

“One foot in, one foot out:” Themes and Issues in Contemporary Mennonite Writing

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This essay is a slightly revised version of the second in a series of four lectures Al Reimer gave on “Mennonite Literary Voices Past and Present” in the Menno Simons lecture series at Bethel College in October, 1991. The first lecture was entitled “Where Did the Voices Come From? ‘In the beginning was the Word’: Anabaptist Writing and the Russian Mennonite Tradition.” The third and fourth lectures were entitled, respectively, “Where Was/Is the Woman’s Voice? The Remembering of the Mennonite Woman: Women Writing Within the Mennonite Ethos,” and “To Whom Are the Voices Speaking? Writing from Outside the Inside: Mennonite Literature and the Community.” Lecture III on Mennonite women writers appears in the March, 1992, issue of Mennonite Life and all four lectures are to be published in book form in the C. H. Wedel series at Bethel College.

From a modest, tentative beginning in Russia just before World War I, Mennonite literary writing in German was developed in Canada—and to a lesser extent in the U.S.—by a generation of secularized emigré writers like Arnold Dyck, Fritz Senn, J. H. Janzen, Peter G. Epp, and others in the decades of the thirties through the fifties. In Canada, beginning in the 1960s with Rudy Wiebe and gaining momentum in the seventies and particularly in the 1980s, a new generation of

Mennonite writers writing in English has been creating a body of literary works already far superior to that of its German-writing predecessors. Today's Mennonite writers are displaying technical skills, imaginative flair and a boldness in addressing themselves to controversial issues and taboo themes never attained or even dared by earlier Mennonite writers as yet unassimilated to mainstream North American society. University educated and fully at home in a secular culture, contemporary Mennonite writers are no longer "in-house" artists satisfied with only Mennonite readers but aspire to a more general readership.

Indeed, it is a startling paradox that most of our better writers today, particularly in Canada, are no longer Mennonites at all. That is, they are no longer Mennonites in the traditional sense of being Anabaptist Mennonite Christians living as members in good standing of a Mennonite church within a well-defined ethnic community. Rather, they consider themselves simply as Canadian or American writers making literature out of whatever ethnic and religious experience they remember from their formative years. Where the German-writing generation of Arnold Dyck had a centripetal relationship with the Mennonite community, at least in an ethnic sense, the new generation of writers for the most part has an uneasy centrifugal relationship that in some cases threatens to fly apart completely. Having either left the Mennonite church or never joined it in the first place, these writers draw what creative energy they can from the tension generated between their remembered ethnic experience and their rejection of Mennonite faith and doctrine. By their own admission they are disenchanted with their Mennonite identity and heritage and write out of anger with whatever critical detachment they can muster. But not with indifference. Even the more dissident of them still seem to care deeply about their people even as they challenge Mennonite values. As one young Mennonite poet has expressed it: "i am in love not with what my people are but with what they want to be."¹

One is tempted to say that Mennonite literature in English was invented by Rudy Wiebe in the early sixties, but of course that would be an oversimplification. In Canadian terms the claim may be valid, but in the U.S there was at least some Mennonite literature before that, although the output was sparse and generally mediocre in quality, as Elmer Suderman has shown.² Apart from Gordon Friesen's prairie-gothic novel *The Flamethrowers* (1936), Otto Schrag's *The Locusts* (1942), Helen Brennenman's *But Not Forsaken* (1955), Warren Kliever's early short stories and plays, and Elmer Suderman's poems about Mennonite rural life, there is not much of any real merit before the sixties. In Canada Mabel Dunham's pioneer novel *The Trail of the Conestoga* (1924) and Paul Hiebert's *Sarah Binks* (1947) were even more isolated literary phenomena and can in any case be regarded only peripherally as "Mennonite" works.

Today most of the best Mennonite writing is coming from Western Canada, most specifically Winnipeg and Manitoba, where a close-knit circle of Mennonite writers is at work shaping the Mennonite experience into literary art by creating a sense of imaginative place and situating in it literary myths that can help us to understand ourselves more clearly, inspiring us to take a closer look at ourselves and

our Mennonite values, our aspirations and claims to being a community of faith and ethnic identity.

