
Separation and Transformation: Tradition and Audience for Three Mennonite Poets

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I

This essay grows out of curiosity and frustration. I was curious to explore the work of some young poets who were born Mennonite but who rarely if ever publish in Mennonite magazines: to discover what in their work is explicitly or implicitly Mennonite, and what has led them to distance their work and sometimes themselves from their religious tradition. I was frustrated by the lack of interest I have felt from Mennonite people and publications, with a few exceptions, to poetry in general (and my own work in particular, I must admit).

Throughout this essay I write above all as a poet and a Mennonite. Indirectly, and no doubt amateurishly, I will also enter the territories of theologians and historians and sociologists. The poet's business is to find linguistic analogues and equivalents to the complexities of experience. Those analogues are complicated, inherently subjective, and resistant to tidy analysis, but what poets tell us does connect with much else in both the experiential and scholarly realms. While the limits of space and of my own knowledge will keep me from more than hinting at many of those connections, in what follows I have attempted to suggest how the work of three young Mennonite poets may lead us toward a deeper sense of what it means to be a Mennonite today.

I began with two poets I knew at least by name, and explored their work and my own with the problems stated above in mind. There are many other young Mennonite writers who are worth serious study, and I make no comparative judgements.¹ In this essay, however, it seemed worthwhile to be intensive rather than extensive. When I had said what seemed essential about Ratzlaff and Rensberger, and traced the most striking continuities of their work and my own, my pages were full.

Keith Ratzlaff grew up in Nebraska, Eric Rensberger in northern Indiana, and I spent my early years in central Illinois. The coincidence of our all having done graduate work at Indiana University within the last ten years binds us together, but more intriguing are strands of imagery and yearning that link our writing in ways I did not suspect until I began to examine it closely. While the tensions between a nonviolent lifestyle and mere passivity, between the urge to labor and the desire to live comfortably, face many North Americans today, the pacifism and separatism of the Mennonite tradition make those tensions especially acute for Mennonites seeking to live in urban, secular society without simply merging into it.²

In a recent essay Elmer Miller argued that earlier markers of Mennonite identity have largely lost their force. In our pluralistic society separatism itself is valued and welcomed, so that the suffering of persecution has disappeared. Dress and language markers have also largely been abandoned among mainstream Mennonites, and even nonresistance and pacifism, after Gandhi, King, and Vietnam, have ceased to be distinctively Mennonite. Today, Miller claims,

The final citadel has been surrendered and there is no longer a reasonable basis for holding on to nonresistance and nonconformity as unique marks of Mennonite separation. Mennonites clearly have joined the mainstream of American denominational churches with the result that the term separation has lost its conceptual and theoretical significance. There is no longer a contextual basis for providing the concept with existential meaning.³

The problem of identity engages most North Americans with any capacity for reflection. In studying these poems, however, I became aware of a particularly strong undercurrent of yearning for a distinctive and separate identity. In the work of all three of us, tensions and desires coalesce into a pattern of what I have called "passive transformations": radical, apocalyptic changes, almost always imagined or predicted rather than realized, which occur not through the poet's action but through the inbreak of some miraculous but secular agent. These transformations, posed either as a way of establishing a new type of separation or as the result of the loss of separation, and both feared and desired, provide powerful images of a people in the grip of change.

II

Being a poet in North America is curiously like being a Mennonite. Both involve membership in a distinctive minority with a tightly knit though geographically scattered membership, and both tend to assume a certain vague superiority based on the intangible benefits of the group's sensibility. Small groups are not necessarily more elite than large ones, but if you are a member it is tempting — and comforting — to think so.

