inventiveness seems to flag in places and he resorts more and more to a travelogue type of presentation as the Müsdarp tourists visit such places as Niagara Falls and Casa Loma and the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. There are still some wonderful scenes, though, like the one in which Bua commandeers the floor at a conference on "*Wehrloosijchtjeit*" in London, Ontario, and in his bastardized High German tries unsuccessfully to set everyone straight on this vital issue. Equally hilarious is the scene where the travelers park their car in St. Catharines, scatter in all directions and can't find it again. But these scenes soon give way to lengthy accounts of tourist attractions and pseudo-scientific lectures on anthropology and evolution delivered in High German. Even Bua's ridiculous questions and comments cannot prevent these scenes from becoming somewhat tedious.

The Toronto trip, then, while containing more surface reality, perhaps, and a greater variety of subject matter and literary technique than the first book, never quite achieves the pure magic, the sustained, inspired comic purity of its predecessor. The pastoral world and the outside world of experience which were held in such satisfying balance in the earlier book are at odds here. The sheer immensity and complexity of the alien society and technological culture to which they have been exposed have left them more dazed than comprehending.

The third and last of the *opp Reise* books, *Koop enn Bua enn Dietschlaund*, is Arnold Dyck's last published work, written when he was past seventy. It differs considerably in form, spirit and intention from the other two, although its general symbolic pattern is similar. Here Dyck reverts to the simple dialogue style of narration with which he had started the *Koop enn Bua* series in the *Steinbach Post* almost thirty years earlier. The entire account of the trip is narrated by the loquacious Bua in Teews's living room after *Koop enn Bua* get back from their extended exploration of Germany. With Bua as narrator and raconteur the book certainly has the lively tone and verbal flair required for good travel narrative. With his brash, inquisitive nature, eye for detail, passion for novelty and people, as well as his need for self-expression, he makes an interesting narrator, although his tendency to veer off on colourful and comical digressions is constantly kept in check by the practical-minded Teews.

What is missing in the book, however, is the ironic perspective provided in the earlier books by the narrator and Peeta Wiens. Bua simply does not have that kind of mind. He is a better target for irony than a user of it. And since the trip is described in retrospect it lacks much of the comic spontaneity and sense of immediacy that mark the earlier *opp Reise* books. To illustrate the difference we need only compare Bua's description of the monkey house in the Munich Zoo with the Assiniboine Zoo scene in the first book. Even as related by Bua the later one is little more than a mildly amusing tourist account. It has none of the marvelous comic

energy and naive sense of wonder that makes the earlier monkey scene one of the highlights of that book.

Another serious flaw in *Koop enn Bua enn Dietschlaund* is Dyck's almost undisguised didactic intention in this work. He seems determined to get the strongest possible contrast between his naive, culturally unsophisticated new-world travelers from Müsdarp and the wise, mellow old-world civilization of Germany. Why else the elaborate introductory section stressing not the charming idyllic aspects of Müsdarp but rather its remoteness, its sheer inaccessibility and unimportance — "wua de Welt aul mearendeels oppjeheat haft" ("where the world has ended for the most part")? Why else send only Koop enn Bua on the journey? Presumably, the presence of Teews and Wiens, both more sophisticated and experienced, would have blurred the contrast and thus undermined Dyck's intentions.

Be that as it may, this last trip takes Koop enn Bua, once again the innocents abroad, back to the land of their remote ancestors. The whole work is more sombre, less comical, and, surprisingly in Arnold Dyck's writings, verges on the morbid and sentimental in places. It has Koop enn Bua retracing their Mennonite origins in northern Germany, discovering the natural wonders of the Rhine, etc., and being introduced to the finer aspects of old-world art and culture. In one scene Dyck sketches an old-world German pastoral ideal by having Bua describe in glowing terms a sturdy, time-polished family farm on the windy coast of East Friesland. In another scene even Bua confesses that the crass materialism of the New World, which insists on regarding a new manure spreader as the greatest boon to mankind, seems unimportant when compared with the charming story of the Pied Piper or the tall tales of Münchhausen that have made people laugh and cry for centuries: "dann fang etj aun too jleewe, daut soone Jeschijchte de Mensche noch joo soo fäl Freid moake doone aus ons Mest, etj wull saje, aus onse Mestmachien" ("then I begin to believe that stories like that can give people as much pleasure as our manure — as our manure spreaders, I meant to say").