That this unprecedented concentration of Mennonite writing should be happening in this particular part of the scattered Mennonite world is not fortuitous, although to outsiders it may seem so. Some of the reasons are obvious. Western Canada, Manitoba in particular, has by far the largest number of Dutch Russian Mennonites in North America, with between 20,000 and 40,000 in Winnipeg alone, depending on one's definition of "Mennonite." Secondly, the Russian Mennonite immigrants of the 1920s brought with them not only a well-defined ethnic culture but the rudiments of a literary tradition, albeit in German. They also became much more rapidly urbanized than the older Canadian Mennonite groups.

Less obvious, perhaps, is the fact that the development of Mennonite ethnic culture in Western Canada and, more recently the rise of Mennonite art and literature, coincided with the cultural development and the rise of the arts in Western Canada as a whole. Remote geographically from the rest of Canada and spiritually and culturally isolated from it in significant ways, the Canadian prairies, with their harsh climate and thin population, were forced to develop an indigenous culture or remain a wilderness, and the Dutch Russian Mennonites came along at the right time to help shape the culture and literature of this vast but solitary region.

Alienation, a strong sense of difference from the rest of the world, the epic struggle to subdue the land, the protective shell of homogeneous communities — all of these conditions were of course familiar to Mennonites coming from the Russian steppes. Even so, in the classic pattern of immigration it took two to three generations for these Mennonites to feel enough like native Canadians to adopt Canadian culture while still retaining a semblance of Mennonite ethnic identity. As for literature, while the tradition of Canadian prairie realism in the novel goes back to the twenties and such writers as Frederick Phillip Grove, Robert Stead and Laura Goodman Salverson, Western Canadian literature, indeed Canadian literature as a whole, did not gain real momentum until after World War II, at the very time when Mennonite cultural and linguistic assimilation was taking place.

And so Mennonite writers in the Canadian west have had the enormous advantage of helping to establish a Western Canadian literary identity merely by writing out of their own Mennonite experience and exploiting their sense of ethnic difference. Rudy Wiebe is not just an important Mennonite writer; as a literary heir of the prairie realists he has become one of the leading novelists in Canada. Compare that with the situation in the U.S, where Mennonite writers are for the most part anonymous voices lost on the vast stage of a much older, much larger much more mature national literature. Canadian Mennonite writers are helping to "name," in the biblical sense, to humanize and mythologize the Canadian west in a way that even a much larger group of American Mennonite writers could never hope to do for the Mid-West, say. Rudy Wiebe expressed his literary credo with exuberant confidence some twenty years ago:

...to break into the space of the reader's mind with the space of this western landscape and the people in it you must build a structure of fiction like an engineer

builds a bridge or a skyscraper over and into space. A poem, a lyric, will not do. You must lay great black steel lines of fiction, break up that space with huge design and, like the fiction of the Russian steppes, build giant artifact.³

That brash confidence, the confidence of a talented literary mythmaker, has not only sustained Wiebe's own successful career as a novelist, but has served as a model for younger Mennonite writers.

Furthermore, the acculturation of Mennonites in Western Canada happened in little more than a generation, a much shorter time than it took in the U.S.; it also happened much later and went hand-in-hand with the process of urbanization and the pursuit of higher education. All these social, cultural and linguistic changes coming more or less at the same time have created an exciting sense of liberation among Canadian-Mennonite writers and artists, often resulting in yet another productive creative tension, the tension set up between memories of a rustic childhood and youth in a traditional Mennonite community, and the experience of a much more sophisticated urban adulthood. Hildi Froese Tiessen calls today's Mennonite writers "immigrants within the dominant Canadian culture," and makes the point that "Mennonite literature...in Canada today is unique because the very particular experiences about which these people write will not ever recur."⁴ It is also true that almost all Canadian-Mennonite writers were nurtured on Low German as children, which means that vestiges of the Low German oral plain style are still to be found in their English writing.⁵ It is precisely those creative tensions between place and culture and between literary and ethnic languages which give a writer a sense of "doubleness," of having "one foot in, one foot out," in Patrick Friesen's phrase, and provide him with a "motive for metaphor" through which, in all his writing, he tries to find his way home again, to write himself and his place into imaginative existence, to create the authentic world of the imagination in which he and we, the readers, can live. The Russian Mennonite emigré writers did that by nostalgically recreating their remembered Russian garden as a metaphor expressing their "longing for a lost homeland," to borrow Harry Loewen's phrase.⁶ Our new Mennonite writers are busy creating a world of the imagination which challenges us to re-examine our remembered Mennonite garden, to explore critically our inherited beliefs and values, to lay aside our accumulated prejudices, our fears and anxieties, and accept a finer, broader, more tolerant vision of ourselves. Maurice Mierau, another of the younger Canadian Mennonite poets and critics, describes the high calling of Mennonite writers with trenchant irony:

But whether Mennonite writers work apart from or within the tradition, they seem to be attracted to the prophetic and didactic modes of the 'outsider'--the same modes in which our preachers and theologians have announced the all-importance of God's Word, and the spiritual irrelevance of art.⁷

No writer has exemplified the serious aims and the prophetic-visionary mode of Mennonite writing more completely than Rudy Wiebe, who almost singlehandedly started it all. From the beginning he has been the quintessential Mennonite writer who speaks from within the community but who adopts in his fiction the radical Christian stance of the outsider, that is, the responsible critic who refuses to replicate

the comfortably idealized image the community wishes to perpetuate. Elmer Suderman's perspicacious comment in an early analysis of Wiebe's first novel could be applied to all of his Mennonite novels:

[Wiebe's] novel is not a lyrical soporific to restore faith's flagging energies but a sacrament of disturbance involving the reader in the most drastic sort of exposure to unwelcome experience and unfamiliar truth.⁸

Note that inspired oxymoron "a sacrament of disturbance," which captures the very essence of what not only Rudy Wiebe but other serious Mennonite writers are attempting to do in their work.

Peace Shall Destroy Many, Rudy Wiebe's controversial first novel, was published in 1962, only two years after Arnold Dyck's last novel, thus maintaining at least a chronological continuity with the German tradition. But that was about all. By bringing to bear, unlike most of his Russian Mennonite predecessors, a deeply religious literary sensibility Wiebe was able to get under the skin of Mennonite readers much more effectively than Dyck's generation of largely secularized writers had done. Judged as literature *Peace Shall Destroy Many* was apprentice work of much less power than his later novels. But its didactic intensity and fearless handling of important themes were enough to set the teeth of conservative Mennonite readers—and non-readers—on edge. *Peace* was the right novel at the right time in that it raised crucial questions and long-suppressed issues of Mennonite life and faith and dared to address them honestly and with creative independence. It slaughtered the sacred cows of institutionalized Mennonitism on all sides by dramatizing such issues as Mennonite isolationism and the patriarchal tyranny it bred, racial bigotry as the ugly product of Mennonite pride, passive non-resistance in a time of national crisis, the German versus English language crisis, sexual repression and subjugation of the woman, religious formalism and the lust for land which in league with religious formalism becomes such a soul-numbing form of idolatry. Even less forgivable in the eyes of many Canadian Mennonites, through the tyrannical character of Deacon Block the novel had the audacity to show that these sacred cows had been imported from Russia, where they had been sheltered in the Mennonite garden all along, and that the fondly remembered garden had been tainted by sin and violence from within long before it was destroyed from without.

And so Wiebe was hounded out of the Mennonite community in Winnipeg because Canadian Mennonites were not yet ready to accept the authentically imagined world and characters he had invented for them. But he had set the agenda, an agenda of themes and issues he would continue to explore in subsequent novels and which he made it respectable for younger Mennonite writers to develop as well. In his first two novels —*Peace Shall Destroy Many* and *The Blue Mountains of China* (1970) —Rudy Wiebe created a Mennonite literary world real enough and spacious enough to make it possible and indeed respectable for other writers to "write Mennonite" even if they were themselves no longer practising Mennonites. He gave them a literary context in which to express Mennonite experience never before accessible to the creative imagination.

Wiebe's novelistic art as it developed over two decades in his three Mennonite

novels from *Peace* to *My Lovely Enemy* (1983) — there are also four critically acclaimed non-Mennonite novels in between — shows an enormous growth in technical skills, depth, and in the handling of themes and language. *Peace* was conventional enough in form and simple enough in style to encourage ordinary Mennonites to read it, even though many of them misread it completely as fiction, including some Mennonite reviewers who should have known better.⁹ In subsequent novels Wiebe perfected forms and styles so complex as to make them comprehensible only to more sophisticated readers (which of course did not prevent some Mennonite readers from misreading them even more egregiously).

