TO WRITE OR TO BELONG: THE DILEMMA OF
CANADIAN MENNONITE STORY-TELLERS

A Thesis Submitted to the College of
Graduate Studies and Research
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of English
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon

By
Edna Froese
Fall 1996

©Copyright Edna Froese, 1996. All rights reserved.
The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author’s permission.

L’auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

L’auteur conserve la propriété du droit d’auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-23987-X
UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN

College of Graduate Studies and Research

SUMMARY OF THE DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfilment

of the Requirements for the

DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

by

Edna Froese

Department of English

Fall 1996

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

Dr. L. Jaeck

Dean/Associate Dean/Dean’s Designate, Chair
College of Graduate Studies and Research

Dr. D. Parkinson

Graduate Chair, Department of English

Dr. D. Carpenter

Supervisor, Department of English

Dr. P. Denham

Department of English

Dr. L. Horne

Department of English

Dr. T. Regehr

Department of History

EXTERNAL EXAMINER:

Dr. Hildi F. Tiessen
Department of English
Conrad Grebel College
University of Waterloo
200 University Avenue W
Waterloo, Ontario
N2L 3G1
To Write or To Belong: The Dilemma of Canadian Mennonite Story-Tellers

Because Mennonite communities have traditionally valued religious conformity and ethnic solidarity above individual artistic expression, Mennonite writers and their readers have tended to view realistic story-telling as an act of revolt against the community. Criticism has, for the most part, also privileged writing above belonging.

My argument in this dissertation is that an historically informed awareness of the dialectic between self and community that is intrinsically part of Mennonite theology makes such an either/or reading of Mennonite narratives misleading and incomplete. Accordingly, Chapter One reviews the historical roots of Russian Mennonite communities in Canada and examines their understanding of the self in light of two views of the individual, Western modernism and more recent social constructionism. Using Weintraub's distinction between personality and individual and Lanham's distinction between rhetorical man and serious man, I discuss the nature of the dilemma faced by the Mennonite writer.

Chapters Two through Six examine, in roughly chronological order, the varicous narrative strategies that have allowed writers such as Arnold Dyck, Rudy Wiebe, Al Reimer, Anne Konrad, Armin Wiebe, Doug Reimer, Elizabeth Falk, and Magdalene Falk Redekop, to gain a voice within their own communities. Essentially all of these writers choose either to emphasize the ethnic component of Mennonite identity in order to defuse theological objections to the subversive act of writing, or to examine the theological component of Mennonite identity in order to adopt or extend the officially accepted act of prophetic utterance. Either way, Mennonite writers contribute to the continuance of Mennonite community even as they can be accused of
undermining it. They do not choose to write or to belong so much as they contribute to the shaping of what they belong to, since the community that once resisted artistic expression now needs that expression in order to forge a new and viable identity in a changing urban world.
In presenting this thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a Postgraduate degree from the University of Saskatchewan, I agree that the Libraries of this University may make it freely available for inspection. I further agree that permission for copying of this thesis in any manner, in whole or in part, for scholarly purposes may be granted by the professor or professors who supervised my thesis work or, in their absence, by the Head of the Department or the Dean of the College in which my thesis work was done. It is understood that any copying or publication or use of this thesis or parts thereof for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission. It is also understood that due recognition shall be given to me and to the University of Saskatchewan in any scholarly use which may be made of any material in my thesis.

Requests for permission to copy or to make other use of material in this thesis in whole or part should be addressed to:

Head of the Department of English
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 0W0
ABSTRACT

Because Mennonite communities have traditionally valued religious conformity and ethnic solidarity above individual artistic expression, Mennonite writers and their readers have tended to view realistic storytelling as an act of revolt against the community. Criticism has, for the most part, also privileged writing above belonging.

My argument in this dissertation is that an historically informed awareness of the dialectic between self and community that is intrinsically part of Mennonite theology makes such an either/or reading of Mennonite narratives misleading and incomplete. Accordingly, Chapter One reviews the historical roots of Russian Mennonite communities in Canada and examines their understanding of the self in light of two views of the individual, Western modernism and more recent social constructionism. Using Weintraub's distinction between personality and individual and Lanham's distinction between rhetorical man and serious man, I discuss the nature of the dilemma faced by the Mennonite writer.

