

Quilt as Text and Text as Quilt: The Influence of Genre in the Mennonite Girls' Home of Vancouver (1930–1960)

Ruth Derksen Siemens, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC

Abstract: My initial investigation of the Mennonite Girls' Home of Vancouver (1930–1960) has been extended to specifically inquire into thirty proverbs stitched onto a quilt by young domestic workers associated with the Home. This paper examines the concept of the quilt as “text”; the perspective of the thirty proverbs on the quilt as a textual genre. Recent literary theorists support the claim that genres are responsive to their situations and that they evolve through performance within socio-cultural spheres. Mikhail Bakhtin (1991), Kenneth Burke (1953, 1973), Jamieson and Campbell (1989), Charles Bazerman (1994), and Carolyn Miller (1994) extend our understanding of how proverbs as a genre are reproduced in the actions of community and how their symbolic action is challenged within a cultural context. In examining the proverbs stitched onto the quilt, new and significant questions have surfaced: What was the effect of the proverbs on the actions and perspectives of these Mennonite women? How did they understand the words within this generic form? Was their understanding shared by others in the community? To what extent was the text's ideology not determined textually? Did the proverbs as a genre (without formal or textual variation) constitute distinct symbolic acts for different speakers within the Mennonite community? Did the genre's action change and to what extent did it change while its generic form remained the same?



The quilt, as representative anecdote, not only exposes these issues, but provides the impetus in this research to foreground issues that are often left under erasure by historians and literary theorists; issues surrounding the construction, transmission and authority of texts.

I

Recent genre theorists support the claim that language is not static, but that it responds to the context of the situation in which it is embedded. Language and the making of meaning do not function in a void, but evolve through performance within socio-cultural spheres.¹ This paper not only situates genre theory within the context of the Mennonite Girls' Home of Vancouver, but more specifically within the language of proverbs that have been stitched onto a quilt² by adolescent women associated with this *Mädchenheim* in the 1930's (see Appendix for original text). Under investigation are the complex, multiple readings of these proverbs as a genre. This leads to an inquiry into the way in



which the women appropriate the foundational narratives embedded in the proverbs as a strategy for making meaning from their circumstances.

Before discussing the generic implications of the proverbs on the quilt, it is important to situate the Mennonite Girls' Home in its socio-historical context. The movement of young Mennonite women to the city in the early 20th century was in conflict with their community's historical agrarian existence. Mennonite people shared a turn of the century feeling that cities were the decisive battleground between the evils of civilization and the good as represented in religion. The city was perceived as being infested with crime, immorality, disease and misery. As historian Joy Parr³ has observed, the reformers of the Social Gospel Movement in Canada in the early 20th century shared a mythology of the countryside as healthy. Paul Peachey⁴ notes that Mennonites had elevated rural life to the point where it had become an unofficial article of faith. It seems that rural living provided visible evidence of living separate from the world. Anyone moving to the city was seen to be giving up the cherished and only way of life worth living. In observing this rural perspective of Mennonite people, Marlene Epp⁵ presents the possibility that "Mennonite girls were ... pioneers in the urbanization process of their people." Royden Loewen⁶ in a

recent paper on Canadian Mennonite Community and Partible Inheritance, observes that "Mennonite inheritance practices secured ... communal cohesiveness and a landed agrarian existence." He notes that such practices "discouraged individual emigrations and associations with industrial labour forces" and "protected them from the pitfalls and 'lure' of the world."

Yet despite this world view, Mennonite single women left their families and went to Vancouver. They were impelled by dual economic forces: the desperate need of their families to survive the Depression and the pressure from the Canadian Pacific Railway to repay the travel debt for the journey from Russia to Canada in the 1920's. Employment in Vancouver was virtually guaranteed, for Mennonite women were highly marketable and greatly desired as domestic servants. In fact, the demand for them far outweighed the supply. Domestic work was ideologically suited for single women who had the stamina, standards of cleanliness and purity of morals required by upper-class families. Sociologist Mariana Valverde has observed that the "purity reformers" in Canada in the early twentieth century perpetuated an age of "light, soap and water."⁷ Mennonite women (poor immigrants who could not speak English) embodied the allegorical ideals of purity, cleanliness and light. They were white, submissive, quiet, hard-working and their lifestyles appeared as clean as their floors.