Peeta Wiens' cousin Wellm Schult and his daughter Gisela (Bua calls her "Jiesbrajcht"), are the patient, knowledgeable guides who take the two innocents by the hand in order to reeducate them. Schult is another of Dyck's partial alter egos who cherishes the old Russian pastoral ideal and who has, fortunately for him, rediscovered it by settling down in post-World War II rural Germany. Schult and his daughter take the aging Koop enn Bua (they must be at least in their late sixties by now) on an extended bicycle tour of the German countryside. The visiting *Strucklenda* certainly have their cultural horizons broadened, and they gratefully embrace such continental habits (at least Bua embraces them, while Koop pretends merely to tolerate them) as drinking cold beer in the summer heat, eating in restaurants and relaxing in German



*Gemütlichkeit* at the friendly *Gasthäuser*. Bua still shows flashes of his old form, as in the scene where he adopts a sly air of worldly skepticism when Schult tells him what the ocean tides can do and that the seawall they are looking at runs for 200 miles from Hamburg to Bremen. Bua gives German place-names humorous twists and keeps up a running verbal competition with the quick-witted Gisela.

More and more, however, Bua acts like a suitably impressed tourist and his account becomes conventional and matter-of-fact. He seems to become as interested in historical sites as in people. Gradually Müsdarp loses its identity in this setting, even in a symbolic sense. Schult lectures several times on the importance of retaining *Plautdietsch* and the rural way of life in order to preserve Mennonite identity. But there is something melancholy, almost depressing about the closing pages of this book, as though Dyck knew this was his valedictory and wanted to close on a serious, even portentous note. Gone are the old comic zest and irreverence. The symbolic quest has come to a solemn, almost despairing end, as though the pastoral ideal is now to be celebrated more as a museum piece, as a relic of the past found preserved among the ancient cultural artifacts of the old World, than as a living, thriving reality in the new World. Müsdarp is still the home Koop enn Bua go back to gratefully at the end of the journey, but somehow it seems to have lost something as a symbolic place, as a crude but vital prairie paradise.

That, in brief, is the thematic and symbolic schema of the three *opp Reise* books. I now want to examine briefly the main characters themselves, the "innocents abroad" who inhabit this fictive world and make it work as a comic odyssey of exploration.

Koop enn Bua, as we know, existed long before Dyck sent them on their travels.<sup>6</sup> As Mennonite country bumpkins they are ideally suited to this type of travel book comedy. As I have written elsewhere, Koop enn Bua are "carefully mismatched physically and temperamentally in order to heighten the comic contrast between them."<sup>7</sup> As a comic pair they represent "two basic sides of the traditionally rural Mennonite character or psyche;"<sup>8</sup> they compliment each other perfectly in a comic sense. In the early "Belauschte Gespräche," the two *Strucklenda* often argue each other to a frustrating impasse, although Koop can never match Bua's inspired rhetorical flights.

In the *opp Reise* books, however, Bua is by far the more dominant character of the two. While Koop retains his main characteristics of selfishness, bigotry, stinginess and fossilized prudery, he says very little; he becomes almost as laconic as Teews. Technically, Koop is the convenient straight man for Bua. On the other hand, Bua, constantly stimulated by new sights and experiences on the road, becomes even more garrulous and all too often, in the confined space of the car, talks his three companions into a glassy-eyed stupor. As Bua himself had once confessed:

"waut etj weet, daut well etj je uck fetale" ("what I know I've got to tell [others]"). Koop, though, claims he has learned enough and usually balks at exposing himself to new experiences. And yet, in a curious negative kind of way, his sourly disapproving, unadventurous and uncooperative presence on the trips, has the effect of reminding the others of the restraints of Müsdarp parochialism and conservatism, and to a degree even inhibits Bua's rash extravertism and puppyish gullibility.

Naturally, it is Bua who generates most of the comic episodes on the road. With his curiosity, ebullience, dynamic self-confidence and love of role-playing, he is at the center — often the cause — of every scene whether pleasant or unpleasant. Bua is a natural traveling man, a born tourist. As the narrator puts it: "Waut nu oba Bua wea . . . daut wea dee rajchta Maun toom Reise. Daut wea am lenjdhan aun too seene. Am wea de Welt . . . een eensja groota Duddelsack." ("As far as Bua was concerned, he was the right man for traveling. You could tell that just by looking at him. To him the world was one great big bagpipe.") But for all Bua's brashness and lack of caution, he is not without shrewd common sense and sensitive insight.