It is not easy, however, to be a member of more than one minority group at once, particularly if one of them involves something you *do* and would like to be able to sell. If only one in two or three hundred Americans buys a book of poems or a literary magazine in a year, a substantial number still get sold. If only one in two or three hundred Mennonites buys a book of poems, then the Mennonite poetry market is small indeed. Mennonite publications reflect this reality; the 1985-86 Herald Press catalog, for example, contains hundreds of titles but not a single book of poems. The nearest approach is a collection of German hymns with no music but with "verses printed in poetic form." Even *Festival Quarterly*, which aims to explore "the art, faith, and culture of Mennonite people," seldom prints poems or reviews books of poems. An editor writes that "Much of our audience finds it foreign; we refuse to use poetry as filler, preferring instead to do an occasional spread . . . we've gone cautiously."⁴

Other magazines, of course, often do use poetry as filler, although even people of flexible standards might find it difficult to accept some of what appears as poetry. Usually the poems are meditations on nature or personal or generalized suffering, almost inevitably resolved on a note of optimism and reasserted conviction. Occasionally they approach the bizarre; my favorite example is this grotesque section from Thomas John Carlisle's "Whispers and Stirrings":

God laid me in a deep ravine
but then cram-packed it in,
yet left a shovel in my hand
to scoop away my sin.⁵

Young Mennonites interested in poetry tend to outgrow the church publications quickly, although *With's* creative arts contest provides an important outlet for high school and college writers and the now defunct *forum* regularly published poems. In recent years the most serious, or at least ambitious, writers have tended to go through the graduate schools, and their networks become those of their literary peers: little magazines and presses, writers' conferences, readings, letters. A few, like myself, fall into teaching jobs at Mennonite schools and find the church back in their daily lives. Yet in spite of this daily Mennonite contact I had thought my poetry, although not anti-Mennonite, was not especially close to the Anabaptist tradition either. When I studied the work of Ratzlaff and Rensberger, however, both of whom claim less formal connection with the church than I do, and then looked again at my own poems, I realized how subtly pervasive a tradition can be.

III

Keith Ratzlaff published his first poems in *With*. He attended Bethel

College and Indiana University, where he studied literature and creative writing. His chapbook *Out Here*,⁶ set in a rural countryside relentless in its sparse vistas, evokes a landscape familiar to many Mennonites. But Ratzlaff makes us see the land in a new way, as suffused by a great indifference:

As a rule there's nothing here
to see. Our fences ride away
on land that couldn't care less.
We wait for something to stop
and defy the horizon
somehow for the roads to come back.⁷

This section from the title poem shows not only the starkness and simplicity of the old farmers and their countryside, but an emphasis on lack and absence that pervades the collection. "All winter we prophesied," the narrator tells us, "but birds/ straggled in all spring, miraculous/ as weeds and we didn't see." We hear of Marlow who dies on the track because he doubts there's a train coming. Here, we discover, doubt itself is "the certainty of our lives," and the people firmly expect that the miraculous will not arrive:

It's like that. When we talk about the river
we mean water running away. When we listen,
it's for the one cracked second
when the clapper hits the church bell
before the sound loses itself
toward whatever direction God is.

Only the second when clapper strikes bell seems meaningful, and the last line shows both caution and fear in its careful imprecision. In this secularized, homogenous society the past yields only thin nostalgia and the future only fear; the desire for faith persists, but the people are curiously insensitive, unable to recognize and respond to the miracles that do happen.

Many poems focus on the hope of a miraculous, transforming change that will somehow restore a violated order. In "Outside Hutchinson, Kansas" a woman hears of salt mines "ambushing farms from below," and it seems right to her, hopeful, "a prophecy/ so balanced and careful it must be right:"

For every rock the man has pulled
from the fields there is a pocket of air,
for every pocket a direction to fall. (12)

Religious language and images pervade this poem and the book as a whole. Here the dominant image is the fall, with its intimations of sin,

judgment and apocalypse, but the woman responds with a resignation that is almost satisfaction yet quite without automatic pie-in-the-sky piety: her hope is of a *natural* order restored through the disruption of the human.

Transformation coming from below is also the theme of "In a Wet Season," although in this poem the speaker is a farmer who still resists it. He sees things sucked down into the mud, and goes around to rescue the shovel, the drill, "the tractor, the baby, the porch/ and the house. Today I'll save myself" (23). This farmer, who is patient enough to watch "a tree limb sink, sucked down/ knuckle by knuckle," endures. He watches ants "all holding messages/ they don't understand either." He muses on "the one who must control all of this," whom he envisions as "the ant big as God," and the chat about the farm he and the great ant will have someday.