Due to the large number of women moving to the city, it was not long before they began to live together in communities. From the interviews with women associated with "the Home", it is apparent that the first *Mädchenheim* began at 6363 Windsor Street, Vancouver, in the late 1920s. The women named the residence "Bethel Home" and in collaboration with the first matron, Sister Rabsch, they modelled the newly formed community after the Winnipeg Girls' Home.⁸ Although the Mennonite Brethren Church must have been aware of the Home's existence in Vancouver, the first comment in the minutes of the Mennonite Brethren Conference is recorded in June 1931, several years after the Home's existence. It is noted that "many positive comments have been made about the Girls' Home in Vancouver."⁹

In considering the impact of Mennonite women migrating to Vancouver, it is important to be aware of the number of women associated with the Bethel Home. In May, 1934, fifty-three women were registered. In 1936 the number had grown to eighty one. At its peak in 1956, three hundred and fifty Mennonite women were matched with 1700 employers. The Bethel Home was also overflowing with permanent residents. In June 1936, matron Tina Lepp reported that "Presently, we have ten girls who have no parents and no home." In another instance, fifteen women were turned away for lack of room.

From the examination of archival records, it is evident that the financial responsibilities for the "Bethel Home" were primarily maintained by the women. Records reveal that each woman registered paid an obligatory fee to provide the matron's salary, heat, light, rent and telephone service. Anything remaining from their salaries was sent to their families. The 1933 Conference minutes state: "To date, the girls have taken care of the operational expenses of

the Home. The girls who support their parents with their hard-earned money, feel it is often a heavy burden to come up with all the finances for the upkeep of the Home". The churches responded to the need in various ways: through individual donations, through a fee levy of 75 cents per member in 1937, and with donations of fruit, vegetables and clothing. As a result of their thrifty practices and financial accountability, the women managed to save enough money to purchase the house they had previously rented, build an addition and buy the adjacent lot.

The responsibility of administrating the Bethel Home was managed by the matrons who considered it to be their "service to God". The matrons cooked meals for the permanent residents, managed the Home's finances, co-ordinated the employers and employees, and escorted the young women to their new places of work. Many matrons shared the load: Sister Rabsch, Olga Berg, Maria Thiessen, Katharina Lepp, Sara Wiens, Tina Goossen, Betty Esau, Susie Warkentin, Tina Krause and Elsa Isaak. All reflected a clear sense of "calling" to their work. They were referred to as servants of God, missionaries with a responsibility for the protection of the moral and spiritual welfare of the young women. A report by minister David Quapp to the Conference in June, 1944 states that: "the need for spiritual nurture and good influence is ... more necessary than ever before. The presence of military personnel, the higher wages and the more independent attitude of employees today are all fruitful ground for frivolous living." The matrons were equally concerned and felt their responsibility acutely. In November, 1944, Sister Tina Lepp reported that "One girl who was already going with the crowd, was taken by the hand and brought along to the Home. She heard God's Word, accepted the advice to attend Bible school and thereby chose a different way".

The matron's responsibility was reflected in the metaphorical motto of the Bethel Home: "Thou God Seest Me". This imperative aphorism assured the young women of Divine protection on one hand, and of an internal surveillance device on the other. The imprinted image of God's all-seeing eyes assured the young women that they did not need to fear for their safety on the street-car or at work. Conversely, it also insured that "a girl from Coaldale would never wear a dress with just little flaps over her arms" and that "we wouldn't do anything in Vancouver that we wouldn't do at home."¹⁰

The all-seeing eyes of God were felt most keenly on Thursdays. It was the only "maid's day-off." The girls came from all over the city with sack-lunches. They came to visit, share stories of their week, listen to a sermon by a minister (C.C. Peters, Jacob Thiessen, David Quapp) and occasionally have a picnic. Several women recalled that "board games" were not allowed for they would induce loud laughter. The matron reminded them to be "*Die stille im Lande*" (the quiet ones in the land). But this did not deter attendance from the Thursday meetings. One woman remembers "the hard, backless wooden benches lining every room. Some girls sat on beds. There were hardly any chairs... but no one seemed to mind. This was a place where we belonged." A fifteen year old girl

who worked in North Vancouver recalls that, although it was a long trip (an hour and a half one way by ferry and tram), she never missed a Thursday. The bond of sisterhood was strong, and the isolation and loneliness experienced by most women was relieved only by the Thursday visits.

