

THREE CANADIAN MENNONITE WRITERS

Responding to an Ethno-Religious Heritage:  
Three Canadian Mennonite Writers

By

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of three Canadian writers of Mennonite background, and their response to that ethno-religious heritage in their work. Rudy Wiebe, Patrick Friesen, and Armin Wiebe have responded to that heritage in different ways, and show varying degrees of cultural and religious retention. Patrick Friesen no longer is associated with any Mennonite church, but considers himself to be ethnically Mennonite and relies heavily on the Mennonite world for subject matter and setting. In his narrative poem, The Shunning, he sometimes criticizes the Mennonite community and sometimes celebrates it. In The Salvation of Yasch Siemens Armin Wiebe celebrates the Mennonite community and way of life, and finds in his heritage a rich mine for humour. Of the three writers, Rudy Wiebe has the most complex relationship to his faith and community; he repeatedly explores the tension between Mennonite ethnicity and the Anabaptist faith in his attempt to realize the full meaning of Mennonite Christianity.

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## Introduction

In his 1972 article "Canadian Mennonite Literature", J. Thiessen expresses regret at the relative lack of Canadian Mennonite literary attempts in English, and hopes that "the long overdue definitive Canadian Mennonite novel will be produced by one of the writers of the present generation"(72). Similarly, but in a larger North American context, in 1978 John Ruth, an important figure in the study of Mennonite culture, called for Mennonite artists not to produce specifically "Mennonite art", but to have respect for that chapter of God's salvation story which it has been our lot to inherit"(24). Fourteen years have passed since Thiessen's article, and in the eight years since Ruth's short book there has been a significant amount of activity among Canadian Mennonite writers. It is perhaps time to once again assess what Mennonite writers in Canada have achieved, and to consider to what extent their writing constitutes a body of clearly Mennonite literature.

Thiessen cited Rudy Wiebe as the only truly Mennonite author writing English prose in Canada. Since the time of that article Wiebe has published The Blue Mountains of China, considered by some to be the Canadian Mennonite novel, and four others which have generally looked towards other experiences than the Mennonite tradition and community for subject

matter.<sup>1</sup> Through the 1970's a few significant Canadian Mennonite poets emerged: David Waltner-Toews, Clinton Toews, and Patrick Friesen. However, the 1980's may very well prove to be the decade in which Mennonite writing came into its own. In addition to the continuing work of Rudy Wiebe and the poets mentioned above, three promising first novels have been published by Mennonite writers to a good critical reception: Sara Stambaugh's I Hear the Reaper's Song, Armin Wiebe's The Salvation of Yasch Siemens and Al Reimer's My Harp is Turned to Mourning. Also, Patrick Friesen's narrative poem The Shunning has been rewritten as a drama and successfully produced.

A simple list of works by Mennonite writers does not necessarily indicate a body of "Mennonite literature". Is there something distinctively "Mennonite" about these works which would justify considering them as a group under a single ethnic or religious heading? I believe there is, for they are not just written by Mennonites, but deal with the Mennonite experience, in both its cultural and religious dimensions. Rudy Wiebe's later works, from The Temptations of Big Bear to The Mad Trapper, present a different situation; they do not refer specifically to Mennonite situations or characters, but some would argue reflect a distinctively Mennonite view of life and faith. Indeed, the career of Rudy Wiebe may reflect a general tendency for writers of a distinctive ethnic background: early works show a need to confront the ethnic heritage; once dealt



with, the writer can, and perhaps must, move on to other considerations. In a recent essay on the search for identity among young Mennonite poets, Peter Pauls sets out three distinct positions which a Mennonite writer can take in relation to his heritage. He can preserve the past, illustrate the "conflicts between past and present", or select "from the people's most unique experience that which can be related to the larger experience of mankind" (Pauls 248). This is perhaps a simplification of the ambivalence and variety of responses a writer may have, but it provides a convenient starting point for the present study of Rudy Wiebe, Patrick Friesen, and Armin Wiebe in relation to their Mennonite heritage. I would argue that Pauls' categories actually constitute three stages in the development of the literature of an ethnic group or of one particular ethnic writer.<sup>2</sup> This paper will examine how the works of these three writers fit into this model through an analysis of their works about the Mennonite community and experience. In addition to comparing how these three have dealt with the Mennonite tradition in their works, I will also attempt to discuss the extent to which the works of these writers have achieved the ultimate third category which Paul outlined, and whether in doing so they have ceased to be distinctively Mennonite works.

A serious issue to consider in the discussion of ethnic literature is whether or not that literature is of interest to those outside the ethnic community. I argue

that Rudy Wiebe, Patrick Friesen, and Armin Wiebe have all attempted to find an audience beyond their own community. This is not to say that their writings will not be of special interest to Mennonite readers, but that non-Mennonite readers will recognize a universal experience in the particular situations described. They appeal to our own sense of ethnicity and immigrant mentality, and yet show us a community and tradition which is foreign. On the other hand, Mennonites will read a work by a Mennonite writer because it tells them something about themselves which they did not know or needed to be reminded of; there is something distinctively Canadian about Mennonite self-consciousness and their desire to read about themselves.

All literature is to some extent ethnic in that it comes out of a particular historical, cultural and linguistic tradition or basis. This has usually been recognized in the international writing community -- few would deny that there is something distinctively Russian about a novel of Dostoevsky, and a Margaret Atwood novel is of particular interest to Canadians in that it reflects a certain national experience. In Canada we find a microcosm of this international situation: Canadian literature is an aggregate of ethnically based literatures. This has been both a cause and a result of the official multiculturalism of this country<sup>3</sup>. Increasingly in the past decade this multicultural dimension to Canadian literature has been recognized and discussed by literary critics. There has been a conference on ethnic literature at

the University of Alberta in 1979 and a recent issue of Canadian Literature was set aside for Italian-Canadian literature (106: Fall 1985). Other significant literary communities are found among Ukranian and Jewish Canadians. These writers have largely accepted Canada as their home and English or French as their language of literary expression, but write literature obviously coming out of an ethnic experience. As such, they are distinct from such emigré writers as Josef Skvorecky and George Faludy who write in their first languages and are not working with a predominantly Canadian ethnic experience, but with experiences in the countries from which they came.

Mennonites are an exceptional ethnic group in that their community is both culturally and religiously determined. The only similar group in Canada who have achieved a significant literary output are Jewish Canadians. Other ethnic groups have had a common religion as well, but have shared this religion with Canadians of a different ethnic background. For example, Italians are nearly all Roman Catholic, but this faith does not set them apart since many non-Italian Canadians are Roman Catholic as well. At this point, an explanation of who the Mennonites are should be undertaken; it is important to clear up certain common misconceptions. Unfortunately, many Canadians, particularly outside the Prairie provinces, associate "Mennonite" with nothing more than horse and buggy, and old-fashioned clothes. The Mennonites who adhere to these customs are commonly called

Old Order Mennonites, constitute only a small fragment of the large Mennonite population in Canada; the majority of Mennonites in Canada are totally indistinguishable from their non-Mennonite neighbours in outward appearance. Despite differences in custom, all Mennonites are part of a Christian tradition dating back to the sixteenth century protestant reformation. Conrad Grebel, a disciple of Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli, felt that the initial reforms did not go far enough towards constituting what he believed to be true Christianity. He called for the abolition of all liturgy and theology which could not be scripturally supported. He called for a believer's baptism rather than infant baptism, and total separation of church and state. Because of their belief in adult believer's baptism, Grebel's followers came to be known as Anabaptists. A respect for scripture, and particularly Christ's Sermon on the Mount, led Grebel and his followers to consider pacifism and non-resistance as the only possible Christian response to military activity and violence. Pacifism came to be a central and very controversial tenet of Anabaptism and Mennonitism. While Grebel's movement spread through the area of the Upper Rhine, a similar Anabaptist movement was going on in the Netherlands and Northern Germany. Menno Simons, a Frisian, came to be the primary figure in this movement, and from his name the term "Mennonite" was derived.

The early Anabaptists of both Switzerland and the

Netherlands encountered persecution, first by the Catholic Church, and then by less radical Calvinist and Lutheran reformers. The most important reason for this persecution by other Protestant groups was the Anabaptist refusal to have anything to do with the state and the military defense of the state. Their position was in stark contrast to the Calvinist view that the Christian ought to play leading roles in all aspects of civic affairs. Many stories of Mennonite persecution are recounted in Martyrs' Mirror which was published in Holland in 1660. Donald Kraybill has argued that "the legacy of suffering collated in the Martyrs' Mirror (1660) was undoubtedly the decisive force shaping the ethnic identity of Swiss Mennonite immigrants (to America) in the eighteenth century"(13). However, this identity of suffering was gradually forgotten and replaced by an identity of humility (Kraybill 14), only to be renewed once again by the suffering of Russian Mennonites under the Soviet regime.

Many Dutch Mennonites migrated to East Prussia in the seventeenth century, and settled primarily in the area of the Vistula Delta near Danzig. Towards the end of the eighteenth century they once again came under persecution. For that reason they began to move to the Ukraine in 1789 at the invitation of Empress Catherine of Russia. She promised them good farmland, military exemption, and autonomy in matters of church, education, and language. The emigrant Mennonites to Russia settled primarily in two colonies:

Chortitza, or the Old Colony, in 1789 with 462 families, and Molotschana in 1803 with first 150 families and later another 1200 (Epp, Mennonite Exodus 15). Later, smaller groups from those settlements broke away to form thier own colonies further east. In Russia the Mennonites retained their German language (High German for worship and serious conversation, Low German at home), and a distinctively German culture. In this way the Mennonites maintained their separate identity and continued to regard themselves as an alien group within Russia. This was to create problems in late Imperial Russia, and in the revolutions of 1917 and civil war which followed.

In spite of its beginnings in continental Europe, Mennonitism is largely a New World phenomenon today. This is the result of four major periods of emigration from Europe. The first of these took place between 1707 and 1754 by Swiss and German Palatine Mennonites who settled in eastern Pennsylvania (Wenger 67). Like the Mennonite groups which were to follow, these emigrated for both religious and economic reasons. In Europe there were problems in remaining pacifist, and America seemed to be a haven of religious freedom. The second great movement took place after the Napoleonic wars with the emigration of many more Swiss Mennonites and Amish from the Palatine and Alsace-Lorraine. This group settled largely on farms in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. Mennonites from both these groups also settled in southwestern Ontario in the Niagara Peninsula and what is now the Kitchener-Waterloo region during

the first half of the nineteenth century. The first Mennonite church in Canada was organized at Vineland near St. Catherines in 1806.

The first emigration of Mennonites from Russia began in 1874 when traditional Mennonite exemption from military service seemed to be threatened. The Mennonite immigrants were offered land in Manitoba by the Canadian government, and in Kansas and Nebraska by the American government. Those who chose to remain in Russia -- who were in the majority -- experienced a time of relative prosperity around the turn of the century, often referred to as the "Golden Age"; and then experienced incredible hardship and persecution during World War I, the Bolshevik revolution, and the civil war which followed. In World War I, most Mennonite young men opted for alternative service in forestry or civiliam) duties. However, their refusal to accept military service and their German language brought them under the suspicion of the Russian government and people. This suspicion of the Mennonites was not totally unfounded: to a certain extent the Mennonites were predisposed to the German foe, feeling much more akin to them than to their Russian neighbours. Their problems did not end with the revolution. During the "Golden Age" many Mennonites had become quite wealthy, owning large tracts of land, factories and businesses. In the mid-1920's they were perceived as part of the bourgeois by the revolutionaries, and persecuted as such. Through a sporadic policy of land

collectivization by the Soviets the large Mennonite landowners were stripped of their land. The Mennonites found themselves unable to keep both their beliefs in non-resistance and their accumulated property. The Mennonites also found themselves caught in the struggles of the civil war, with the front line between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks passing repeatedly through the Molotschna colony. Also during this time the Mennonites were the targets of the followers of the anarchist Makhno who had worked as a labourer on a large Mennonite farm before the revolution. Under his terror, a number of young Mennonites forsook the traditional Mennonite stance of non-resistance and formed a militia to defend themselves in what is known as the Selbstschutz (Epp, Mennonite Exodus 35).

The Mennonites realized there was little future in Soviet Russia with their land confiscated and their guarantees of pacifism and freedom of religion taken away. A large scale emigration would have been possible before the war and revolution, but with traditional emigration channels closed off and most of their wealth confiscated any movement would be difficult. Through the financial support of Mennonites already living in North America, about 20,000 Russian Mennonites were able to emigrate between 1923 and 1930, at which time the Soviets closed the door on any further emigration (Epp, Mennonite Exodus 282). These immigrants settled in Ontario and all four western provinces, with the majority



settling in Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

I have detailed the history of the Russian Mennonites at some length, for their experiences in Russia, and particularly under the Soviet regime, hold such an important place in the collective memory of Russian Mennonites and in the writing of Rudy Wiebe, Patrick Friesen and Al Reimer. The literary importance of these ordeals is comparable in kind, but not in scope, to the place of the experiences of World War II for Jewish writers since that time. These experiences strengthened an already existing martyr mentality, and the idea of exodus to a better land became a more important part of the Mennonite experience.