Ratzlaff celebrates this farmer's patience, his effort, and his capacity for homely if not orthodox religious reflection, all traits that seem recognizably, if nostalgically, Mennonite. In other poems he warns against impatience and indifference, as callous farmers like Dan in "Field Burning" find themselves suddenly vulnerable. Dan refuses to "lift a finger in honor of the wind" until it swings around to drive fire into his new pickup. The next morning, he sits in the cafe "looking over his shoulder/ toward the door where the wind kept sneaking in" (22).

One fascinating nexus in the English language and in Mennonite thought concerns pacifism and passivity, nonviolence and nonresistance. Throughout the book Ratzlaff juxtaposes action and passivity, and active people generally turn out to be rash and sometimes frankly destructive. "Tearing Down the Santa Fe Depot" works a variation on the Biblical theme of tearing down barns to build bigger barns; with the depot gone, Wayne can build more bins and circle his trucks more easily. The speakers, a collective "we" as in the title poem, can only muse on the depot's history and "hope Wayne knows what it is he's doing."

An even purer example of destructive activity is Charlie in "Gophers," who is almost a caricature of D. H. Lawrence's pure American soul: "hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer." Charlie hates gophers, shoots wildly at them out the window of his "rudderless Chevy," and can't see what the males see in the females. His hostility is so intense and unbalanced that when he turns his car over he simply wriggles out the window and wobbles off down the road

hollering at the ditch, sniffing
sort of, and beating at anything
in the weeds that moved. (13)

The speaker judges Charlie only by implication; he does not glorify him, but he does not try to change him. Charlie is presented as a given, a fact of

life, with the suggestion that as long as he's not beating at *us* we need not — or perhaps cannot hope to — change him.

The poems do not lack moments of celebration. In "My Daughter After an Illness" the speaker sees his daughter as "the saint of distance" who blesses the birds with "Him/ who is able to keep you from falling . . ." The daughter doesn't care "that what I own can't go as far/ as she sees," and seeing her the speaker also realizes that he doesn't care about his unmowed fencerows, but is content to celebrate being "part of something/ unselfish, moving in as many directions as air" (18).

This turning loose of selfishness, desire, even responsibility, begins to connect with the urge toward apocalyptic transformation in the last poems in the book. "In the Garden" again is full of buried religious language. Its speaker doesn't expect much in the heat, but he appreciates the words of the feedstore man: "The blessing of a man with eyes/ at home in his hands/ is the only one worth having" (25). The poem approves the letting go of desire and culminates in a vision of a vegetative paradise: "From my fingers,/ if I were quiet, flowers would rise/ that do not want to change the world." Although the poem suggests the speaker has not yet reached this state, the impulse toward the *via negativa*, the mystical path of quietness, withdrawal, and passivity, is unmistakable.

The last poems in the collection are "The Grain Elevator Explosion" and "The Hawks We Have Never Seen": both are apocalyptic, filled with what *could* happen but hasn't yet. Rollie's only satisfaction in the first poem will be "knowing he was right" as he comes "swimming down,/ any wings he thought he had/ husked off" (26). The hawks in the final poem are nuclear missiles; the speaker insists they "will never come here./ Nothing we own is enough/ to draw them" (27). Yet he waits, and imagines the sudden inbreak that "will change everything": and unobtrusively the long wait of Christians for the Second Coming fuses, in a complex and compelling way, with the long suspense of the nuclear age. The apocalypses of joy and terror, the poem suggests, share more than we wish to admit: one root of our fascination with both is a yearning for change, any change, that would lift us out of the weary, effortful round of life "out here" on our own.

The poem also crystallizes what seems to me the peculiarly Mennonite ambivalence of the entire collection. On the one hand "Nothing we own is enough/ to draw" the hawks, but on the other there persists the desire to achieve some kind of notice, some kind of recognition, some kind of change. Ratzlaff's work couples a yearning for transforming change with a deep and traditional Mennonite caution, a reluctance to commit too soon or assert too much, and a deep suspicion of action or involvement with anything that smacks of the "world." Thus the images of transformation are set in the future conditional and the passive: they

happen from outside, demanding no activity, no responsibility, and almost no response.

