

The Naming of Rudy Wiebe

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...I...move backwards to his naming, which is the most important thing to me.... (Rudy Wiebe, on "The Naming of Albert Johnson")¹

Rudy Wiebe is best known, indeed, most often publically represents himself, as a novelist, a builder of "giant artifact."² Wiebe is a serious (and, with few exceptions, "difficult") novelist who exercises a high sense of "purpose" in his art. In his novels, complex in cultural implication and narrative conception, he makes bold assaults on audiences comfortably taken up with otherwise largely unchallenged cultural preconceptions. Creating on a broad canvas filled with histories of Métis or Indian or his own Mennonite people, he instructs his audience by satire and precept, challenges his readers' received versions of history and world-view, subverts secular beliefs about the technological and material world by asserting assumptions based on man's shared spirituality, and defies the demand for contemporary anti-heroes by appending his own voice to romantic visionaries who strode the Canadian prairie where he now lives. In the wide spaces of his novels he gives his readers, especially through "historical" characters such as Big Bear and Louis Riel, not just new myths of the past, but warnings, by strong and often threatening implication and analogy, about the future.

Although Wiebe (b. 1934) has written seven novels since 1962,³ and is listed often as a major contemporary Canadian novelist, he still (like some of his protagonists, however heroic or noble) remains something of an outsider in his own country. He seems to occupy a place (though, to be sure, one not altogether undesirable to him) along certain of the margins of the literary world in Canada. W.J. Keith, a major Wiebe scholar, has taken stock of Wiebe's anomalous position as a writer who is as important as but so much less known and understood than, say, Margaret Laurence, Mordecai Richler,

or Robertson Davies: "[H]is position within the exciting contemporary developments in Canadian literature is oddly ambiguous. He is very much a part of it, but remains enigmatically detached. Where, we may ask, is his voice coming from? Where does he fit?"⁴

Presumably Wiebe's narrative daring in his stories to incorporate on a literal and often non-ironic plane a Christian world-view, or the invitation to his readers to engage with a deeply felt sympathy in what he sees as the moral rightness and noble heroism of the Indian in western Canada a century ago, have, as Keith suggests, prevented even interested readers from easily coming to terms with him.⁵ (Time and again Wiebe has been effectively de-centered as a literary figure by being pegged by the media as a "prophetic," or as a "minority-culture" writer. What comes to mind is the dust-jacket of his first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, where on the front in bold letters he was branded "theologian.") In novels such as *The Temptations of Big Bear* and *The Scorched-Wood People* Wiebe has used the voices of nineteenth-century Canadian exiles and outlaws such as Big Bear and Louis Riel to carve out and claim the aesthetic and moral expanse he has needed to develop a broad heroic ground for the prophetic tone of protest in his own late-twentieth century voice. He has found in his adaptation of these voices room to articulate a rich and wry and biting rhetorical stance by which he undercuts and exposes pretentious and hollow claims and clichés of dominant power, of bullying force supported by convention and jargon, whether that force be expressed in the Anglo-Canadian voices of imperialistic power, or in the faceless hegemonies of nineteenth and twentieth-century technological procedures. Through his major fictional voices or personae Wiebe's work becomes a lament at the crushing, by man-made strategies repeated so often that they seem natural, of an organically rich universe profuse in but denied the possibilities for community and wholeness.

Despite its resonance, a voice like the one Wiebe strains to project is really a voice only if it can indwell, or be recreated in, a body of hearers; and for all the critical success of his novels it seems clear that Wiebe (marking in 1987 his twenty-fifth year as a published novelist) has not developed strong, clear lines of connection with a large segment of the reading public. (Indeed, what lines there were seem to have been twisted by the effect of his having surprised his readers by the "urban" and "contemporary" emphases which make his recent *My Lovely Enemy* the most "hard-to-place" of his major works.) He himself has increasingly felt his "oddly ambiguous" situation, has himself been asking—especially in short work, where his points of entry to a reader, a reader's to him, are particularly immediate—where he "fits".