Naturally, the Russian experience has had no direct effect on the Swiss Mennonite community, and this, along with other factors, separates Mennonites in North America into two fairly distinct groups (Juhnke 14). Theologically, the two groups are the same; both have progressive and conservative subgroups, although as a general rule the Russian Mennonites tend to be more progressive. They share a traditional use of the German language for religious instruction, but have spoken two different German dialects: the Russian Mennonites have spoken Plautdietsch, a low German dialect developed during their time in the Vistula delta (Reimer, Reimer and Thiessen 2), and the Swiss Mennonites have spoken a form of German native to their origins along the upper Rhine. In North America the Russian Mennonites have been much more active in literature

and the other arts than those of a Swiss background (Juhnke 15): of the writers mentioned above, only Sara Stambaugh is of Swiss Mennonite background. The Russian Mennonites constitute an ethno-religious grouping on their own; it is as such that I will consider them in this paper.

A central question in any discussion of Mennonite culture is whether "Mennonite" is a primarily ethnic or religious designation. In a document pertaining to Mennonite refugees following World War II, Peter Dyck wrote:

To these people the concept "Mennonite" is not confined to religion alone nor does it connote a church or church membership; it means infinitely more than that, embracing all that which culture, language, tradition and a distinct way of life implies. The only parallel of this is the classic example of the Jews. (Dyck, Peter qtd. in Epp 375)

Mennonitism, as Dyck defines it, is both a faith and the culture in which that faith is found. The two are inseparable. Such a definition was fine at a time when there was little contact between Mennonites and the world around them. Since World War II, however, there has been increased intermingling of Mennonites and their neighbours. Is someone who leaves the Mennonite community and church to join the United Church still a Mennonite?<sup>4</sup> Does a French-Canadian who marries a Mennonite girl and accepts the Mennonite faith become a "real" Mennonite? There is little consensus on these questions, but generally "Mennonite" seems to refer to someone who is both ethnically and denominationally

Mennonite. Someone who leaves the church is usually referred to as an ex-Mennonite. By this definition Rudy and Armin Wiebe are "complete" Mennonites in that they have continued to be part of the Mennonite community and church, in spite of their occasional criticisms of that church, while Patrick Friesen is only ethnically Mennonite, no longer having official affiliation with any Mennonite church.

Because of state-imposed restrictions on many European Mennonites in the seventeenth century, evangelism came to play an increasingly minor role in the Mennonite faith between 1600 and 1900. This turning inward has resulted in Mennonitism being largely an inherited faith. This puts the Mennonites in a rather odd position of having a somewhat hereditary concept of God's covenant, while yet insisting on a believer's baptism and church. The concept of an inherited covenant is more understandable in the context of Calvinism, where baptism is seen as corresponding to the Old Testament sacrament of circumcision, and where the inheritance of faith has both a doctrinal and practiced place. Some recent Mennonite scholars have argued that the ethnic and religious identities of Mennonitism are inseparable. Calvin Redekop has written that "Faith (ideology) and tradition (community) are intrinsic parts of each other" ("The Embarrassment of a Religious Tradition" 21). He argues that there is a Biblical precedent for this cultural basis of faith in the correspondence of community and faith in Old

Testament Judaism<sup>5</sup>. These writers fear that the Mennonite tradition may slip into either the American evangelical or liberal mainstream of the Christian faith, and that to discard their "cultural baggage" would be to relinquish their distinctive religious beliefs -- such as pacifism -- as well. Donald Kraybill has argued convincingly that with the near disappearance of such cultural barriers as geographic separation and a distinctive language, Mennonites have begun to turn to the arts as a continuing "separator" which will help maintain the community of faith (Kraybill 25).

Because of the emphasis on tradition and inherited culture and faith within the Mennonite community, the individual Mennonite, and in particular the Mennonite writer, must at some point confront his Mennonite inheritance to either accept, reject, or modify it.<sup>6</sup> It is too strong a force to be ignored. For this reason a great part of Mennonite imaginative writing has been about the Mennonite tradition and community itself. Some have totally rejected it: Gordon Friesen, an American raised in a Mennonite community wrote Flamethrowers in 1936, a novel loudly condemning Mennonite hypocrisy and narrowness (Teichroew 13-15). Mennonite writers in Canada of Friesen's generation wrote only works accepting and justifying traditional Mennonite ways. Only with the present generation of Mennonite writers has a healthy internal criticism developed in Mennonite literature.

In confronting their tradition, Mennonite writers must also deal with a traditional and firmly set suspicion of art on the part of the Mennonite community. It is not only a matter of whether the artist will accept his community, but also whether the community will accept him. This attitude has also hindered the development of a theory of aesthetics or culture within Mennonite thinking (Erb 203). This anti-aesthetic sentiment had roots in the early years of the Protestant reformation with the austere iconoclasm of Ulrich Zwingli. The Reformers reacted to the excessive opulence of the Roman Church, and emphasized simplicity in liturgy, church structure and decoration (Ruth 28). John Ruth has suggested that three important factors made early Mennonites suspicious of art: the temptation of idolatry, the danger of worldly sophistication, and the danger of individualism (Ruth 33-35). For the individual artist to maintain the virtue of humility would have become increasingly difficult with the cult of individualism fostered by the romantic movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Generally this suspicion of all art and the "invented" nature of fiction in particular has continued among some Mennonites through to the twentieth century (Tiessen 15). An illustration of this suspicion and misunderstanding<sup>s</sup> found in this anecdote of Rudy Wiebe:

In Low German I tried to tell my  
relatives that I wrote novels. But they

didn't understand because in Low German there is no word for novel. They had a word for a "thought up story" which is really a genteel way of saying a lie. Needless to say they wondered why a good Mennonite from Canada would come to Paraguay to write lies about them.

(quoted in Baskin 9)

Certain Dutch Mennonites in the seventeenth century achieved expression of their faith in literary art which was largely meditative, but this behaviour was seen as evidence of backsliding by more austere Swiss Brethren (Ruth 31). In this period of literary activity, Martyrs' Mirror was compiled and published by Thieleman van Braght. It is a collection of very graphic stories about persecuted Anabaptists. The stories are about individuals, but as a whole they comprise the story of a community of believers. Such a work reflected the structure of the Bible, and looked forward to the structure of Rudy Wiebe's The Blue Mountains of China. The importance of Martyrs' Mirror to Mennonites, and particularly for Mennonite literary efforts, should not be ignored. It was translated into English in 1740 and became a staple in both North American and European Mennonite households, holding a position similar to that held by Pilgrim's Progress in English Non-conformist homes. The martyr ideology which this work has fostered also seems to have directly affected Reimer's My Harp is Turned to Mourning and Maurice Mierau's poem cycle "The Martyrdom Method".

From the eighteenth century onwards, an interesting view of literature developed among many Mennonites. Stories,

whether they be about martyrs or fictional pious figures were quite popular and important in shaping Mennonite religious sentiments and practices (Doerksen 199), but it was inconceivable that a Mennonite should write, or that Mennonitism be the subject of a literary work (Janzen 22). Russian Mennonites of the nineteenth century were most likely to read the works of German pietists like Johann Heinrich Jung (commonly known as Jung-Stillung) (Doerksen 198). For a Mennonite to write even a meditative fictional work was to set himself apart from his community (Janzen 22). Like government and justice, writing was viewed by Mennonites as something done by others, but never by themselves. This attitude began to change among Russian Mennonites at the beginning of the twentieth century as young Mennonites became increasingly well educated (Reimer, Al "The Russian Mennonite Experience" 222-223) and some made literary attempts, largely taking the works of nineteenth century German authors as models. This gradual cultural awakening was broken off by the Russian revolution which followed, to be taken up again by those writers who managed to reach Canada.

In a paper given at The Identifications conference in 1979 Judy Young outlined the typical attributes of an emigré writing community. Literary works -- mostly poems and short stories -- are written in the native tongue rather than English or French and appear in newspapers published in the native

European language (Young 107). They rely largely on folk rhythms and images, and express the difficulties of hardship in a new country and a longing for the old country (Young 108). Young draws most of her examples from the Ukrainian community, but her description applies well to Russian Mennonite writing of the 1930's and 1940's as well. The one major difference is that in Mennonite writing there is less sense of a longing for the homeland. Even after one hundred years in the Ukraine the Mennonites there still considered themselves to be aliens in the land. They may have been attached to their old world communities, farms and mulberry hedges, but these were not necessarily associated with one particular land -- there was no sense of having a homeland to go back to. Instead of hardship in the new land and nostalgia for the old, Mennonites had a sense of hardship in both the new and the old. This has had an effect on all Russian Mennonite literature which has followed: it has kept the works largely from devolving into the sentimental nostalgia which plagues much ethnic literature. The future is presented as more important. This tendency is noticeable in such second and third generation works as The Blue Mountains of China and My Harp is Turned to Mourning.

Chief among the Mennonite emigré writers were Arnold Dyck of Manitoba and J.H. Janzen of Ontario. These two wrote in both Low and High German: Low German for light, humorous stories, drama, and poems, High German for more serious longer works (Epp, Mennonites in Canada 531). There is one



point about these first generation writers which is very important: they wrote exclusively in High and Low German, even when they knew English well. It could be that this avoidance of the English language was a natural result of all the writers knowing German as their first language. However, other writers -- most notably Joseph Conrad -- have adopted the language of their new home as their literary language. Why did none of the first-generation Mennonite writers do this? I would argue that by using the German language they were defining the audience which was to read their works. Especially with Low German works that audience would be nearly exclusively Mennonite. Literature became another means of maintaining traditional Mennonite cultural isolation.

Mennonites have also had a difficult time conceiving that their simple life might be the stuff of which literature is made (Erb 205-6). Recent Mennonite literary art has taken two courses in using Mennonite experiences as literary material. The first is based on what Hilde Tiessen has called the "growing awareness of the aesthetic quality of what were once commonplaces"(2). There can be artistic beauty and possibilities in the simplest affairs of everyday farming life, and it is the artist's role to uncover and reshape that experience.<sup>7</sup> The other course has been to focus on those moments in Mennonite history which have been momentous and show the Mennonites displaced from their normal sphere of activities. This has been used particularly by Russian Mennonite writers such as Rudy Wiebe in The Blue

Mountains of China and Al Reimer in My Harp is Turned to Mourning. However, this distinction between the two courses of Mennonite literature is by no means absolute: Peace Shall Destroy Many and My Harp is Turned to Mourning display both traits. The important feature of both approaches is that they unashamedly go to the Mennonite heritage itself for literary material. Henry Kreisel has argued that this is an important step in the development of a worthwhile ethnic literature:

they must first of all muster the courage to confront that material honestly. There are ever present doubts whether the material will interest the majority of the people living in a country, whether indeed the material is indeed inherently valuable. I certainly confronted such doubts when I first set out on my way nearly forty years ago.

(Kreisel 10)

The writer must overcome the feeling that his own people will not want to read about this because they know all about it anyway, and outsiders will not have any interest in the odd habits of a small minority. These worries underestimate the extent to which people like to read about things they already know, and the extent to which outsiders will find exotic that which Mennonites themselves will consider only embarrassingly odd. Thus, in the second half of the twentieth century we find that the two most significant barriers to Mennonite literary expression - suspicion of literary art by the Mennonite community at large, and the belief that Mennonite experience is not worthy of literary attention - have been eroded enough

that a significant body of Russian Mennonite literature has been produced.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Although Thiessen's article was published in 1972, it seems to have been written before the publication of The Blue Mountains of China in 1970.

<sup>2</sup>This model also owes something to the three generation immigrant hypothesis put forward by Marcu Hansen in 1952. He labeled the first generation "retainers", the second "forgetters" and the the third "retrievers". Donald Kraybill has shown that this model is applicable to the Mennonite experience in North America (10-11) with the retainers actually lasting a number of generations because of separation from the world. Also see David Waltner-Toews "Tante Tina's Lament" and "Hanschen's Complaint" (Good Housekeeping) for an excellent treatment of this phenomenon in a Russian Mennonite context.

<sup>3</sup>As Linda Hutcheon points out in her article "Voices of Displacement" this cultural mosaic may be very open-minded, but it puts great demands on the immigrant who is expected to be both ethnic and Canadian. Rudy Wiebe seems to have encountered this problem: his early work was criticized for being insular by some critics, and some Mennonites claim that there is little about Rudy Wiebe which is distinctively Mennonite.

<sup>4</sup>In the last few months of 1985 just such a debate went on in the letters column of Mennonite Martyr, a Canadian Mennonite literary magazine.

<sup>5</sup> See also Erb, 210-211, where he argues that without cultural distinctives there can be no religion.

<sup>6</sup>An interesting comparison can be made to writers from the North American Dutch Calvinist community. Early in this century all these writers felt compelled to deal with their heritage in some way, and most (such as Peter de Vries) moved away from their inherited community and faith and openly rebelled against it in their works (Bratt Dutch Calvinism in North America 159-160). Recent history seems to indicate that the Dutch Calvinist tradition no longer exerts such a force on the writers which come out of it. Aritha van Herk has totally ignored her heritage in her two novels, Judith and The Tent Peg.

<sup>7</sup>Such an artistic impulse does not necessarily result in "Folk" art. Witness Jan Vermeer's "The Lace-maker."