The voice of these poems is warm, humane, realistic, intelligent, humorous, and compassionate. Yet it is also a voice that sees only dangers in action and only threat in possibility; the mindset seems almost fanatically nonresistant, determined to insist on the virtues of unassertiveness. These poems rest on a paradox that underlies much that is Mennonite: action in the world is suspect, those who act invite danger and destruction. Yet we cannot escape a yearning for change that we dare not try to bring about ourselves. So we wait, and hope, not knowing what we hope for.

IV

Eric Rensberger's *Standing Where Something Did*⁸ is a more explicitly autobiographical book than Ratzlaff's, beginning with the memory of "Early Mornings" in northern Indiana, "country so flat/ you could roll a marble from Middlebury to Millersburg." Like Ratzlaff's, however, Rensberger's language is at once secular and subtly, yearningly religious, continually confronting issues of doubt and belief.

"Foot-washing" presents the tin bowls and towels familiar to many of us, the ceremony and its mysterious emotion:

One would kneel
and lift the other's white feet
into the bowl. Thick fingers splashing
the water. After each washing
they stood up and kissed
each other's cheeks. The old ones
cried. The boys watched.

The last lines explore the puzzlement of one who comes along too late to be *in* the tradition, one who sees it fading as the old men weep but the young do not. Rensberger recognizes the power of the experience but knows he will never feel it himself:

I never did it. They stopped
the year I was baptized
and I always wondered
just why the old men did weep?

Like Ratzlaff, Rensberger begins with the confrontation of loss and moves into a search for compensating transformation. In the first half of this book, however, transformation most commonly occurs in the form of identification with animals. In "Buzzard" the speaker watches the bird weave "A web/ for all the dead, cast everywhere," and is "pulled toward her rise,/ coasting wings fixing my eyes/ higher and higher." An even

fuller identification occurs in "Flying With the Crows": they have "bad hearts, cry remorse/ and make special pleas," and so does the speaker. He flies with them in a kind of naturalized confession, a cleansing:

I go flying on their backs
down the open side of the pasture,
slack-mouthed and trembling,
clutching hard black feathers,
my bad heart pouring out
it whoops and caws.

The old categories may have blurred, but the conviction of sin surely persists here, in however naturalized a fashion. For Rensberger the animals come to represent a purer, more primitive, less thought-full life, one that he celebrates in poems like the ones above. In "My Ancestors," however, the animal life is explicitly connected both to his rural Mennonite forebears and to a part of himself that he remains ambivalent about. "My ancestors abound within me," the poem begins, but quickly focuses on the one who was "stupid," who let the world

make him think he knew where his place was
like a beast coming up to its stall
satisfied. He had warm sides, an open mouth,
and a hollow place in the head
he filled up with devotion and trust,
simple trust, a trust so stupid
he thought the world
was everywhere and always a blessing.

Rensberger finds numerous paradoxes connected to this "simple trust." He recognizes its origins in his tradition and its persistence in himself, whether he likes it or not. On the one hand, he acknowledges that this "stupidity" makes it possible to accept the world, to feel at home in it. Yet he also sees it as dangerously innocent, a trust that is neither deserved nor rewarded. The speaker may intermittently feel and desire such trust, but his skepticism is far too great to pose such simplicity as an unambiguous good. Elsewhere in the book the buzzards, crows and turtles are bearers of uncivilized wisdom, but here the beast is domesticated and "satisfied" with its stall, its "place" all too clearly a prison. If we fill up the "hollow place in the head" with devotion and trust only, we will have no room left for the learning that this world requires, especially the learning that, unless we do great violence to the language, it is not "always and everywhere a blessing." The sophistication and self-awareness that make writing the poem possible make the old blessed stupidity impossible.

Yet there is a further level of irony: the "stupidity" itself may be an

illusion born of nostalgia, of the desire to "return" to a simplicity that almost certainly never existed. This ancestor is far more real as an aspect of the speaker, worth respect though not worship, than as a historical person. We may guess that the ancestors also felt this urge to simple, stupid acquiescence to the world, and also the need to resist that urge.

The final poems of *Standing Where Something Did*, like those in *Out Here*, invoke transformation and apocalypse in ways deeply revealing of the author's Mennonite roots. In "The Temptation" the speaker steps into "the good round enclosing" of a tree and refuses to emerge; the last stanza hints at a kind of transcendence, even deification, that comes from giving up mobility:

Lay at my feet the food or
ornament you think will call
me out. My joints are knobs
of years and will not move.