Chapters Two through Six examine, in roughly chronological order, the various narrative strategies that have allowed writers such as Arnold Dyck, Rudy Wiebe, Al Reimer, Anne Konrad, Armin Wiebe, Doug Reimer, Elizabeth Falk, and Magdalene Falk Redekop, to gain a voice within their own communities. Essentially all of these writers choose either to emphasize the ethnic component of Mennonite identity in order to defuse theological objections to the subversive act of writing, or to examine the theological component of Mennonite identity in order to adopt or extend the officially accepted act of prophetic utterance.
Either way, Mennonite writers contribute to the continuance of Mennonite community even as they can be accused of undermining it. They do not choose to write or to belong so much as they contribute to the shaping of what they belong to, since the community that once resisted artistic expression now needs that expression in order to forge a new and viable identity in a changing urban world.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude, first of all, to my supervisor, Prof. David Carpenter, who gave generously and willingly of his time even during his leave of absence and his sabbatical year. Though we shared neither ethnic background nor religious convictions, he gave exactly the kind of assistance I needed. He had the gift of listening well before asking the shrewd questions that helped me clarify what I wanted to say. Despite the various delays in my three years of work on the dissertation, he spoke only words of encouragement and understanding instead of reproach. His corrections were made tactfully, but I soon learned the wisdom of his suggestions.

I am also indebted to the three gracious people, Dr. Susan Gingell, Dr. W.W. Slights, and Dr. David Parkinson, who served as chair of the graduate committee of the English Department during my seven-year sojourn as graduate student. All three gave understanding and support as I sought to balance the needs of my family with the demands of academia. Dr. Gingell especially gave continued friendship and occasional valuable advice even when she was no longer under any official obligation to do so.

I wish to offer sincere thanks to my advisory committee members, Dr. Paul Denham, Dr. Ted Regehr, and Dr. Lewis Horne for their thorough reading of my dissertation. I am especially grateful to Dr. Ted Regehr for his valuable suggestions in the initial stages of my research and his willingness to continue as committee member even during his sabbatical.

A special word of thanks is due to Dr. Hildi Tiessen, my external examiner, whose criticism on Mennonite literature I encountered at the same time that I first discovered the literature. Her work informed my early evaluation of Mennonite literature and motivated my continued interest. She became a role model for me, demonstrating the possibility of exercising critical judgment without losing touch with the Mennonite ethos.

Sincere thanks to the reference librarians of the University of Saskatchewan who cheerfully and efficiently responded to my unusual requests. A special word of gratitude goes to Victor Wiebe who lent me several valuable, hard-to-find books from his personal library, thereby giving me extra time for reading.

I am grateful to the College of Graduate Studies for three years of scholarship, and for the compassion with which they arranged for a necessary leave of absence from studies. I am particularly grateful for the year of funding supplied by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada in 1992-93.

Further thanks go to my colleagues and friends at St. Thomas More College for their warm understanding of the difficult balancing act between good teaching and dedicated graduate student work. Their encouragement was particularly appreciated during times of family crisis.

Finally, I wish to thank my husband Don and our sons Ken, Corin, and Darian, for their infinite patience and unfailing support, especially during those summer months of concentrated writing when my preoccupation and neglect of their needs would have merited reproof. They listened willingly, if sometimes uncomprehendingly, when I needed
to talk and they graciously forbore to ask questions when I needed to sulk in silence over temporary blocks to creativity.

A word of appreciation is also due to the wider Mennonite community of which I am a part. Numerous friends within Mennonite Central Committee and related churches have given me support. They have shown an eager interest in the discoveries I made about what it means to be Mennonite, even being willing to read early excerpts of this dissertation. To the editors of the Mennonite Brethren Herald I owe a particular word of gratitude, for it was their request, in 1990, that I write a lengthy review article on the recently published Liars and Rascals, and the Mennonite issues of New Quarterly Review and Prairie Fire that really began this dissertation.
Dedicated to the memory of my parents

John and Alice Voth

who, themselves conservative and uneducated Mennonites, nevertheless encouraged me to get the education I have now used to re-examine and embrace my heritage.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