We always had a pleasant haven to go to, to share our burdens and experiences with all the other girls. We made many new friends, some which remained for the rest of our lives. Thursday afternoons, maid's day-off, were great times! When the evening was over, we'd take the bus together back to our places of work. If a girl got sick, she was looked after... The Home was a great boon to hundreds of girls and will never be forgotten. We needed each other then and the *Mädchenheim* was our oasis in the desert.

II

It was on one of these Thursday visits that the creation of the quilt was initiated. In the examination of the proverbs embroidered on the squares of the quilt, three motifs, inferred from the text itself, become evident: service, purity and submission. These proverbs contributed to a foundational narrative that enabled the Mennonite women in this community to cope with a new situation. Foundational narratives can be defined as a way to describe the position of the voice (explicit or implicit) that structures story, time and relations between speaker and audience. This phenomenon has been most notably asserted by Jean-Francois Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*. Lyotard observes that "narration is the quintessential form of customary knowledge ... what is transmitted through these narratives is a set of pragmatic rules that constitute a social bond."¹¹ For example, the proverbs, "Continue to do good works," "In all Your Ways Acknowledge Him," "Serve the Lord with gladness"¹² reinforce the rhetorical notion of "service" and a higher calling embedded in all activity. The narrative of "service" contributed to the social bond of the Mennonite community and provided a noble purpose for even the most demeaning and trivial work. This narrative emerged collectively and was shared by the women interviewed for this study. The "service" narrative functioned as a foundational "story" that organized information, not only in the Girls' home, but across the Mennonite community in intriguing and sometimes unusual ways.

Specifically, records of meetings of the Mennonite Brethren Conference reveal that the young women and matrons were often reminded by the community "brothers" that domestic work was much more than washing and cleaning other people's houses. These women were told that they were responding to a "higher calling" in "service to God." During the Conference of 1934, the two matrons present were reminded that they were entering a "pagan" territory as "ambassadors of light and good will".

Furthermore, Gayatri Spivak¹³ notes that foundational narratives arise in and prompt discourses that operate in new systems and newly formed socio-cultural

spheres. Domestic work in an urban setting was a new sphere for most Mennonite women and the community needed to form a discourse to justify this system. The identity of the immigrants had been shaken when their dreams of starting over in a new land began to dissolve. The young women's experiences in the exploitative, isolating and stigmatizing occupation of domestic work was discomforting for them and their families. In order to re-balance and re-stabilize their identity, the Mennonite community crafted a complex and distinct narrative around domestic service as a missionary enterprise. This narrative formed a discourse and an identity with those who worked in useful occupations, rather than that of exploited, underpaid, immigrant domestic workers. This is evident in the recounted experience of Elizabeth, a young Mennonite woman who lived in the home of her employer. She considered each additional task that was demanded of her as a "service to God," and she performed them as "a missionary" called to do good works. Each task added to her work routine was another way of "shedding light in a dark city." This interpretation extended itself for Elizabeth and other women in that they often worked longer hours than was expected of them, and did not demand additional pay for extra work.

