

# *Lost In the Steppe: Portrait of an Acceptable Mennonite Artist*

**Edna Froese, St. Thomas More College, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan**

When Arnold Dyck published *Verloren in der Steppe* in 1944-48 (translated as *Lost in the Steppe* in 1974), arguably the first Mennonite novel in Canada that has earned continued literary acclaim,<sup>1</sup> he wrote for a Mennonite community that valued religious conformity and ethnic solidarity above individual artistic expression. For most Mennonites, creative activity, with its subtle lure of pleasure and its often subversive attitudes towards tradition, was at best frivolous and at worst dangerously worldly. Thus, in order to gain acceptance as a story-teller, Dyck had to find strategies that allowed him to balance the claims of aesthetic integrity and community solidarity. Both Dyck himself, in the writing of *Lost in the Steppe*, and his young protagonist Hans Toews (an aspiring painter in a Russian Mennonite village most emphatically not ready to affirm his ambitions), maintain that delicate balance.

Instead of drawing lines of open conflict between the artistic individual and an oppressive, resistant community (a familiar conflict in Western literature), Dyck judiciously works within the limitations created by Mennonite suspicion of literature and the artist figure. In the first place, he evades direct confrontation with Mennonite principles by presenting issues in their least threatening guise, focusing more on educational progress than on artistic endeavour, and depicting a secular community rather than a religious one. Secondly, Dyck chooses a consistently ironic, but also consistently evasive narrative stance, so that the novel can be read simultaneously as a celebration of an earthly paradise now lost

to his immigrant readers and as a critique of the narrow prejudices characteristic of self-serving, deliberately isolated Russian Mennonite communities. The celebration is kept from shameless nostalgia with realistic descriptions of hardships and prejudices, and the critique is softened with a warm understanding of the most conservative villager. Finally, Dyck's portrait of the artist emphasizes aesthetic mediation, not alienation or rejection.

To avoid, or at least postpone, the problem of freedom of creative expression by focusing primarily on education instead would not seem, at first, to evade much conflict, since "for the orthodox Mennonite, education implies alienation. It is seen not so much as preparation for life, but as a threat to the preservation of that life."<sup>2</sup> The fear that education inevitably alienates the educated ones from their community and even threatens the continuity of that community is demonstrated on several occasions in *Lost in the Steppe*, particularly through the sensitive relationship between Hans Toews and his mother. Hans' eagerness to learn the scholarly High German appears to Mother Toews as a rejection not only of her "straightforward language" (the everyday Low German) but also as an even more painful rejection of her. The "cold school" becomes something that she must "defend herself against" (97). Years later as Hans gains his wish to leave Hochfeld for Chortitza to enter the Central School, Mother Toews thinks bitterly:

He's going away, into the world. Will he sometimes later still sit by her? - She has such fear of educated people. When the teacher and his wife visit, she never knows how to talk, and feels uncomfortable.... She doesn't measure up to them, and... feels glad when the guests leave; and now her boy too is to become such a refined, learned person. (349)

Though her fear here is personal, she also embodies the general village frame of reference that thinks "according to a hundred-year-old peasant tradition, rejecting every innovation, especially the kind that could estrange the village people from the soil. And that's exactly what the 'high' school does" (302), for the "educated ones are spoiled for farming; they won't like to hold a pitchfork or push a wheelbarrow full of manure" (172).

What the villagers of Hochfeld understand as desirable education is merely a controlled process of socialization. Without ever explicitly criticizing such a narrow view of learning, Dyck reveals, early in the novel, how Mennonite boundaries of experience are established. After describing five-year-old Hanschen's home, Dyck enumerates the various animals who live in the barn and the surrounding yard. To an exiled Mennonite who with Dyck would relive his/her own childhood in just such a village, these descriptions are a pastoral delight. This is a world untouched by any evil more threatening than sparrows who steal bird houses built for starlings. The subtext of these chapters, however, makes it clear that village life is fully integrated, communal, and purposeful. One must either fill one's predetermined role or be ruthlessly excluded: those kittens, for example, not needed for the control of mice must be "done away with" (46), and while piglets may be temporary playmates, they will ultimately be fattened into spare ribs and sausage (55).

A prevailing discourse of education underlines the utilitarian purpose for which each animal is included in this self-sufficient community. A kitten must learn “to accept [its] subordinate role in this peculiar society of the two-and four-footed” (47), and if it “proves teachable...and lives up to its responsibilities in general” it is “conclusively accepted” (48). Even more revealing is the comment that dogs learn their “dog duties” from older, already trained dogs (50). The parallels between young animals learning time-honoured duties from older animals and young children learning their roles in the communities from the parents (called “the old ones” in Low German) are obvious. Just as villagers sometimes observe that dogs, for example, are not always “endowed with all that is needed” and turn out to be “pretty dumb, bungling dogs” (50), so Hans’ father sees with dismay that his middle son, Berend, does not display the usual young man’s delight in “horse talk” (59).