PERMISSION TO USE ......................................................... i
ABSTRACT ................................................................. ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ...................................................... iv
DEDICATION ............................................................... vi
TABLE OF CONTENTS ....................................................... vii

INTRODUCTION: CHOOSING ONE OF TWO IMPOSSIBILITIES .......... 1

1. A GEMEINSCHAFT OF INDIVIDUALS ................................. 12
2. EVASION, IRONY, AND MEDIATION ................................. 45
3. POTENT PROPHETS AND IMPOTENT ARTISTS ..................... 83
4. BEING IN THE WORLD AS MENNONITE ............................. 110
5. THE SILENT IN THE LAND ........................................... 167
6. REQUIEM OR RECLAMATION? ....................................... 224

CONCLUSION: CONSTRUCTING A NEW GEMEINSCHAFT .............. 270

WORKS CITED .......................................................... 279

vii
INTRODUCTION

Choosing One of Two Impossibilities

The recent explosion in Mennonite writing in Canada\(^1\) raises two major critical issues: the construction of authorial self in relation to the engendering community, and the defining of religious identity through creative literature. Both of these issues become problems for Mennonite writers (and readers) because Mennonite communities have traditionally refused to adopt dominant Western conceptions of self and of religious faith.

In the first place, Western understanding of the author, that most articulate of individual selves, has generally posited an unresolvable tension between the individual and an unresponsive, or even oppressive, society. As Lionel Trilling summarized this self in his introduction to The Opposing Self, "The modern self . . . was born in a prison" (xi), and is "characterized by certain powers of indignant perception" of its cultural prison (x), which stands in need of redemption (xi). Whether

---

\(^1\) That something unusual is happening among Mennonites is indicated by the publication of two literary journals exclusively on Mennonite literature in 1990, a conference held on "Mennonite/s Writing in Canada" in 1990, and the publication, in 1989, of Liars and Rascals, a collection of Mennonite short stories. Hildi Froese Tiessen's introduction to The New Quarterly's Mennonite issue mentions a surprising number of recently published Mennonite authors, such as Patrick Friesen, Sara Stambaugh, Dallas Wiebe, Rudy Wiebe, David Waltner-Toews, Armin Wiebe, Andreas Schroeder, Mark Bazchmann, John Kooistra, Maurice Mierau, John Unrau, Fred Redekop, Lorraine Janzen, Anne Konrad, Elaine Driedger, Marjorie Toews, Di Brandt, Sarah Klassen, Rosemary Deckert Nixon, and Roma Quapp (The New Quarterly 10: 1 & 2 (Spring/Summer '90), 12).
described in the prophetic/religious terms of Romanticism (Shelley's poet as "legislator of the world"), or in the modernistic terminology of alienated, existential man in conflict with an increasingly technological, institutionalized society, the author (functioning often as a representative ideal human) has remained a unique outsider. His/her exercise of individual autonomy in choosing to be an author and thus following the perceived demands of aesthetic excellence, is worth any sacrifice of communal approval, or economic stability, or political conformity. Such a tension between creative individual and insensitive conformist society is most evident in the novel, described by Bernard Bergonzi as a genre most clearly dedicated to the celebration of individual freedom: "the novel is a historically conditioned form, the vehicle of a liberal ideology which exalted the individual and the individual apprehension of experience, and which in practice drew most of its strength from the dual tension between individuals and each other, and between individuals and society" (53).

Secondly, the corollary to the idea that individuality is constructed in opposition to society's prisons is that whatever religious faith can still be adhered to (and it will be defined as a personal faith as opposed to institutional or traditional systems) must be achieved through struggle. To adopt without question the tenets of the faith taught by parents and community is to deny one's selfhood. The role of author then includes the questioning of society's religious given. Such a conflict between religious faith and individual doubt is again most acute in the longer, often more realistic, form of the novel: according to George Orwell, "the atmosphere of orthodoxy is always damaging to
prose; and above all it is completely ruinous to the novel, the most anarchical of all forms of literature. . . . The novel is . . . a product of the free mind, of the autonomous individual" (qtd. in Woodman ix). Hence, fiction that is written to espouse a particular institutionalized belief risks the derogatory label of propaganda or didacticism.