Although the women may not have been aware of the multiple readings of the texts as they stitched the didactic aphorisms, the interviews suggest the possibility of other meanings in light of the women's remembered and lived experiences. For example, the "service" narrative not only provided a discourse for a new situation, but these mission/ service proverbs, examined in retrospect, challenged the interests of the hegemony. An alternate reading reveals a resistance of the women to the interests of the elders, ministers, parents and rural community. It seems the women became so absorbed with their saintly "calling" to the "evil city", anything less appeared mundane and mediocre. The sense of "calling" to their work is particularly evident in the interviews with some of the matrons, for as long as they worked in the city, they were expected to report bi-annually to the larger assembly of "brethren". Their reports were documented, preserved and given an equal status with the reports submitted by "foreign" missionaries, pastors of churches and directors of committees. Not only for the matrons, but for most women to be considered a "missionary" ordained for "service" in the city was affirming and appealing. Even after the Girls' Home was closed, many women continued to stay in Vancouver. Although their reasons for remaining in the city are complex, many of the women felt more useful as ambassadors of light and good will in a "dark" city than as wives, mothers and daughters in the country.

In a similar manner, the proverb "Remember Lot's wife", exposes an alternate reading and a reversal of the conventional narrative of the greater Mennonite community; it exemplifies the extent to which a genre's action can change while its text remains the same. When stitching, reading or reciting this proverb, a young girl would likely remember the classic Hebrew story and its didactic purpose. Although she was a missionary doing service for God in the city, she would be reminded not to look longingly toward "Sodom" which was

exemplified in her employer's lifestyle, and to the city that offered her an alternative lifestyle.

However, through the interviews with the women, another layer of meaning, submerged beneath the dominant practice, becomes evident. Although originally tacit, another reading is exposed in the process of assessing the symbolic action desired by those who enforced the proverbs, and the symbolic action experienced by the women. Within the maxim of Lot's wife, a level of subterranean practice is revealed in which the women not only experienced the proverb differently, but they experienced it in a manner that contradicted the reading and interests of the larger community. For many young domestic workers, the work in the city was not only a mission and service opportunity, but it offered a way out of a conventional role. Curiously, of the women interviewed for this study, almost one-third chose not to return to the country and not to marry. Some married much later in their life, when they were past their child-bearing years. Others continued to live together in Vancouver with other single women they befriended while employed in domestic work. This action seems to have contradicted the Mennonite community's focus and interests. For example, Margaret knew that she needed to remain in the city if she wanted an occupation other than domestic work. "If I moved back, I'd be doing the same work for my parents or a husband—I just wouldn't get paid for it". Elfrieda wanted to complete her secondary education and become a teacher. She asserted that "the only way I could finance this was through my domestic work ... What else could I do? Marry and have nine children like my mother?—Now I had a choice". In considering the exhortation in the proverb to remember Lot's wife, many of the women (whether explicitly or tacitly) chose an alternative reading. It seems they were willing to risk the possibility of turning into a "pillar of salt" in the city, rather than becoming fossilized in a conventional role in the country.

III

A third compilation of proverbs, those that evoke the "purity" ideal, also expose the foundational narratives of the Mennonite community and reveal the way in which the proverbs, as a genre, respond on various levels to specific situations. The young domestic workers had adopted the purity ideals of a culture in which physical cleanliness was equated with purity of morals and sexual practices.¹⁴ For example, the proverb, "Whatever things are pure, think on these things," reinforced the foundational narrative of "purity" in the greater community and was defined by hegemonic practice. Although other vices and transgressions were addressed, sexual purity seemed to be the primary concern of visiting ministers and resident matrons. One matron recalled that, "Some girls had trouble with boys. They were dealt with". The manner in which they were "dealt with," ensured that all young women associated with the Girls' Home understood the value of sexual purity. Within the orthodox translation of the text, the young domestic workers could be expected to understand the actions expected of them, whether in the city or visiting their families in the country.

Furthermore, a young woman stitching the proverb, “Seek those things which are above,” or “Place your desire on the Lord” or “Don’t be conformed to this world” was also exposed to the “purity” narrative. The knowledge transmitted through these proverbs associated the “world” with the city and with every imaginable evil. Significantly, exposure to these maxims not only fostered a fear of acquiescing to “the world”, but also provided the impetus for the women to live communally and open their residence to other domestic workers.