Rudy Wiebe: Peace Shall Destroy Many

Rudy Wiebe is the only Mennonite writer considered in this paper who has published a large enough amount of work over a period of time that a change in the treatment of the Mennonite heritage is evident. I will briefly sketch that development before going on to a closer study of his work. His first novel Peace Shall Destroy Many (1962) takes the Mennonite community for subject matter, and can be described as confrontational in nature. The young Wiebe often seems to be directly addressing and criticizing a Mennonite audience, and attempting what W.J. Keith calls "an imaginative testing of his own position within his Church" (Epic Fiction 24). The next novel to deal with a specifically Mennonite theme, The Blue Mountains of China (1970), shows more a use of his Mennonite heritage than an addressing of it. The author remains detached, and is less obviously didactic. The novels which follow depart from the Mennonite ethos for other historical traditions, with a return to Mennonite characters coming only with Jacob Dyck in My Lovely Enemy (1983). Through the character of Jacob Dyck, Wiebe seems to be

attempting to move beyond Mennonite ethnicity and problems of community in a return to the Christian vision of the original Anabaptists. A similar theological movement can also be seen at the end of the two earlier "Mennonite" novels.

As shown towards the end of the last chapter, Rudy Wiebe was by no means the first serious Mennonite novelist in Canada; however, Wiebe stands apart from this earlier generation of writers in two important respects. He writes in English rather than German, and he is openly critical of certain aspects of the Mennonite community. In Peace Shall Destroy Many Wiebe is engaged in that second stage of Pauls' model where the writer critically depicts the tension between tradition and the present. The first generation of writers like Janzen and Dyck considered themselves to be writing for an exclusively Mennonite readership; those who attempted to achieve even a larger German audience became outcasts from the Mennonite community (Janzen 24-25). Many Mennonites felt that Wiebe's criticisms would have been acceptable if circulation of the book had been limited to the Mennonite community (Wiebe "Ethnicity and Identity" 76); self-criticism for the sake of improvement would not have been as scandalous as the exposé which many perceived Peace Shall Destroy Many to be because of the use of the English language and its publication by a non-Mennonite press. Many felt that a work of fiction about the Mennonite faith ought to put the church's best side forward; Joseph Dueck's words in the novel likely reflect Wiebe's own feelings in this regard:

I was not concerned if what I said made the church look fine or not. I wanted everyone to know our only concern is to find the Truth. If the Truth is unflattering, then we know what to do.

(60-61)

The apprehension of some Mennonites is understandable, however; apart from sensationalist news features, a work of literature like Wiebe's may be the only source for a typical Canadian's impression of the Mennonite community (Hutcheon 36). Because of the turmoil surrounding the novel, Wiebe resigned his position as editor of the Mennonite Brethren Herald.

Wiebe showed that he was aware that non-Mennonites would read the novel by including a preface "explaining" Mennonites, yet the tone of the novel is one of self-exploration rather than apology or exposé. It must also be recognized that any "dirty laundry" about the Mennonites which comes out in the course of the novel is neither extraneous nor sensational, but central to the plot and novel as a whole. Wiebe had been encouraged by his college creative writing instructor to write about what he knew (Wiebe in Reimer and Steiner, 126); he was familiar with isolated northern Saskatchewan Mennonite communities, having grown up in one, and saw in such situations the possibility of artistic exploration which would be universal in spite of its definite particularity. A Mennonite setting enabled Wiebe to write realistic

description, and engage in moral self-exploration at both the community and personal level. The basic and agonizing question of self-exploration in the novel can be summarized in this way: how do traditional Mennonite teachings apply to contemporary situations of society unforeseen by either the founding Anabaptist fathers or even the previous generation? To put it more simply: what is the relationship of tradition, Christian faith, and ethics? The implied criticism of the novel is that Mennonites have failed to consider this question seriously, but have relied instead on traditional ways, which may or may not still be attached to the beliefs upon which they were founded.

Central to Peace Shall Destroy Many are the figures of Thom Wiens and Deacon Block, the questioning young protagonist and the unyielding community leader. At the beginning of the novel Thom is a typical Mennonite young man of his community, Wapiti, unquestionably accepting the teachings and practices of his church. The Mennonite faith and ways are a central and assumed part of his being: "if someone had asked him when he had first known that Christ bade his disciples love their enemies, he could no more have answered than if he had been asked to consciously recollect his first breath" (12). However, as the novel progresses through the seasons of one year, the problems of both the insular Mennonite world and the outside world compel Thom to reconsider all that which he has been taught. He begins to question and explore, not because he wants to destroy

Mennonitism, but because he wishes to find true Mennonite Christianity , what it really means to walk in the way of Christ.

As one who questions and explores, Thom has a certain correspondence to the position being put forward by Wiebe in the novel as a whole. However, we must not equate the character and his author, nor see Thom as a model character. His faults are many. We must recognize Peace Shall Destroy Many as a story of growth, a Bildungsroman, with Thom achieving a small degree of true insight at the very end of the novel. In some ways Thom is a blank character searching for a way to act. There are three young men in the community who represent alternative models which he can follow in responding to his Mennonite heritage. There is Peter Block, the son of the community leader, one who rarely "checks his father's opinion with facts" (196). There is Herb Unger who has totally rejected Mennonite ways to live as wildly as he can in the small community of Wapiti. And lastly, there is Joseph Dueck, the Mennonite schoolteacher who has come from another community and challenges the Mennonites of Wapiti, and especially Thom, to a reconsideration of the relationship of Mennonites to the world. There is never any doubt that Joseph is the right model; Thom knows this but often finds himself acting more like Herb or Pete. Joseph's early departure from the physical setting of the novel leaves Thom awkwardly trying to take his place. Joseph's presence is continued, however,



through frequent letters of advice which he sends to Thom. Unfortunately, the letters too obviously represent a convenient mouthpiece for Wiebe's views. Thom's heavy reliance on Joseph also raises some questions about Thom and his basis for faith and action. Has he fallen into the same dilemma as the Mennonites around him by letting another direct his beliefs and action, only substituting Joseph for Deacon Block?

For young people like Thom the world outside Wapiti is unknown. His younger brother once believed that the world was surrounded by pines, and their world literally is by the forest surrounding the settlement. The Métis are the only "outsiders" in the area and live on the edge of the community hunting and trapping for their livelihood. This degree of separation from the world is extreme for Russian Mennonites in Canada, but one which some have equated with the northern Saskatchewan community in which Wiebe himself grew up. We thus have Thom Wiens confronting an atypical and very narrow community with the ideas of Joseph Dueck from the more liberal southern communities. Much of the action of the novel depends on the tension between Deacon Block, who is trying to keep the community separate from the world, and Thom and Joseph, who are trying to open up the community to the outside world. The relations with outsiders, rather than pacifism, is the central issue of the book. How can Mennonites be "in the world, but not of the world", and still share the love of Christ? At one

point Thom pointedly asks his mother "why must we in Wapiti love only Mennonites?" (215).

Deacon Block stands at the centre of the Mennonite community, seemingly running the church, the school, and handling all dealings with non-Mennonites. He is responsible for both the founding and the maintenance of the community. He represents a common phenomenon in Mennonite communities of the past: the separation of the church from the state through physical distance leads to an oppressive governing authority emerging from the church itself (Calvin Redekop "The Mennonite Romance", 91). Upon emigrating from Russia in 1927, Block had established a Mennonite community in northern Saskatchewan, purposely as far as possible from non-Mennonite settlements. Through most of the novel Thom admires Deacon Block's efficiency and leadership, and Block is somewhat worthy of Thom's admiration: he is a despot, but a benevolent rather than a tyrannical one. For Deacon Block the community comes first, at the expense of both the individual Mennonite and all those outside the community. His attempts to preserve a perfect little community is misdirected in that it prevents him from showing compassion to the Métis of the area, and even to his own daughter when she has "fallen" by using a Métis to find sexual fulfillment.

To Block the Métis are a blight on the community with their "filth and laziness" (202); but for Thom they are a constant reminder of the Mennonite failure to show concern for those outside their own community. Thom runs a Sunday

school class for the Métis children begun by Joseph, in an half-hearted attempt to make them Mennonites. Deacon Block confronts him with the impossibility of ever achieving that goal: they are ethnically non-Mennonite. For the deacon it is a gap "that should never be bridged"(205). He tells Thom:

You will undermine this community completely by trying to bring breeds - and Indians naturally follow - into it. They are basically different from us - qualitatively. (205)

Block seems to have ignored the Christian denial of the distinction between Jew and Greek (Galatians 3:28-29), and made ethnicity the sole basis of Mennonitism.

The German language of the Mennonites keeps outsiders distant, and in doing so keeps the Mennonite community together. Any attempt to use English in any church related activity is seen as a threat to the community and tradition. For Thom, the German language has become cultural baggage which gets in the way of true religious expression which must include evangelism. Deacon Block's seemingly calm and logical explanation of the importance of separation is ironically undercut by the reader's awareness that separation has done nothing to protect Deacon Block's own children from evil:

we hold that our actions are eternally important; our fathers found the right moral and spiritual action. Therefore we withdraw from the influence of the outside world and train up our children

in seclusion where they can learn the correct way unhindered. We want nothing from the world - either the English or the breeds. They will merely ruin the training of our children. Other Mennonite churches in Canada, not sheltered as we are in Wapiti, have many more problems. Especially in city churches the devil lures many young people from our teachings. More than enough men at the Conference have wept as they told me. (203)

No degree of separation from the world will protect the community of Mennonites from their own failings and sinfulness. Block's daughter Elizabeth is not seduced by the Métis, but aggressively seeks him out, and young Peter Block slides into violence and lust at the end of the novel. Thom's admiration for Deacon Block diminishes towards the end of the novel to the point where he is ready to bitterly blame Block for the death of Elizabeth and all the problems of the community: "But where does the Bible say you must torture your daughter to death if she wants to mix her sacred Mennonite blood with - "(218). Only after he has struck Herb Unger in the Christmas Eve climax, does Thom realize that he is no better: "He, with his months of his oh-so-noble questionings, had plumbed the pit"(237). He too has been hypocritical in his relations with Herb Unger and the Métis.

On that same Christmas Eve Thom finds what he believes to be a glimmer of direction. More is required than the rejection of Deacon Block and his adherence to tradition: a new understanding of the Christian life must be found. Thom

thinks that "Christ's teachings stood clear in the scriptures; could he but scrape them bare of all their acquired meanings and see them as those first disciples had done" (237). Through the searching figure of Thom, Wiebe has questioned the Mennonite tenet of tradition-based Christianity, or the following of the fathers, including the concept of a separated community of believers. For Thom, it is very much a questioning and exploration, rather than the proposal of a fully thought-out new plan. Only in the letters and speeches of Joseph is there a full description of this new way:

There are Mennonites in the south - too many - who live in settlements as you people do here, but others are getting away from this "physical separation" idea. They are living out our common faith. And they do it better, I believe, than you are here, because it reacts and comes alive in contact with people who do not have it. Of course there are big problems too, but those spring up everywhere. If you could only come and see - (69).

At least one Mennonite reviewer has criticized Wiebe for not having Thom's understanding of the truth go far enough: "Wiebe's novel is not untrue -- it is unfinished", in that it fails to show "the reality of Christ" (Jeschke 336). However, that assessment of the novel downplays the breakthrough which Thom makes in the final scene on Christmas Eve, and ignores the figure of Hal, Thom's younger brother, who points out the way in the Christmas pageant, and who

throughout the novel has shown the way by innocently treating the Métis as friends and brothers (Tiessen "A Mighty Inner River" 72). There is hope for the future of the community in the younger people like Hal and Thom.

Some Mennonites may have been angered by the depiction of Mennonite failings in Peace Shall Destroy Many, but Wiebe was not "soft" on outsiders either. Deacon Block at least has depth, but the imported schoolteacher Razia Tantamount is portrayed as incredibly superficial. She is shown as thinking of little but sex, and one suspects that her choice of reading material -- The Sun Also Rises -- is meant to be damning. Unfortunately, Wiebe's depiction of her leaves her as a stock flat character representing the evils of the outside world. At times we feel that what we are seeing is the embodiment of outside evil as Deacon Block conceives it. Only in the later works The Temptations of Big Bear and The Scorched Wood People will Wiebe create believable and sympathetic non-Mennonite characters.

The Mennonitism which Wiebe is advocating at the end of Peace Shall Destroy Many must be seen within the context of a movement in North American Mennonitism usually referred to as "the Anabaptist Vision". The supporters of this concept, which came to prominence in the 1950's, argued for a movement away from acquired cultural aspects of Mennonitism, and a return to the teachings of Christ as interpreted by the original Anabaptists of the 16th century<sup>1</sup>. It is a "vision that calls us to throw off the swaddling

clothes of a cultural continuum, and once more to follow Christ only as he dwells in the midst of His people" (Peachey 340). Many Mennonite theologians and historians like Bender, Peachey, and Guy Hershberger felt that the church had become bound by legalism and a tradition of separation which had been forced upon Anabaptist groups by persecution, and was contrary to the original Anabaptist ideals of active evangelism and radical social change. Wiebe seems to be pushing beyond even this Anabaptist Vision by having Thom believe that the teachings of Christ are unequivocal and do not need to be interpreted by the Anabaptist fathers or by the Mennonite community as a whole. Many Mennonites would see Thom as tending toward a dangerous state of individualism. He might also be warned that most Mennonite splinter groups like Deacon Block's had taken the actions they did in order to return the church to what they believed were the ways of the Anabaptist fathers and of Christ.