If the creative writer's role is thus understood to include a questioning of accepted assumptions of the society in which he/she lives in order to inscribe the right of an individual to construct his/her own self apart from society's prison, then the creative writer within the Mennonite community faces compounded tensions. Many shades of Mennonitism exist; however, the majority of recent Canadian Mennonite writers have grown up within the Dutch/Russian Mennonite heritage. In that particular ethno-religious culture several basic attitudes and beliefs militate against the development of the aesthetic freedom commonly understood to be a necessity for creative writers: 1) the centrality and authority of the Bible, interpreted as literally as possible, thus becoming a plumbline against which all ambiguous, figurative speech and multiple perspectives are perceived as dangerously deviant; 2) a strong sense of Gemeinschaft (all-encompassing community), continually reinforced by patriarchal authority, and a sacralization of conformity to the smallest detail of communal living; 3) a materialistic pragmatism, originally the result of the rural pioneering conditions that allowed no space for the imaginary or for the strictly beautiful; 4) the deliberate insularity of the community enforced by the tradition of a separate language (Low German and German). J.B. Toews, in "Cultural and Intellectual Aspects of the Mennonite Experience in Russia," has described the inhibiting
effect of these assumptions on the Mennonite mind, and Don Wiebe, in "Philosophical Reflections on Twentieth-Century Mennonite Thought," gives evidence "that 'the thinker' in the community is [still] silenced, or ostracized; that there has been little in the way of creative and original intellectual productivity" (157).

That Canadian Mennonite writers themselves have written and thought largely within the paradigm of the modern self constructed in opposition to a repressive community is evident both by the ubiquitous presence of the alienated outsider in their literature,¹ and by comments they have made about their writing. Priscilla Reimer notes in Mennonite Artist: Insider as Outsider that "artists of Mennonite heritage adopted Western iconography and, perhaps uncritically, its art practice as well: the fundamental belief that art is an individual rather than a communal undertaking. And individual expression of any kind is a direct challenge to the very nature of Mennonite community" (23) which upholds communal conformity as a sacred obligation. Such an adoption of individualistic aesthetic practice results in the dilemma articulated by Di Brandt: "i hate having to choose between my inherited identity & my life: traditional Mennonite versus contemporary Canadian woman writer, yet how can i be both & not fly apart?" ("personal statement").

Most of what criticism has been written on recent Mennonite literature has also assumed a dichotomy of creative individual and oppressive community within which aesthetic freedom is valued above

¹ The prime example here is the artist-hero of Reimer’s My Harp is Turned to Mourning, who feels ever more alienated from his community as he continues his education, experiences a world outside the Mennonite enclave, and chooses a career as artist.
maintaining community allegiance. Mierau, for example, in "Rebel Mennos Move into the Arts," quotes poets Brandt and Friesen on the "'totalitarian' effect of the community on the artistic individual" and the "dictatorship" of the Mennonite community in "its pressure for conformity" (20). Implying that only as the dictatorship of the community is defied or weakened can a Mennonite write or paint with artistic integrity, Mierau explains the recent explosion of Mennonite artistic activity by noting an "assimilation and gradual disappearance of a distinctly Mennonite culture in North America" (18). Similarly, Hildi Froese Tiessen, arguably the most well-known critic of Mennonite writing, defines the artist's voice as one which "is generally heard from the margins" (The New Quarterly 10). If art is an implicit, and often explicit, critique of the Mennonite community, it is no wonder that many Mennonite artists "have left their community of origin: they have deliberately taken the stance of outsider in order to find their artistic voice" (P. Reimer 10).

