
Style and Theme in Rudy Wiebe's *My Lovely Enemy*: Love, Language, and "the big trouble with Jesus"

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All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already. But the cares we have to struggle with every day: that is a different matter.

— Franz Kafka
"On Parables"

Rudy Wiebe's novel *My Lovely Enemy* focusses on love, both human and divine. It grapples with the problem of human understanding of divine mysteries. How can the great religious mysteries be expressed in human language? As the title of the novel suggests, one way is through paradox. Other ways are through metaphor and parable. All of these are methods used by Jesus to translate his perfect understanding to human beings. Wiebe uses these techniques too. I am not suggesting that Wiebe is trying to translate some divine understanding of his own to less enlightened readers. As a Christian, Wiebe wants to understand the word of God; as a human being, he has difficulty understanding it completely; and as a writer, he is concerned with the failure of language to express the transcendental. These are the central issues of the novel.

Because language is structured in such a way as to mirror our concept of "reality," it fails as a tool for discussing anything beyond this reality. Thus, we rely on paradox, metaphor, parable, fiction — in short, on art — to express our attempts to explore beyond the boundaries of our human limitations. *My Lovely Enemy* uses all of these techniques.

The novel moves on several levels of reality and these shifts serve to confuse the reader. The time sequence of event, and even the events themselves, are not easy to understand. Yet Wiebe's blending of realism, surrealism, and magic realism is integral to the theme of the novel. It is

impossible to approach divine mysteries in non-metaphorical language. There is no concrete way to express questions of this magnitude. As a character in Wiebe's *The Blue Mountains of China* says, "That's the big trouble with Jesus . . . He never gives you a thing to hold in your hand" (227). In *My Lovely Enemy*, Wiebe tries courageously and successfully to use fallible human words to express ideals which are impossible "to hold in your hand."

In order to succeed, Wiebe needs readers whose minds are open to the possibility of a linguistic exploration beyond the confines of physical reality. He faces the task of making his readers aware of what he is doing, and it is interesting to note how he does this. As he creates the atmosphere of the novel, he gradually acclimatizes his readers to it. In his opening pages, he begins to give his readers warning signs of the kind of experience they may expect.

The main character, James Dyck, is an historian. He deals with "completed facts" over which he can look "very much as we must imagine God himself looks upon them: Knowing (within the uncertainty of human limits and the mutability of its records) all" (3). But the events of his own life are not completed facts, and he wonders at

the way in which life happens before our eyes all the time, where we can't really understand who is doing what, or why because the "doing" humans are still alive and so always becoming something — or perhaps unbecoming. A living stream never at rest and forever moving into an unknown land. We have memory of course, and expectation — what more can we have with the present the slit it is between past and future . . . we ourselves are tangled in these memories and expectations, we always are. Life our one long journey to our long home. (3)

These opening pages set the tone for the novel. Throughout, Wiebe plays with sequential time in post-modernist fashion. Events do not occur necessarily in sequence. The link between cause and effect is often obscure. Like James Dyck, the reader often "can't really understand who is doing what, or why?" (3).

When Gillian first steps into James' reading room, she is virtually a total stranger to him. Yet within seconds, it seems, she is sitting on his knee, and soon they are "kissing, in each other's arms, tentatively as children and tasting for the first time, really, to the contemplated texture of each other's mouths moving beyond the tip of sensation" (17). Not only is this passage grammatically confusing, there does not seem to be a logical sequence of events that leads up to, and so explains, this sudden love. And yet, in a sense, there is nothing "unrealistic" about it. Wiebe seems to be suggesting that it is not possible to reconstruct the past to make it explain the present, that it is perhaps our "realistic" concept of linear, sequential time which is the fiction. By taking his readers beyond the conventional concept of time, Wiebe moves them towards the realiza-

tion that a deeper level of understanding than usual will be required in the strange world of the novel to come.

When Jesus suddenly appears before James in a Calgary hotel room to discuss love and sex, Wiebe is not attempting to convince his readers that this actually did, or could, happen in the world as we know it. This use of magic realism is a literary device employed for the purpose of expanding the boundaries of what we believe to be possible. Conventional, non-metaphoric language is not equal to this task. In their conversation, Jesus and James discuss the problem of language, which is a function of the limitations of human understanding. When Jesus appears, the very first question James asks him is: "How can a human being live the good life?" Jesus answers, "You ask like that, and it can't be answered" (79). As their conversation continues, James, imprisoned in his human perspective, continues to ask the wrong questions. He wants to know about love, but he cannot seem to get beyond the topic of sex. Defensive about his position as an adulterer, James wants to forestall censure by claiming that Jesus does not understand what it means to be human: "It's easy for you to talk, did you ever love a woman completely?" (80). In his dogged pursuit of concrete answers, James ignores Jesus' answers. James wants to get right to the point: "Weren't you a virgin?" (85). Jesus replies, "Heavenly Father, what does 'virgin' have to do with anything? . . . As if another human being could dirty you!" (85). Jesus never really answers the questions to James' satisfaction. Their discussion moves from the subject of love to the subject of language itself. At one point, when James asks about physical love, Jesus answers with a "story":

"To love is to be . . . Love is exquisite health. Being human is not body and spirit the way the Greeks thought, to be human is to be dust living by God's breath. That breath, spirit gives our body substance, otherwise we're only dust" (83).