That education, as the inhabitants of Hochfeld see it, is a tool for conformity and utmost utility, Dyck underlines metaphorically in a chapter describing the first day the winter-born calves are taken out to spring pasture. The action is largely farcical, but the vocabulary is that of education. The calves must be “trained” and in the course of the day they will “become much smarter” (229). Initially stupid, they “prove completely educable” (231). What they learn is that their lives will remain clearly circumscribed by unmovable boundaries, that “man is their master and that they will fare better if they submit to his will” (233), the bovine equivalent of *Gelassenheit*. Dyck does not make explicit the similarity between the calves’ narrow boundaries of action and the village boys’ limited geographical boundaries, but there is an unmistakable resemblance between the calves and the school-children who are both trained by whip to know their place. The recognized purpose of the village school is to uphold respect for authority (teachers, *Ohms* {preachers or elders}, the “old ones”), to inculcate a thorough knowledge of the catechism, and to train the children in whatever knowledge is deemed necessary for continuing peaceful and prosperous village life. Graduating students assume that at fourteen or fifteen “they are now grown up. That of course means their installation in the farm management...and each is proud to handle the milk pail, or the manurefork now, instead of trotting to school with books under the arm” (252).

Having begun the novel with a disarmingly detailed description of the integrated agricultural community, and having throughout the novel noted the village perception of education as an instrument of conformity to community ideals and purposes, Dyck nevertheless depicts education in Hans’ life as a widening of horizons and a freeing of the imagination.<sup>3</sup> With characteristic subtlety, however, he balances the implied threat to Mennonite ways with a reassuring evocation of the familiar.

Even before Hans sets foot in the village school his already active imagination endows the cracking paint on the table leg with vivid life and sees hair-raising adventures in the grain of the wooden ceiling beams. His first trip outside Hochfeld to Kronsweide through a wild, beautiful landscape so different from

his own “prosaic village in the steppe” (81) destroys Hans’ previous contentment with his own surroundings, so usefully ordered with no thought for the beautiful. In Kronsweide he also meets, for the first time, a boy as imaginative as he is. Jasch tells Hans fairy tales and awakens in Hans desires he can’t explain; Hans has discovered “life in an incorporeal [sic] world that lies in his own breast and isn’t bound by space or time - the world of dreams” (84). From then on, since Hans has now realized that there are other ways of being in the world, he continually escapes the circumscribed world of Hochfeld through highly romantic dreams.

Though this early opposition between the earthy practicality of village life and Hans’ unbridled imagination is vast, Dyck softens its effect by making it clear that Hans has not totally fallen away from his family tree.<sup>4</sup> After all, his brother Berend is fond of exaggerated stories and his father also willingly tells tall tales from the past (76). The family calendar, a popular source of reading material, includes stories whose veracity may not always be vouched for. The Low German culture, as a matter of fact, had a strong tradition of story-telling,<sup>5</sup> which “consisted of never-ending streams of earthy, often humorous stories, everyday experiences *fancifully embroidered*, homely and pungent anecdotes, parodic wordplay, irreverent character sketches, and *endlessly elaborated* narratives passed on from generation to generation.”<sup>6</sup> The marvellous and the imaginative are not as removed from Mennonite life as the sombre public speeches of the “old ones” might suggest. Dyck thus locates Hans’ youthful imaginings within the traditions of the community.

Yet Hans’ response to formal education is strikingly different from the majority of the Hochfeld children. Granted, Dyck makes Hans a typical boy in his love of games and wrestling, and initially Hans is distinguished by no unusual ambitions. What does set him apart is his imaginative grasp of the limited material presented and his sensitive response to his teachers. Repelled by the unfair beatings of his first teacher, and bewildered by the Russianness of the succession of Russian teachers sent to Hochfeld, Hans responds with warmth and near idolatry to Teacher Dyck. Mr. Dyck enraptures Hans by reading aloud stories and poetry until Hans makes the discovery that he can read on his own. Eagerly he devours everything available in the library, German and Russian:

Through books a new world opens to him. The fact that this exists only in his imagination does not make it unreal for him. High mountains, deep valleys, dark forests, and broad seas come alive for him. So do the knights and pirates, the princes and shepherd boys, princesses and witches. No, that is no dream world but living reality, approaching closer from day to day and captivating him. (130)

Such a fascinating dream world alienates Hans from his own surroundings: “What is Hochfeld to him, this insipid village with its straight lines and right angles, with its farmyards all formed after the same plan.... Everything is a thirty-fold repetition of the same pattern” (131). His growing purpose is “to participate in the beauty and adventure, in the greatness, which the outside world has to offer” (132).

Teacher Dyck's influence furthermore determines the direction of Hans' rebellion against prosaic farm-life. Hans has realized for some time that he is different from his classmates, but he has early learned to keep his dreams to himself lest they be ridiculed or misunderstood. Then he grasps that Mr. Dyck is also a "dreamer." That sense of kinship between the two gives added impact to Hans' discovery that Mr. Dyck is also a painter: "Hans regards his teacher as a true magician. There is such a thing, then, as doing it oneself" (135). His dream of becoming a world-famous painter is born. Since Mr. Dyck explains that drawing can be taught in higher schools, Hans' immediate purpose becomes more education. Altogether Mr. Dyck has a profound influence on Hans, encouraging his interest in art and in music, teaching him good morals, and declaring by example that a man can be an artist and a highly educated man without being alienated from his community.