In *Peace* Wiebe had chosen for his setting the kind of remote, claustrophobic Mennonite community he himself had grown up in in northern Saskatchewan. In *The Blue Mountains of China* he presented a sweeping panorama of Mennonite wandering and settlement on four continents over a span of several generations. Written as a series of loosely but subtly related and vividly conceived separate episodes or short stories, the novel is deliberately disjunctive in form and structure, its style ambiguously complex, its themes, characters and action presented in an oblique and visionary manner. There is no coherently developed plot, no central protagonist, no one definitive point of view, the main elements we expect in a literary epic. And that deliberately disjunctive form itself reflects Wiebe's view of the collective Russian Mennonite world as less purposeful, coherent and homogenous than it traditionally assumed itself to be.

The novel deals powerfully with such contrasted themes as betrayal and sacrifice in Russia, community solidarity and sexual repression in Paraguay, crass materialism and radical Christian discipleship in Canada. Of special interest here is Wiebe's subtle and eloquent use of oral voice and various levels of language of which the common denominator, the one remaining thread of continuity, is Low German. This is especially evident in the concluding scene where characters from diverse social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds come together by carefully contrived chance to discuss *opp Plautdietsch* what it means to be Mennonite. In the end, however, nothing is resolved, all possibilities are left open and fluid as indicated by the chapter heading "On the Way." Even the radical Christian rhetoric of young John Reimer, dragging his symbolic cross along the highway, is subtly undercut by the dogged literalism and sceptical stoicism of the old Russian camp survivor Jakob Friesen.¹⁰

My Lovely Enemy, Wiebe's most recent Mennonite novel, is a profoundly Christian work of almost unbearable intensity, an extended parable about love and language which employs post-modern and magic realism techniques and a style so charged metaphorically that the novel reads like a prose poem in places. The novel takes us to the very edge of the mystery of life and death where even language cannot leap across the void to where the voiceless spirit lives in the "peace that passes understanding." Even more than *Blue Mountains* this is a complex and layered didactic novel that spurns egotistical preaching, avoids the shelter of doctrine, rejects the claims of moral rectitude and refuses to provide a logical, coherent pattern of thematic closure in its conclusion.

In *My Lovely Enemy* history professor James Dyck, a lapsed Mennonite, goes on a spiritual quest during which he explores love in all its forms and guises, from the frankly sexual to the purest spiritual love with various gradations in between, including his adulterous love for a colleague's young wife, his deep love for his own wife and young daughter, and his special love for his aging mother. Through scenes of physical intimacy and discussions on the complex nature of love, including two astonishingly suggestive "interviews" with Jesus himself, Dyck begins to learn that love is one and indivisible and that the various categories into which we normally divide love—spiritual love, maternal love, parental love, romantic love, adulterous love—are artificially forced upon us by language and social codes. The theme of love triumphant as one indivisible whole transcending all logic and analysis, a truth beyond even metaphysical expression, receives its most dramatic treatment in the concluding scene where at the funeral of Dyck's mother she is miraculously restored to life and joins her son, the two women and daughter he loves, and the others at the funeral in a sacrament of potato salad and cold tea in the harvest field beside the cemetery. It is a love feast that goes beyond language and understanding, on a literal level resolving nothing (James Dyck is still an adulterer who wants to have his cake and eat it too), on a spiritual level resolving everything in a context that makes the literal irrelevant.

The central theme of interaction among community, family and individual explored by Rudy Wiebe in his three Mennonite novels is also prominent in the work of other Mennonite writers. A brief discussion of four works which portray life in fictitious Mennonite rural communities in southern Manitoba at different periods ranging from around World War I through the 1980s will serve as illustrations. Taken together these works give us a more or less consecutive account of the pressures and processes of change that Canadian Mennonite society has been subjected to in the past several generations. The main focus in all four works is the struggle for individual identity and meaning within a church-dominated, conformist society whose highest priority is to preserve itself.

Patrick Friesen's narrative poem *The Shunning* (1980) takes place early in this century in a tiny farming community that isn't even given a name. The story unfolds mainly on the two farms of the brothers Peter and Johann Neufeld, but offstage lurks a repressive little society dominated by an all-powerful, legalistic church run by petty, vindictive men. Symbolically, Peter's farm is a garden, but with a snake in it poised to strike. Peter himself is an innocent idealist, a fool of Christ — his brother Johann calls him *der blaue Engel* — who yearns for the purity and simplicity of the Christian love we associate with the Anabaptist ideal and who tries to ignore the church. For his "sin of pride" he is banned by Loewen, the church elder, shunned by his own wife and driven to suicide because he literally "had nowhere to go."¹¹

The second half of the poem is devoted to Johann, who loved his defiant brother Peter but who is willing to make the necessary compromises that enable him to survive in this cruel, claustrophobic religious atmosphere. Unlike his ascetic brother, Johann is a caring, sociable man who reaches out to others and lives a relatively rewarding life within the narrow constraints of a community in which an

appreciation of beauty, sensuality and joy are only clandestinely possible, if at all. The two brothers can be seen as representing two different sides of the Mennonite psyche—Peter the idealist pure of heart and soul but unwilling to compromise with reality, Johann the pragmatist to whom “time happens,” willing to surrender his innocence as the price of survival in a closed church society oblivious to the outside world.