The last three poems are short, vivid fantasies. In "A New World" the speaker waves to find "it's all different," and the poem couples fascination with fear:

Even the dog and cat are changed
to rare beasts with the smell
of a far off jungle hanging on their feet.
Trembling, I stagger
to wash my face, putting off
the moment when I look in the mirror.

In "Flatland" the lush Midwest landscape become a hellish dream of smoke and fire, where the corn's dream name is the "black swollen tongue" of death. For my purposes, however, the most fascinating and revealing poem is "Gnaw," a shrinking fantasy akin to the science fiction movie *Incredible Shrinking Man*, but set in a forest "of sky high trees." The speaker begins by telling us "I may have made a mistake here, / drifting into this area." He left his "homey clearing" only half a day ago, but "the farther I go, the stranger it is." He sees a giant hawk, a mouse "like a bear," gets more and more nervous, until the poem quite abruptly ends:

The trees get bigger and bigger,
the air clearer and more desperate for my lungs.
Out of nervousness, I stop to chew
on the roots of a tree too large
to walk around.

What makes this unpretentious poem remarkable is its seemingly artless embodiment of what seems to me a crucial though rarely spoken

myth of Mennonite culture: the myth of powerlessness, helplessness, smallness in the face of mainstream society. Once the speaker enters the world beyond his "homey clearing," his "shrinking" becomes inevitable, just as we fear that the "real world" is too large and powerful to confront, let alone act upon. Here the hawks are so fierce that when they tangle with clouds it is the clouds who lose. When the speaker finally stops to gnaw nervously on the root, the tree itself is too large even to walk around. His nearly total insignificance is revealed both by his size and by the quirky futility of his gnawing, yet he is still presumably shrinking.

This situation is in one sense universal. We all leave home, we all fear the Big World. Its treatment, however, is quite distinct from the usual American myth of the indomitable hero. In *Incredible Shrinking Man*, the main character survives fierce battles with cats and spiders, and finally sets out, armed only with a straight pin, to confront and defy the mysteries of sub-atomic worlds. But here the speaker can only resort to futile, pointless activity; he gnaws at the root just to do something, but he knows it will make no difference. His only chance to survive is to hope the hawks and even the mice do not notice him.

I do not know how "conscious" this poem may be. But it seems to me a striking evocation of one reaction to the loss of distinct Mennonite markers of identity traced by Elmer Miller. It provides a memorable image of the nightmarish consequences of the simple, irreversible action of leaving "home" for a world of massive and uncontrollable forces, and demonstrates the powerful persistence of the ideal of separation and the fear of what giving up separation may entail, even for a self-declaredly lapsed Mennonite.

V

In working with Ratzlaff and Rensberger's books I became fascinated with the images of retreat from the world, of passivity, and of transformation that I found there, and when I looked back at my own manuscript in progress I was surprised to find signs of those same themes. It seems worthwhile, then, to explore some of the ways I have myself, often half-consciously or unconsciously, worked with ideas and images I have argued here are distinctly Mennonite.

"Chainsaw Inquiries," a poem in a somewhat unusual form, begins from the point of view shared by Heidegger and the Amish: machines change the way we think and act, they have moral implications. The poem may be "true" about chainsaws in some dim way, but its questions and answers aim to penetrate the technological mindset, the one that uses and consumes things and people. I sense a secret, dim feeling of unease and impending disaster that troubles even the most successful consumers:

What do chainsaws love?

— Lumber, dust. Live wood pulled down
by the dying. Sun on last year's leaves.

Do chainsaws share a hidden fear?

— Rocks. Nails. A few, the wise, fear
their appetites, and that what they chew
does not nourish them.

If chainsaws dream, of what?

— Of hands that never tire, tanks
that never empty. Forests
rising quick as grass. A heaven
where silence never falls.

Do chainsaws share a hidden grief?

— Not that their eating draws nothing
into balance. Not that they leave level
what stood upright. But that they cannot see
what they kill, that they cannot keep
what they kill. That they cannot
feed themselves.