James replies sarcastically, "which is also a metaphor, of course" (83). They discuss James' frustration at not being able to understand. Jesus comments, and James' replies and questions verge on the comic:

"My story of breath and dust is too simple . . ."
 "O don't worry, it's tangled enough, so you say to love spiritually you have to love bodily?"
 "There is no breath without dust, there is no body without spirit."
 "Can you answer my question!"
 "Can you stop thinking them so stupidly?"
 "It's the only way I can think them!"
 "Then think different!"
 "I'm trying."
 "Try a little harder. The story we live by is not so flat. It is in God we live, and move, and have our being. You limit God's breath too much, to one custom's way of doing and thinking" (84).

James has trouble understanding. His language allows him to speak of "complete love" only in terms of sex. This is, perhaps, a clue to the pervasive sexuality in the novel — it is the closest metaphor for passion that Wiebe can find.

James wants to "live the good life;" to reconcile the various elements of his life into one meaningful whole; to bring together all of his loves in one good and beautiful way. As it is, his loves are separate, compartmentalized. His life is divided among the women in his life: his sister, mother, daughter, wife, and his paradoxical "lovely enemy," Gillian. His love for God seems to have been thwarted by his relationship with his father, whose "rigid inspection for sin" (122) filled James with guilt and bitterness. Al Reimer's review of this novel lists the various kinds of love that James' relationships represent. A look at this list reveals a possible reason for the compartmentalization of James' love: "spiritual love . . . maternal love, marital love, parental love, romantic love, adulterous love" (16). To what extent are these actually separate categories, and to what extent are they merely semantic labels, artificial distinctions created by the necessity of language to label everything? With which of these loves did Jesus mean for us to love our enemies? Tied down by language to these limiting definitions, how are we to fathom the love of God? Jesus tells James, "God is passion; he is hopelessly, endlessly in love!" (138). "No more than you can quite imagine the limits of light moving into the limitless universe can you imagine the boundaries of love" (139).

In his second conversation with Jesus, James learns that the split between body and soul was originally not part of Christ's message. Jesus tells him that medieval Christians "got mixed up with Plato. They always fixed that awesome gulf between spirit and matter, you advance spiritually when you mortify the flesh" (135). He also learns that God is not necessarily male, "it's just the human situation, the necessary language that splits everything male/female" (136). Jesus invites James to explore: "with God there are many, an infinity of answers if you like, and anything you can imagine is possible with Him and even a few things beyond that" (138). James' concept of God as a sort of larger type of his rigid, punishing, domineering father begins to fade. He opens up to new possibilities and begins to wonder: "Am I being tempted by Christianity?" (169). He begins to feel that "what I do not believe is not enough for me" (169). He dares to explore further, and Wiebe dares the reader to follow him.

The first and second sections of the novel are separated by a two-page chapter entitled "The Black Bridge." Magdalene Redekop has written that this passage "is horrific precisely because it deliberately fails to bridge. It isn't even a hyphen. It's the black hole at the heart of the novel" (11). Perhaps, however, the passage is not intended to refer to a narrative

bridge which links the two parts of the novel. In no way does it address, directly, any concrete connection between these parts. It is not so much a bridge as an invitation to bridge. In other words, the "crossing over" must be done by the reader, not from one narrative sequence to another, but from one way of seeing and thinking to another. Some mystical event occurs at the bridge "at the moment before dawn," which suggests awakening: "Perhaps then it is also true that at that moment the bridge itself is unnecessary; that a human being could cross the wide valley on the mist, on the final amazement of that incredible, terrifying song" (183). This is a note to the reader that the novel is now moving into another world, a world to which there is no concrete bridge — we must "cross the wide valley on the mist" (183).

Wiebe's experimentation with form may disorient the reader, but that is what the novel needs — a "disoriented" reader. Pierre Spriet writes that *My Lovely Enemy*

tends to perturb and to confuse the reader and at the same time to spur him into seeking a higher level of awareness. It signals that it cannot be read as another piece of traditional fiction. The reader must be deprived his usual landmarks if he is to be led to the discovery of another world no longer governed by the laws of verisimilitude or limited by the norms of logical sense. (61)

"The Black Bridge" is a good example of this technique, and it occurs just before the two most "difficult" chapters of the book.