This last point is important. One of the chief objections Mennonites levelled against higher education was that it made individuals "proud," "too good for their community." Indeed, Hans is developing exactly that kind of pride, for he exults in his ability to show up the older students, particularly during the public examinations staged for the entire village (254). When his decision to attend the Central School in Chortitz is noised abroad in the community, no one is surprised: "hasn't the devil of pride always possessed that 'straight' Toews?... Yes, he is one of those who wants out; the village people are too 'prost' [Russian for simple] for him" (301).

However, one of Dyck's shrewd techniques in this novel is to raise a point of contention (in this case, the merits of higher education), demonstrate the seeming validity of the community position, and then undermine that village viewpoint with contradicting evidence, all in an ironic tone that utters approval and implies disapproval or vice versa. Thus, while Hans "isn't one of those to hide his light under a bushel" (253) he has, through Mr. Dyck's gentle coaching and through absorbing community loyalty, learned that sometimes personal ambition must be submerged within the overall "honour of Hochfeld school and that of his beloved teacher" (253). Mr. Dyck himself has quietly relegated to spare time activity his own painting ambitions in order to awaken in school children some greater appreciation for the arts, and to educate, gradually and tactfully, the larger village community. Furthermore, Dyck reveals that a good part of the suspicion with which the villagers treat the highly educated is actually mixed with deep respect. Father Toews, frequently presented as the ideal villager, yet defers willingly to the judgment of the educated (171-72). As for the matter of "pride," again Dyck uses Father Toews' perceptions to give the lie to village prejudice: among the teachers that Father Toews meets at Hans' final examinations, not one "showed any sign of presumption or arrogance. On the contrary, all gladly conversed with him, unabashedly speaking Low German and treating him with the respect due an honest farmer" (307). Yet Dyck's pervasive irony does not let the issue of pride rest without ambiguity. In the same mental breath that Father Toews notes the unassuming nature of the most

educated teachers in the larger colony, he revels in the esteem those same “humble” teachers grant him when they discover that he is Hans’ father: “Oho, he told himself, just look at that: his Hans’ glory already rubs off on him, his father, and raises his social standing” (307). Pride definitely is the result of an education that allows even the barest hint of individuality; the question is whether that pride necessarily undermines the overall aims of the community. Dyck, through the characters of Mr. Dyck and Father Toews, argues that it does not.

Contrary to usual Mennonite fears, creativity and independent thought also do not destroy the solidarity of the community, as Dyck clearly demonstrates. Hans’ strangely different nature is not set in complete opposition to all that surrounds him, but is begotten of the proclivities of his grandfather and father, and is nourished within a growing educational reform movement. Even before Hans has begun to articulate his subversive dreams, Dyck introduces us, through Hans’ uncomprehending eyes, to Hans’ grandfather. He is a peculiar man, silent and respected by all in the community. The little Hans suspects that Grandfather “broods over things; maybe he is a thinker” (111). His private corner in the house is full of books and papers. In a quick flash-forward Dyck shows us an older Hans, now in a high school uniform, visiting his grandfather. Berend, also with him, observes, “our little grandfather is a great man, only nobody knows it....It has become clear to me today that we aren’t different from our kind in our dislike of horse talk. Grandfather isn’t interested in it either” (113). To Hans’ objection that Grandfather remained a model Mennonite farmer, Berend replies, “he is a clever and efficient man, who deployed his energies in the place in which he found himself and from which he couldn’t escape” (113). Hans’ father is thus reasonably disposed toward education long before his sons lose themselves in books. As Mother Toews ruefully reflects, “Isn’t he, rather stingy in all other things, ready for any sacrifice the school asks?” (97). When Hans then requests attendance at the higher Central School, Father Toews doesn’t need all that much persuasion. Yet both Grandfather and Father Toews contributed largely toward the continuance of community, despite their interest in books.

Dyck is also careful to describe the change in attitude toward education within the Mennonite community as a whole. Educational reforms instituted in the last two or three generations make it possible for Hans to appeal to precedents set by other students who have advanced to higher schools. Some have even acquired their education through colony scholarships (209). What is more, industrial progress throughout the colonies has required some members of each village to become bookkeepers and take up other professions beneficial to the community. Since Dyck’s focus is on Hans’ development, he does not describe the enormous technological advances that have taken place in the Mennonite Commonwealth, other than to note briefly that Chortitza had become “a city rather than a village” (307) and that windmills no longer turned (325).

Dyck himself viewed education as the means of heightening Mennonite self-consciousness, not through inculcating a blinkered conformity to tradition, but

through developing a more cosmopolitan awareness of surrounding culture,<sup>7</sup> a process *Lost in the Steppe* enacts. Not only does Dyck describe Hans' growth through education, but he gives us an ideal agent for such growth, the village teacher, revealingly also named Dyck. Just as Mr. Dyck uses his public speeches in school to widen village perceptions (170), so Arnold Dyck uses his novel to widen readers' perceptions and to defuse their objections to new ideas. Nowhere is his educational purpose more evident than in the scenes including Hans' Russian teacher, Varvara Pavlovna. After a long diatribe against the prejudices of unfairly privileged Mennonites, Varvara describes to the startled Hans a vision of the worth of education that seems to be Dyck's own:

I expect from you and others like you that once you have gotten out of your villages into our Russian schools, among us Russian people, have learned to know and understand us, from you and your influence I expect that the colonists in the villages will gradually learn to look at themselves and at us differently, and that we Germans and Russians some day will live beside each other and with each other peacefully and in friendship, complementing each other, complementing each other with what good is in each of us.... (317)

Dyck's depiction of education throughout the novel has thus been both a description of Hans' expanded understanding and a careful, tactful expansion of his readers' understanding. As an artist he is a mediator from within, rather than a prophet without, a distinction I will explore in greater detail later. For Dyck, education did not have to alienate; rightly used it could reconcile the peasant villagers with the dreamers among them, perhaps even enable those dreamers to reconcile the "*Khokhols* [derogatory term for Ukrainians]" with the "damned *nyimtsey* [Germans]" (283). Far from being the divisive instrument of individualists determined to leave their Mennonite roots behind, education is the instrument that will strengthen the community: as the minister Loewen confidently asserts, higher education for all children would mean better educated ministers and a "more active spiritual life" in the village to keep pace with the economic progress (173).

That Dyck would include the argument that education would improve spiritual life is entirely in keeping with the changing attitudes among more educated Mennonites in Russia after the educational reforms of 1869 and later. From viewing education as a part of the ever-threatening outside world, the Mennonite community had progressed to recognizing that education was "central to the maintenance of the Mennonite faith and the separate identity of Mennonites as a people distinct from their neighbors."<sup>8</sup> But such a view of education and culture was not yet part of the Canadian Mennonite community that formed *Lost in the Steppe's* readership.<sup>9</sup> Thus one of Dyck's main techniques in defusing potential conflict between the artistic individual and the community is to present Hans' Mennonite village as a secular community, not a religious one. While even today many Mennonites will argue that "Mennonite" is not an ethnic term but a religious one, denoting voluntary adherence to a Mennonite church;<sup>10</sup> and James Urry, a non-Mennonite anthropologist, has

maintained that being Mennonite is “at its core...about faith. Mennonites live in Christian communities;”<sup>11</sup> that all-important religious dimension of Mennonite life is taken for granted in *Lost in the Steppe* as merely part of the background, scarcely worth mentioning. Not once do we see Hans in church, though he knows his catechism backwards and forwards. That skill in the catechism becomes merely another demonstration of Hans’ intellectual gifts; the beliefs uttered in it make no discernible impact on his life. Dyck does mention a few details about church practice: the *Ohms* (the ministers) lack education and must struggle to educate themselves after being appointed (118); Father Toews is precentor in the church. These are incidentals, treated with no greater reverence than facts about spring seeding or harvesting. As Al Reimer has observed, Dyck chose to “interpret Mennonite experience from a fully integrated ethno-secular perspective,” depicting “his Mennonite world as a vital ethnic reality...without much regard given to the church as controlling force or inhibitor.”<sup>12</sup> This completely secular stance sidesteps any tension that might arise from efforts to attain education or artistic expression in opposition to a religiously defined community.

In place of the religious discourse we might expect, Dyck uses terms denoting tradition and race. Hans is not resisting church dictums, but merely a “hundred-year-old peasant tradition” that rejects any innovation threatening the ancient connection to the land (302). Again and again Dyck gives us glimpses into the villager’s instinctive, traditional reactions, but he never includes the sacred context that most Mennonites take for granted and that still forms the basis of much current Mennonite literature. What causes Father Toews the greatest conflict when Hans declares his intention to pursue higher education is Hans’ defection from the time-honoured practice of farming. To whom will he give his prosperous farm if Hans, and perhaps even Berend the avid bookworm, refuse to become farmers? Warmly as Father Toews advocates a *Bauernkultur*, though, he does not view it as a sacred obligation, as many Mennonites have done. Hans therefore rebels against the life of a farmer, not against the decrees of God. For Mennonite readers that context defuses much of the anger that could otherwise be raised.

Whereas the discourse of tradition rather than of belief makes Hans’ eventual defection from the community less controversial, the discourse of race rather than of belief makes Hans’ complete defection impossible, and therefore less of a threat. Dyck’s choice of the term “German” rather than “Mennonite” (not once does he use the word “Mennonite”) reflects a change in self-definition among Mennonites in the Russian community of his childhood,<sup>13</sup> and also expresses his “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.”<sup>14</sup> What is important here, however, is that Dyck’s choice of “German” rather than “Mennonite” makes Hans’ identity very much a matter of birth. Racial identity is not easily erased, particularly when one sees oneself as part of



a superior race, a Mennonite assumption that Dyck acknowledges throughout the novel, even while making every effort to present the Russians in as favourable a light as possible. In his discussion of the antagonisms between Russians and Mennonites, he mentions economic injustices but emphasizes primarily basic differences in culture and in patterns of thinking: "Marya Ivanovna embodied the Russian being, while the village community represented a far deeper consciousness of the German nature than she realized, or deeper than one would have thought possible after a hundred years of lostness in the Russian steppe" (106). The effect of such discourse is to anchor Hans rather firmly within his ethnic community, despite his desires to experience the wider world. It is telling that Hans' escapist dreams are always peopled with Germans (147). Despite Varvara's passionate dream of educated Mennonites acting as mediators between Russians and Germans, such mediation, if Hans attempts it, which is doubtful, is not likely to blur his sense of being German.