An American Mennonite, Warren Kliever nevertheless set his collection of related short stories *The Violators* (1964) in Waldheim, again a fictional village in southern Manitoba. His village characters are identified only as “German,” though internal evidence in the stories leaves no doubt that they are Mennonite. Kliever was apparently trying to avoid having his fictional world confused with his home town of Mountain Lake, Minnesota, a prudent subterfuge given the fierce territorial instincts of rural Mennonites.¹² Waldheim, as the name indicates, is both physically and spiritually isolated from the outside world, and the stunted parochialism of its inhabitants is rendered with almost grotesque realism in some of the ten stories in the book. The stories embrace the middle decades of the century, a time when the traditional remoteness from the world was about to be breached by linguistic change from German to English, by radio and TV and other irresistible forces of assimilation.

The stories deal with such themes and issues as spiritual pride, moral smugness, superstition, hypocrisy, sexual repression, lack of charity, and racism (against the local French Canadians). Reverend Schultz, the local pastor, is a pious, cliché-babbling inanity who symbolizes the spiritual sterility of the church, while other characters bring out the narrow, backward cultural state of the community. Stories like “The Death of the Patriarch” and “Martin and the French” vividly illustrate that Waldheim, far from being an idyllic spiritual retreat and refuge from the wicked city, harbors the destructive human ego with its cruelty and violence as much as any city. And yet, a few of these stories, most notably “UHF,” one of the best in the book, also hint at a possible accommodation with the outside world, an end to benighted spiritual isolation and social alienation of the kind from which there seemed to be no escape in *The Shunning*.

Armin Wiebe’s *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* (1984) is a comic novel with serious undertones set in Gutenthal, another fictional Mennonite community in southern Manitoba, as it was in the late fifties through the seventies. While still church-oriented Gutenthal is in the throes of changing from a sleepy Mennonite farming community to a more progressive community culturally and technologically connected to the rest of the world. In the comic vision of the novel the church is neither a repressive nor a dominant force, but is depicted as an institution comfortably integrated with an ethnic community confident of its own identity while casually adopting secular ways and customs from the outside world. The novel reflects the rapid secularization of Canadian society after the 1950s, with the church forced to adapt itself to the changed social conditions. At their best, church and ethnic community achieve an almost ideal balance or integration, as in an early scene where the traditional Sylvester (New Year’s) Eve service is noisily interrupted by

a gang of schoolboys dressed as mummers celebrating with the traditional *brummtopp*, a crude, home-made drum producing loud, flatulent sounds when worked with a horse tail. The raucous scene ends harmoniously, however, with the congregation lustily singing the Beethoven-Schiller Ode to Joy to the hoarse accompaniment of the lowly *brummtopp*.

Yasch Siemens, the comic hero, landless and fatherless (his father had defected to Mexico years earlier) and without status in the community, is forced to pull himself up by his own bootstraps, to gain local respectability by acquiring his own land along with a wife and family and membership in the church. With something of the picaresque hero in his makeup, Yasch, after numerous false starts and misadventures, finally acquires land and wife in one fell swoop by marrying the enormously fat but amiable Oata Needarp, who has just inherited her father's farm. In conjunction with Yasch's own shrewd mother, Oata teaches him the practical ways of the world and explodes the fallacy of his romantic fantasies. And so Yasch's "salvation" is much more a matter of gaining status in the ethnic community and life as a conservative farmer and landowner than salvation in the religious sense. As a somewhat aimless and self-destructive individualist, Yasch has to learn how to "connect" with the community and with the other individuals in his life, how, in short, to become a useful member of Mennonite society and a caring human being.