Bua's love of life and basic innocence are dramatized symbolically through his many encounters with water: not only does he love lakes and rivers, swimming and playing in the water whenever possible, he even falls into the water accidentally — a well in one case, a puddle in another. Water images, of course, stand for baptism, purification, regeneration, or simply for life itself. Water is also part of the green pastoral world. In *Koop enn Bua opp Reise* the happiest and warmest moments occur in scenes where Bua interacts with other people, men, women, and particularly children, by playing with them in the water. While sitting on the shore waiting for his turn in Wiens' bathing suit, Bua already identifies with the people disporting in the water: "enn [hee] lacht lud mett, wann'et wua waut too lache gauf. Eenjemol lacht hee uck, wann'et wieda nijch waut too lache gauf, aus daut am blooss soo lachrijch too Mood wea." ("and he joined in the laughter loudly whenever there was something to laugh about. And sometimes he even laughed when there was no other reason to laugh except that he was in a laughing mood.") After Bua gives a grandiose English speech in the water, the bathers are ready to elect "Mr. Fatty" to parliament. Later, in Clear Lake he is such a hit with the kids on the beach that their parents want to appoint him nursemaid and entertainer for the whole resort (Bua later claims that the people wanted to make him "Minister of Education" for Clear Lake).

Koop can never leave Müsdarp behind in his travels. He takes all his personal and cultural baggage with him wherever he goes. He hates water and avoids it whenever he can. Mixed bathing is anathema to him, as it violates his narrow religious code. And so, while Bua has fun in the water at their camp near Estevan, Koop stays in their cabin lamenting to

Teews that Bua in the water with women is the last straw — everything is going to the dogs with the Mennonites in Canada: “Weetst, Teews, mie kjemt daut soo fää, daut ess Tiet, daut wie wada ütwaundre. Daut jeit hia mett ons kjeenem gooden Gang nijch.” (“You know, Toews, it seems to me it’s time we emigrated again. Things are not going the right way for us here.”)

Next to Bua the most prominent character among the travelers is Peeta Wiens, “dee Russlenda.” Of all the *Russlenda* characters in Dyck’s *Koop enn Bua* works, Wiens comes closest to being a true alter ego for the author. He is introduced in the first *opp Reise* book and quickly asserts himself as a character who can hold his own even with Bua. In fact, Wiens and Bua, although very different from each other in temperament, get along very well, much to the chagrin of Koop who thoroughly detests all *Russlenda*. Wiens is portrayed as a friendly, well-informed man, but one who has suffered in life and whose past contains experiences he would rather not talk about. The innocent Canadian Mennonites know that Wiens’ life in the Old World has hidden depths, depths which they respect but don’t really understand. All they know is that after the Revolution he had wandered through the wastelands of Siberia for months as a fugitive before finally escaping through China. The experience has left him somewhat melancholy and taciturn, although with time he is getting to be a little more cheerful.

Wiens’ main technical function is to reflect the author’s own views, to add a serious dimension to the comedy through nostalgic flashbacks to his old Russian home and by making astute comparisons between the new world he finds himself in and the old world he has lost. At times his sense of loss is almost more than he can bear, as in the scene where he gets up early in the morning and walks out into the hayfield near the cabin where they are staying overnight:

Soo stoatj watjt dise stelle Morjelaundschaufft mett däm Heijeroch enn am dee Erennerung aun daut aundre Fletjstje Ead, woont hee lang emma fe siene Heimat jehooole haud; enn soo sea packt am daut, daut am rajcht dieslijch wort.

(So strongly did this quiet morning landscape with its smell of hay awake in him the memory of that other little patch of earth which he had for so long regarded as his home, and he was so moved by it, that he actually felt dizzy.)

Wiens’ tragic loss and hard experiences have not, however, made him bitter. On the contrary, his exposure to human wickedness and violence has made him all the more sensitive to the beauty and wonder of God’s created world and the creatures in it. For all his experience he has retained a curiosity and sense of wonder as acute as Bua’s. Of the four travelers he is best able to assimilate old and new experiences to the pastoral world he has chosen to live in, and is able to find a viable balance

between city technology and rustic simplicity. Wiens is always ready to serve as mentor, guide and informant to the others, particularly to Bua, but is tactful enough not to flaunt his superior knowledge and greater experience. He is the *Reisemarschall* with his maps and knowledge, and saves Bua from impulsive mistakes more than once.