I find myself attracted to this kind of social criticism, but I have come to realize that it poses the danger of a stance of "humility" that becomes its own arrogance through its assumption of superiority. Not until graduate school was I in a situation where the majority of the people I saw every day were of "the world." I gradually came to see that I had never thought non-Mennonites were quite real: of course I knew that they had all the physical attributes, but their problems did not seem serious to me except as abstractions, issues, and I tended somehow to assume that they were *deserved*, the logical result of a lack of moral earnestness or some such fatal flaw. During those years, as I worked, talked and argued with people born and raised without the church background I know now is mine for life, like it or not, I discovered two things. I found that those people were exactly as real as I was, their problems and desires, strengths and failings, just as intense and individual as my own. And I found that many of them seemed to miss, sometimes unconsciously, the sense of stability and purpose that my background, however ambivalent I was about it, provided.

The business of how to imagine my relation to the larger world persisted, even in my dreams. Along the way I made two poems out of dreams of strangers. The first is "The People You Meet":

They are nondescript
almost anonymous
you can't get straight exactly

how many there are
 or what you are doing here with them:
 they live in a half-finished house
 on the edge of some town
 you've never seen. When you come
 they are in mourning
 and though you don't know
 who is dead
 it does not matter:
 standing with them
 in the bare-studded kitchen,
 eating their stew,
 you grieve too.

I do not know whether to read this poem simply as an expression of liberal guilt or as one of compassion and human solidarity; it may be finally a matter of ideology rather than poetics. I have never been impressed by sincerity as a measure of literary merit, and I make no claims for the merits of this poem. The compassion and shared grief of the final lines still feel real to me, yet a year or two later I wrote a quite similar poem that pulls in a very different direction. Titled "The Children in the Dream," the poem again deals with strangers, but this time they are in my house; I suddenly find they've been using it for who knows how long,

sitting around, driving the car
 when we are gone, taking showers.
 They are children . . .
 they wonder what else
 they could have done.
 I tell them I'm not used
 to sharing my house and things
 with strangers. They don't care.
 They wait for what's next,
 doing nothing but unhappily
 surviving, knowing
 nothing but their rights
 and how useless they are now,
 trapped in someone else's dream,
 bound to be abandoned
 when the rain stops
 and a little light comes
 nudging through the curtains.¹⁰

Here possessiveness outweighs compassion, at least until the last

few lines: the first impulse is outrage, which lasted almost all the way through the dream, and the concern for the children's situation which surfaces in the last three stanzas came almost entirely in the period of revision. I don't know which of those emotions is more true of me, more real; perhaps the truth is that both are present, but I have to work harder at the second. Also worth noting is that the compassion here lacks an outlet in action, unless the poem itself be considered that action. Regret is certainly present, empathy perhaps, but nothing is changed.

Yeats said that out of the quarrel with others we make rhetoric, but out of the quarrel with ourselves we make poetry. One of my self-quarrels has concerned a main theme of this essay, that of separatism versus engagement. I have felt strongly both the temptation to retreat from problems that seem overwhelming and the contrary urge to do something, anything, to confront them. After hearing a friend in graduate school interviewed by one of my writing classes, freshmen who were baffled by his insistence that he loved junk more than almost anything else, I wrote a poem titled "I Fall Through, or Junk Food":

What is it in the way
the crowded days pass,
leaving us hungry for any edge,
sliced on tin cans, pinned
to box scores and obituaries,
stopped halfway to sympathy when we realize
it could have been us, but wasn't.

There's not call for alarm,
no one to call;
we all learn the names
to spell at night, but
it does no good to love or to hate
the twentieth century. Forget
the bat that sleeps in the storeroom,
the leaves clattering down the sidewalk.

The real accumulations,
the ones we must contain,
compose, settle, are elsewhere:
out in the landfills, stinking
or rusting or just sitting there quietly,
shattered but stiff, beading the rain,
ready for thousands of years of this.¹¹

The "we" in "Junk Food" is a social voice, one that aims to be prophetic but is not separate from mainstream society. The poem attempts to deflect attention away from the romantic, "poetic" bat and

leaves of the second stanza to the "real accumulations," to the usually ignored consequences of industrial society. There is no demand for a return to a simpler life, no real suggestion of a solution. Yet the image of the broken plastic, passive but persistent, ready to last thousands of years in its junkyard exile, seems in a convoluted way to connect with the fading image of the Mennonite "quiet in the land," enduring and thriving by keeping their distance. Put to very different use, the image persists.