The language of *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* deserves special mention. A unique form of English vernacular larded with Low German words and idioms literally translated ("overset"), it is the perfect vehicle not only for the comedy in the novel, but even more importantly for the presentation of an ethnic society in which the everyday Low German vernacular provided a lusty, irreverent counter-language to the solemn spiritual language of the church. Armin Wiebe cleverly exploits the Mennonite plain style derived from that oral tradition — he always refers to it as "Flat German," a literal translation of *Plautdietsch* — and forges it into a wonderful style whose hybrid strength and raw energy are fully up to his comic demands. Here, for example, are Yasch's reflections after fat Oata's father dies and Yasch realizes that his casual involvement with her now calls for a more serious commitment:

A man can't just claw out from a woman like that, at least not if she has just found out that her Futtachi has gone dead. I mean if a person goes dead you can't just turn away and spin your tires. Not if you want to call yourself a mensch. A mensch has to deal with other mensch[e] and when you try to do something with another mensch it always gets kompliziet. And when you try to do something with a fruemensch it can be like building a fence with hackelwire you found at the mist acre. But that's the ball game.¹³

Douglas Reimer's first collection of short stories *Older Than Ravens* (1989) portrays life in the Manitoba community of Altwelt from the 1960s through the eighties. The very name of the village — Old World — implies that the place is an anachronism for the most recent generation of Mennonites growing up in it. In these intensely personal stories the solidarity of the traditional Mennonite community is breaking down, its rigid codes of belief and behavior expressed as mindless piety and

insensitive social reflexes. Most of the stories are about three adolescent brothers, Peter, Thomas and Roley Regier, who try to find themselves as individuals within a family and community where traditional Mennonite values and beliefs are being trivialized by the new "conversion" mentality represented by the Brunk Tent Mission. As a consequence, the brothers suffer from crippling feelings of guilt and religious *angst*, not to mention moral confusion as they rebel against the narrow code of belief imposed upon them.

Well-schooled in post-modernism, Douglas Reimer deals tellingly with such taboo subjects as adolescent sexual obsessions, sexual repression in parents, the hypocrisy of professing Christians, the spiritual shallowness of the "are you saved?" approach, and the suppressed violence that seems to lurk at the heart of Mennonite meekness and humility. "A Picture of Jesus" is the disturbing story of Thomas Regier, who in self-righteous imitation of Christ has the school principal spank him for a misdemeanor he knows other boys committed. By the time he gets home, however, he is close to hysteria and makes his mother put away her kitchen knife for fear that he may erupt in an act of violence--against himself possibly, or even against his mother.

The disturbing paradox of Altwelt is that while it considers itself an exemplary Christian community with all the answers, it actually provides no coherent pattern by which to live in today's world. A perceptive reviewer of Reimer's book states:

In all honesty it must be said that the religion depicted in these stories is for the most part profoundly pathological. While these Mennonites are deeply burdened for the salvation of what they understand to be "the world," it was their own religion which stood most in need of redemption.¹⁴

For all that, Reimer's troubled adolescent characters grow up into upwardly mobile middle-class Mennonites, enlightened enough to escape to the more tolerant world of the city, or else defiantly trying to enlarge their horizons in Altwelt. Either way they they will never completely free themselves of the pervasive sin and guilt they experienced in the agonizing process of growing up in that community.

So far we have looked at the sense of place in Mennonite literature mainly in terms of how the individual relates to church and community. Mennonite writers also have a lot to say about relationships within the family. The traditional structure of the Mennonite church and community took the form of a patriarchal hierarchy with God the Father and Christ the Bridegroom as models for the church fathers (the minister-teachers) and for the father as head of the family. Not surprisingly the authoritative father, either as direct or implied metaphor, appears frequently in Mennonite literature. The traditional image is that of the benign, all-protective, life-giving, life-sustaining, wise and justice-dispensing paterfamilias whose will and word must not be questioned, and who is himself answerable only to the church fathers and ultimately to God. He is the bearer of ancestral traditions, the connecting link, along with the grandfather, between the generations, the perpetuator of community wisdom and spokesman for those who depend upon him. In his purest form, he is a farmer, a tiller of the soil like Adam the first father, strong, stern, sparing of words, but resonating mysterious, even feared depths hidden from his subjects,

that is, his wife and children. He is held in awe and veneration by his family, but like God his model he tends to be remote, not easily approachable.¹⁵

This god-like father appears frequently in the earlier Mennonite literature in German, where his strength and wisdom are freely acknowledged but his weaknesses and vulnerabilities seldom touched upon, at least not until he dwindles into feeble and passive grandfatherhood. But he is given some human touches. The traditional father in Arnold Dyck's *Lost in the Steppe*, for example, becomes addicted in middle age to the reading of novels serialized in the German papers he takes in.¹⁶ Fritz Senn's many father poems, while portraying the hard-working farmer-father, also show him coming home from the field out of sorts and scolding the children, or coming out of his habitual silence with friendly advice to his son, or relaxing in the evening with his family around him.¹⁷ By and large, however, in the older Mennonite literature the father is presented in terms of the traditional stereotype.