On one occasion he proves to be a kind of wizard or magician who rescues the Canadian innocents from a situation in which they are completely helpless. When they run out of gas in the middle of the Saskatchewan prairie, Wiens sets out on foot with an empty pail to find some. While he and the others wait in the car Bua waxes sentimental and fantasizes the worst for their friend:

Jo, ons Wiens. Ons oama Wiens. Hee kaun fedarschte, ooda hee kaun fehungre . . . am kaun en Boa teriete, am kaun een Beffel opp'e Heana spetje, am kjenne de Wilw oppfräte. — Enn wann hee daut fleijcht uck noch aules üthoole enn darjchsate deit, waa weet, dann jriepe am schliesslich noch dee Indians enn ladre am läwendijch auf . . .

(Yeah, our Wiens. Our poor Wiens. He may die of thirst, or hunger . . . a bear may tear him to pieces, a buffalo may spike him on its horns, wolves may devour him. And even if he can endure and survive all this, who knows, the Indians may capture him in the end and skin him alive.)

To cut a long story short, Wiens, after walking west for many miles while the others have fallen asleep in the car, finally comes back with a pailful of gas; but lo and behold he comes back not from the west but from an *easterly* direction. The mystery, or joke, is never explained, but Bua, for one, is convinced that Wiens is a magician who has walked right around the earth, and Wiens lets him think so. Joke aside, the point made is that while the innocent *Struckforma* are sleeping, the man of experience finds a way of rescuing them in the wilderness.

In *Koop enn Bua foare no Toronto*, Wiens becomes an even more dominant character and spokesman for the author. In the visit to Niagara Falls, Wiens, in one of the most important thematic revelations in the series, contrasts Niagara Falls as a symbol of peaceful democracy with Siberia as a frightening wasteland inhabited only by wild animals and even wilder people who represent the new Soviet society:

Dee Menshe, daut wea daut Schratlijchste jewast. Dee Mensch, dee nia rusche Mensch, dee wear'et jrod, dee am enn dee Wildness jejoacht, dee am derjch Sibieren hetse deed.

(The people — that had been the most horrible part. The man, the new Russian man, he was the one who had chased him into the wilderness, who had driven him through Siberia.)

How different is Niagara Falls, Wiens reflects, where people from all over the world get together in amity, equality and civilized self-control. In Wiens' mind this is a cultivated garden, a symbol of integration

between the beautiful and awesome forces of nature and the man-made world of civilized society and nature artfully cultivated. Most important of all, it is an egalitarian, non-hierarchical world where the powerful and the famous rub elbows with ordinary people. True greatness (*Jreese*) in this cosmopolitan garden is not limited to "presidents" and "prime ministers" whom the world recognizes as great, but also includes those who have an inner greatness, like scholars and artists: "dee Wissenschaftla enn Forscha, dee Dijchta enn Kjenstla. Ferr aulem dee Dijchta enn Kjenstla." ("the scholars and scientists, the writers and artists. Above all the writers and artists.")

Another important spokesman for Dyck in the *opp Reise* books is the ironic narrator himself. His warm, gentle "derche Bloom" irony, his knowing air of self-deprecating whimsy is the most magical ingredient of all in adding realism and perspective to this comic odyssey. But Dyck's narrator is also a serious commentator who at times seems to be speaking directly for the author, as he does in complaining with a tinge of bitterness about certain people who kept poking him in the ribs until they had finally poked his *Reiseschult* out of him and people like him.<sup>9</sup> Writing, he admits in the same passage, is not a very lucrative profession. He also seems to be speaking for the author when he comments in the first *opp Reise* book on people who think that all that matters in life is to work and get ahead, and who have never learned to relax and enjoy the beauties of nature. When such people *do* discover nature, it can become a religious experience for them:

Enn see senn gaunss fewundat enn äwarauscht, woofäl deepa daut packt. Soo deep, daut se daut goanijch mett Wead saje kjenne. Enn see bejriepe nu, daut uck kjeen aundra an daut haft mett Wead saje kunnt . . .

(And they are lost in wonder and astonishment at how much more deeply this moves them. So deeply they can't even express it in words. And now they understand why no one else could express this to them in words.)