In his non-literary writings of the period Wiebe confirms his own commitment to Thom's view of the state of Mennonitism. In "For the Mennonite Churches: A Last Chance" he stresses that the original Anabaptist idea was to be anything but ethnic. It was to be a church flourishing in all nations and not bound to any one (26). He seems to fear that the Mennonites are in danger of becoming solely an ethnic group without the spirit of Christ, and calls for "God's help to cut the spiritual life within our Mennonite

churches free from this cultural hangman's noose" (27).

Wiebe has continued to reject the idea that Mennonites are an ethnic group: "being a Mennonite isn't an ethnic designation. It's not racial at all; it's more like being a Quaker or a Mormon. Being a Mennonite is being part of a religious group which in certain ways has acquired some of the characteristics of an ethnic group" (Wiebe, "Ethnicity and Identity" 88)

In his essays of the early 1960's and Peace Shall Destroy Many Wiebe is calling to Mennonites in what can best be described as a prophetic way. He is like Isaiah calling the people of Israel to repentance and a return to the ways of Yahweh. Wiebe believes that the artist must take this prophetic role. By writing a good novel he or she acts as "critic and witness" to society, both society at large, and the smaller Mennonite society. In his first novel his role tends to be more of a critic than witness, and it is the Mennonite community specifically he is criticizing. To criticize society first or leave Mennonites alone would be unfair: "We Christians claim to be following a perfect Lord; surely we should be evaluating ourselves, not others" (Wiebe "The Artist as Critic and Witness 46-47"). In an article published in Christian Living in 1965, Wiebe outlined how he thought a church or religious group ought to respond to a writer's correcting hand: "When a novel or other work of art realistically shows the church in error, we should say, 'Yes, it is true. As a matter of fact we're worse than that. But by God's grace' -" ("The Artist as Critic and Witness" 46).



The role of the writer becomes an important one for the Christian community in that it challenges the church and its members to improve. And this is the role of any writer, not just the Mennonite writer: "The whole purpose of art, poetry and storytelling is to make us more humane" (Wiebe "Ethnicity and Identity" 86).

A major criticism that can be made of Peace Shall Destroy Many is that it fails to make full use of the aesthetic possibilities of Mennonite life. Wapiti comes across as a dark, tumultuous place; the reader needs to be reminded more often that the conflicts going on are something out of the ordinary, and that life in the community does not need to be humourless and oppressing. Wiebe seems to be attempting something of this in the preludes to the four main sections of the novel, and in the haymaking of Chapter 6. In that chapter there is the occasional indication that Wiebe appreciates the beauty of simplicity ; one is reminded of a similar, but much more celebratory, description of haymaking in Tolstoy's Anna Karenin. Such moments are rare. Usually in Peace Shall Destroy Many, traditional Mennonite ways are being coldly examined and then discarded; only with The Blue Mountains of China does Wiebe fully explore the aesthetic richness of his Mennonite heritage.

Notes

<sup>1</sup>Harold Bender, a Mennonite scholar at Goshen College, Indiana, was the unofficial leader of this school of thought and he coined the term "Anabaptist Vision" in an article published in 1944 ("The Anabaptist Vision" Church History. March 1944). Later in the 1960's, Wiebe would have encountered this sort of thinking more closely while teaching at Goshen College, especially in the person of John H. Yoder, whom he much admired. (see Neumann "Unearthing Language" 243). The development of Wiebe's own "Anabaptist Vision" will be more fully disclosed in the chapter on The Blue Mountains of China.

Rudy Wiebe: The Blue Mountains of China

Rudy Wiebe's second novel, First and Vital Candle, turns away from the Mennonite community for subject matter. It is the story of Abe Ross, an agnostic searching for religious truth among the Indians of northwestern Ontario. There is nothing specifically Mennonite about the Christian faith which is introduced to Abe by Sally Howell, a local schoolteacher. The bland evangelical Christianity which Abe comes close to accepting is much less impressive than the specifically Mennonite Christianity found in Peace Shall Destroy Many and The Blue Mountains of China. Is the Christianity of Sally the non-cultural faith of Wiebe's and other Mennonites' Anabaptist Vision? Wiebe's next novel shows a recognition that the cultural dimension of a religion is inescapable and not necessarily a bad thing.

With The Blue Mountains of China, Wiebe returns to the Mennonite ethos, but responds to it differently than in Peace Shall Destroy Many. He is no longer confronting that tradition, but using the unique history and faith of Mennonites to fashion a story which is both the story of the Russian Mennonites, and the universal story of the searching and suffering of a people. He is neither primarily criticizing nor praising Mennonite ways or history, but attempting to understand it (Redekop, Magdalene 101). The

novel is firmly rooted in the past of Wiebe's Mennonite forebears, who came from the Ukraine in 1929. Much of the novel consists of the sort of stories of hardship he would have heard from his parents, yet the telling of the stories always avoids sentimentality. The novel shows a recognition on Wiebe's part that the history of the Mennonites -- both as a cultural and religious people -- can be a "reservoir of meaning" (Magdalene Redekop 102) for great literature. The intense focus on a particular people does not exclude non-Mennonite readers; instead the reader is convinced of the authenticity of the experience because of its particular detail. Through the use of the specific Wiebe achieves what Sam Solecki refers to as an "incarnation" of the universal in the local (Solecki 5). He slowly draws us into the Mennonite world, until, like Anna in the chapter "The Well", we are not sure if we are "looking into the well or out of it" (96).

The Blue Mountains of China consists of thirteen chapters which maintain neither a strict chronological order nor a consistent narrative stance. The first chapter consists of Frieda Friesen, an elderly Paraguayan Mennonite, orally recollecting her youth in Canada at the turn of the century. With Chapter Two the story has shifted - without announcement - to a Soviet prison cell in 1929 and the central consciousness of Jakob Friesen, a distant relative of Frieda Friesen of the first chapter. So the novel continues, shifting from one Mennonite individual and setting to another, across four continents and over the better part

of this century. The chapters are fragments, and it is only after a substantial part of the book has been read that the reader comes to recognize that they all work together to form a larger story of the Russian Mennonites. The narrative voice changes from chapter to chapter as well, so the reader must be alert to the distinctive features which Wiebe gives the different voices. The storylines themselves are not brought together until the final chapter.

It would be inaccurate to refer to the novel as a history of the Russian Mennonites or an historical epic -- it makes no attempt to tell the whole story. It is a mythologizing of history, an attempt to make the past "mean" something in relation to the present instead of just "be". To achieve this Wiebe uses what Robert Kroetsch has aptly described as an archaeological rather than historical approach (Neumann 230). This is true, not only of The Blue Mountains of China, but also of the two novels of the Northwest which follow: the narrative fragments or artefacts come up one by one from a seemingly disturbed archaeological site, and the reader is left the task of organizing the history from the displayed artefacts. The technique is most fully used in The Temptations of Big Bear, where actual historical documents form part of the text. Wiebe himself has written: "Presumably all the parts of the story are themselves available. A difficulty is that they are, as always, available only in bits and pieces" ("Where is the Voice Coming From" 135). In The Blue

Mountains of China Wiebe has arranged these fragments from the Mennonite heritage in such a way that the inter-relations, and the oneness of the Mennonite experience, become clear.

The effects of this narrative diffusion on our reading of the novel will be discussed later in this chapter. Here I would like to concentrate on the implications of Wiebe's decision to use such a form. The choice of it would seem to indicate a concern for showing the full range of the Russian Mennonite experience in this century. It is a move away from the narrow focus on a particular branch of Mennonitism in Peace Shall Destroy Many, to a broad inclusive sweep. The novel becomes an exploration of the cultural and religious diversity of Russian Mennonites, and an inconclusive attempt to determine "What is a Mennonite?". The figures in the novel show varying degrees of cultural and religious retention of the Mennonite heritage. They run the full gamut from Frieda's simple and traditional rural life in Paraguay, to the "muppyism"<sup>1</sup> of the university professor Liesel Driediger, to the cultural forgetfulness of the Soviet Jakob Friesen. Some characters -- like Liesel Driediger and the mercantile Dennis Willms -- are little more than types, but the major figures of Frieda Friesen, David Epp, and Jakob Friesen, are given a psychological depth. Although so seemingly different these characters have something in common which is far more important than the Low German Language, or their distinctively Mennonite names: they all define

themselves in terms of Mennonitism, whether they have accepted it, rejected it, or modified it for personal use.

As Liesel Driediger notices about Jakob Friesen (IV):

"despite his lifetime wandering there was for him still only one thing to believe or not believe" (193). This Mennonite self-consciousness brings a number of characters together in a strange communion alongside an Alberta highway.

Like the later novels The Temptations of Big Bear and The Scorched Wood People, The Blue Mountains of China focuses on those historical moments which are central in the consciousness of a people. This sense of a common history, and especially an historical sense of suffering, are central to any ethnic consciousness. The conflicts both within and outside the Mennonite community in the Soviet Union of the 1920's provide the moments of central action in the novel. As in Peace Shall Destroy Many, we see Mennonite pacifism confronted with militarism and violent deprivation. However, in this novel we see not only the responses of men like Peter Block, but of a wide variety of Mennonites young and old, male and female: from the aggressive Jakob Friesen (V) to the communist Serebro to the suffering Greta Suderman and many others. This period of Mennonite history, the most tumultuous since the sixteenth century, has become a standard theme in Canadian Mennonite literature, with the German language novels of Harder and Dyck, Wiebe's own contributions, and the recently published My Harp is Turned to Mourning by Al Reimer. Is it becoming a literary tradition

in its own right, or is it simply the reflection of a continuing Mennonite consciousness, which has nevertheless been fostered by works dealing with the period? (see Reimer, "The Russian-Mennonite Experience") Will these works, like the seventeenth century Martyrs' Mirror, play an important part in keeping the memory of Mennonite martyrs alive, and continuing the Mennonite consciousness of being a people of martyrdom?

As in Peace Shall Destroy Many Wiebe exhibits a certain degree of caution concerning the cultural baggage of Mennonitism. However, in this novel there is a growing awareness that any over concern with mundane material things can become a sort of cultural baggage. To give up Low German and physical separateness for the secular worldliness of Dennis Willms is no improvement. As Cal Redekop writes in "The Embarassment of a Religious Tradition", to give up one's inherited culture is merely to assume someone else's (21). Mennonitism, or any variety of Christian faith, will always be incarnate in a specific earthly form. The Blue Mountains of China seems to affirm the cultural basis of faith, yet naturally Wiebe wants to push beyond the merely cultural. His treatment of Frieda Friesen is interesting in this respect. She, like Peter Block, is of that stream of Mennonitism that believes the community must separate itself from the world to remain holy. Towards this end, the cultural barriers of German and isolation are maintained. However, Frieda, unlike Block, is treated



sympathetically; hers is the most consistent and trustworthy voice in the novel (Magdalene Redekop 97). As her name, which comes from the German word for peace (Friede), suggests, she has attained a state of inner peace -- the main thing which Block lacks (Tiessen "A Mighty River" 76). We are not meant to scorn Frieda's insularity, but warmly smile at her language and recollection of her life (Magdalene Redekop 101). In reference to Frieda, Wiebe writes that he was trying "to capture both the contorted language and self-deprecating humour of prairie Mennonites", and relates this treatment to Arnold Dyck's humorous Low German stories of Koop and Bua ("In the West" 209). Frieda's situation is presented as one of many possible incarnations of Mennonite Christianity. Wiebe presents David Epp, Samuel Reimer, and John Reimer, as other possible incarnations of the faith in the novel.

"The Calling of Samuel U. Reimer" is more hardhitting and critical of Mennonite behaviour than any other chapter in the novel. Whereas religious narrowness was criticized in Peace Shall Destroy Many, complacency and a slackness in religious conviction are the target in "The Calling of Samuel U. Reimer". In a parallel to the calling of the prophet Samuel in the Old Testament, Reimer is called to proclaim peace in Vietnam. Reimer seems a very unlikely candidate; he is a Mennonite farmer in Manitoba "known as careful, not always completely slow or stubborn, but careful" (158). He knows nothing about Vietnam, and in addition his religious

consciousness is markedly undeveloped. The local Mennonite church is an assumed, unconsidered part of his life (164). However, once Reimer has heard the call, he is committed to actually going to Vietnam and proclaiming peace. The chapter is not a satire of him, but of all those around him, including the local pastor, his family and friends, who try to dissuade him from such an idealistic gesture. What he sees as a mission consistent with the traditional Mennonite tenet of pacifism, they regard as a sickness: "his recovery was being prayed for by the church at every Wednesday Prayer Service" (170). His family and friends are depicted as lost in a mire of materialism; when he simply gives up in the face of unbeatable opposition and dies, no one knows whether his wife "had moved up to a Chrysler or a Cadillac, or Thunderbird" with the insurance money (180). Samuel Reimer may be a fool, but he is a holy fool, and becomes a martyr for the faith. I also suspect that his prophetic dilemma is one that Wiebe himself has sometimes felt.