However, like other proverbs this study has examined, knowledge transmitted through this medium was understood on various levels. According to Sara, “Think on pure things” was understood to mean: “Be pure!” and “If something impure happens—keep silent!” Elizabeth recalled that, “We didn’t gossip about those things. It was kept quiet.” Catherine responded tersely that “There was no problem. I always felt safe, except when there were large parties and people were drinking. I simply went to my room and that was it. If you knew your place at these times, there was no problem.” Anne admitted that “there may have been a few cases, but we didn’t talk about it.”

One of these “cases” was Suzy. Most women knew she had some “troubles” and that she suffered from some sort of “breakdown.” But, likely due to the distancing effect of sixty years, Suzy was able to talk about her breach of the purity ideal.

He used me—a couple of times a week. His wife wasn’t home, just little children—I was an innocent girl. I didn’t know about those things. In those days people didn’t talk about those things. Where did babies come from? A six year old knows now. Intercourse? What’s that?—He took me—threw me on the bed. I was a lot less than I am now. He could do it even now. I didn’t have the foggiest idea what was going on.—More than once—no help from anyone. I was so ashamed. Who would believe me? So many girls didn’t report it because they don’t believe them.—His wife knew. She never helped me. Only came to see if I was pregnant six months later. I was just fifteen.

Another set of proverbs, those referring to “submission” and “peace”, also reveal foundational narratives and multiple readings that are potentially resistant to a conventional reading. “Strive to live at peace with everyone,” “Submit to those in authority over you,” and “Love seeks no evil against another” can be understood on one level as caring for the needs of the people of the community from birth to death in the spirit of peace and “brotherhood”. For the men and boys of the Mennonite community, the “peace” narrative meant refusing military service, not physically defending yourself against injustice, not provoking any violent physical attack or invasion, and promoting peaceful, non-violent solutions to all conflict. However, for the women of the Girls’ Home, the words of the proverb were experienced as a passive response to any aggressive act and a desire to seek peaceful resolutions to arguments and dissensions. The proverbs meant an unquestioning acceptance of a parent’s, matron’s or church elder’s authority. The women’s submission to these words of authority, and their understanding of the social action expected of them, was central to the

closure of the Bethel Home. After thirty years of functioning as a centre for hundreds of domestic workers, the women accepted the notice to vacate the premises without protest or question. They understood that it was “not their place” to disobey their “authorities,” for they were called to live peaceably and submissively. One of the matrons recalls the final days in 1961:

The elder came to the door, handed me the notice and announced that we had one month to vacate the premises—One month. After all those years. What were we supposed to do? Where could we go? But it was not our place to question. We packed up as much as we could. We didn’t have much time so we burned many records, the journals of the matrons and the names of the girls.

Another women’s poignant reflection reveals the ambiguity surrounding the closure of the Bethel Home:

Where could we go on our days off? [We couldn’t afford to go to restaurants]. I remember when it closed. We were all lost. The Home was supposed to be for young people now. Of course, we girls were welcome to go there, but we didn’t feel comfortable with them. I don’t think they enjoyed our company either. Now there was a husband and wife, boys and girls. I remember the first Thursday after it closed. We came to the corner of Fraser Street. What should we do? Where could we stay? The conference thought it didn’t pay well anymore, not enough to pay the matron. But we could have paid her! Maybe the young people needed it more because we were smarter by then.

Through an examination of genre, this paper has addressed the way in which certain proverbs stitched onto a quilt have responded to specific situations and how their meaning has evolved through performance. This study has also investigated foundational narratives and the way in which they provide a model for understanding the way in which knowledge is transmitted through the text of a proverb in a community of Mennonite domestic workers. The women of the Bethel Home not only lived by the ideologies inherent in the traditional translation of the proverbs, but they also lived by the submerged meanings, often hidden from the hegemony. But as the women have substantiated through the interviews, it was the subterranean levels of meaning, those often only recalled in retrospect, which were often most relevant to them.

However, above all other considerations, I want to acknowledge that the experience belongs to the women of the *Mädchenheim*. I am grateful to those who invited me into their homes, shared their experiences with me, and presented me with the quilt. The women’s experience of the proverbs legitimates both the conformity and the subversion of an orthodox text, and the quilt provides a way of understanding how the women found a place in all versions of text.

