
Rudy Wiebe's Frieda and Peter Epp's Agatha: Narrators and Narrative Technique in *The Blue Mountains of China* and *Eine Mutter*

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In an interesting and scholarly essay entitled "The Significance of 'Words and, Above All, Voice' in the Fiction of Rudy Wiebe,"¹ Herbert Giesbrecht quotes Rudy Wiebe on the art of story telling. Wiebe, he states, sees it as both a moral and aesthetic challenge to recreate a chronicle from the past which will give "meaning and life to us as a people, as a particular people."² "Consciously building a story is my way of trying to get at those big questions."³ Giesbrecht goes on to make the following perceptive observation about Wiebe's use of narrator and narrative technique in this process of story building:

And the imaginative recreation of this kind of compelling story from the past, particularly when the story necessarily involves a good deal of oral tradition as it does in Wiebe's major novels, requires a sensitive and flexible handling of both voice and viewpoint, in the treatment of individual characters *within* the stories and also of the narrators *of* these stories. The alert reader of Rudy Wiebe's novels learns to listen carefully to "sound and voice," in his endeavour to comprehend their further reaches, or finer nuances, of meaning at many points.⁴

While Giesbrecht goes on in his essay to make many more telling observations about Wiebe's narrators and his use of voice, he doesn't once mention the significance of the voice of Frieda Friesen in *The Blue Mountains of China*. Here, if anywhere, is the prime example of Thom Wiens's discovery in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, namely, that "words

faithfully spoken and transmitted by one means or another can do much to keep our knowledge of the very life and destiny of a people alive and authentic."⁵ Frieda Friesen's voice has a purpose other than to merely illustrate "the distinctive qualities of Mennonite Low German dialogue,"⁶ as Giesbrecht seems to imply in his brief comments on *The Blue Mountains of China*. Hers is the authentic voice from the past, the record of memory, the history of suffering, the background voice against which Samuel Reimer's "voice" is heard later. It is the voice of compassion which antedates the voice Samuel Reimer hears, a voice concerned with a smaller world but nevertheless as genuine and as credible as any of the others in the novel.

Wiebe's elderly female narrator perfectly exemplifies the oral tradition. In creating such a narrator Wiebe may owe something to Peter Epp, an earlier Mennonite novelist. In his novel *Eine Mutter*, published in 1932,⁷ Epp uses an aging Mennonite matriarch as his sole voice, the voice through which he relates the stories of numerous individuals, all of them members of the same extended family. Wiebe's and Epp's narrators have much in common although they are also significantly different from one another. Wiebe's narrator, like Epp's, has "lived long"⁸ and has spent much time remembering the past and wondering, in an innocent way sometimes, what it all means. Both recall the past in a haphazard way, one recollection leading to another with which it is often only tenuously connected. However, both storytellers adhere to a loose kind of structure; despite their ramblings they usually proceed chronologically and the events they recount follow one another more or less sequentially. This is the simplest and most honest way to tell a story. Events are related as they come to mind, without any conscious attempt to order them according to their importance.

Both narrators are keen observers and have the ability to call to mind details which others have long since forgotten or didn't even notice at the time the events transpired. It is through being remembered that these details become all-important. Thus Wiebe's *Muttachi* in recalling the funeral of Lena Toews remembers that she "would say things mostly about flowers; she never said about anything else. How nice they were, and clean and fresh just like God had said and they had been in the garden of Eden. One night she died in sleep."⁹ This is a far more personal and more touching tribute to the deceased than was the actual eulogy: "At the funeral they said only three things about her life: she was born in Fürstenland, Russia in 1846, she was confirmed in 1863 and she died August 23, 1902."¹⁰ Epp's narrator likewise remembers details which others would not have noticed or remembered. Agatha Boschman-Neufeld (she married twice), or "Agatchen" as she is always called, pays an analogous tribute to a childhood lover when she recounts, by means of similar Edenic imagery, how this suitor brought her a gift of fruit as a love offering many years earlier:

The next Sunday Abram did not come to our house but our David spent most of the day with him in their garden. It was late autumn and the fruit had already been harvested. Here and there an apple or a plum could be seen hiding among the last leaves. It was these apples and plums that the boys spent the entire afternoon gathering and toward evening David brought me a large kerchief full of fruit. From Abram, I was told. He hoped I wasn't angry with him. This fruit was the very last of that summer and it was for me.¹¹