In "The Dream House," which ends most recent versions of my manuscript in progress, the myth of transformation is mingled with the myth of progress. "In the thinning hills/ we make our changes," the poem begins, "endless developments of/ the rich, beautiful, and good." The poem reflects my ambivalent loyalties: on the one hand to unspoiled nature, to the fir trees "slashed for sewers and power lines," and on the other to the honest aspirations contained in human building:

our workmen already
are framing the spaces of
your dream house, the one
that costs everything you have
ever made or imagined,
so far beyond you only
a master can even describe it,
so eloquent and firm
in its geometry that it
articulates all you never
quite knew you wanted:
inside you will move
as crisp and gentle
as a tree in the light wind
after rain.¹²

I struggled considerably with how seriously I could take the central word-play of this poem. I still am not sure I trust the transformation of technology, carpentry, into something capable of making a *literal* dream house. In earlier drafts the end of the poem was much more cynical, emphasizing the hollowness of such promises and concluding with sarcastic mock-advertising language about "the price of money going higher." Yet something made me conclude that the final image of the crisp, gentle tree was genuine, whatever the source. While I use simile rather than metaphor, I think the impulse here connects strongly with Rensberger's in "The Temptation" and Ratzlaff's in "In the Garden." We all feel the urge to recover an ease and perhaps an innocence that is no less powerful for all our awareness that it will never happen in this life. Although we all know that the only time truly without struggle is after

death, the metaphor of transformation, especially into something alive yet stationary like a tree, provides a powerful image for our yearnings. Trees seem a goodly compromise, living yet mindless, still responsive to the wind and the seasons but free from the agonizing choices and responsibilities that come with our mobility and our freedom.

Note also the separation implicit in the final vision of the tree. It is enclosed, sheltered in the house, safe within a structure that manages to suggest, perhaps contradictorily, both nature and society at once. To be in the world but not of it, to be within the house which is within the suburb yet to be somehow set apart, to preserve a uniqueness in the face of a society that insists *everyone* must somehow be unique: such is the dream the poem invokes.

The urge for a life without struggle implicit in all visions like this may be a universal one; there is a literary and mythic tradition of imagined transformations at least as old as the *Odyssey*, and Mircea Eliade traces the desire to break out of the wearisome progression of time and duty through many cultures and religions in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*.¹³ But I think Mennonites, with their tradition of separatism and nonresistance, have yearned for it with more intensity than most. Certainly in the poems I have explored here that desire breaks through over and over again. Surely it also connects to the sense of powerlessness of Rensberger's "Gnaw": we have chosen not to be separate from the world, we have found its evils as always too massive to change, and we must struggle now to re-imagine our relation to a society that offers tolerance, material success, even admiration from some quarters, but not the harsh clarity our ancestors defined themselves against. Accustomed to marginality, we shrink from responsibility for social change; yet we cannot stop dreaming that it might somehow happen.

VI

Artists are the antennae of the race
— Ezra Pound

Why aren't these poems more widely known? To my admittedly partisan eye they seem nearly free of the "difficulty" almost everyone seems to feel connects with poetry these days. They are far more "realistic," surely, than *Dynasty* or *Rambo*; they have natural language, real people, honest emotion, believable and important moral problems. They are difficult in other ways, however. They demand much of the reader, they refuse to confirm the easy convictions, they question what many prefer not to question. In college someone criticized one of my poems in a newspaper editorial by claiming the poem "afflicted the comfortable, but not in the right place." The Mennonite comfortable, like those everywhere, wish to choose their afflictions. They can be quite at ease with the problems of others, with famines and hurricanes and droughts. They can

take serious and sacrificial action to ease those problems, and I would not minimize what has been done. But the problems that poets have always seen, and tried to remedy through the strange, indirect medium of the poem, are those too close, too subtle and too threatening for us to want to see them clearly.