In this context, Dyck's brief glimpses into the future acquire particular relevance, for if anything else were yet lacking to cement the Mennonite sense of a peculiar identity, the experiences of the Revolution fulfilled that lack. The child Hans is merely bewildered by the "problem" of the untrustworthy, hostile Russians; the young man, Hans, whom we see only briefly in a flash-forward, is bitterly confirmed in his loyalty to his people as he stands before the "burning Neuhorst" (where his grandparents once lived) and "the smoking ruins of all the other colony villages, and before the countless graves of those overtaken by this cruel destruction" (114). Toward the end of the novel, as the references to Russian-German antagonism increase, the reader (particularly any Russian-Mennonite reader) cannot help remembering what will happen, especially when Hans, in conversation with Berend about his leaving Hochfeld, finally expresses his growing fear of the Russians: "Berend, they will kill us all one day... I want to leave here, and I want you and father and mother and everybody to go away, else they will kill us all" (329). Dyck has abruptly conflated Hans' individual need to leave Hochfeld with the Mennonites' need to leave Russia, thus implying Hans' continuing ties with his people. Hans imagines that he "wants Hochfeld to remain behind completely" (351), but Dyck has given us sufficient evidence to convince us that Hans will take his Mennonite/German legacy with him.

Dyck's cautiously ambiguous stance toward the tension between artistic individual and shaping community is most evident in his complex, distanced, ironic narrator. The centre of consciousness for most of the novel is Hans (the diction and perceptions accordingly reflect the growing maturity of Hans), but Hans' limited boyish perspective is throughout widened by "the sophisticated author who is at every step aware of the social, ethical, and philosophical implications which accompany the boy's largely instinctive and subconscious exploration of his environment and of himself."<sup>15</sup> The novel's pervasive irony thus depends largely on the difference between Hans' viewpoint and that of the "mature recording voice's,"<sup>16</sup> and is heightened by the narrator's inclusion of additional, sometimes opposing, perspectives, seemingly without taking sides.

Such apparent objectivity makes the narrator's subtle shifts in perspective almost unnoticeable and the direction of his ironic wit ambiguous. For example, after Hans' first two weeks of school when the bigger students arrive, "Hans is a little worried after all. There are so many of them and some are so big; with a few exceptions they are strangers to him" (98). That is purely Hans' perspective. But then, when Dyck writes, "But Hans doesn't need protection. Mr. Peters keeps order among the students..." (98), is that still Hans' perspective or is the adult narrator describing what Hans does not totally understand? Probably it is still Hans' perspective, but in the next sentence, "For Hans a little bit of pressure is probably even a good thing," the perspective is definitely not Hans'. In order for us to realize that Hans can be a spoilt crybaby, the narrator has to move us out of a strict absorption in Hans' mind. Yet these shifts away from his direct perceptions frequently deepen our sympathy for Hans because they often include an ironic judgment on the Mennonite way of doing things. When Hans is presented with a "cold, shiny sugarthing" instead of the popgun he had hoped for, the narrator relates, "Hanschen doesn't even make the attempt to imagine how, in about twenty years, he will move into his otherwise empty farm house with a young wife on his right arm and his shining 'new' sugarthing in his left. No, that much fantasy he doesn't have" (24). On the other hand, there are times when the narrator's subtly suggested perspective directs the irony against Hans himself:

Of all agricultural work Hans likes the preparation of the fields in spring the best. Perhaps this is so simply because it is spring, which always shakes up his mind so mightily and gives much stimulation to his spirit; perhaps, however, because he doesn't have to participate, and may view the work from a safe distance, affected only by its poetic aspect. (295)

Hans just may have reached enough self-knowledge to be able to laugh at his intellectual pretensions, but numerous similar examples suggest that it is the narrator, with his urbane knowledge of the ways of the wider world and his sophisticated artistic tastes, inviting us to laugh with him at Hans—but always with sympathetic understanding for Hans' difficulties.

More obvious, though still never bitter, is the irony arising out of the narrator's frequent adoption of other characters' viewpoints. Sometimes the narrator frankly expresses the thoughts of the villagers: "But in the case of the Loewens and the Ennses it's pride, nothing but pride. They consider themselves better than the other villagers and carry their noses two inches higher than is proper for farm people. And that's just what Hans Toews is becoming" (301). More frequently the narrator chooses to enter the consciousness of Father Toews or Mother Toews in order to expose through them the general village perspective: "should he take him to Chortitza? The question is not so much the expense, but what will become of the boy later on. Such educated ones are spoiled for farming" (172). Father Toews, particularly, becomes a figure of fun without losing his respectability, since the narrator treats Father Toews as he does Hans, beginning with Father Toews' respectable thoughts and then gradually letting his own urbane author's voice emerge. For example,

during the winter months Father Toews has time on his hands. At first the narrator simply relays facts that could be objective reporting, but could also be Father's thoughts: "Then he sits in the corner room again, with outstretched legs, and reads. He would really have liked a pillow behind his back, but mother doesn't tolerate that. . . . Before he read in the Bible only, but with the years and as his sons grow up, he too has become more 'worldly'" (159). The wish for comfort is certainly Father's, but what about his worldliness? Then the irony becomes particularly delicious, as the narrator catalogues Father's changing reading materials:

And recently father has even started to read regular 'story books,' the same that Berend and Hans read. Now that is 'useless stuff,' but it's fun for him, and mother often must call two or three times before he puts away the book and comes to the dinner table. Mother in her quiet manner scolds at such book reading; it surely looked nice, for him, the father, to foster such a bad habit; it was enough not to be able to pry the boys loose from their books. Quite likely he would soon begin to read novels too. Thus mother scolds. -Novels—something worse, leading people directly to perdition, didn't exist for the sedate Hochfelders, at least as far as the older generation was concerned. Novels—ha!—Sure enough, one day father sits behind a novel; Berend didn't happen to have anything else. And, look there, no earthquake! When the world continues to spin on its axis as usual, father continues with a second 'love story.' Berend, the rascal, laughs up his sleeve for having seduced his father to sin, and because he now has 'got his man' as far as the matter of books is concerned. (159)

The distanced narrator here adopts, as it suits his purpose, the viewpoint of Father, of Mother, the villagers in general, and even of Berend. Yet the controlling consciousness is surely that of one who both understands the Mennonite mind and stands above it.

As that voice from above, the narrator frequently inserts information that none of the characters has access to. All of his flash-forwards are written in that omniscient, timeless awareness of the larger context. Descriptions of the present are often equally serious:

And the old grandfathers, with the furrowed faces, faded hair, and stern eyes, that haven't felt a tear in six decades because it wasn't allowed, because one was a man, had to be a man because they too, the third generation since Danzig, still had to struggle hard—what are their thoughts at the sound of 'Silent night, holy night,' sung softly and appealingly as never before? (169)

These seemingly objective evaluations place the mainly comedic account of Hans' developing personality into a larger perspective. It is not that the narrator thus trivializes Hans' struggles (his omniscient descriptions of some of Hans' experiences are as moving as anything he says of the larger Mennonite colony), but that he creates a balance between mockery and sympathy.

That careful balance is really the *tour de force* of Dyck's narrator. The villagers are exposed as narrow and uninformed, but also well-meaning, shaped by very harsh circumstances, and about to be placed into yet another crucible of hatred and war. Hans is a sensitive, artistic figure caught in a stiflingly narrow

community, but also a fun-loving boy ready for any prank and delighted with the simple pleasures of village life. The very structure of the novel supports this balance: serious discussions about art or education are followed by chapters of mostly farcical activity: Hans' unfortunate attempt at spring riding is followed by a trip to the city in which he sees his first real painting; epiphany is followed by the carnival of pig-killing. What that balance means for the reader is an intimacy with Hans and with the villagers that resembles family ties, that is, healthy family ties that let love outweigh and outlaugh the inevitable conflicts of interest.

Dyck does not, however, evade the question of the importance of art, nor does he minimize the imperatives of the artistic personality. He does temper his serious assertions about art with ironic wit (usually directed against the substitution of artificiality for art), yet what disarms the usual Mennonite resistance to artistic pursuits is Dyck's focus on the aesthetic and mediative benefits of art, rather than on its disturbing prophetic role. In doing so, Dyck established something of a pattern for subsequent artists to follow. Hildi Froese Tiessen has traced that "route by which the fine arts could create for themselves a place within the Mennonite community."<sup>17</sup> She suggests that by "aestheticizing objects, customs, and modes of speech which have conventionally served to define Mennonite identity"<sup>18</sup> Mennonite artists have divorced those objects and customs from their utilitarian purpose and context, thus leading their audiences to perceive them as art objects with line and form and colour and structure, but not necessarily as art objects that threaten the Mennonite identity or way of life. The very familiarity of those objects actually strengthens the Mennonite identity. Her analysis of *Lost in the Steppe* as an example of how the Mennonite artist has worked within the familiar in order to extend Mennonite boundaries of acceptance is very helpful. She points out, for example, that the Hochfeld community already had an appreciation for the beautiful art object, but still needed to veil that appreciation with labels of functionality. Thus "sugarthings", as Dyck's suave narrator explains after a digressive explanation of how little Mennonites actually use sugar, "do not exist because of the sugar, but stand empty and unused decade after decade in the china cabinet of the great room because of their external splendour" (25). In the same way, the women take delight in embroidered pillows heaped to the ceiling on their guest beds. The pillows have an ostensible use, as does the beautiful "big coal oil lamp with the spherical shade of dimmed glass" (25), but their real value is their decorative function. Plain and "bare of pictures" (11) as Hans' home is, it is not without signs of a developing aesthetic sense.

