

The Role of Arnold Dyck in Canadian Mennonite Writing

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When Arnold Dyck emigrated from Russia to Canada in 1923, he expected to make a living as an artist by painting the portraits of wealthy Canadian Mennonites. That naive expectation was rudely dashed by the reality of the parochial Mennonite society he found in Manitoba (Dyck "Aus meinem Leben" I 499-500). Compared with the Mennonites of Russia, Canadian Mennonites lacked cultural aspirations and still regarded almost any kind of art as sinful. Dyck's attempts to become an art teacher or even a commercial artist in Winnipeg foundered because he had no English. In a state of culture shock, he settled for a new career as a small-town newspaper editor and owner in Steinbach. It turned out to be a fortuitous move. Dyck began a many-sided career as journalist, editor, man-of-letters, publisher and cultural entrepreneur. Not only did he develop into a major writer, but spearheaded a literary movement that for the first time gave Canadian Mennonites a coherent literary image of themselves.

Dyck had studied art in Munich, Stuttgart and St. Petersburg before World War I, had served as a Red Cross officer during the War and had survived at close range the horrors and violence of the Civil War. His training and experiences had turned him into an urbane man of the world who nevertheless remained a strong cultural Mennonite dedicated to a life and career within the Mennonite community. When he purchased the moribund little weekly *Steinbach Post* in 1924 for the nominal price of one dollar down, he did so with the intention of having it serve the thousands of Mennonites who were flocking in from Russia as refugees. Unfortunately, his former teacher in Russia, Dietrich Epp, beat him to the punch with *Der Immigrantenbote*, a weekly paper published out of Rosthern, Saskatchewan. Dyck was left to do the best he could with his paper in a community made up almost entirely of Low-German-speaking Mennonites who had

immigrated from Russia in the 1870s and who were not much interested in the relatively sophisticated European Mennonite culture Dyck had brought with him.

Although his paper barely made a living for him in the twenties and thirties, it was conducive to his development as a writer. The *Post* provided a forum that enabled him to act as a mentor and cultural guru to his insular readers, his well-trained iconic imagination having easily made the transition from pictorial to verbal expression. Along with his witty, well-informed articles and editorials, he began to fill his pages with original sketches and stories in both High and Low German under such pseudonyms as Hans Ennen and Fritz Walden. In 1932 he began, in dialogue form, a series of sketches featuring "Koop enn Bua," a carefully mismatched pair of local "bush" farmers who like Laurel and Hardy constantly got in each other's hair but who remained comically locked together in their complementary disparity. The sketches were Dyck's first attempt at written Low German — his beloved *Plautdietsch* — and eventually led to the hilarious *Koop and Bua* "road" novels. With virtually no Low German literary models to draw upon, Dyck all the same soon proved himself to be a master of the language. Not only did he capture the nuances of *Plautdietsch* idiom and the daily experiences of rural Mennonites perfectly, but was able to give the sketches a subtle — at times not so subtle — didactic twist that reflected his concern to raise the intellectual and cultural horizons of his people.

Dyck's creative instincts were too strong, however, his literary ambitions too broad, to be satisfied with a weekly paper and printing business for very long. His dream was to stimulate literary and historical awareness within the Mennonite community, and he was optimistic enough to assume that there were literate Russian Mennonites among the recent immigrants in Canada who could develop into effective writers if given the opportunity. By 1935 he felt confident enough to launch *Mennonitische Volkswarte*, a monthly literary and cultural journal. The *Warte*, as it came to be known, ran through 1938, after which Dyck was forced to discontinue it for lack of funds. His ambitious literary project was simply ahead of its time. He had been able to attract a coterie of promising amateur writers, all right, although one suspects that Dyck was forced to do a good deal of rewriting for them. But the Russian Mennonite readers he was counting on were struggling to establish themselves in the midst of the Depression and failed to support him as he had hoped they would.

Dyck did not give up his dream easily. He made two further attempts to establish a literary journal. In 1943 — again his timing was unpropitious — he came out with the *Warte-Jahrbuch*, an annual anthology that was to include the very best Canadian Mennonite writing in German. After only two issues this project also died for lack of subscribers. After the War — in 1951 — Dyck tried a new tack with *Mennonitische Auslese*, a literary digest that would gather the best Mennonite writing from all over the world. Again the project failed. He was able to glean very little from American, European and South

American sources. Even the Canadian Mennonite writers whom he had encouraged to write for him in the thirties — Fritz Senn, Peter J. Klassen, Gerhard Toews, Gerhard Loewen, J. H. Janzen, and others — had mostly gone their own way, the more persistent of them “publishing” their novels and poems at their own expense.