If the novel were to end with the despairing cynicism of "The Calling of Samuel U. Reimer", it could be described as nothing but pessimistic about the state of Mennonitism in modern North America. However, in the final chapter Samuel's brother continues his older brother's mission in his own way by carrying a cross weighing forty-five pounds across Canada. It is a gesture defiant both of the Mennonite community and Canadian society, moving westward in the summer of 1967 when all trekked east for Montreal's Expo (Christie 28). His

fellow Mennonites respond to him in much the same way that they had responded to his older brother: "Reimer what is this dummheit, running across the country, like that? Attracting bike rifraff and such like vultures to os, a Mennonite talking to newspapers" (204). Yet it is Reimer's strange pilgrimmage which brings together the characters and stories of the novel in the final chapter. Along a roadside in Alberta, the Willms', Liesel Driediger, Jakob Friesen, and John Reimer, gather in a staged, yet convincing, Mennonite communion. One major figure, or representative, is missing: Frieda Friesen. The time of the old-style isolationist Mennonite which she represents has passed. It is no longer an alternative in Canada; from this assembled group must come the replacement incarnation. The threads of the novel are brought together, and the connections between various characters and events are revealed in this chapter. W.J. Keith points out that the interconnections are not mere novelistic coincidence, but "an illustration of the principle that "No man is an island"" (Epic Fiction 49). However, it is more than just an assertion of anti-individualism; it is an affirmation of the organic unity of the Mennonite community. On a more comic level, it is a play upon what Magdalene Falk Redekop calls an "in joke (that) wherever two Mennonites are gathered together they will inevitably discover that their mother's father's aunt is their uncle's cousin" (117).

The conversation of this group in the roadside ditch

is at times a Babel of voices, at times a dialectic approaching important truths. For the final section, the Willms and Liesel Driediger drive away while old Jakob Friesen and Reimer continue walking and talking. These two have made radically different twentieth century responses to Mennonitism, yet they can communicate and share to reach a better understanding of their common heritage. The voices of the two men are never explicitly distinguished in this section; they simply become one voice and "the other", and it is in this dialectic, rather than through individual "preaching" that they reach for the truth. The philosophical comments they make sound natural in a way that Joseph Dueck's letters never do. Perhaps it is because the situation is so unnatural that we no longer question the realism of anything that is taking place.<sup>2</sup> Also, there is no tone of absolute individual certainty:

"...as long as I am alive the possibility can never be completely closed that God is good"

"Ah-h-h. If there is one."

"That possibility cannot be closed, either." (226)

Reimer, Friesen, and Wiebe himself, have come to accept the limits of human understanding this side of the Blue Mountains of China: "now we see through a glass darkly, but then we shall see face to face". The chapter, and the novel, ends with Reimer's analysis of "the trouble with Mennonites":

They've always wanted to be Jews. To have land God had given them for their very own, to which they were called; so even if someone chased them away, they could work forever to get it back.

For all their dependence on the New Testament, and in particular on Christ's teachings, the Mennonites as Reimer sees them still have an Old Testament view of the covenant and their peoplehood. Robert Kroetsch senses this Old Testament worldview in Wiebe himself: "behind Big Bear is Wiebe's vision of a Mennonite patriarch. Behind the patriarch is his vision of the lost Old Testament world" (Jeffrey 100). The Mennonites have always been in danger of forgetting the turn away from legalism, and the erasing of the distinction between Jew and Gentile which came with the New Testament. They keep searching for the promised land, the blue mountains of China, a rich commonwealth like that experienced in nineteenth century Russia, the perfect Gemeinde, or complete separation from the world; but none of these are "anywhere on earth" (227).

Due to the structure of The Blue Mountains of China we must be careful not to regard John Reimer's as the authoritative voice in the novel. The final chapter is merely "On the Way": John Reimer is at least moving and trying to find direction, but even he does not know whether it will be north or west. Like Thom Wiens, Reimer is an explorer, one whose business is to push at the rigid fabrics of the Mennonite tradition in order to reshape it. He is

trying to fulfill the New Testament mandate to make "new wineskins" for the Christian faith. In an article written shortly after The Blue Mountains of China, Wiebe outlines the three different cultural alternatives for the Mennonites: they can try to maintain their rural ghetto existence by continuing to look inward, but this is unnatural and difficult after the first generation, they can try to be part of every new trend in theology, worship, and lifestyle, or they can recognize that they are meant to be a church in the "desert", that is, "culturally unrooted" (Wiebe "The Ghetto, the Launch Pad, the Desert" 25). Reimer is very much an expression of this "cultural unrootedness"; he has rejected the traditional features of the Mennonite ghetto, but has been careful to avoid adopting any other cultural image in its place. He keeps himself well-trimmed so that people will not be offended and identify him with the hippie movement.<sup>3</sup>

The structure of The Blue Mountains of China has been much discussed, but no one has pointed out how the structure of the novel relates to the Mennonite literary heritage. There has been a tendency to regard Wiebe's prose style as nothing more than second-rate Faulkner. However, as with the subject matter, Wiebe is using the Mennonite tradition in new ways. Ina Ferris has argued that the multivoiced narrative structure "questions...the possibility of an authentic integrative vision" (90). However, Ferris has failed to consider the religious and literary heritage out of which The Blue Mountains of China comes. The many voices do not deny

the possibility of this vision, but affirm that when it comes it will be a communal rather than an individual vision. As a collection of stories or legends about individuals which together form the history of a people, the novel is similar to the Bible (the Old Testament in particular) and the Martyrs' Mirror. Many have noted the Biblical parallels in The Blue Mountains of China: "The Calling of Samuel U. Reimer", the parallel to Rachel at the well in Anna's experience in "The Well". These Biblical references are not merely an allegorical retelling of Biblical stories; they are an affirmation that "history itself [is] really, as in typological hermeneutics, an ongoing fulfillment of the story begun in the Bible" (Jeffrey 100). However, critics have not pushed forward to consider how these Biblical parallels should affect our reading of the novel, beyond reminding "the reader that an interpretive act is required" (Ferris 93), which I thought was assumed about any work of literary art. As in the Old Testament, there are separate "books" in The Blue Mountains of China, which seem to have little to do with each other, yet because of the parallels we recognize that they are meant to go together to form a work of revelation. It is significant that the parallels are all from the Old Testament - the conversation at the end shows the Mennonites only just coming out of their Old Testament covenantal mentality. Beyond the end of the novel lies Christ. Like the books of the Old Testament prophets the novel points forward to salvation, yet never fully discloses it. It could

be argued that John Reimer is a Christ figure because of the cross he bears; however, he is more like his namesake, John the Baptist, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, announcing the coming Christ.

The Blue Mountains of China also owes something to Martyrs' Mirror, for in the figures of David Epp, Samuel Reimer and John Reimer, it shows the same Mennonite emphasis on martyrdom - a martyrdom not for the sake of persecution and blessed reward, but for the sake of changing the world (Solecki 7-8). It is important to note the influence and succession of martyrs: Samuel is inspired by David Epp's actions during the flight from Russia (71-72), and John Reimer feels that he is continuing Samuel's mission (Tiessen "A Mighty River" 75). They are beginning a new tradition of martyrdom. In a time when the original martyr literature "has been memorialized and/or forgotten" (Doerksen 198), new martyrs are established.

All three - the Bible, Martyrs' Mirror and The Blue Mountains of China - show a concern with the people or community over individuals. A similar emphasis is found in The Temptations of Big Bear and The Scorched Wood People, in contrast to the individual search for truth of Thom Wiens. Although Wiebe rejects an ethnic or racial designation of Mennonites, he still sees them as a group or community rather than individuals. However, they are a community bound together by ideas and religious convictions (Identifications 69)



Above all, The Blue Mountains of China puts forth a radical Christian view, in the tradition of the founding Anabaptists, who were interested in anything but maintaining the status quo. It is a challenge to all Mennonites to reexamine and renew their Anabaptist heritage. Thus, it is a comprehensively Mennonite novel in a way that a more cautious novel -- acceptable to all Mennonites -- never could be.

### Later Novels

After The Blue Mountains of China, Wiebe moved on to novels of non-Mennonite subject matter in The Temptations of Big Bear, The Scorched Wood People, and The Mad Trapper. However, the first two of these three are not as far removed from the Mennonite experience as might first appear. Both are about communities which, like the Mennonites, are both culturally and religiously determined. Also, the central figures - Big Bear and Riel - are prophetic religious figures whose faiths have affinities to Wiebe's Mennonitism. However, he does not turn them into Mennonites, but accepts the challenge of trying to think through their minds and worldviews (Wiebe in Reimer and Steiner 129). He avoids sectarian division: Big Bear's "Only One" is the same God as the Christian God of Frieda Friesen and Louis Riel. As with The Blue Mountains of China, Wiebe's two subsequent novels confront traditional ways of thinking; in these cases, the

North American stereotypes of Indians, and the designation of Riel as insane.

The figures of Riel and Big Bear are not just religious leaders, but prophets or visionaries as well. W.J. Keith has noted the importance of "voice" in Wiebe's works and these two figures speak with the authority and vision only available to the prophet (Epic Fiction 9). Riel's description of the future Christian nation of the North-West, and Big Bear's prophetic forebodings of the disappearance of the Cree way of life dominate the two novels. In My Lovely Enemy a third, more important voice speaks: that of Christ. The voices of Big Bear and Riel are both aurally impressive and authoritative, but Christ's authority comes through a simple, nearly colloquial, voice when he approaches the protagonist Jacob Dyck. The voice of Christ in the novel -- and the novel as a whole -- presents a radical departure from traditional Mennonite escapism or suspicion of the physical realm. Christ affirms the dignity of human love and life, and the novel recognizes the affinities between spiritual and sexual love. This is not a radical break with the broader Christian literary tradition -- Dante, Donne, and Charles Williams have all stressed the affinities between spiritual and sexual love -- but this way of thinking has not been a part of Mennonite tradition, however. Thus, Wiebe seems to have moved away from a particularly Mennonite way of thinking to a broader Christian humanism. The question remains: will the Mennonite community go with

him or still accept him? Many Mennonites -- including ones who approved of his earlier novels -- have reacted negatively to My Lovely Enemy because of its descriptions of sex and what many perceived to be a condoning of an adulterous affair. However, it could also be described as his most spiritual novel in that it most completely shows the essence of Wiebe's Christian vision; the cultural basis of the faith is still there in Dyck's Mennonite upbringing -- with which he must struggle -- but that particular cultural manifestation is forgotten in the final pages where Dyck is turned nearly inside out in being shown the real meaning of Christian love.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Muppyism" is a acronym quite predictably derived from "Mennonite Urban Professional People". Liesel seems to have reached this state of existence well before it was recognized as a social phenomenon. See Emerson L. Leshner The Muppie Manual: The Mennonite Urban Professional's Handbook for Humility and Success. Intercourse, Penn.: Good Books, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> To call Wiebe a realist as many critics have done is inadequate in that it disregards the visionary quality of Wiebe's better work.

<sup>3</sup> During the 1960's some young people, including Mennonite young people, stressed the affinity between the Mennonites and the radical youth movement of the 1960's, because of their shared views on pacifism and a simple way of

life. Generally, Mennonites were uncomfortable with this comparison. David Waltner-Toews is one of these young Mennonites whose writing seems to be a mixture of traditional Mennonite and radical 1960's views. See, for example, his story, "Uncle Ed, the Mennonite Gorilla", in which Uncle Ed barricades himself in a Real Estate office to protest that firm's lack of low-cost housing and its support of nuclear projects. This action is in contrast to that of Samuel and John Reimer, whose actions never include civil disobedience, and who are trying more to change themselves and their community than change the world.

Patrick Friesen: The Shunning

Superficially, Peace Shall Destroy Many and Patrick Friesen's The Shunning appear to have fairly similar themes. They both deal with Mennonite intolerance and persecution in the past, and have a character who is destroyed by this intolerance. However, there are important differences between Rudy Wiebe's and Patrick Friesen's treatment of Mennonitism in their literary works, because they are writing from different standpoints in relation to the Mennonite faith. However critical Wiebe may be of Mennonite customs in Peace Shall Destroy Many, he is nevertheless remaining within the Mennonite religious community. In contrast, Friesen has broken ties with that community: religiously he has become an outsider. This position in relation to the Mennonite community gives Friesen a different view of the situation, and, presumably, a different reason for writing about Mennonites.

Like many writers who have left similar heritages, Friesen has found that he can neither totally leave the Mennonite community, nor fit into the larger outside community (Hillis 2). He still feels himself to be ethnically Mennonite, and he has returned to the Mennonite community by writing about it throughout his poetry. Patrick Friesen is not the first writer to leave a religious

community and then use that community for subject matter in subsequent works. However, not all writers look back on their communities in the same way. The American novelist Peter de Vries has found comic material in the Dutch Calvinist community he left as a young man. Among ex-Mennonites treatment of the abandoned community has varied. Gerald Friesen wrote The Flamethrowers in 1936, a bitter attack against Mennonite hypocrisy and narrowness. This would perhaps be the most expected literary treatment; bitterness would seem to logically lead to an attempt at exposé, as part of breaking away from the past. Two Canadian novelists, Paul Hiebert and Sandra Birdsell, are of Mennonite background, but make only passing reference to their heritage in their works. Friesen, however, does not seem primarily interested in exposé or condemnation; instead his work is an attempt to understand his heritage and explore it in an artistic fashion not that different from Wiebe's achievement in The Blue Mountains of China. He is in no way interested in anti-Mennonite propaganda.