A study of Mennonite literature, then, raises unavoidable questions about the relationship of the individual to community, particularly the artistic individual. Must the writer place himself/herself outside the community in order to assert artistic freedom? If the creative writer so defines himself/herself as one who might well have to abandon the birthright of a clearly-delineated ethno-religious identity in order to write, what strategies appear in the writing? Is the dichotomous framework of creative individual/oppressive community the only one in which to read Mennonite literature or can Mennonite literature be fruitfully considered in other paradigmatic theories of authorial identity?
I am not the first to ask such questions. The earliest Mennonite artists themselves asked similar questions. The personal letters of Johann P. Klassen, one of the earliest artists in the Mennonite community in Russia, suggest that Klassen felt keenly the opposition of his parents and community to his desire to become a sculptor. Klassen's letters, dated 1905-1913, make no attempt to reconcile his calling as an artist and his community's outright rejection of him and his work. Instead, he exults in his newfound freedom from the narrow expectations of his fellow Mennonites: "How beautiful it is to stand so alone in the world! One is completely free" (qtd. in Loewen, "Letters" 28). Ironically, Klassen spent the later years of his life teaching art at a Mennonite institution in Bluffton, Ohio ("Letters" 34) and was recognized as a spokesman of the Mennonite belief in pacifism. His most well-known works are clear expressions of Mennonite values (Kehler 148). Klassen's life and works seem to me to epitomize both the continuing argument in criticism on Mennonite literature and a possible solution available to Mennonite artists.

Jeff Gundy, in "Humility in Mennonite Literature", summarizes the two conflicting positions he sees taken in regard to the Mennonite artist's relationship to the community. Suderman and Kliwer (authors prominent in the 1960s), he says, write within a "relatively conventional aesthetic framework which poses the artist's unique and independent vision against an audience and community which are grudgingly tolerant at best and hostile at worst" (8). That certainly would have been Klassen's early perception of his relationship to his community. John Ruth, on the other hand, whose criticism Gundy mentions with approval,
calls for an art that works within the traditions of the community, rather than against them. The artist must find "the imaginative courage . . . to become involved in the very soul-drama of his covenant-community" (qtd. in Gundy 9). Dismissing Hildi Tiessen's extensive criticism on Mennonite literature on the grounds that it assumes "artists are solitary individuals, stifled in the repressive world of the community" (10), Gundy suggests another paradigm, that of social constructionism, through which we can profitably evaluate Mennonite literature. Quoting Kenneth Bruffee, Gundy notes that "social construction understands reality, knowledge, thought, facts, texts, selves, and so on as community-generated and community-maintained linguistic entities" (11). In other words, to propose an irreconcilable "dualism between a close, pious but restrictive group" (12) and individualistic endeavour is to ignore "ontological realities" (20). We all are shaped, our selves are constructed, within our community, and Mennonite writers would do well to "unfold for us some of the syllables, words and phrases that make up our rich and equivocal tradition of humility" (21), rather than to adopt uncritically the Western notion of the autonomous self, particularly the creative, godlike author. Johann Klassen's later sculptures embodying Mennonite values would seem to exemplify Gundy's and Ruth's ideal Mennonite art.

Gundy's analysis, though, and his approval of those authors who make humility a theme of their work, raises the question of whether Gundy really suggests another paradigm in which to see author and community, or whether he has just rephrased the artistic self's essential dilemma: to adopt the model of resistant individual, or to adopt the role
of uncritical spokesperson for the community. Despite his insistence on ontological realities, Gundy writes as if Mennonite authors must still choose their stance toward their community.

My argument in this dissertation is that an examination of the strategies Canadian Mennonite authors have used to depict their communities and to construct themselves as writers within and through their works needs to take historical and religious contexts into account. When that is done the questions of "either/or" become variations of "both/and." Like Klassen, Mennonite artists must first discover or recover the individual power of choice before electing to criticise or celebrate the community of origin, a process that is in itself a validation of Mennonitism since the choosing to subordinate oneself to the community is an integral, or at least an historical, part of Mennonite thinking. Thus, Gundy is more accurate in his assessment of the importance of the shaping community than he knows. When he insists that "artists and their works are inevitably and complexly linked to their social and physical environment" (11) he does not, I think, take complete account of the ingredients of that environment. He does say that "Anabaptists [the Reformation group out of which Mennonites developed] have traditionally claimed that valid interpretation and discernment take place within the community of believers, not in isolated individuals" (11), but he does not acknowledge that the Dutch/Russian Mennonite interpretive community fostered both its communality and a peculiarly virulent strain of individualism, an individualism that engenders the energy and tension evident in early and recent Mennonite writing. Whether Mennonite literary texts depict their community with
angry derogation or with understanding sympathy, they demonstrate their adherence to the tradition of sacred choice with all the weight of commitment that is consequent to that choice.