Both narrators are disarming in their simplicity, although they can be philosophical too in a rustic way. When confronted with the inexplicable they take refuge in the comfort of their religion. Frieda Friesen repeats the same pious words again and again: "What I know is it comes from God, strength and sickness, want and plenty."¹² Agatha can be just as pious and simplistic, especially when she faces a decision on the question of whether or not to migrate to America: "The Almighty God who has sustained and protected our people thus far will not forsake our children in the future,"¹³ she tells her brothers when they accept her advice to stay. Yet when she remembers the fate of some of her descendants Agatha finds it more difficult to accept it as coming from God. Recounting her grandson's strange disappearance during the Great War, Agatha repeats the lament of her daughter expressed years earlier in a letter from Ohrenburg. The words, through repetition, also become the words of the narrator:

Everything seemed to lead, without our knowing it, to this unhappy event. Was this meant to be the end of all our hopes and dreams? Were all our hopes false and illusory from the beginning? Why weren't we given some warning of what was to come? Didn't all the signs indicate instead that we might safely journey down the road we took, even though it now turns out it was the wrong road? If the right road and the wrong are so much alike, if there are no signs warning against traps and dangers that lie ahead, how are we poor mortals to find our way in this life? Perhaps we never will understand. Then all we can do is to quietly carry our crosses when they are laid upon us.¹⁴

Both narrators comment on the unpredictability of human events. The following exchange illustrates one such moment in Wiebe's novel. The conversation takes place in Paraguay but recalls Russian Mennonite history:

In the evening we drove home. The horses trotted and my man said, "To think, all those Friesen men, all such strong men, killed so terrible. And the women had to see it and live, and try to live."

I still couldn't say anything; Johann, driving, said, "Well, here's one Friesen left over. That's sure."

"You're a Friesen two times," my man said. "So just be careful." I looked at him; the moon was bright but he wasn't smiling.

That's how it is with the world: who can ever foresee how.¹⁵

Epp's Agatha comes to a similar conclusion as she contemplates the death of her nephew Abram:

They placed the remains in the wagon and returned home slowly. The children waited in the yard and Netchen on the *Beischlag*, their eyes expressing both curiosity and horror . . . A crude coffin was hastily constructed and poor Abram was buried without the usual public ceremony.

If anyone just a few years earlier had predicted that this boy who was so promising would come to such an end, we would all have said, "No, no, such terrible things can't happen." But now we have seen that there is nothing so terrible that it can't happen and when it does happen, no matter how terrible, we can endure because we have no choice in these matters.¹⁶

These elderly female narrators are closely associated in both novels with the theme of migration, with new beginnings. Frieda Friesen has pioneered in Saskatchewan as well as in Paraguay. Agatha Boschman-Neufeld has experienced it all more vicariously through her sister Tienke's ordeal in America and her daughter's much happier life in Ohrenburg. Both use vivid imagery to describe the desolation that greeted the first settlers. Frieda Friesen at one point recalls her first sight of the landscape near Swift Current: "There were no grain fields. I remember the sun was going down and the wagon tracks just went out between a few houses and into the prairie."¹⁷ Epp's Agatha repeats her daughter's recollection of her first sight of what was to become her new home, "on the lonesome barren steppe which . . . stretched on and on . . . with only two long furrows to tell us where the street would be."¹⁸

Wiebe's matriarch, like Epp's, also questions the wisdom of migrating. On this matter, however, she questions indirectly through younger spirits like her daughter Esther or through her husband who wonders, on his deathbed, if their children will ever blame them for exposing helpless infants to such harsh conditions. "But you don't bother yourself with that," her dying husband tells her. "We were the parents. Maybe we were wrong, maybe we were right, but we thought we couldn't raise our children when they took the German and the Bible lessons away in school. Maybe we were wrong, maybe we were right, but we believed it. Here we have land, we have quiet here; peace and quiet. They're old enough now; now they can decide."¹⁹

Epp's Agatha grudgingly approves new settlements in Russia but only if they are close copies of their mother colonies.²⁰ To migrate herself to another country, another continent, is beyond her imagination. For her such migrations are too threatening to an established pattern of life, even if that pattern of life is changing as a result of the pressures of industrialization in her native country. She can accept migration for her children but not for those of her generation. Years later she has no regrets about the momentous decision she and her brothers took when they

chose to stay in Russia in 1875, a time when so many of her people were leaving: "When I think back now on forty years that have passed since then I'm still convinced that, under the circumstances, we did the right thing. We could never have foreseen all that has happened since. Only a few of our children actually stayed in the mother colony."²¹

Both narrators vividly describe scenes of parting with loved ones. Both take comfort from their simple religious convictions during such moments. Frieda describes such a scene when she remembers their departure for Paraguay:

Heinrich took us to Altona and we sat on the train overnight where Esther and her Dennis came for a little while and at morning left. To start my mother drove along with us the few miles to Gretna. We never met again on this earth; nor my father. Only half his face could smile the last time we saw him. But we have the everlasting hope of the halls of heaven where parting and tears will not be.²²

Agatha, as she bids so many of her kinfolk farewell, imagines her father and other of her ancestors witnessing the scene from those same "halls of heaven:"