Wiebe has always used various short literary forms to punctuate and play along the ground of his long fiction. He has used short stories, essays, interviews, and lecture presentations (any of these sometimes incorporating or anticipating some or all of the others) as means of artistic proclamation and exploration.⁶ Recently he has begun to fit to these forms his own explorations of the apparent crisis of ambiguity in writer-reader relationship, and

has found in these forms a means of publically performing or acting out, at least by analogy which comes astonishingly close to autobiography, his identity as artist. He has gone to the short story and other short literary forms to probe and dramatize the mixture of doubt and desire that may take root in any serious and major novelist who does not yet have the precise readership he seeks, who feels he has not yet found the national and international audience he wishes so much to affect, deeply, on artistic and moral and spiritual planes. The three recently published pieces which I will refer to here—the short story “Sailing to Danzig,” the essay “On Death and Writing,” the interview “The Blindman River Contradictions”⁷—not only illustrate the continuing importance of the short work for him; they also show Wiebe moving flexibly from one form to another, effectively creating art in each, and all the while playfully drawing readers over to his own ideas about his literary vision as a whole.

Furthermore (to take one of these three works, “Sailing to Danzig,” simply as an example of one of these forms, for a moment), it is interesting to note how Wiebe can take what is generally regarded as the most literary of these forms, the short story, and turn it into an essay on art, or an enquiry into the very identity of the artist. It is through the short story form that Wiebe may signal the high points of his movement, his development, as a writer. Just as in his essays Wiebe may help readers break through the curtain of “obscurity” that sometimes seems to veil his longer work, may set out, like markers, ways of approaching his world, so too, through the short story, he may provide privileged moments of instruction which will shed light on his longer work. He does not thereby enclose or contain that larger world; rather, he prods readers into richer response to it.

Indeed “Sailing to Danzig” inevitably invites us to recall his short story, “Where Is the Voice Coming From?”⁸ This earlier story stands, perhaps, as the best-known argument that for Wiebe-as-novelist the short story is not a secondary form artistically, and also that it is central in teaching readers how they might understand elements of Wiebe more generally. This story, brilliant simply as fiction, functions also as essay, serves notice as manifesto, declares a philosophic position, announces an aesthetic. It is a story in which Wiebe writes meta-history and meta-literature, and in which he exposes the very conventions by which historical and literary meanings are assigned, especially within white society. It is a story which offers a model for a broad understanding of one of the most intriguing and sustained of Wiebe’s concerns and achievements, thematically and technically: namely, voice. Although this story evokes immediately *The Temptations of Big Bear*, on which Wiebe had just begun to work when he was writing it, its implications will always determine a reading of all his work. What is interesting to note there is that in some ways its self-satiric narrative voice anticipates the narrator of “Sailing to Danzig.” Significantly, however, it does not yet, as “Sailing to Danzig” (which I will read here in combination with “The Blindman River Contradictions” and “On Death and Writing”) virtually does, name Wiebe

(Wiebe, the western-Canadian Mennonite) as narrator. Such a naming signals an end, or death (to take our cue from the death in Wiebe's "The Naming of Albert Johnson") to a phase in Wiebe's stance as a public figure and artist, but it announces the stirrings of a new posture, a birth in the exploration of the dynamic between the author and his audience.

In the partly-comic, partly-serious interview (or mock-interview), "The Blindman River Contradictions," Wiebe points to the dynamic of his own specific relation with a people, a country, a literature, points to his own motives and longings, and reveals the nature of his frustration in the very years of recent artistic achievement. In "On Death and Writing" Wiebe restates the same frustration, but crucially, moves a step further; he reveals how a process of listening, of hearing, leads, almost inevitably and effortlessly, to new artistic experience. He speaks initially of his sense of frustration and sterility as a writer without a necessary audience. However, upon hearing new voices calling to him, and triumphing suddenly as he finds his lament displaced by fresh story-making, Wiebe is demonstrating that the oft-acknowledged Wiebe-the-historian, Wiebe-the-archeologist, Wiebe-the-moralist, and, now, Wiebe-the-angst-ridden-writer simply cannot help himself: he is still Wiebe the artist. Really, it is the artist/hearer-in-the-reader he is trying to arouse; Wiebe's method implies that his greatness as a writer is predicated upon a greatness which he must find, even create, within his reader.