It must be stressed that Friesen has parted ways with the institutional Mennonite faith only, and not with the cultural dimensions of Mennonitism. He still considers himself a Mennonite ethnically (Hillis 2). He lives in the largest concentration of Russian Mennonites in the world in Winnipeg, and counts Mennonites among his close friends. The acknowledgements in his books are a litany of Russian Mennonite names. Neither have Mennonites ignored him; in

fact, he seems to receive at least as much attention as Rudy Wiebe. For example, the dramatic presentation of The Shunning was deemed worthy of three articles in The Mennonite Mirror -- a Rudy Wiebe novel receives one. As one who has left the flock of the faithful, Friesen seems to come in for less chastisement than Rudy Wiebe, as a certain amount of rebelliousness and criticism of the Mennonite community seems to be expected. By leaving the community Friesen has achieved a degree of freedom beyond that of writers who have remained religiously Mennonite (Tiessen 19). His perception and understanding of the community may have been heightened as well by his external perspective.

To date, Friesen's major piece of work has been The Shunning which was published as a series of poems and short prose pieces forming one narrative whole in <sup>1980</sup> 1981. In 1985 Friesen reworked the poem into a play which was performed by the Prairie Theatre Exchange in Winnipeg and in various smaller Manitoba communities. Friesen has published three collections of poetry, one of which, Unearthly Horses, is described as the second part of the trilogy begun in The Shunning. However, Unearthly Horses lacks the narrative unity of the earlier work, which had seemed complete in itself. For that reason and the fact that The Shunning most clearly shows Friesen working with the Mennonite tradition I will try to restrict my comments in this chapter to that work. However, The Shunning is not representative of Friesen's work; he himself has described it as more objective

and less personal than any of his other work (Reimer and Tiessen, "The Poetry and Distemper" 252).

The Shunning is the story of two Mennonite brothers, Peter and Johannes Neufeld, set in early twentieth century rural Manitoba. Part I focuses on Peter, the older brother, who is ostracized by the church for his liberal views and commits suicide at a fairly young age. Part II follows the life of Johann after the death of Peter; he lives to an old age and dies a "natural" death in an old age <sup>hospital</sup> home<sup>1</sup>. The story, or stories, are told through a multitude of voices, Peter and Johann's own, Johann's daughter Anna's, Peter's wife Helena, and the diary entries of the midwife Mrs. Hiebert and Dr. Blanchard.

The title The Shunning is a reference to part of a formal disciplinary action traditionally used in some Mennonite churches, and most frequently referred to as "The Ban". In "The Ban" a member of the Mennonite community who has lapsed either doctrinally or ethically, and refuses to repent, is both excommunicated and avoided by all members of the church. They are not to associate with him in any way unless there is dire need. The purpose of "The Ban" was to punish the offending and member and bring him back to the church, and also to maintain purity in the church. In its more extreme forms it was expected that even wife and family avoid the banned member (The Mennonite Encyclopedia 1: 219-221). This is the degree of chastisement we see in Friesen's book. Because Peter refuses to believe that there could "be



such a place as Hell, not with a loving God" (30), he is "banned" by the church, and the elder Loewen instructs his wife to even avoid his bed (30). Instead of bringing Peter back to the fold, the discipline leads eventually to his suicide. The failure of Mennonites to love is explicit; the church which was supposed to reflect the forgiving love of Christ has instead become a disciplinary watchdog. In a review of The Shunning Mavis Reimer remembers a comment Friesen had made earlier: "he had often thought, while growing up, that the Mennonite conception of God was of a searchlight in a concentration camp, a light that roved over the darkness seeking out evidence of missteps and errors" (10). The Mennonites we see in The Shunning seem to have forgotten that the new covenant in Christ was supposed to replace the legalism of the Old Testament. It is a New Testament love that Peter believes in:

if I could find a love  
 that grabs Loewen by his collar and shakes him  
 awake look again look  
 with eyes open see me hands touch at least  
 at last a love that sloughs the flesh  
 and we are reborn in Christ loving man

Peter's problem with the church goes further than his resistance to the idea of Hell. His differing view and refusal to change that view is seen by his fellow church members as evidence of pride. Peter asserts independent thought; he is one who appreciates individuality in a community where conformity and unity are expected. His niece

Anna remembers: "Uncle Peter left people alone and he wanted to be left alone" (22). Even before the formal implementation of "The Ban" this sets him apart from the community. Peter is also set apart by his temper and what may be called an imaginative or even poetic inclination. As a boy he describes red-winged blackbirds as birds that "bleed but never die"(19) and their creek is "a silver S/a brand placed on earth by God"(19). To Johann he often seems "der blaue Engel"(22), and his wife Helena "often thought Peter was not meant for this world"(51). Friesen comes very close to presenting Peter as the post-romantic archetypal artist figure, one who rebels and separates himself from society and is hopelessly misunderstood. Such a concept runs contrary to traditional Mennonite views of the individual, and even the individual artist and his relationship to the community.

Peter in fact becomes a martyr figure, one who dies in trying to show the Mennonites of his time and place a better way. The description of his death at times echoes the scriptural account of Christ's crucifixion.

a choir of soldiers sings shoulder to shoulder  
 he smells rope at his wrists  
 the approaching rain

He asks God to forgive those who have done this to him:

forgive them he whispers  
 limp hair and sweating

forgive them he says  
(41)

However, Peter is an ineffectual martyr, for, unlike the death of Christ or the martyr figures in The Blue Mountains of China, his death changes nothing. The community goes on as before, confirmed in their opinion that Peter was a fallen man.

The only person Peter's death seems to change is his wife Helena. By participating in the shunning of Peter she had shown her solidarity with the community, and had also hoped to be preserving her own salvation. Only after his suicide does she realize that she along with everyone else has acted in an un-Christian way.

And I lived in shame for many years.  
Maybe still. A shame that I had not  
behaved in a truly Christian way, in a  
human way, and that Peter had known and  
despaired for me. (51)

The community that Helena had hoped to remain a part of by participating in the shunning, begins to informally shun her after the suicide; again the Mennonite community fails to show compassion for the individual.

When he died something changed. They  
tried to comfort me by saying I had done  
what was best, that I had done the best  
I could for him. But very quickly they  
avoided me. Fewer and fewer women  
talked to me or, if they did, only in  
passing about other things. They still  
said I had done God's will, but now I  
think they feared me. I felt sometimes  
like a witch. (51)

Friesen has done more than show the mean narrowness of a certain Mennonite community in early twentieth century Manitoba. Even more than Peace Shall Destroy Many, the first part of his book is an attempt to show the universal problem of the tension between individual and community. This tension has always been a problem in religious communities in particular; Protestantism was supposed to do away with the mediating institution of the church between God and the believer, but nearly all Protestant churches have tried to limit the freedom of individual belief and response to God. Many other men like Peter Neufeld have been, and still are, excluded -- either formally or informally -- from the community because of an independence of thought or practice. The first part of The Shunning explores the tragedy which can result from such an approach to the individual believer.

The second part of The Shunning, dealing with Peter's younger brother, Johann Neufeld, is a contrast to the story of Peter rather than a continuation of it. Friesen balances the first part by here focusing on the possible beauty of a rural Mennonite community. It is the story of an unexceptional Mennonite farmer, one who lives his long life simply, with few conflicts. He is one of those "quiet ones who live their faith so you never really notice until they're dead"(87). It is doubtful whether this section can be referred to as a story as there seems to be no direction to it. It is not that things do not happen -- there is a fire,

the death of Loewen, the death of one wife and marriage to another -- but these events are not shaped in the way that life-cum-art usually is. Appropriately entitled "Time Happens", it is a collection of impressions gathered from a lifetime.

Friesen has said that

the most important part of the book is the second half, not the first. ...The scenes of the shunning are insignificant. To me the centre of that book is this guy and his wife swimming in a pond together and scaring the cows. All these physical and erotic things that I didn't know Mennonites ever did" (Reimer and Tiessen, "The Poetry and Distemper" 250).

As such the poetry of Part II is a celebration of the commonplace, what Hilde Tiessen has called "the aestheticization of the mundane" (25). What is familiar and taken for granted is seen through new eyes which recognize the aesthetic value of all life and all things. Patrick Friesen describes as a breakthrough the recognition that a poet could use a common word like railroad in a poem (Reimer and Tiessen, "The Poetry and Distemper" 245). This is done, not through excessive adjectival hyperbole, but through simple poetry which focuses on the ignored detail. It is an act of noticing:

How she bunches freshly-cut gladioli in one quick hand and thrusts them into a pitcher. Her familiar fingers spreading the long stalks fluffing petals open.

How she walks straight as a hollyhock a milk-pail in each hand.

How she curves her head forward and to  
one side to watch the young one suck.

How like a girl she looks even though  
she is young. (59)

This sensibility is a legacy of Peter who could see the red-winged blackbird as the bird that "bleeds but never dies"; it is the application of a poetic or aesthetic sensibility to all areas of life.

The second part of The Shunning also continues the quest for an understanding of Mennonitism begun in the first section. After his shunning, Peter had thought: "if I could know each day of our 400 years/take them in hand and say this is what it is"(35). Johann, less insightful than Peter, can do no more in trying to put together what it all means. He lists people, images, places from the centuries of Mennonite history, many of which are familiar from The Blue Mountains of China:

*Anna's voice*

simlins cowshit fires  
horses wandering home through blizzards  
Toews or Reimer frozen in the sleigh  
grasshoppers in plagues  
those born on oceans those buried there  
steppes that father often talked of  
with their yellow waves of wheat  
the swamps of danzig where no armies could come  
whaling ships yes whaling ships  
and some of our people sailors  
horse and foot blade flame and iron  
those driven from home  
and there being bears in the mountains  
and soldiers in the countryside

(89)

These are the memories we come from , he says, but he can

only present not interpret them: "do you understand this? where we came from?/it all adds up/figure it out for yourself"(89). It is archaeological in the same way that much of Rudy Wiebe's writing is, but we are not assured by Friesen that it can altogether mean something. He asks "What do you want to know about Mennonites?" He then describes different types of Mennonites, from "those that went to Africa or Asia to save the souls of heathens" to "our businessmen. The sharp ones who pay their workers dirt"(87). As with the figures in Wiebe's The Blue Mountains of China, there is no one prototypical Mennonite.

Like The Blue Mountains of China and Al Reimer's My Harp is Turned to Mourning, the story in The Shunning is told through many voices. The reader is often uncertain at first about who is speaking. In early drafts the character speaking was named, but then Friesen "realized the voices were all the same voice...all aspects of the same being...and suddenly to separate them seemed arbitrary."(Friesen qtd. in Hillis 3). Unlike The Blue Mountains of China, the intended effect is not to present the story of a people, but rather to present the story of one man in one community. We see Peter and his shunning from many different perspectives, but even so we still cannot totally understand either him or his situation. The book ends with the first line from the well-known German hymn: "O dass ich tausend Zungen hätte" (99). The reader senses that even that number of voices would be insufficient to tell the story completely.

Friesen also returns to his Mennonite heritage through the use of Biblical typology. As in the novels of Rudy Wiebe, the naming of the characters alerts the reader to the Biblical parallels. Peter Neufeld is linked to Peter the disciple of Christ, who denied Christ three times before Christ's crucifixion (John 18). Peter Neufeld hears his rooster crow and knows "what must be done/ before it crows again" (36). He does not literally deny Christ, but goes on a rampage through the henhouse killing the hens and rooster with his bare hands. Presumably by killing the rooster he will not be reminded of his denial by its crow. During his killing spree he bellows "no" three times; then in the calm after the carnage: "from Johann's farm a cock crows/the sun will not be denied"(36). Like the Biblical Peter, Peter Neufeld is made aware of his denial by the crowing of the cock. With it he recognizes the futility and irony of attempting to deny the sun/son's rising. Peter, the disciple of Christ went on to become a martyr for the Christian faith; the description of Peter Neufeld's death later in the book suggests that Friesen considers him a martyr for the faith as well, in spite of his denial of Christ through suicide.

At this point I am prepared to argue that the use of Biblical typology is a distinctive feature of Mennonite literature. We will see it used again in Armin Wiebe's The Salvation of Yasch Siemens. Such usage is understandable considering the important place of the Bible in Mennonite



churches and homes. The technique is used to give a deeper resonance to the stories being told: the Biblical stories and the modern retellings become commentaries on each other.

Considering that The Shunning is largely confrontational in relation to the Mennonite community, it is surprising that it has not aroused more hostile reactions from Mennonites. The dramatic adaptation of the book was put on before largely Mennonite audiences in the towns of Altona and Steinbach in Manitoba, where audience reaction was favourable (Loewen, "Reflections on The Shunning" 9). Part of the explanation for this Mennonite reaction may be the historical distance between the setting of The Shunning and their own time. Whereas Peace Shall Destroy Many was about a community whose members could still be alive, and dealt explicitly with issues such as pacifism and conformity to the community, The Shunning deals with a community long past, and a custom which is perceived as no longer in use (Loewen "Reflections on The Shunning" 9). Mennonites' readers or audiences could soften the criticism of The Shunning in this way, and perhaps even feel good about their increased tolerance. Such a response to Friesen's book or play may be comfortable, but it does not do justice to the wider criticism which the book is making. In a comment made in a television interview, Friesen has suggested that "shunning" still goes on today, but in a subtler form (Loewen "Reflections on The Shunning" 9). Ruth Vogt rhetorically

asks in a review of the play

Is this drama about us, modern urban  
Mennonites living comfortably in the city  
in the second half of the twentieth  
century? What do we do with the  
independent thinkers in our community?  
(11)

Many Mennonite congregations are still uncertain about what to do with the independent or radical thinker: to ignore him is often the easiest way out (Loewen "Reflections on The Shunning" 9). I sense that Friesen considers himself to be one of these independent thinkers who has been unofficially shunned by the Mennonite community. To what degree is The Shunning autobiographical, outlining his own search for religious truth, and his own struggle with the Mennonite church? It is important to recognize that Friesen is a spiritual poet (Reimer and Tiessen 246); his quarrel with Mennonitism is not that it is a spiritual religion, but the behaviour which sometimes results from that faith. Like Wiebe he has argued that Mennonites have replaced spirituality with materialism (Hillis 2). His Wiebe-like criticism of the church shows that Friesen has not entirely divorced himself from the religious community of his parents; he still cares enough to try to correct it.