As artist figure, then, Hans does not wish to criticise his world so much as he wishes to enrich it with beauty. He is more interested in noting colour and line than in challenging values—or endorsing them, for that matter. His taste appears to be strongly romantic. His response to nature favours the sublime, rather than the beautiful (the Dnieper falls, the forests free from "human interference" {75}, the kaleidoscopic colour and disorder of the Russian villages). The paintings that

move him so profoundly are landscapes with the heightened shadows and latent intensity of emotion characteristic of romanticism. His dream world includes gypsies, fairies, princesses, knights, and beggar children miraculously restored to true nobility. Hans himself becomes something of a romantic figure as Dyck describes his increasing dissociation from his village friends and his reluctance to share his dreams with them. He stands apart, isolated by a sensibility that no one else, even the inventive and clever Berend, can share (339).

Whether Dyck also sees this artist figure as romantic in the sense of assuming prophetic stature is debatable. Mennonite experience is not unconnected to the prophet. Their very history has been shaped by individuals who dared to stand against the society around them and declare, "This is what the Lord says!" While the more ethnicized Mennonite society that Dyck depicts had grown wary of prophets, it still revered truth. Hence Mennonites were prepared to tolerate only two forms of fiction: wildly improbable romance "so exotic...it could not possibly be confused with 'real' life," and didactic works that proclaimed divine truth.<sup>19</sup> The secular nature of the Mennonite community Dyck presents precludes the didactic purpose of art, and in any case one cannot imagine the romantic Hans ever thinking about religious instruction through art. Yet, distanced romance is not what Hans really wants to paint. The only picture we see him imagining himself creating is one of astounding realism (the little Hans on horseback in the corn field) and the impetus for its conception is the harsh reality of Hans' own farm life (213-14). Hans' discovery that the subject of art need not be "something grand or something remote" (213) could be a defence of Dyck's own writings. Like Hans, Dyck is letting "those on the outside find out that there are such boys and how hard they must struggle" (214). If this suggests that Hans (and Dyck himself—the autobiographical note in *Lost in the Steppe* is strong) is assuming the prophetic stance, concerned about conveying truth and challenging communal values, it is only a very brief suggestion. Immediately after his epiphanic discovery of art's varied contents, Hans is lost in his usual contemplation of colour and forms in the evening sky of the steppe, happily translating the clouds into castles and dragons and threatened kings' daughters. Having just introduced the possibility of art's disturbing reflection of truth, Dyck draws back and maintains instead the aesthetic figure, not the prophet.

Dyck makes his mediative stance explicit in his descriptions of the function of the aesthetic sense. Teacher Dyck becomes his spokesman and model for extolling an appreciation of beauty as a medium of virtue and redemption. Before Mr. Dyck arrives, school has become a place of unjust beatings and empty recitations that "little advanced [Hans'] spirit" (126); he hated his German teacher and mocked his Russian teacher. But Mr. Dyck is different:

All his other subjects give him pleasure and joy, a new joy awakened by Mr. Dyck. The reason is not Mr. Dyck's pedagogical expertise, but something else. There is something in his German teacher that touches a kindred chord in Hans, a chord he didn't know existed. It is touched because all Mr. Dyck's teaching is marked by an artistic nature, which influences Hans for life. (129)

Even the villagers are touched by Mr. Dyck. His singing with the children replaces decibels with sensitivity; his teaching style softens even the rambunctious Isaac; and his tactful speeches to the community win over “even his opponents, who have met his many innovations in and outside of school with suspicion” (169). The portrait of Mr. Dyck is idealized, of course, for he does no wrong throughout, yet he does embody Dyck’s aesthetic aims.

Varvara’s vision of a reconciled understanding between Russians and Germans is a logical extension of Mr. Dyck’s mediative function in Hochfeld. Once Hans has been educated, has experienced the wider world of the Russians, he will be able to work against current prejudices. It is noteworthy in this context that what attracts Hans to the Russians is their love of brilliant colour, their cheerful tolerance of disorder, and their ability to sing. At the fair he is drawn to the “cheerful colouring” of the pots from Poltava (276) and the highly embroidered clothing of the Russians (271). The aesthetic sense should be able to reconcile unreconcilable opposites as easily as the lark unites romance and reality:

At times it happens that the lark carries his thoughts up and over hills and valleys, over woods and fields to the west, into the land of his books...after he knows that the same lark flings itself into the blue sky and sings the same songs in the land of his dreams, in his fairy land, just as it does here, it has become a mediator to him that spins the invisible threads by which he glides into the bright distance” (199).

Dyck’s act of writing *Lost in the Steppe* is, in some ways, a demonstration of just such a mediative act of reconciling unreconcilable opposites. By evading direct conflict between aesthetic expression and religious tradition, and veiling his implicit criticism of the narrow parochialism of the Russian Mennonite communities in a subtle irony comprehensible only by those already prepared to accept its conclusions, Dyck makes it possible for his Mennonite readers to accept his novel as a validation of communal identity, not a threat. He has thus maintained a role within the community without sacrificing aesthetic integrity, and created an artist figure who is, surprisingly, acceptable after all.