In spite of being commercial failures, Dyck’s literary journals were of immense importance for Canadian Mennonite writing in this first generation. Not only did Dyck discover and sponsor some genuine writing talent, but the journals themselves, even with their limited runs, constituted a rich and diversified repository of Mennonite history and literary culture and reflected much of the ideology the Mennonites had brought with them from Russia. They provided focussed intellectual and cultural *topoi* and began the shaping of a Mennonite literary sensibility. While the writing was mainly of the nostalgic “lost homeland” kind, it was an important first step in the development of indigenous Canadian Mennonite writing. It demonstrated that not all Canadian Mennonites were content to live in a cultural wasteland dotted only with the prickly growth of church piety and social conformity.

Undeterred by his failure to establish a permanent periodical press, Dyck bravely embarked on a new career as a novelist and playwright, publishing and distributing his books at his own cost, as some of his colleagues had been doing for years. Between 1942 and 1960 he produced sixteen books (booklets, really) of prose fiction and comic stage plays, some of the earlier texts superbly self-illustrated, and always about 100 pages in length. Dyck explains in his memoirs that the length was determined by the Catch-22 situation in which he found himself. Try as he might he could never count on more than about 600 buyers of his books among Mennonites (the ongoing Canadian bookselling dilemma writ small?). To keep even this small group of readers he dared not charge more than a dollar per booklet, which meant that he had to keep the length down to 100 pages so as to cover at least his printing costs. From start to finish he made little money on his books.

Still, the decade from the early forties to the early fifties was Dyck’s most productive period as a writer and editor. Much of his work during this period was in *Plautdietsch*, and consisted of two of his three Koop and Bua road novels, three well-received comic plays and two collections of short fiction and dramatic sketches. In addition to the Low German works, he wrote in High German his five-part autobiographical novel *Lost in the Steppe (1944-48)*, a novel regarded by many as his masterpiece. Around this time he also served as editor for what eventually became an important series of thirteen books on Russian Mennonite historical subjects written in High German by various authors and published under the auspices of the Echo-Verlag, a society established expressly for this purpose.¹ In his memoirs Dyck says it was the only one of his editing projects that went as planned and from which he realized a modest profit (Dyck I 511).

It was Arnold Dyck’s cherished conviction that the Russian Mennonites, and by extension Canadian Mennonites, were a genuine *Volk* (or *Völklein*), a

people that had developed a distinct ethnic identity along with its unique religious heritage, and that it had its own distinct language of *Plautdietsch* with High German as a secondary church and (borrowed) literary language. Indeed, since the Mennonites had never had a true homeland, their language was as crucial to their ethnic identity as their Anabaptist beliefs were to their spiritual identity.² As Dyck put it in his late play *Daut Jeburtsdach*, “homeless as we are, [*Plautdietsch*] has itself been something like a homeland” (Dyck IV 273). The church as an institution and the customs of religious worship play very peripheral roles in his writings. What interested him was ordinary ethnic experience and Mennonite folkways as encoded in the everyday language of *Plautdietsch* and to a lesser extent in High German.

Dyck was the first writer in the Russian-Canadian tradition to depict and interpret Mennonite experience from a fully integrated ethno-secular perspective rather than from a church-oriented didactic perspective. By assuming the wholeness and authenticity of Mennonite ethnic identity he could write about it from within, explore its inner dynamics in language and shape it into literary myth. Dyck demythologized or, more accurately, remythologized his Mennonite world as a vital ethnic reality where human relationships existed for their own sake in a social setting, without much regard given to the church as controlling force or inhibitor. Not that Dyck repudiated the teachings of the church. What he did was to secularize them into socio-ethnic values that gave to his peasant characters an appealing innocence, a simple dignity and a fundamental decency never completely obscured by whatever oddities of behavior, defects of character or willfull blunders they fell into. There are shadows, of course, in Dyck’s essentially comic vision, but the darkest forms of evil are missing from it, except perhaps by implication. The dry, gentle irony that was Dyck’s trademark seldom sharpened into satire and never degenerated into sentimentality. If Arnold Dyck was a didactic writer — and up to a point he was — his driving motive was to civilize his people.