Notes

<sup>1</sup>The title The Shunning refers only to the first half of the book. The title was suggested by the publisher because it played up the more sensational aspects of the book, and does not accurately reflect the focus of it. (see Friesen in Reimer and Tiessen, 250)

Armin Wiebe: The Salvation of Yasch Siemens

Published in 1984, The Salvation of Yasch Siemens is a significant departure from the tone set by Rudy Wiebe's novels, and Friesen's The Shunning. It shows a certain comfortable ease with the Mennonite tradition and community which was absent from the probing works discussed above. Like Peace Shall Destroy Many it is a bildungsroman about a young male Mennonite growing up, but unlike Thom Wiens, Yasch Siemens is not particularly meditative or concerned with deeper problems of the Mennonite tradition. While Thom Wiens in Peace Shall Destroy Many moves from innocent acceptance to questioning to a redefined acceptance of the Mennonite faith, Yasch Siemens moves from comfortable indifference to a comfortable acceptance. He experiences his share of angst, but it is usually concerned with girls rather than with moral or doctrinal dilemmas. It is not that Yasch Siemens is a flippant book -- it is spiritual in a sense far beyond Peace Shall Destroy Many. However, it is a natural, undogmatic spirituality which is in harmony with the rollicking humour of the novel rather than opposed to it.

The Salvation of Yasch Siemens is a somewhat picaresque novel consisting of a series of incidents in the life of Yasch Siemens from age 15 to age 32. Some of the chapters are more like short stories in that they seem to be

complete in themselves, and do not figure in the central story line concerning the relationship of Yasch and Oata Needarp<sup>1</sup>. For instance, the first chapter is the story of adolescent Yasch and Shups Stoezs climbing the TV tower for their first experience of adolescent love. Shups plays no further part in the novel, and the chapter ends with a shimmering coda suitable for a short story ending. Both this chapter and the similarly unconnected Chapter 2 play an important part in establishing the distinctly rural Mennonite setting of the novel. The setting is specifically the vegetable area of southern Manitoba near the U.S. border. Only with Chapter 3 does the main story line of Yasch and Oata begin. Yasch at 23 is romantically obsessed with willow-slender 15 year-old Sadie Nickel who is the daughter of Yasch's employer Ha Ha Nickel. However, Yasch ends up working for Nobah Naze Needarp, whose daughter Oata weighs two hundred pounds. With the help of some chokecherry wine and the lure of her father's land Oata seduces Yasch.

Wiebe treats the love of Yasch and Oata in a humorous way and he avoids the sentimental romanticism of much literature: Yasch and Oata grow to love each other and live a comfortable life in spite of Yasch's suspect motivation in marrying her. The most exceptional feature of the novel is Armin Wiebe's success in capturing the humour and vigour of the rural Russian Mennonite community. In doing so he has returned to the ethnic humour which characterizes the small amount of secular Mennonite literature written in Plautdietsch, mostly

the work of Arnold Dyck. Much of the humour depends on manipulation of language, as indicated by Wiebe's quotation from Josef Skvorecky for his epigraph to the novel:

My God, how we adored this bugging up  
of our lovely language for we felt that  
all languages were lifeless if not  
buggered up a little.<sup>2</sup>

Wiebe makes occasional use of Plautdietsch expressions and tries to imitate the verbal construction of that language in the English in which Yasch and his neighbours think and speak. James C. Juhnke suggests that there is something naturally "gutteral", "earthy", and "humorous", about Plautdietsch (20). The imitation of Plautdietsch grammatical construction, or oversetting as Madeline Redekop refers to it (98), is similar to that used by Rudy Wiebe with the character Frieda Friesen. However, in The Salvation of Yasch Siemens it is used more extensively and for a more obviously comic effect. At one point Oata explains to a store clerk: "He wants Sunday suit to buy so he doesn't look like a schludenz when he to church goes" (108). Wiebe never uses Plautdietsch expressions and constructions to the point that the meaning is obscured for the non-Mennonite reader; merely the flavour of Plautdietsch is brought across. Redekop has argued that oversetting actually helps draw the outsider into the Mennonite world (102). Wiebe's portrayal of Yasch and Oata's way of speaking is not a satire of rural Russian Mennonites, but more a celebration and a reveling in their way of speaking and

acting.

This attitude towards the language of the Flat Germans -- as Yasch usually refers to his people -- is typical of the novel as a whole. The novel is a reaffirmation of traditional Mennonite social and cultural values. It is the land, the church and the family which are important for the mature Yasch at the end of the novel. At first he only wants land and a girl, but that girl brings about a family and Yasch slowly achieves a comfortable spirituality within the church. He comes to accept the ways of the fathers. The novel is an unsentimental celebration of a particularly ethnic and rural way of life. As in the second part of Friesen's The Shunning, the aesthetic potential of the commonplace is recognized. Armin Wiebe is "dislocating the functional" by using Plautdietsch and referring to a "fly-clapper" made from an old piece of tire in a literary work: it is an artistic move similar to the revolution which took place when the Mennonite quilt was taken off the bed and hung on the wall for decoration (Tiessen 22-23).

Wiebe never refers to the people in the novel as Mennonites, but always as Flat Germans; however, even this designation has a religious connotation. A Flat German has been given a religious heritage at birth, but he can "learn (himself) away from the schmallen Lebensweg - even so far as the United Church!" (35). The Russian Mennonite community in which Yasch lives does not look much beyond its own bounds. Those outside the community are regarded with some wonder and

suspicion. They shake their heads at a Flat German who has married an English girl and "doesn't make her weed beets in the summer"(25). An American woman whom Yasch sees at the rightmaker's is depicted in much the same way that Rudy Wiebe depicted the schoolteacher Razia Tantamount in Peace Shall Destroy Many. She is set apart by her makeup and way of dressing:

a black-haired, tall woman with a fur jacket over her black dress. Her lips and fingernails are red like Schuzzel Schroeder's new pig barn and she is smoking with a long thin holder a cigarette. (36)

Yasch's mother goes to Knibble Thiessen, a Flat German rightmaker, rather than to a doctor with her sore back.

Yasch explains:

You see, people go to the knibbler because a rightmaker isn't a high person like a doctor. A doctor is learned so high that people are scared and you have to talk English - sometimes to a Catholic yet. (35)

Yasch's community is still very church-centred; it is the focus of both their religious and social lives, as it traditionally has been for all Mennonite communities (Epp, Mennonites in Canada 237). Even New Year's Eve is spent in church. Religiously, they are a strange mixture of traditional Mennonitism and twentieth century North American evangelical fundamentalism. At Oata's father's funeral they



sing "Nun Danket Aller Gott" in German (83), but they listen to "The Back to the Bible Hour" and have Tent Crusades.

Traditional Mennonite religious tenets like pacifism are not raised at all. The extent of religious discipline shown is Hova Jake's brummtupp escapade where he goes around making fun of those who have stayed home from church New Year's Eve.

Although the community is not presented in as negative light as those in Peace Shall Destroy Many and The Shunning, it is not a perfect little world. Peter Block finds his equivalent in Forscha Friesen, the hypocritical Sunday School superintendant. As a child Forscha had bullied the smaller children, and particularly Emmanuel, a young boy who comes to Gutenthal from Mexico. Forscha continues his malicious ways, but more subtly, as an adult. Unlike Peace Shall Destroy Many, there is no deeper probing of this sort of hypocrisy. Forscha is presented as an individual instance of hypocrisy without motivation or reason, rather than as a product of the Mennonite past and community. It is a much simpler world than Deacon Block's community, one where good and evil can coexist without raising alarming questions.

Unlike the Mennonite works already discussed, there is little focus on Mennonite covenant memory in The Salvation of Yasch Siemens. The cultural baggage of the past is evident in the way Yasch and his neighbours live -- these could be nothing but Russian Mennonites. However, the common Russian experience only comes out in the Brummtupp section where one of the boys dresses up as the Czar and another as a Communist soldier in an

impromptu play. A heavy consciousness of a terror-marked history would not have been appropriate in a comic novel, but we cannot be certain of whether the covenant memory is excluded because Yasch Siemens is a comic novel, or whether it is a comic novel because the generation of the author and Yasch himself lack this covenant memory of suffering.

However, much of the novel is about the turning away from an acquired North American way of life and sensibility to the traditional Mennonite values. Like Dennis Willms in The Blue Mountains of China, many of Yasch's neighbours have been very successful. They have large farms with John Deere 4010 tractors and satellite TV dishes. Yasch wants no part of this rampant materialism; he is content with a black and white TV without a satellite dish, and most importantly with his small piece of land.

Sure, Yasch Siemens isn't a bigshot farmer like the others, but it's not so bad really. With only a half-section I can really farm it, and I don't think I have any more wild oats and mustard than the neighbors who use all that Avadex BW and Hoe-grass stuff they show sliding on a curling rink on TV. . . . Doft sometimes wants to know how come he can't have one of those games that you play with the TV like the neighbors' boys have but I just laugh and say that while those guys are playing with themselves on TV he can play with their girlfriends. (165)

The attitude toward Mennonite materialism is not that different from that which we find in The Blue Mountains of China; Yasch merely has simpler ways than Samuel or John

Reimer of showing his non-conformity.

The novel also suggests a move away from adopted American fundamentalist practices back to traditional Mennonite spirituality. This should not be mistaken for the attempts to recapture the Anabaptist Vision which we saw in Rudy Wiebe's novels: Hova Jake is resurrecting a very particular cultural incarnation of that Anabaptist Vision. In the second chapter of the novel, Hova Jake reintroduces the brummtupp to the Mennonite community during the New Year's Eve church service. A brummtupp is a crude musical instrument made from leather-covered barrel with a string of horsetail sticking out of the middle. Hova Jake had learned about the brummtupp from his grandfather:

all about the olden days his grandfather  
tells him, how it was with the Flat  
Germans long ago in Russland and  
Dietschlaund and Hullaund"(16)

His grandfather had also told him that "the Flat Germans used to dance, too, until some States preachers came to say that it was wrong"(17).

On New Year's Eve, or Sylvesterabend, Hova Jake, Yasch -- who is dressed as a girl -- and a few others, skip church to play the brummtupp at people's houses. Hova Jake explains to them what he learned from his grandfather:

You go around to people's houses. You  
get dressed up like on Halloween and go  
around with the brummtupp and sing a  
song and do a bit of dummheit (20).

Hova Jake and the rest go to a few houses and then end up at the church, where the service is already under way. There they interrupt Preacher Janzen - the American preacher who always uses "two times as many words as he needs to say something" (27) -- and then put on a short unannounced play about Mennonite history, the brummtupp going all the time. At the end of the play Hova Jake begins singing "Joyful, joyful we adore thee,", very quietly to the beat of the brummtupp. After a few verses the congregation joins in:

And we sing it louder each time, but  
 even when I think everybody in the  
 church is singing full blast the  
 brummtupp is still keeping the beat for  
 the song and you can hear it flowing  
 through your bones, through everybody's  
 bones, up the walls, back and forth, up  
 and down, and it seems almost like the  
 earth and sky are joined or something.  
 I don't know, I can't say for sure, I  
 mean I am there, but well, I just feel  
 all connected up with everything. (30)

Through a forgotten Flat German secular custom Hova Jake brings some new spirit into the Gutenthal church. It is both a return to tradition, and a transformation of that tradition into something more spiritual. It is not merely reactionary; the return is made with new vigour and insight. The presentation of a return to traditional values is done with such life and humour that there is never the sense that Wiebe is preaching, or being obviously didactic. Yet Wiebe is being didactic, in the same way that Arnold Dyck was in

his Koop and Bua stories. Al Reimer makes this comment on those stories' didacticism: "One gets the impression from these sketches that Dyck thought of himself as a kind of sly and unobtrusive teacher to his people" ("The Creation of Arnold Dyck" 259). The same can be said of Armin Wiebe's treatment of tradition in The Salvation of Yasch Siemens.