In these two works, as well as "Sailing to Danzig," Wiebe the author intertwines his voice not with characters or narrators named Big Bear or Louis Riel but "Rudy Wiebe" or, in "Sailing to Danzig," "Adam Peter Wiebe" (a comically tantalizing pseudonym for Wiebe, whose full name is Rudy Henry Wiebe and whose life in many ways parallels in detail Adam Peter Wiebe's). The voices of Wiebe as prophet, as western Canadian, as Mennonite are in these works named "Wiebe," and given the role of speaker. In "Sailing to Danzig" and (with Rudy Wiebe fictionalizing himself) the mock-interview and essay, these remarkably *distinct* voices for which Wiebe is in fact known come under scrutiny. In these works Wiebe foregrounds himself as a writer reflecting—with some sense of crisis, some sense of comedy—on the voice he has spent a life-time re-creating in artistic form: his own. (I say these things aware of opposing arguments, of the pitfalls of my apparently biographical criticism, and, certainly, of Wiebe's potency as ironist.) In these three works the dynamics of the writing-process and its effects are scrutinized both along the surfaces and within the heart of Wiebe projecting and exploring himself as a kind of Wiebe. They affect an openly confessional stance, turning to quite personal spaces within the writer. Ultimately, these works (though they offer much else, of course) provide new instruction in reading Wiebe, in making (with Wiebe himself illustrating the method) good listeners, good hearers, out of his audience, in order that they might complete, or at least carry on, something of Wiebe's work.

In "The Blindman River Contradictions" Wiebe starts out by giving readers ways of thinking about the frustrating public blurriness of his posi-

tion. Within the structure of an interview, he deals directly with himself as writer. With successful comic send-up, he hilariously flattens the very obstructions that he here says prevent his wide public reception; he thrusts himself forward, tells the truth about himself, not in terms of marginal but in terms of dominant cultural patterns, patterns with which his potential audience, that vast English-speaking readership he takes to be out there somewhere, can surely identify warmly, securely; he undoes himself, divests himself, or his internationally-known identity as a Mennonite writer; he comes clean, as it were, deconstructs himself, and, telling a new truth, reconstructs himself as he should be known (though thereby adopting the very form of his traditional object of satire): an Anglo-Canadian writer.

"There's a story around that I was born in Saskatchewan to a Mennonite family but that's not true," he says in response to the usual opening question about birth-place and growing-up (all the while parodying the obsession of countless Canadian Mennonites determined to cover up their cultural inheritance). "I was really born in Alberta....My father was the son of the Inspector General of the British Army....There was no Mennonite. I'm not a Mennonite," he says to the stunned interviewer. "I'm British, I'm English. I never had anything to do with the Mennonites; that's a fiction I made up because of course in Western Canada there's much more point to being ethnic than to being English....I had the races of the world to choose from and I made a really bad choice; I should have chosen Jewish, which would have given me tremendous literary contacts in ways I can never have as a Mennonite..."(40) The absurdity of Wiebe's argument, its unrelenting attack on the Mennonite profile that he says keeps him out of the mainstream (and, all along, its caricaturing the ways of the genteel English), is richly comic in its self-flagellation, and forces the reader to see Wiebe simply as man, stripped of the labels which encase him and mark him as separate.

This interview incorporates serious and more literally true moments, too—for even the grandson of a "general above all British generals"(40) can be sincere about the writing he does do—and Wiebe states bluntly one of his main motives for writing at all: to make a better world. He denies being a "social worker" in this (42), but laments that people are not patient enough as readers to come to grips with the complexities of his vision for mankind—his "particular world view" (42), as he calls it—which he struggles to create, and share.

In "On Death and Writing," this time in the context of a grim discussion of twentieth-century military/technological horror, Wiebe again describes his work in terms of the social consequences he wishes it might have, again (in a manner recalling his complaint about having to live with a Mennonite identity) laments the trajectory of his own life, its origins, its contexts: "I belong to the unlikely northern half of North America, a nation materially rich enough to be envied by almost everyone but socially and politically meaningless" (356). Again he complains about lost opportunities and chance misfortunes: "let me tell you something," he says. "I once had a brilliant

chance. It happened five years before I was born..." (356). And here Wiebe describes how, in Moscow in 1929, his family and a relatively small number of other Mennonites were suddenly declared free to leave Moscow and to travel to Germany as refugees, while most of his relatives and other co-religionists were sent back to their Russian villages or to prison camps in the north. "My problem is that my [family was] among those...who were shipped out [of Russia]" (356). Wiebe claims he began to see something of the magnitude of this "problem" in the 1960s, when he read Solzhenitsyn's work and sensed how straitened was his situation in contrast to Solzhenitsyn's, how apparently slim, by comparison, his material and his audience: "Dear God, what a writer! And what a platform from which to address the world," thought Wiebe, envying Solzhenitsyn for his experience of the Stalin purges and terror (357). For himself, the question of origins and background seemed all the more frustrating: "An immigrant child born in an obscure corner of an unimportant land....[T]he question...does not go away. *What* can I write? Or should I say *whom*? (357)