Dyck’s literary career coincided with a period of rapid change in Canadian Mennonite society. The decades from the thirties to the sixties saw Mennonites beginning to move from their traditional semi-isolation towards mainstream society. The most dramatic phase of this process was the changeover from German to English which began to gather momentum in the forties and proceeded apace in the fifties and sixties. Dyck, equating Mennonite ethnicity with the German language, regarded the switch to English as inevitably leading to ethnic suicide. But he was artist enough to express even his concern for *Plautdietsch* in playful form. In one of his plays there is an amusing fable-fantasy about “Steewel-Jauntse,” a humble Russian Mennonite workman who labored so diligently on the Tower of Babel that when the linguistic breakup came he was allowed the first pick from the language sack and naturally he chose *Plautdietsch* (Dyck “Wellkom opp’e Forstei!” III 293-96).

Although he feared for the future of Low German in Canada, Dyck could still assume that he had enough Low German readers to make writing in it worthwhile. He may also have written in it from a growing sense of *après moi le deluge*. In any case, he was able to forge this rather uncouth peasant vernacular into a simple but vivid literary language that worked especially well for comedy but well enough also for serious fiction. Writing about the Mennonite world as a sympathetic insider with a sophisticated artistic vision, Dyck developed early on a subtle narrative tone replete with the kind of irony that is bland and self-deprecatory on the surface but urbane and often trenchant in its implications. It was a cleverly disguised style designed to entertain without giving offense to unsophisticated readers, but to provide a more telling subtext for discerning readers. For the most part Dyck's contemporary Mennonite readers were blissfully unaware of the technical craft and tonal effects of his literary art and regarded him as a simple, amusing storyteller in the time-honored Mennonite oral tradition. Dyck was an artist who knew how to cover his tracks.

In two recent articles, E. F. Dyck has drawn our attention to the rhetoric of "Mennonite plain speech," as he calls it, and how it is exploited in the work of some of today's Canadian Mennonite writers. No one ever exploited the rhetoric of Low German plain style and the levels of irony it offers more effectively than Arnold Dyck. He had been exposed to the techniques of plain speech irony long before he became a writer. During his alternative service on a Russian forestry station before World War I, he had learned the art of "derjche Bloom räde," literally, "speaking through the flower," a form of conversational irony practised by Low-German-speaking Mennonite servicemen. To alleviate acute feelings of boredom, loneliness and isolation, they resorted to a rhetoric of resigned acceptance and mindless cheerfulness no matter how lousy or depressing things were. If, for example, the bedbugs devoured them at night, in the morning they would praise them as the only true friends they had left, who could be relied upon to take the place of their loved ones at home. "Derjche Bloom räde" could range from gentle understatement to wildly inventive flights of fancy. Whatever form the irony took, this Low German rhetoric of plain speech was never self-assertive, coercive or confrontational. Subversive, yes, but always implying a base of common sense and candor.

Arnold Dyck perfected this technique of irony in his Low German works, using it not only for the voice of his ironic narrator, but also applying it to his artfully contrasted pair of Koop and Bua. As I have stated elsewhere, the two friends represent contrasting sides of the traditional rustic Mennonite character, Bua being the outgoing, progressive "liberal," Koop the repressed, xenophobic "conservative" (Reimer Intro. Dyck II 8). Or, as Dyck describes them physically, "Whatever is pushed out in Bua, in Koop is pushed in."(9).

The ironic contrast between the two is most effectively developed through speech. Bua is endlessly garrulous, Koop sourly taciturn. Koop's style is that of literal plain speech devoid of any ironic play, imaginative stretch or verbal

energy. He believes in the literal truth of the Bible and in Mennonite *Schlichtheit* — modesty and plainness in all things, including speech. Bua exploits the rhetorical possibilities of *Plautdietsch*, its pith and pungency, its sheer love of verbal play, its raw energy and bold irreverence. Bua frequently uses Koop's literal plain speech as a springboard from which to leap into outrageous fantasy or romantic nostalgia, or into devastating parodies of Koop's stale pieties and self-protective legalisms. Typically, Bua uses his colorful rhetoric to express his zest for life and its sensations, as in this rapturous description of his favorite Mennonite soul food:

...when I have freshly made liverwurst and spareribs in front of me with a nice fruitsoup on the side, I can't help wondering what miserable wretches Adam and Eve must have been to squabble over an apple (Reimer "Creation" 264).

Bua's fanciful comparison is, among other things, a sly parody of the Mennonite habit of reading the Bible literally.