Because the tensions between the community and the autonomous, questioning author are often most evident in the novel, I have concentrated primarily on works of fiction, mostly novels, but also some short stories, referring only peripherally to poetry. My primary texts are chosen according to several criteria: author of Dutch/Russian background; text published in Canada; text reflects and foregrounds intimate knowledge of Mennonite communities; text has been given some critical recognition. Hence I exclude writers such as Sandra Birsdell and Lois Braun, whose work rarely foregrounds Mennonite ethnicity or concerns, and Sara Stambaugh, whose novels reflect a Swiss Mennonite background with its markedly different emphases.

A logical beginning for my examination of the strategies Mennonite authors have used to gain a hearing within the Mennonite community even as they write for a wider Canadian audience is Arnold Dyck's Verloren in der Steppe (1944-48), written in German for his own community (translated as Lost in the Steppe (1974) for a now largely English-speaking community). With an aspiring artist as protagonist, it foregrounds, if somewhat evasively, the antagonism with which the Mennonite ethos reacts to aesthetic endeavours. Al Reimer's much later My Harp Is Turned To Mourning (1985) includes a more open discussion of the struggles of the first artists within the Russian/Mennonite community and a more detailed, objective account of the history Dyck alludes to. These two novels provide an essential background for
understanding the work of later novelists. Rudy Wiebe's two early Mennonite novels, _Peace Shall Destroy Many_ (the first Mennonite novel written in English, 1962) and _The Blue Mountains of China_ (1970), are important for their encouragement to subsequent writers and especially for their direct exposition of the relationship between the Mennonite self and the Mennonite community. Of the recent generation of writers I have chosen Anne Konrad (_The Blue Jar_ {1985} and _Family Games_ {1992}), Magdalene Falk Redekop and Elizabeth Falk (companion stories "Side By Side By" {1990} and "Moving" {1990}), Armin Wiebe (_The Salvation of Yasch Siemens_ {1984}), and Doug Reimer (_Older Than Ravens_ {1989}) to exemplify current strategies for gaining a voice within the changing, and more diverse, Mennonite community.

Without understanding the roots of either the Russian/Mennonite ethnic identity or the Mennonite faith itself, too many Mennonite readers have condemned what looks like apostasy to both ethnic and religious identity, and too many rebellious critics have celebrated what looks like a severing of all restrictive Mennonite ties. And without understanding the basis of Mennonite antipathy toward creative expression, neither readers nor critics, perhaps not even writers, can be fully conscious of the ways in which Mennonite fictional texts actually explore and validate the continuing tension between individualistic freedom and communal authority that is the essence of the Mennonite identity.

Chapter One will thus establish a necessary historical and theoretical context for a generally chronological examination of Mennonite fiction that, contrary to initial, often uninformed, judgments, does not
repudiate the Mennonite heritage at all, but re-appropriates it in various ways and through differing strategies.

One final word of introduction concerns my particular perspective as it will become evident in my readings of the chosen texts. As a Mennonite myself, born of Mennonites who emigrated from Russia, and an active member, by choice, of a Mennonite Brethren church, I have read these novels with an especially sensitive eye for strategies of reclamation of the Mennonite identity. While I have endeavoured to place each novel in a historical and philosophical context that should be readily understandable for all readers, I have, on occasion, inevitably interpreted the novels within the perceptual framework of my own childhood in a largely Mennonite community that was, at that time, still relatively isolated from "worldly" influences. Because these texts "identify me to myself" (Thomas 130) so closely, my choices were definitely influenced by the tone of their representation of Mennonite communities. What I have attempted to do throughout this dissertation is to use my position as insider to render these novels as intelligible as possible to non-Mennonites and to make them as understandable and as acceptable as possible to Mennonites who suspiciously view the novelists among them as quislings.
CHAPTER ONE

A Gemeinschaft of Individuals

The Anabaptists themselves encouraged an almost unbridled individualism. . . . (Clasen in 1972)