Appendix

Trachtet nach dem was Droben ist.
 Nach Dir Herr verlanget mich.
 Alles was Odem hat, lobe den Herrn.
 Christus is des Gesetres Ende.
 Jaget nach dem Frieden gegen jedermann.
 Meine Gnade soll nicht von dir weichen.
 Rufe mich an in der Not.
 Kommt her zu mir alle die ihr mühselig and beladen seit.
 Nahet euch zu Gott, so nahet er sich zu euch.
 Eine linde Antwort stilltet den Zorn.
 Gedenke an Ihm in allen diener Wegen.
 Die Liebe tut dem Nächsten nichts Böses.
 Habe deine Lust an dem Herrn.
 Prufe mich und erfahr wie Ich meine.
 Dienet dem Herrn mit Frueden.
 Tut Busse und glaubt an das Evangelium.
 Er is am unserer Sünde willen verschlagen.
 Befiehl dem Herrn deine Wege.
 Wohl dem, dem die Übertretungen vergeben sind.
 Gedenke an Lot's Weib.
 Ohne mich könnt ihr nichts tun.
 Aber die auf dem Herrn harren kriegen neue Kraft.
 Wie hat Gott die Leute so lieb.
 Fülle uns frühe mit deiner Gnade.
 Ist Gott für uns wer mag wieder uns sein.

Notes

¹ For a more extensive investigation of genre theory see Mikhail Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres", *The Rhetorical Tradition*, eds. Patricia Bizell & Bruce Herzberg (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1980); and Kenneth Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); and *Genre and the New Rhetoric*, eds. Aviva Freedman & Peter Medway (London: Taylor and Francis Ltd., 1994).

² This quilt is six feet wide and seven feet long. It contains thirty squares of white fabric enclosed in a blue border. Each square contains an embroidered flower pattern, a maxim and a name. Some flower patterns were traced from commercial embroidery transfers, but some were drawn by the women. The text of the maxims was chosen by the matrons and transferred onto the squares by them. The creation of the quilt was initiated by the matrons, Tina Lepp and Mary Thiessen in the early 1940's. They, along with the young women of the Girls' Home, made it as a gift of gratitude to Rev. Jacob Thiessen, the minister who led the services on Thursday evenings. The quilt was initially used in the Thiessen's home, but given to his children after his death. In 1980, the quilt was given to the last matron, Sara Wiens, who stored it in her closet.

³ Joy Parr. *Labouring Children: British Immigrant Apprentices to Canada, 1869-1924*.

(London: Hogarth Press, 1980).

⁴ Paul Peachey, "Some Theological Reflections of the City." *Mennonite Life* 19 (January 1964), 29.

⁵ Marlene Epp, "The Mennonite Girls' Homes of Winnipeg: A Home Away from Home," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 6 (1988), 101.

⁶ Royden Loewen, "'If Joint Heirs of Grace, How much more of the Temporal Goods': A Canadian Mennonite Community and Partible Inheritance". Paper presented to the Mennonite Historical Society of B.C., Abbotsford, B.C., (Spring 1998), 5 & 11.

⁷ Mariana Valverde. *Age of Light, Soap and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925*. (Toronto: McLellan & Stewart, 1991).

⁸ Although my investigation has centred on the Mennonite Brethren Girls' Home, it is important to note that a Girls' Home was also established by the General Conference of Mennonites in Vancouver in 1935.

⁹ All statistics and reports by matron's and ministers of the Mennonite Brethren Conference are recorded in *Protocol*. Minutes of the Semi-Annual Meetings of the Mennonite Brethren Conference (Columbia Press: Clearbrook, British Columbia, Canada).

¹⁰ Many women have been interviewed for this research. Interviews were conducted from 1993-1994 in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the women.

¹¹ Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. G. Bennington & B. Massumi. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 18-21.

¹² The proverbs on the quilt are in the German language and have been translated into English for this study.

¹³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*. (New York: Routledge, 1990), 19.

¹⁴ Marina Valverde, *Age of Light, Soap and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925*. (Toronto: McLellan & Stewart, 1991).