Dyck's most subtle and important character is without doubt the ironic narrator he employs in his fiction. With his relaxed folksiness and smiling disdain for cultural pretensions, including his own, the ironic narrator is neither patronizing nor bumptious, but remains benign and civilized behind his mask of irony. At times the narrator also serves important thematic and structural functions, as in *Lost in the Steppe*, where little Hänschen Toews, struggling to develop his artistic sensibility, dreams of transforming his drab workaday Russian-Mennonite village world through the magic of art after seeing his first oil paintings on a rare visit to the city. Behind this fictive foreground stands the adult narrator, Hänschen grown up, so to speak, "painting" with affection and delicate tact the boy's mundane world as an ironic myth of the lost Russian-Mennonite garden. Thus, theme and form are unified through the agency of the ironic narrator.

Important as Arnold Dyck's role was in the development of a Canadian-Mennonite literary sensibility, he has had little if any direct influence on Mennonite writing in English. Nevertheless, there are some important links connecting Dyck's work to that of Rudy Wiebe and younger writers. As already noted, in addition to the literary merit of his work Dyck is important because he was the first to write the bulk of his work in *Plautdietsch*, the language of everyday Mennonite experience. He was also the only writer of that first émigré generation to make a sustained and largely successful attempt to integrate the old Russian experience with the new Canadian experience. While the nostalgic lost garden *topos* remained at the centre of his work, he also invented a Canadian setting for the Mennonite literary imagination to work in. Koop and Bua, both at home and on the road, are the explorers of that Canadian setting, finding ways of accommodating their isolated Musdarp (mouse village) with its homely ethnic values to the larger world outside. And that, after all, is what most Canadian-Mennonite writers have continued to do, although in English, the language of daily experience for most Canadian Mennonites today.

Arnold Dyck is the most complete ethnic writer the Mennonites have produced, a writer who dealt with ethnic experience from within the community in a manner slyly critical at times but never hostile or rejective. His work was, if you like, centripetal in the ethnic sense, not centrifugal as so much Mennonite writing is today. That does not make his work better or more relevant, of course. Indeed, Dyck touched only lightly or not at all the issues and themes that Mennonite writers like to focus on today: e.g., church and community repression, including linguistic and sexual repression, ethnic smugness and hypocrisy, or even the fall from innocence. But he brought an honesty and depth of insight to Mennonite ethnic writing as no writer before him had been able to do.

Where Dyck went wrong was in assuming that the only valid languages in which to write Mennonite literature were Low and High German ("das deutsche Buch" was his obsession, his Mennonite shibboleth). He failed to anticipate the ease with which the Low German oral tradition of plain speech would be exploited in English by Mennonite writers a generation later. In this sense there *is* an unbroken tradition in Canadian-Mennonite writing. Dyck's last book — *Koop enn Bua enn Dietschlaund* — appeared in 1960, just two years prior to Rudy Wiebe's ground-breaking first novel *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. And it is worth noting that almost all of today's Mennonite writers in English still have their linguistic roots in *Plautdietsch*, even though some of the younger ones no longer speak it. All are somehow still steeped in the rich tradition of Low German oral story-telling.

Sad to say, in the end Arnold Dyck regarded himself as a cultural anachronism, and in articles, letters and interviews expressed his despair over the "Americanization" — by which he meant a whole host of things from a linguistic debasement to English, to the ethnic erosion and cultural vulgarization of his beloved *Völklein*. With a growing sense of futility and alienation he shuttled back and forth between Germany and Canada during the last fifteen years of his life. No longer feeling at home either in Europe or in Canada, he took refuge in the memories of his remote Russian past. He grew despondent over Mennonite writing in general and over his own writing in particular, leaving behind at his death in 1970 a pile of unpublished manuscripts. He could not have foreseen that far from falling into oblivion his collected works, including the best of his unpublished writing, would be reissued in the 1980s in a handsome new four-volume edition that would revive his literary reputation at the very time that Canadian-Mennonite writing in English was coming into its own. He would have rejoiced over the coincidence and taken pride in knowing that his works represent an early but significant part of what is becoming a vibrant minority literature in this country.

Notes

¹The Manitoba Historical Society has undertaken the task of translating this important series in the next few years.

²Dyck expresses this view in an unpublished letter to J. J. Hildebrand on February 12, 1933.

3. For a fuller discussion of Forstei irony and Dyck's experience with it see my article " 'Derche Bloom Råde': Arnold Dyck and the Comic Irony of the Forstei" (*Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 2, 1984, 60-71).

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