...if I persist in writing novels, who will be a reader? I belong to no impoverished so-called "developing" nation; if I did, my work might be of romantic or revolutionary interest, condescended to perhaps but at least considered. Nor am I a citizen of the supernations; if I were a significant writer there, it is highly likely that I would be published in all parts of the world because it is essential for every nation on earth to know what the U.S.A. or the U.S.S.R. considers important. (356)

For all the sarcasm and irony in his statement, Wiebe's agony has a genuine and overwhelming effect; he has, as also in the more carnival ambience of "The Blindman River Contradictions," made himself one with the spiritually tormented heroes of his fiction, has taken on their sense of terror, and of the possibility of extinction. But Wiebe goes on in this essay. After having reduced himself to an emptiness, a kind of death, Wiebe in effect and unwittingly (as it were) becomes a type of reader, makes room as listener for a new fullness, or as reader for a new story. Thus, in mournfully remembering just how invisible the Mennonite world into which he fell at birth was, a world with no literature confirming the richness and the rightness of its life, its hymn singing, its Low German language, he finds himself captured and captivated by a piece of Mennonite-family history which suddenly interrupts his complaint. The memory of a recent meeting in Germany with his cousin, the son of one of the then-wealthy family members who did not get from Moscow to Germany in 1929 when his own always-poor parents started on their way to Germany and then to Canada, but who disappeared in Stalin's Gulag, invades his consciousness. This son had himself been sent to the Gulag—twice, in fact, "the last time in 1952 when he was arrested because a group met in his home regularly to read the Bible and pray" (357). He was freed four years later by Kruschew: "In 1956 when he returned home.... I was graduating from a Canadian university and I wanted to become

a writer. I had every chance, to be whatever I wanted. But what could I write, really?" (357)

The impact, now, of remembering his meeting with his kinsman—"he holds me, laughing and laughing, there is no limit to his happiness at meeting me" (357)—stirs Wiebe out of his debilitating feeling of barrenness and angst. That kinsman, giving flesh to the story of his own Solzhenitsyn-like life in Russia, effectively reminds Wiebe of the power of stories, of the hearing and the telling of stories. Most important, the kinsman has created an audience out of Wiebe—where moments before there had been no audience, no story, no kinsman. The kinsman has—like the poet who is parent to his people (as Wiebe says in adapting Osip Mandelstam's 1921 statement, "Just as a person does not choose his parents, a people does not choose its poets" (357)—fathered Wiebe. And so Wiebe suddenly sees, and shows, as he has seen and shown before, that through story he will, and must, go on fathering people and place into existence.

It is, finally, as a merry tale-teller that Rudy (Henry) Wiebe writes the story of "himself" as an Adam Peter Wiebe in "Sailing to Danzig." In this fairly autobiographical exploration of himself he produces again something of the spirit of "send-up" and parody that we saw in "The Blindman River Contradictions." But here the open flaunting of a feisty, brawling voice dissecting an audience's neglect with considerable chagrin (though never without a flourish of burlesque-like exhibitionism) is replaced by richly-poetic, gently-melancholy reflections—not quite parody—of the argument in "The Blindman River Contradictions." Here, in "Sailing to Danzig," is a Wiebe who cannot find an audience even in his own loving parents—"Books, books, all your books they'll ruin you." (66) says his father—but who remembers being himself transfixed, being himself made into audience, by the magnificent harmony in the singing voices of these non-reading parents when he was a child.

And strikingly, here again—now within the domain of a wonderful short story (the many riches of which I will not comment on here) rather than an essay—is the incredible story of the kinsman who had survived Stalin's Gulag by being, appropriately enough, a bookkeeper, a kind of writer, maintaining records of productivity, life, and death in a labour camp. Here again is that story, transmuted now into fiction within fiction, and turning Wiebe (whether Adam Peter Wiebe or Rudy Henry Wiebe) into listener, demonstrating through this listener-Wiebe just how readers might listen to and hear Rudy Wiebe's voice when he tells his stories.