There is one communion of all the faithful in Christ and one community (gemeinschaft) of the holy children called of God. . . . In brief, one, common builds the Lord’s house and is pure; but mine, thine, his, own divides the Lord’s house and is impure. (Stadler in 1537)

Participants in the present frustrated discussion among Mennonite writers, readers, and critics concerning the Mennonite artist’s freedom to expose and oppose the values of the Mennonite community often do not acknowledge that a basic tension between individualism and communal loyalty has been embedded in Mennonite thought and experience from the very beginning of Mennonite history. In essence, Mennonites form a Gemeinschaft of individuals, Gemeinschaft being understood as a community whose relationships are "based on common spirit, mind, beliefs, and goals" (Redekop, Mennonite Society 129). To see Mennonitism as "totalitarian" (Patrick Friesen qtd. in Mierau 20) is to focus on present specific peculiarities to the exclusion of past and present generalities, and to ignore the voluntarism implicit in the Mennonite theological understanding of Gemeinschaft. My intent, in this chapter, is to explain the seeming paradox of a Gemeinschaft of individuals by summarizing the historical process through which it

12
developed, and placing current literary representations of that tensive balance between individuals and community into a theoretical context.

Anabaptism, that radical branch of the Reformation out of which Mennonites emerged, was certainly far from totalitarianism. It is possible, in fact, to argue that one crucial step toward our present concept of individuality was taken by the Anabaptists when they insisted on the right of an individual to choose his or her form of worship and belief. Certainly their definition of the acting subject was not yet the modern conception of a wholly "autonomous human being" charged with the responsibility of fulfilling a unique potentiality (Weintraub xiii). Their concern was not the rights and freedoms of a unique person, but the responsibility of God-created human beings to obey God rather than man or whatever institutions he had established.

The Anabaptists, so named by their opponents for their practice of re-baptizing adults who had already been baptized as infants, articulated for the first time "the great principles of freedom of conscience, separation of church and state, and voluntarism in religion" (Bender 30). Luther and Zwingli had already proclaimed Christianity as an individual appropriation of grace through faith, itself a belief that placed unprecedented value on the individual. They had not, however, challenged the prevailing connection between church and state with its underlying assumption that all "men and women were still born into compulsory membership in two equally all-embracing and powerful social organizations--one civil, the other ecclesiastical--the state and the church" (Smith 14). It was the Anabaptists who envisioned the church as composed of voluntary believers: "If then they accept the teaching
and wish to become disciples of Christ they shall baptize them so that they may put on Christ and be incorporated in his holy church" (Rothmann 1534, qtd. in Klaassen 106). Such a church is not politically created or maintained. Both Protestants—Lutherans and Calvinists alike—and Catholic authorities found the Anabaptist refusal to join the state church, to baptize infants, to bear arms, and to take up public office intolerable. Freedom of conscience applied so radically was then considered treasonous enough to warrant the severest persecution.

Such a voluntarism, based as it was on the authority of Scripture as read and applied by the individual, not only gave divine approval for resisting the authority of the larger society but, in the minds of too many of their leaders, also justified numerous schisms among Anabaptists. Freedom of conscience proved difficult to control. To explain the internal divisions that plagued Anabaptists (contemporaries spoke of Täuferkrankheit {baptizer's disease}), Smith observes:

Mennonites took their religion seriously. They were extreme individualists. Members of the state churches could shift the responsibility for their religious decisions . . . . Not so the Mennonites. They were their own priests, and must answer to God directly for all their shortcomings . . . . There was no hierarchy with power to impose uniformity of doctrine or practise upon the whole body. (169)

Similarly, but with less sympathy, Clasen concludes that "the Anabaptists themselves encouraged an almost unbridled individualism by rejecting all human authority and the use of force in religious matters" (36). To suggest, however, as Smith does, that Anabaptism is "the
essence of individualism" (21) is to ignore the radical understanding of Christian community that was equally a part of it.