The essence of Dyck’s subtle art is its provocative ambiguity, however. Hans Toews is an equally acceptable artist figure to those readers less concerned about maintaining unquestioned ethnic and religious traditions and more aware of the problematic possibilities of prophetic art. As definitely as Hans stands within the boundaries of his community, he also stands close enough to those boundaries to step over when the time is right or when his “passionate nature” can no longer “withstand his inner urge” (298). The ending of the novel can certainly be read as Hans’s final, relieved escape. As he prepares to leave for Chortitza he “gets a notion that the world, the small Hochfeld world...takes damned little notice of his leaving” but “if nobody needs him here, he doesn’t need anybody either....Hans says it not without bitterness, but with a spontaneously rising feeling of defiance” (351). The only ties he finally recognizes as worth retaining are his family ties, and his family members, with the notable exception of his mother, have supported or at least recognized his gifts. What’s

more, his father has acquiesced in the matter of higher education only; it is very doubtful if he knows anything about Hans' passionate desire to become a painter.

The fragility of Dyck's balance between aesthetic ambitions and ethnic traditions and between sturdy individualism and community conformity is apparent as soon as we imagine other scenarios in Hochfeld. Suppose Dyck had placed a boy of Hans' temperament within the narrowly pragmatic Dietrich Harms family. Open, painful conflict would have been inevitable. Or suppose Dyck's protagonist had been the sacrificial Berend (who reluctantly chose to remain on the farm so that Hans could leave {327}). Dyck would then have had to explore the inner tensions of a man like Hans' grandfather who was forced to "deploy his energies in the place in which he found himself and from which he couldn't escape" (113). Hadley's comment that *Lost in the Steppe* expresses a valiant struggle against "a closed society's self-estrangement and fear"<sup>20</sup> and that survival in such circumstances "demands that one overcome the obstacles, or else escape. But escape...means denial of the culture one has been nurtured to preserve,"<sup>21</sup> would then be entirely applicable. As Dyck has written *Lost in the Steppe*, however, such stark alternatives are only cautiously implied. The youthful Hans Toews, as well as his beloved creator, Arnold Dyck, remain acceptable artists.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Among Mennonite critics who have examined early Mennonite literature, such as Harry Loewen in "Mennonite Literature in Canada: Beginnings, Reception and Study," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 1 (1983): 119-132, and Jack Thiessen in "Canadian Mennonite Literature," *Canadian Literature* 51 (1972): 65-72, Arnold Dyck is generally agreed to have produced the most mature work. *Verloren in der Steppe* has achieved recognition among German scholars as well, such as Michael Hadley in "Education and Alienation in Dyck's *Verloren in der Steppe*: a Novel of Cultural Crisis," *German-Canadian Yearbook*, III (Toronto: Historical Society of Mecklenburg Upper Canada, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> Hadley, "Education and Alienation," 200.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>4</sup> A common proverb among Mennonites can be translated roughly as "the apple hasn't fallen far from the tree" meaning that individuals rarely depart completely from what they have inherited genetically from their parents or experienced as children.

<sup>5</sup> James Urry, *None But Saints: the Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia* (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1989) 154.

<sup>6</sup> Al Reimer, *Mennonite Literary Voices: Past & Present* (North Newton, Kansas: Bethel College, 1993) 13, italics mine.

<sup>7</sup> Al Reimer, "The Creation of Arnold Dyck's 'Koop en Bua' Characters," *Mennonite Images: Historical, Cultural, and Literary Essay Dealing With Mennonite Issues*, ed. Harry Loewen (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1980) 259.

<sup>8</sup> Urry, *None But Saints*, 244.

<sup>9</sup> As Al Reimer observes in "The Role of Arnold Dyck in Canadian Mennonite Writing," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 2 (1991), "Compared with the Mennonites of Russia, Canadian Mennonites lacked cultural aspirations and still regarded almost any kind of art as sinful" (83).

<sup>10</sup> Hildi Froese Tiessen, "Mennonite/s Writing in Canada: An Introduction," *The New Quarterly* 10 (1990), 9.

<sup>11</sup> Urry, *None But Saints*, 22.

<sup>12</sup> Reimer, "The Role of Arnold Dyck," 86.

<sup>13</sup> In using the term "German" rather than "Mennonite", Dyck was following a trend already well-established as many Mennonites, in the wake of Russian reforms that challenged separate identity, chose to strengthen ties with German Lutheran colonies and to articulate "more clearly than previously the connection between the German language, their customs and institutions, and their religious identity" (Urry, 261). Epp, in *Mennonite Exodus* (Altona, Manitoba: D.W. Friesen & Sons, 1962), similarly explains the value the German language gained in Russia: "these Germanized Mennonites automatically became a part of, and were identified with, a much larger German populace in Russia....Surrounded by an alien and less developed culture, it was natural for the Mennonites to cultivate their heritage and to solidify into a strong sociological group in the German tradition" (12).

<sup>14</sup> Reimer, "The Role of Arnold Dyck," 85-86.

<sup>15</sup> Reimer, "The Russian-Mennonite Experience in Fiction," *Mennonite Images*, 232.

<sup>16</sup> Reimer, "Russian-Mennonite Experience," 232.

<sup>17</sup> Hildi Froese Tiessen, "The Role of Art and Literature in Mennonite Self-Understanding," *Mennonite Identity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Calvin Redekop & S.J. Steiner (Lanham: University Press of America, 1988) 235.

<sup>18</sup> Tiessen, "Role of Art," 235.

<sup>19</sup> Reimer, "Russian-Mennonite Experience," 222.

<sup>20</sup> Hadley, "Education and Alienation," 200.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.