In Mennonite literature in English the patriarchal image of the father is no longer idealized but more ambiguously presented, as in the character of Deacon Block in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. As the patriarchal leader of the isolated community he has established in the Saskatchewan bush, Block is generous and benign in helping those in need, but a tyrant in his attempts to keep his community "pure" and uncontaminated by "the world." Worse still, as family father, like Milton's Satan he tries to make evil his good as he ruins his daughter's life with his cruel repression, finally destroying her altogether. Earlier in Russia, he had even committed murder in order to save his starving infant son's life out of ego-driven dynastic motives.

The father-son relationship is a frequent theme in Mennonite literature written by men and can take various ambivalent forms. Elmer Suderman's recent cycle of father poems "A Mennonite Father: New Poems"¹⁸ portrays the traditional father, now long dead, through the elegiac memory of a son with subtly ambivalent feelings towards his strong, God-fearing sire who worked the land without benefit of modern technology, who was untouched by culture and art, and who would probably, if he were still alive, be concerned about his Ph.D.-bearing son.¹⁹ Even as the son celebrates the memory of his father, he implicitly measures himself against him, wondering whether he is worthy, trying to find words to fill in the father's past silence, conscious of his responsibility for re-imagining the father back into life.

I think about him often, wondering
about the stories he did not tell
so I might tell for him
stories that might be true²⁰

Thus the traditional father figure is subtly undercut by his incompleteness, his "lostness," by the necessity of the son to "complete" the father, to give him the "voice" in the present that he never had even in the past.

Complex and even more ambivalent father images inform some of the best work of David Waltner-Toews and Patrick Friesen, the two senior Canadian

Mennonite poets who between them have published nine volumes of verse since the mid-seventies. Like Rudy Wiebe, Waltner-Toews accepts his Mennonite heritage, although that has not prevented him from being sharply critical of its excesses, pretensions and other weaknesses. He grew up with the burden of having a father who was a prominent minister, college teacher and church historian in the Canadian Mennonite community. As a result, by the poet's own admission his father "never entered my poems until he died." The poems expressing his sense of loss are among Waltner-Toews's most moving, but like all good elegies they are also universalized and made the occasion for meditation. For him the Mennonite father as public icon must finally be humanized and domesticated in memory before he can be accepted as personal father image. In "Christmas, 1979," Waltner-Toews imagines his father coming back for a visit a year after his death and completing the family Christmas scene in a way that leaves the poet-son feeling consoled and at peace:

I come from the kitchen
a piece of cold turkey
in my hand.
My father looks comfortable
as if he intends to stay
a long time.²¹

Patrick Friesen's group of "pa" poems forms the core of his poetic exploration of the father image. What is only delicately hinted at in Elmer Suderman's father poems, namely the necessity for the son to redeem his father's lost presence, of keeping faith with his father's past, perhaps regret over having lost the purity and simplicity of the old Mennonite tradition, comes to the fore in various ambivalent ways in Friesen's father poems. Friesen was a rebellious son and his remembered father image is far from traditional: "pa" was as vulnerable as he was strong; in contrast to Waltner-Toews's public father, he was a very private man, not so much silent as inarticulate in the face of things he didn't understand about life. But he lived entirely for his family, a fact the rebellious son did not come to appreciate until after his father's premature death when there was no longer a need to voice grievances. In "pa poem 4: naked and nailed," the poet depicts his father as a kind of Christ figure crucified for love but unable to voice love, and so the son is finally forced to express his own reluctant love:

And see you old dead man
how I start with my grievance
and always end up with this Goddamned love
but I tell you that won't happen every time
or it'll kill me.²²

Wayne Tefs, Friesen's friend and fellow-writer in Winnipeg, has pointed out that the death of the poet's father coincided with Friesen's "assumption of the role of poet,"²³ and that his "elegiac effusions on the death of the familial father act as agents of expiation" for his own loss of faith and his feeling of having "betrayed his past and his culture, the history of his father and his father before him."²⁴ But by exploring his own guilt and voicing his concern over his betrayal, the poet begins

to define a new feeling of faith and qualified belief in his past, thus shifting the blame from his father to himself, so to speak, as he expresses it in "fatherless again":

1.
rest old man I must love you
I'm the boy who blames himself
our people taught us and taught us didn't they?
the ritual of betrayal and penance
I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry
if there is anything I can hate it's me²⁵

The acceptance here is, of course, hesitant, provisional and finally still ambivalent, but in the clash of dissonant notes the alert ear may also hear a chord of resolution.