Now all those loved ones lie in their graves, unaware of the restless stirrings of our people, unaware of their children's migration to lands from which they will never return. Perhaps they look down from their new home on high and see all our striving, our running hither and thither, and smile sadly when they see our suffering, our labour, and our endless wandering as they wait for that great day when all of us, wherever we are, will finally arrive at our eternal home.²³

Both matriarchs keep vigil at the deathbeds of their husbands.²⁴ Both also describe scenes of death which do not affect their immediate families or people but which nevertheless move them to compassion. Frieda Friesen remembers a scene from the war between Paraguay and Bolivia:

In September 1932 there was a war at the waterhole of Boqueron, 50 kilometers from our colony. It lasted all month and there was no rain. In the evening we could hear the cannon. Sometimes night and day they hauled wounded with wagons through Schoenbach to the railroad and over 5000 Paraguayans ended that month. They said they never took prisoners or counted Bolivians. Most weren't killed in the battle; they just didn't have water.²⁵

Old Agatha calls to mind a similar scene:

I've always been amazed by the capacity we humans have for suffering. This ability to suffer and to love actually seems to increase with age in spite of the fact that our other powers decrease and decay. Even as I say this I can't help remembering a scene in Barwenke many years later. It was when the Whites and the Reds were fighting for control of the village. I

stood on the street with the children watching a regiment of White soldiers ride out with their rifles and artillery to attack the Reds who were dug in on a hill just outside the town. A few hours later I saw them return in their wagons, the horses panting and sweating, their heads lowered as they pulled their loads of men, exhausted, wounded and dead, all covered with dust and blood. The smell of gunsmoke, of death, filled my nostrils.²⁶

Both narrators comment on their own loquaciousness. When Frieda Friesen returns from the hospital, December 16, 1948, her tongue healed of cancer, she says: "I was happy as a child for Christmas and so was my man, Johann. And talk — well, my tongue was healed, wasn't it?:²⁷ Agatha records a remark her brother once made about her incessant talking: "My brother Gerhard says my tongue just becomes more limber with age."²⁸

Both matriarchs distrust governments and profess to know little about the larger world that lies beyond the confines of their familiar Mennonite colonies. Both are child-like in many ways, blessed with an infinite capacity for wonder. Like children they demonstrate a remarkable resilience, an ability to rebound physically and spiritually from innumerable painful experiences.

Of course, there are also significant differences between these two storytellers. Wiebe's narrator is often more realistically portrayed. Frieda Friesen remains simple, is not so given to philosophical speculation as is Agatha Boschman-Neufeld. Epp's Agatha tells the stories of many other people and in doing so learns to project, to empathize, to be more tolerant of the views of others. Occasionally she seems to become the author's mouthpiece. Frieda Friesen is more factual, giving us her point of view mainly. She is only one of the many voices in Wiebe's novel and is seldom the filter through which we hear others. In spite of these differences, however, they are strikingly similar. In the end both are left behind by rapidly changing conditions and lifestyles, both voices from a distant past.

Notes

¹Herbert Giesbrecht, "The Significance of 'Words and, Above All, Voice' in the Fiction of Rudy Wiebe," in *Visions and Realities: Essays Poems, and Fiction Dealing With Mennonite Issues*, ed. Harry Loewen and Al Reimer (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press Ltd., 1985), pp. 213-229.

²Rudy Wiebe, as quoted by William John Keith, *Epic Fiction: The Art of Rudy Wiebe* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1981), p. 9. See also Giesbrecht, p. 213.

³Rudy Wiebe, as quoted by Donald Cameron, *Conversations with Canadian Novelists* (Toronto: MacMillan Company, 1973), pp. 159-160. See also Giesbrecht, pp. 213-214.

⁴Giesbrecht, p. 214.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 219.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁷Peter Epp, *Eine Mutter* (Bluffton: Libertas Verlag, 1932).

⁸Rudy Wiebe, *The Blue Mountains of China* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), p. 7. All subsequent references are to this edition.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹Epp, p. 59. Translations from this novel are mine.

¹²Wiebe, p. 145.

¹³Epp, p. 177.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 503.

¹⁵Wiebe, p. 147.

¹⁶Epp, p. 316.

¹⁷Wiebe, p. 43.

¹⁸Epp, p. 479.

¹⁹Wiebe, p. 148.

²⁰Epp, pp. 463–480.

²¹*Ibid.*, pp. 177–178.

²²Wiebe, p. 49.

²³Epp, p. 187.

²⁴Wiebe, pp. 147–148; Epp, p. 125 and pp. 395–396.

²⁵Wiebe, p. 94.

²⁶Epp, p. 418.

²⁷Wiebe, p. 144.

²⁸Epp, p. 283.