It must not be forgotten that it is the salvation of Yasch which the novel is all about. It is not simply the story of his religious salvation, but also his monetary and social salvation. However, these different salvations are closely related. With his marriage to Oata, Yasch settles down into a stable church and family life. As a youth Yasch never seems to seriously consider his faith or his church: it is merely an inherited part of being Flat German. He went to "Sunday Night Christian Endeavors" because

that was where the action was, and the girls would sit on the choir loft benches and their skirts would pull up a little over the knees and a guy could feel right happy to be in the church even if the children's story was just a little bit young and the gospel message was always too long. (62)

He stops going to Sunday Night Christian Endeavors because they start singing cantatas instead of country songs (63), but Oata makes him start going again (119). The second time back, Forscha Friesen, who is leading the service, announces that Yasch will give a testimony in two weeks time. The

prospect of talking about his religious life makes Yasch think about the church and his faith, and leads to his recollection of the boy Emmanuel who came from Mexico.

Yasch must consider why he goes to church. It is because Oata makes him, but that makes Yasch wonder why she wants to go. He decides that she wants to belong to something, in the same way that he wanted to belong to a baseball team. The community is as important as the faith which is its basis. Yasch decides that Oata is right about the importance of the community of the church.

I mean, something Oata must know about what to people happens when they can't be part of things, because, that's why her Muttachi in the mental home is.  
(122)

As with Peter Neufeld in The Shunning, separation from the community is devastating for someone who does not fit in; the traditional emphasis on community in Mennonitism rather than the individual makes any separation from that community even more damaging.

Yasch knows how to go about giving the testimony which is required of him; he has seen others do it and "could say something like that and it would almost be true"(124). He is frightened because he has noticed that when people give a testimony it is as if they "were undressing for everybody to see" (133). He realizes that it does not really matter what he says, as long as he goes up there and says something, but when he gets on the pulpit the words come naturally and

he feels good about them:

Then I start to testify. And when I hear my shtimm going through the loudspeakers it makes me feel hartsoft good. It makes me feel strong like a giant or Samson. And the heat bulb from in the ceiling burns down on the Bible. But I don't even look it on. I don't even open to the ribbon page where on some paper my testimony is written down. I just tell the story and everybody listens. I tell it in Flat German. I tell it in English. I even tell some of it in High German. But mostly it is die gute language all mixed up. (144)

Yasch is literally speaking in tongues; his "tongue is a flame" (144) in a very humorous pentecostal experience. As with the brummtupp experience, the humour in this section makes the religious experience described much more comfortable for the reader. While testifying, Yasch has a vision of a boy "throwing his ball in the air" (144). The boy is Emmanuel, whom Yasch has been thinking about ever since Forscha asked him to give a testimony.

Yasch's memories of Emmanuel are scattered through two chapters of the novel; as a whole they are a retelling of Christ's time on earth, his teaching and crucifixion. The relationship of the Emmanuel story to the Christian gospel can be fruitfully compared to R. Wiebe's echoing of the Biblical Samuel story in the chapter "The Calling of Samuel U. Reimer". W.J. Keith described that chapter as a "Biblical parallel-cum-parody which succeeds in being humorous and serious at the same time" (Keith Epic Fiction 56). After

Emmanuel arrives from Mexico he quickly acquires a group of followers which includes Yasch. This group plays many different games, but most importantly Emmanuel gets them to play baseball together. The popularity of Emmanuel and the introduction of baseball infuriate Forscha Friesen who quickly comes to lead a group of kids opposing Emmanuel. Forscha and his gang are obviously a parallel group to the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They tease and harass Emmanuel who very patiently ignores them. While Yasch is giving his testimony he remembers the climax of the Emmanuel story. Emmanuel and his disciples had met for a secret picnic, which is going to become their last supper. Judy, the Judas figure among his disciples, has betrayed him by letting Forscha know about the picnic. Forscha's gang interrupt the wiener roast, tie Emmanuel up and sexually molest him. They also force the disciples of Emmanuel to spit in his face and touch his genitals. With the climax of the Emmanuel story, Yasch's testimony ends:

Then my tongue is cold. My jaws still move like I'm trying to tell something. But no shtimm comes out. Then it slowly seepers into my head what I'm still trying to say, how it really was in my pants that day and I look at Forscha Friesen and I don't want to hammer any more nails, not even into myself. (148)

Has Yasch merely thought about that past story while giving the testimonial, or has he told it to the congregation as well?

Whether spoken or not, the story of Emmanuel is Yasch's



real testimony, and we suspect Armin Wiebe's as well, since Yasch seems unaware of the Christ-Emmanuel parallel. The story cuts two ways, for it is both a retelling of the gospel, and an indictment of people like Forscha Friesen. At times the parallels are embarrassingly obvious and frivolous, and this may be the one part of the book where Wiebe makes the reader feel uncomfortable with Mennonite religious sentiments. However, much more unsettling is the description of the assault on Emmanuel. The scene stands out in stark contrast because of the comic nature of most of the book. Like the depiction of Peter Block or the shunning of Peter Neufeld the incident could be perceived by Mennonite readers as an exposure of "dirty laundry". Wiebe seems to be saying that hypocrites like Forscha could be found not only in a Mennonite community, but in positions of importance in the Mennonite church. Because Forscha totally lacks depth, there is no prospect that he might be changed - a possibility which always exists for the more complex and more sympathetic character of Peter Block. To imagine Yasch and Forscha continuing to sit next to each other in the Gutenthal church after the testimonial is a bleak scenario. However, the comic nature of the novel and the functional necessity of a sinister character lead us to overlook the blot which Forscha puts on the Gutenthal Mennonite community.

After his testimonial, Yasch settles down to a quiet life in the church. He is never asked to do another testimonial. Near the end Yasch admits:

I guess you could say that I'm one of the still ones in the land....I'm a still one in church, too. Sure, me and Oata go to church every Sunday like most others here. It's a good place to rest after a week's hard work. (168)

Significantly, Yasch gives up ball-playing when he joins the church<sup>3</sup>. Throughout the novel the cooperative aspect of baseball has been a metaphor for religious and social communion. Emmanuel brought baseball to the Gutenthal schoolyard. Yasch recognized that the community of the church was important for Oata in the same way the baseball team was important for him. This religious community cannot be separated from the relationship of a man and a woman where the ball-playing image is used as well. Before he married Oata, Yasch had wanted to play catch with Sadie Nickel, and he ends their relationship by giving her his glove. After he has succumbed to Oata he reflects:

For sure, it's no trouble to play catch with yourself. Just throw the ball straight up and it falls always right in your glove back. And in your head you can dream that such a good ball player you are. And you never miss because even if you throw a curve you know how it's coming for you heaved it yourself. And you can play catch with yourself anytime you feel like it because you are always ready and you don't have to wait for nobody to find their gloves or their baseball caps. And you can play catch with yourself any place, even on the field on the tractor by holding the steer between your knees. But it gets kind of lonesome and one day you think this is no way to raise a family and you start to look for someone to play catch with even if it means that you only can

play catch when the other person wants to play, too. And then you can't control the game so easy no more because the other person sometimes misses your best pitch, or throws you back a wild one that smashes a window. But the worst is when you are really hot about the game but the other person doesn't feel like it and so throws the ball that it doesn't to you all the way come. But it is better than catch all by yourself.  
(75-76)

Unlike Thom Wiens, Yasch recognizes and accepts the importance of communion, whether it be sexual or religious. But Yasch never considers the predicament of someone like Peter Neufeld in The Shunning who is forced out of the community, or someone who cannot fit in.

Will any community do, or is it a specifically Mennonite one which Yasch needs? I would argue that for Yasch the only possible community is the one which he has inherited, one bound by the traditions of the fathers. He is hopelessly out of place in the non-Mennonite world. When he and Oata go to Winnipeg to pick up Ha Ha Nickel's honey wagon more than the stock comedy of "country bumpkin goes to the city" is involved: Yasch is simply out of his element in an unnatural world of department stores, stripteases and pretentious restaurants. We do not laugh so much at Yasch as at the crazy city where they call undercooked cow meat "Filet Mignon"(107) and bar patrons indifferently watch near-naked women dance (112) because we are seeing it through Yasch's eyes. Wiebe is not "blasting" non-Mennonite society here, for a person from Winnipeg would find Yasch's community as

odd as Yasch finds the city. It is the universal conflict between two drastically different communities, and between the familiar and the unfamiliar ways of life. The folly of becoming involved in the world outside the Mennonite community is shown in the final chapter where a few Gutenthalers go off to Ottawa to support a supposedly Flat German political contender. They end up as the dupes of a sharp huckster.

What Armin Wiebe has achieved in The Salvation of Yasch Siemens shows the limitations of Paul's model for Mennonite literature. He combines stages one and three by showing a concern for the preservation of the community and tradition while nevertheless pushing beyond ethnic boundaries in showing the comic life common to all insular communities. We are not invited to consider any conflict between the Mennonite individual and his tradition. The result is a work largely lacking in self-consciousness or cultural embarrassment. He seems to assume a Mennonite community can be a literary subject, and does not feel called upon to explain Mennonite ways or local details. This should be compared to Rudy Wiebe's inclusion of an explanatory preface "explaining" Mennonites in Peace Shall Destroy Many. I suspect that this difference between the two first novels is mainly because of the changes which took place in the twenty years which separated them. Canadians were not as accustomed to the concept of multiculturalism in 1962 as they are now: ethnic literature was not an accepted part of the

literary scene. Secondly, a Mennonite writer in 1962 was not familiar with works about Mennonites in English. In this way -- among many others -- Rudy Wiebe was important in breaking ground for later Mennonite writers like Friesen and Armin Wiebe. The unexplained details in The Salvation of Yasch Siemens do not hinder the outsider's reading, but give a tone of authenticity to the work. As non-Mennonite readers we can quietly go along for the ride; we encounter first a foreign community, slowly become accustomed to it, and eventually recognize that the community and Yasch's experiences are not all that different from our own.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>In fact, some of the chapters were published as short stories in periodicals such as Grain and Canadian Forum.

<sup>2</sup>This "buggering up" of the language is something of a tradition in North American ethnic humour of different kinds: in Jan Lieuwen's Sweat en Tears, the stories and poems are written in a mixture of English and Dutch commonly referred to as "Yankee Dutch". The language is an imitation of that spoken by some rural Dutch immigrants, and achieves its humour largely by having this vernacular language incongruously appear in a written and literary form.

<sup>3</sup>Yasch is not the first Manitoba Mennonite to find baseball and church membership incompatible. In the 1930's Mennonite congregations known as Kleine Gemeinde, ruled that baseball was a suitable activity for children and youths, but that a person must give up baseball when he became a church member (Epp, Mennonites in Canada 422).

## Conclusion

Robert Kreider, an American Mennonite critic has suggested that The Salvation of Yasch Siemens may be the Mennonite novel of this generation (29). This enthusiasm for an enjoyable book is understandable, but is a disservice to the work of Rudy Wiebe, Sara Stambaugh and Al Reimer. Even other bildungsromanen like Peace Shall Destroy Many or I Hear the Reaper's Song -- let alone The Blue Mountains of China -- are attempting something quite different from Armin Wiebe's book. It is impossible, or at best very limiting, to talk about the Mennonite novel or even the Mennonite novel of a generation. Such a concept suffocates literary production by presupposing that there is only one story to tell about Mennonites and only one way to tell it. If The Blue Mountains of China were unanimously acclaimed to be the Mennonite novel would writers to follow be left to more limited goals like the novel about Mennonite experiences in Mexico? No one forces a similar complex upon British writers by talking about the English novel, and one even hears very little about the elusive "great American novel" now.

Once again, a comparison to the Bible may be useful in

considering the state of Mennonite literature. If Peace Shall Destroy Many corresponds to the prophetic chastisement of Isaiah and The Blue Mountains of China the book of Exodus, is there not still room for Yasch Siemens as The Song of Songs? It has all the humour, love and playful spirituality of that book of scripture. After all, Oata telling Yasch that his kiss sounded like a "cow pulling its foot out of the mud" is not all that different from the lover telling his beloved: "Thy nose is like a tower of Lebanon overlooking Damascus"(VII, 4). Love can be sincere and comic at the same time. No one would try to compare Exodus and The Song of Songs -- they are quite obviously concerned with different parts of Old Testament Judaic existence. Similarly there is room for The Blue Mountains of China, Yasch Siemens, and many other works in the canon of Mennonite fiction.

However, even such an opening up of the Mennonite literary canon will not ensure that a definable Mennonite literature will continue in Canada. In fact, cultural developments like literature will open up the Mennonite community to the society around it, thereby eroding the cultural and religious distinctiveness of Mennonitism. Will the cultural memory we see in the Blue Mountains of China and The Salvation of Yasch Siemens still have a natural hold on the next generation of Mennonite writers? A danger is that it may be unnaturally maintained or retrieved by writers who put on "Mennonite hats" to write

because to write about Mennonites guarantees a target audience in places like Steinbach, Manitoba and Coaldale, Alberta. In some ways it can be an advantage to be ethnic (Kraybill). It may be that Mennonite literature as a whole has already moved through the three modes described by Pauls, and that Wiebe's My Lovely Enemy indicates a new and important direction for Mennonite writers. In my reference to the advantage of a "Mennonite Hat" I am not suggesting that any of the writers discussed in this paper misused or exaggerated their ethnicity; I am merely pointing it out as a possible danger. Rudy Wiebe, Patrick Friesen and Armin Wiebe all write from an authentic and unavoidable religious and ethnic experience; for them to ignore their heritage would be artistically dishonest, for it has provided for them a rich spiritual and cultural basis for their writing, an area of subject matter which through its very uniqueness achieves a wider importance and reaffirms the commonality of all human experience.



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