Another problem which my small and unscientific sampling suggests is a tendency for relatively secularized writers like the three of us here not to submit to Mennonite publications. Keith Ratzlaff gives two reasons, the first the nature of Mennonite publications and audiences:

I simply don't think the audience of *The Mennonite* or *Festival Quarterly* or *The Mennonite Weekly Review* or *Mennonite Quarterly* are interested in poetry. They want meditations . . . Menno pride themselves in thinking about 'searching' for values, but poets, whose responsibility is to literally search for a stance to life, simply can't find the stance artistically within the Menno publications I'm familiar with.¹⁴

His second reason is more personal and career-centered: "It makes a difference, too, if I *want* to find a niche in Mennonite circles . . . Right now I'd rather see [my poems] in front of the Iowa audience than in front of people who want to see them because I come from Henderson, Nebraska, and am related to other Mennonites."

Rensberger writes simply "I have never submitted poems to a Mennonite publication," although he also acknowledges a problem in conceiving his audience:

Many of my poems are accessible to a "general reader," but some are not perfectly understandable, I think, except to someone who has participated in that extraordinarily gentle obsession with God's working in the individual heart that is part of growing up Mennonite.¹⁵

I have felt this dilemma as well, and feel it more urgently the longer I work at Mennonite colleges. In Ratzlaff's terms, I feel my task as a poet to be the search for a stance to life; but I also feel that most Americans, Mennonite or not, are virtually closed to a search that contains real suspense and tension and concludes in something other than comfortable orthodoxy, religious or secular. Face-to-face, I can convince (or coerce, in my classes) people to take poems seriously, to hear and read them as a rich and rewarding form of experience. But if I want a wider audience for my poems I am almost forced to appeal to the widely scattered group, largely poets themselves, who buy and read little magazines and chap-books. "Normal" people tend to react to poetry with the same aggressive humility I have been accusing Mennonites of: they feel it is somehow "beyond" them, they don't think themselves capable of understanding it, they fear they will look like fools if they try. I don't think they are right, but they are not all wrong either.

Poetry has been a minority art for a long time. Perhaps we should

not complain about being a remnant of a remnant; it takes little yeast to make good bread. On my most optimistic days I hope that my mingled fascination and frustration with my tradition, with its beginnings in radical reformation and its present institutionalization, is a re-emergence of the original impulse to rethink in concrete and particular terms what it means to be human and to worship. But as we seek to invent and imagine what it means to be Mennonite in these yeasty and perilous times, we can little afford to ignore anyone whose antennae may be more sensitive than our own.

Notes

¹A beginning list of other worthy young Mennonite poets might include David Waltner-Toews and Pat Friesen, both Canadian; David Rensberger in Georgia; Loren Friesen at Goshen College; Shari Miller Wagner at Indiana University; and Anne Ruth Ediger Baehr, whose "I Am Dancing With My Mennonite Father" appeared in the summer 1985 *American Scholar*. Goshen College's Pinchpenny Press has published numerous collections of poetry and fiction, mostly by college students, in the last fifteen years.

²For a tongue-in-cheek treatment of this problem, see *The Muppet Manual: The Mennonite Urban Professional's Handbook for Humility and Success* (Intercourse, Pa.: Good Books, 1985).

³"Marking Mennonite Identity: A Structuralist Approach to Separation," *Conrad Grebel Review*, III (Fall 1985), pp. 251-263.

⁴Phyllis Pellman Good, personal letter, May 5, 1982.

⁵*Purpose*, (May 10, 1981), p. 5.

⁶Pitchford, N.Y.: State St. Press, 1984.

⁷Ratzlaff, p. 9. Further references in text.

⁸Bloomington, In.: Ink Press, 1984, n.p. All poems by Rensberger are from this source.

⁹*Kansas Quarterly*, XV (Winter 1983), p. 148.

¹⁰*Indiana Review*, V, 3 (Autumn 1982), p. 44.

¹¹*Indiana Review*, VI, 2 (Spring 1983), p. 6.

¹²*Mid-American Review*, XI, 2 (Fall 1982), pp. 44-5.

¹³Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press/Bollingen, 1954.

¹⁴Quotations in this paragraph and the next are from a personal letter, Sept. 29, 1985.

¹⁵Quotations in this paragraph and the next are from a personal letter, Oct. 3, 1985.