Yet (though hereby too Wiebe is exploring and objectifying his relationship with his audience) "Wiebe" the narrator asks, near the end of "Sailing to Danzig," disturbingly, ironically, enigmatically, inexplicably:

...[he] the rich Wiebe's son having to live a sort of life in the Soviet Union, I the poor Wiebe's son living a different sort in Canada: which would one actually prefer? (73)

Notes

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¹From statements made by Rudy Wiebe in an interview with Eli Mandel (CBC Radio, Toronto, October 24, 1974); quoted in *Personal Fictions: Stories by Munro, Wiebe, Thomas, & Blaise*, ed. Michael Ondaatje (Toronto, 1977), p. 226.

²Rudy Wiebe, "Passage by Land," *Canadian Literature*, No. 48 (Spring 1971), p. 27.

³*Peace Shall Destroy Many* (Toronto, 1962); *First and Vital Candle* (Toronto, 1966); *The Blue Mountains of China* (Toronto, 1970); *The Temptations of Big Bear* (Toronto, 1973); *The Scorched-Wood People* (Toronto, 1977); *The Mad Trapper* (Toronto, 1980); *My Lovely Enemy* (Toronto, 1983).

⁴W. J. Keith, *Epic Fiction: The Art of Rudy Wiebe* (Edmonton, 1981), p. 119. I reflect aspects of W. J. Keith's work throughout my introductory comments in this paper. Of parallel interest are Wiebe's own recollections of his origins as a novelist, as presented in "The Skull in the Swamp," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 5 (1987), 8-20.

⁵See W. J. Keith's "Preface" to his edited collection of essays, *A Voice in the Land: Essays by and about Rudy Wiebe* (Edmonton, 1981), pp. 7-9.

⁶Many of Wiebe's short stories appear in the two volumes (with some stories repeated in the latter), *Where Is the Voice Coming From?* (Toronto, 1974) and *The Angel of the Tar Sands and Other Stories* (Toronto, 1982). Another series accompanies Harry Savage's photographic work in *Alberta: A Celebration*, ed. Tom Radford (Edmonton, 1979). Besides the publication of yet other short stories individually elsewhere, excerpts from some of Wiebe's novels have been published as short stories; a novel such as *The Blue Mountains of China* demonstrates, in the construction and progression of its chapters, Wiebe's reliance on the short story form even in his creation of a novel. Wiebe also has edited and written introductions to short story anthologies such as *The Story-Makers: A Selection of Modern Short Stories* (Toronto, 1970), *Stories from Western Canada* (Toronto, 1972), *Stories from Pacific and Arctic Canada*, with Andreas Schroeder (Toronto, 1974), *Double Vision: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Stories in English* (Toronto, 1976), *Getting Here* (Edmonton, 1977), and *More Stories from Western Canada*, with Aritha van Herk (Toronto, 1980). Susan Whaley lists some of Wiebe's essays and interviews in her recent, though undated, *Rudy Wiebe and His Works* (Toronto, ECW Press). Others are catalogued in, for example, Keith's two 1981 volumes on Wiebe (listed in the two preceding notes); indeed, some are included in *A Voice in the Land*.

⁷"Sailing to Danzig," *Malahat Review*, 76 (September 1985), 64-73; "On Death and Writing," *Canadian Literature*, No. 100 (Spring 1984), 354-360; "The Blindman River Contradictions," *The Camrose Review*, 5 (1984), 40-44. The page sources for quotations from these three texts are given within the body of my paper. "Sailing to Danzig" has recently been published in *Liars and Rascals: Mennonite Short Stories*, edited by Hildi Froese Tiessen and published by the University of Waterloo Press (Waterloo, Ontario, 1989).

⁸Rudy Wiebe, "Where Is the Voice Coming From?," in *Fourteen Stories High*, eds. David Helwig and Tom Marshall (Ottawa, 1971), pp. 112-121. Reprinted in *Where Is the Voice Coming From?* and *The Angel of the Tar Sands and Other Stories* (both listed in note 6). For an excellent discussion of this short story, see John Thieme's "Scheherazade as Historian: Rudy Wiebe's 'Where Is the Voice Coming From?'" *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, XVII, 1 (1982), 172-181.