This reverence for nature, almost a form of pantheism, fits in very well with the pastoral ideal that is at the heart of Arnold Dyck's *Koop enn Bua* series.

In summary, then, what I have stressed in this paper are the more serious themes and symbols which give depth and resonance to the endlessly entertaining comic episodes that are strung together in these books in what at first may appear to be a somewhat random order. The comedy, I would argue, hilarious and attractive though it be, does not exist for its own sake but is even more important as an entertaining vehicle for the serious and significant thematic and symbolic matter with which Dyck is trying to touch the minds and hearts of his Mennonite readers. That Arnold Dyck chose comedy and gentle satire as literary modes probably indicated the basic optimism and idealism in his nature,

his firm belief in the fundamental goodness of human beings and in the unperverted and unspoiled pastoral world his literary imagination created and peopled with characters like Koop enn Bua and their friends.

The Mennonite innocents who travel abroad in these novels can and do benefit from the experiences they undergo in the outside world. And that outside world, for all its dangers, its greed and blind faith in technological progress, is still relatively benign, its evil and demonic forces never allowed to come to the fore. In Dyck's fictive world it is not so much evil that threatens innocence as it is the ignorance that comes from lack of experience. Dyck's characters — and this surely makes them unique in Mennonite literature — are never shown to wrestle with the usual problems that plague a society that thinks of itself as Christian. Dyck's Mennonites, full of foibles and prejudices though they be, come across as essentially decent, honorable, morally and ethically stable folks whose spiritual sustenance seems to come more directly from the land they love and inhabit than from any church or specific theology or beliefs.

Arnold Dyck seems to have taken Christianity and the Mennonite church as givens, and never makes them an issue in his fiction. In his fictive world everything is portrayed and developed in strictly human and social terms. That is not to say that there is no religious atmosphere or feeling in the Koop enn Bua world. Dyck is a profoundly moral writer, and most particularly so in his comic writing. But he tends to dramatize faith as already achieved and quietly at work rather than dramatically fought for or over. Perhaps this very point illustrates the difference between a writer whose literary vision is essentially comic, in the literary sense, and one whose vision is essentially tragic. The comic writer postulates a relatively stable, sane world out of which sense can be made and in which things can be set right if one has the necessary faith and goes about it the right way. Serious comedy like Arnold Dyck's, and I choose the adjective deliberately, is sanative and deeply humanizing: it opens up the moral pores, expands the ethical lungs and allows one to breathe in a fresher, more human air than real life provides.

Koop enn Bua and their Müsdarp (whether or not it still exists or ever has existed in the real world) will always remain for Dyck's readers a cozy refuge away from the complex, confusing and threatening world to which we are all condemned: an innocent little garden in the wilderness of North American society and culture. Some may argue that a comic pastoral vision such as Dyck's should be dismissed as sentimentalized, oversimplified, irreverent and perhaps finally irrelevant. I do not share that view, unless one is ready to dismiss innocence and natural grace themselves as trivial or irrelevant. Koop enn Bua and their friends are indeed "innocents abroad" but in ways that include not only their innocence of the world, but their spiritual innocence as well, and that is an innocence we all share as we confront the ineffable mystery of life itself.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>See Introduction to *Collected Works of Arnold Dyck*, vol. I, ed. Victor G. Doerksen and Harry Loewen (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 1985), pp. 9-10.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>*Verloren in der Steppe*, pp. 181-82.

<sup>4</sup>My quotations from the *Koop enn Bua* books are taken from the ms. typescript of what will be volume II of the new edition of Arnold Dyck's works as cited above. Rather than give ms. page references or references from the now superseded original edition I have decided not to give any.

<sup>5</sup>James Urry, "Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth and the Mennonite Experience in Imperial Russia," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, vol. 3, 1985, p. 30.

<sup>6</sup>Arnold Dyck first ran his *Koop enn Bua* sketches in the *Steinbach Post* (1932-34) and then in his literary journal *Mennonitische Volkswarte* (1935-38).

<sup>7</sup>See my "The Creation of Arnold Dyck's 'Koop enn Bua' Characters," *Mennonite Images: Historical, Cultural and Literary Essays Dealing with Mennonite Issues*, ed. Harry Loewen (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press Ltd., 1980), p. 264.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>The insensitive way in which the *Reiseschult* or transportation debt incurred by the Russian Mennonites who immigrated to Canada in 1920 was collected by the CPR left many of them angry and humiliated.