In "September One," James and his wife, Liv, and Gillian and her husband Harold come together on a strange beach where some things seem to be resolved. Spriet comments on Wiebe's "systematic deconstruction of logical language":

It amounts to a refusal of rational coherence. If a logical sense cannot be established, it is because the text forbids it. When the writer makes warm sand and cold snow function as doubles (p. 224), he is deliberately making it impossible to read the novel, in its narrative and discursive organization, within the codes of so-called realism. (59)

If the reader has been reading, so far, on a literal level, with all of its attendant implications about adultery and sin, the surrealistic landscape of the last part of this chapter will put an end to that. The characters speak to each other with an honesty that, even without the surrealism of the landscape, removes this section from the realm of realism: it is too good to be true. On a literal level this scene depicts a sort of decadent orgy. But on the level on which Wiebe is teaching us to read, it is a scene of tender and beautiful exploration of the possibilities of love. James' conversations with Jesus have opened his mind to the infinite passion that cannot be understood or expressed on a literal level. Wiebe uses sex partly because in this vision of an all-encompassing love he wants to make sure that

sexual love is included. But the sex is largely metaphoric, and Wiebe is constantly reminding us that this is metaphor — this is art. At times, his visual description of scene seems to dissolve; the reader cannot picture it. At one point, James, Liv, Gillian and Harold seem fused in a tangle of arms and legs. Pronouns are ambiguous. It seems that Harold, or someone, is making love to someone else (234). The ambiguity is deliberate. As the reader ponders the passage, trying to untangle the meaning, trying to discover just who is doing what and why, he or she may begin to feel, foolishly, a little bit like James in his conversations with Jesus: bound to the literal, doggedly seeking a concrete explanation for that which cannot be explained concretely, and too preoccupied with sex. Once the reader discovers that it is impossible to piece this scene together logically, the realization dawns, once again, that this is all metaphor. In this metaphoric realm of innocence and love, James is healed: "To love totally, without debauchery. Nothing heals like it, as the man said" (235).

The love in "September One" can be seen as the power behind the resurrection in "September Two." The rising from the dead of James' mother is, perhaps, the strongest shock of all for the reader of this novel. W. J. Keith writes:

I defy any reader to anticipate or to come to accept [the ending] without considerable inner debate. For myself, the first time I encountered the closing pages, I read them with a sense of shock, almost of outrage; the second time, a sadder and a wiser man, I read them literally with tears in my eyes. (30)

Wiebe does weave hints of what is to come into the funeral scene, but, as Keith suggests, what is to come is so unexpected that the reader cannot see the hints on the first reading. In the funeral procession a young great-granddaughter, reminiscent of a flower girl at a wedding, carries crocuses. Although not traditional funeral flowers, they represent on the prairies new life. They are usually the first flowers of spring, blooming even through the snow. Yet the reader expects a spiritual resurrection, not a literal one, even though "in Christ all things are possible."

Some readers may object to such a literal portrayal of resurrection, feeling that it is in poor taste, or unconvincing. But, again, magic realism serves a purpose. Wiebe gives us, in "September One," a metaphoric representation of human beings experiencing the divine love. Here he shows them experiencing the miracle of resurrection. Placing this event in a realistic setting stresses the fact that it *is* a miracle. It is a miracle of love. During the funeral service, James silently objects to his cousin's prayers, which speak of death being "slain by the sword of the Lord," and other violent images of destroying death. It is at this point that James comes to a full awareness of what he has been searching for throughout the novel: "only love can so destroy" (251).

The love that James experienced in "September One" grows out of his conversations with Jesus, in which Jesus urged him to expand his awareness. This love can be seen as both a gift from Jesus, and as the only possible destroyer of death. Through love, James is enabled to witness the immortality of the soul. This connection between the last two chapters may be read as an artistic interpretation of the Biblical statement that "God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

The novel may seem, in places, incomprehensible; Wiebe is exploring various ways of expressing mysteries which are usually beyond language, and although he succeeds in bringing them closer to us, he is not pretending to be capable of expressing them completely. He gives us no conventional ending in this novel; we do not find out what happens to James on the literal level of the plot. For example, there are no conclusive answers to James' marital predicament, because the ending transcends such literal concerns. There are larger issues involved, and Wiebe is not attempting to provide any final answers. He is providing the questions: how can we understand the word of God? how can we understand divine love? how can we love? Wiebe has written that "all great art has a profoundly moral purpose if in no other sense than that it purges us from pettiness, from smallness of mind and outlook" ("Artist as Critic," 43). In this sense, the questions raised by *My Lovely Enemy* make it a profoundly moral book.

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