Notes

¹ Audrey Poetker, *Prairie Fire: A Special Issue on Canadian Mennonite Writing*, vol. 11, No. 2, 119.

² Elmer Suderman, "Universal Values in Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many*," *Mennonite Life*, October, 1965, 172-173.

³ Rudy Wiebe, "Passage by Land," in *Writers of the Prairies*, 131.

⁴ Hildi Froese Tiessen, "Mennonite/s Writing in Canada: An Introduction" to *The New Quarterly: Special Issue: Mennonite/s Writing in Canada*, (Spring/Summer, 1990), 12.

⁵ The coming of age of Canadian Mennonite writing was dramatically evident at a special conference on Mennonite literature held at Conrad Grebel College in May, 1990, and sponsored by *New Quarterly Review*, a non-Mennonite academic journal at the University of Waterloo in Ontario. Not only Mennonite writers participated in this conference, but some of Canada's leading non-Mennonite writers as well. In addition to numerous individually published Mennonite literary works, three anthologies of Mennonite literature have been published in Canada in the past two years. Mennonite writers like Rudy Wiebe, Armin Wiebe, Di Brandt and others are regularly invited to German, French, Canadian and American universities to read from their works and as writers in residence or as instructors of creative writing. Theses on Mennonite writing are now appearing in Europe as well as in North America.

⁶ See Harry Loewen, "Canadian Mennonite Literature: Longing for a Lost Homeland," *The Old and the New World: Literary Perspectives of German-Speaking Canadians*, ed. Walter Riedel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984).

⁷ Maurice Mierau, *Prairie Fire* Special Issue, 139.

⁸ Suderman, op cit., 175.

⁹ See for example the review by Marlin Jeschke in *MQR*, vol. 37, No. 34, October, 1963, 135-137.

¹⁰ See Ina Ferris, "Religious Vision and Fictional Form: Rudy Wiebe's *The Blue Mountains of China*," 95-96, and Magdalene Falk Redekop, "Translated Into the Past: Language in *The Blue Mountains of China*," 119-121, both articles in *A Voice In The Land: Essays By and About Rudy Wiebe*, ed. W. J. Keith (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1981), for two different but interesting analyses of the concluding scene in the novel.

¹¹Patrick Friesen, *The Shunning* (Winnipeg: Turnstone, 1980), 43.

¹²In his Introduction to the volume Elmer Suderman wisely cautions the reader not to be deflected from the universality of Kliewer's stories by trying "to find a prototype for his community and for the German church" (xiii).

¹³Armin Wiebe, *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* (Winnipeg: Turnstone, 1984), 75.

¹⁴Denis R. Janz, Review in *Mennonite Reporter*, February 5, 1990, vol. 20, no. 3, 9.

¹⁵I am indebted in a general way for insights into the Mennonite father image to Victor G. Doerksen's suggestive unpublished paper "'Our Father, Which Art in Heaven...': Some Thoughts on the Father Image in Recent Mennonite Poetry."

¹⁶See Arnold Dyck, *Lost in the Steppe* (Vol. I, *Arnold Dyck Collected Works*, ed. by Victor G. Doerksen and Harry Loewen. Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 1985), 159.

¹⁷See Fritz Senn, *Gesammelte Gedichte und Prosa*. Ed. by Victor G. Doerksen (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1987).

¹⁸In *JMS*, vol. 7, 1989, 96-102.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 97.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 102.

²¹David Waltner-Toews, *Good Housekeeping* (Winnipeg: Turnstone, 1983) 61.

²²Patrick Friesen, *Unearthly Horses* (Winnipeg: Turnstone, 1984), 19.

²³Wayne Tefs, "13 Ways of Looking at Pat Friesen," in *Contemporary Manitoba Writers*, ed. Kenneth James Hughes (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1990), 58.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 60.

²⁵Friesen, *Unearthly Horses*, 29.