The single most distinctive belief of Anabaptists was their insistence that the Christian life must be lived out within a believing community, and that their individual interpretations of Scripture must be validated by the witness of the Holy Spirit within the congregation (C. Dyck 104). Friedman, in "On Mennonite Historiography and On Individualism and Brotherhood," resists Smith's emphasis on Anabaptist individualism by noting that, while Mennonites do stress "the supreme importance of the decision of each individual in his own conscience" (120), they move beyond such liberty of conscience toward true brotherhood:

Now then, the central idea of Anabaptism . . . was this, that one cannot find salvation without caring for his brother, that this "brother" actually matters in the personal life. This is the teaching of Christ and the Apostles (particularly of John). This interdependence of men gives life and salvation a new meaning. It is not "faith alone" which matters (for which faith no church organization would be needed) but it is brotherhood, this intimate caring for each other, as it was commanded to the disciples of Christ as the way to God's kingdom. That was the discovery which made Anabaptism so forceful and outstanding in all of church history. (121)

To belong to an Anabaptist congregation meant an individual choice, yes, but it also meant a "voluntary submission" to an all-encompassing
accountability toward other believers of like mind (C. Dyck 108). Therefore, at the very core of Anabaptist belief is the paradox of individualistic thinking and communal living, a tension that James Urry observes in the lives of Mennonites in succeeding generations:

Through baptism Mennonites entered into a covenant with God and with the community. The acceptance of faith was an individual act and the personal baptismal covenant was to follow Christ, to live according to His life. The public covenant was with the congregational community. In the public arena Mennonites agreed to subordinate themselves to the ethical rules of the community: baptism was a private act with public consequences. In everyday life Mennonites surrendered their individuality to the common good. (36-37)

Historical accounts of various Mennonite churches indicate that communities have handled that balance in different ways, sometimes emphasizing individual choice and sometimes community cohesion.\(^1\)

Despite such differences, Mennonites generally appear to place a high value on some form of community.\(^2\)

\(^{1}\) As Driedger notes, "the various Mennonites groups . . . illustrate how difficult it has been to reach a balance between freedom of the individual, and loyalty to a gemeinschaft. On the one hand, more conservative rural Old Order Amish, Old Colony Mennonites and modern Hutterites have tended to restrict individualism, stressing tradition and cultural forms at the expense of individual freedom; while more urban General Conference Mennonites and Mennonite Brethren are pursuing individualism and freedom to the point where grace often becomes cheap, and gemeinschaft community is superficial" (Conflict 32).

\(^{2}\) Driedger in Mennonite Identity in Conflict, and Kauffman and Driedger in The Mennonite Mosaic observe the creation of Mennonite Gemeinschaft in urban environments, noting that with greater education Mennonites have deliberately cultivated their sense of communal identity
Given that theological commitment to brotherhood and an equally powerful conviction that every aspect of living is a demonstration of Christ-likeness, it is perhaps inevitable that the diverse ethnic groups included in the early Anabaptist churches in two main areas of Europe (Switzerland/Southern Germany and Netherlands/North Germany), should eventually become two cohesive ethnic peoples, Swiss Brethren who are sometimes also called Mennonites, and Mennonites.\(^1\) Persecution drove the initially urban Anabaptists into rural areas where they were allowed some measure of security and freedom. The various groups of Frisian and Flemish people, named Mennonites because of the leadership of Menno Simons (a prolific writer who managed to stay alive longer than most leaders despite the price on his head), eventually found a haven in the "Hansa port-city of Danzig (Gdansk) and neighbouring regions of Royal Prussia, which was later (after 1569) part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth" (Urry 35). Welcomed for their ability to reclaim swampy land, they were encouraged to settle in "socially and economically self-contained communities" (Francis 14) and were granted "special privileges . . . as a distinctive religious body" (Francis 15). Gradually Mennonite through awareness of Anabaptist ideology. And Kasdorf notes that even Mennonite writers who see writing as "an individual activity . . . have not forgotten community ways. In an endeavour marked by solitude, the Canadian writers from Mennonite backgrounds have been unusually cooperative" and have created an "alternative community of writers" (16).

\(^1\) To avoid confusion I use the term "Anabaptist" to refer to beliefs, rather than any sort of ethnic identity. The term "Mennonite" now has strong ethnic connotations, although it should be remembered that Mennonites claim Anabaptist beliefs as their spiritual heritage, and even today many people belonging to Mennonite churches would insist that the term designates religious belief, not ethnic identity. Indeed, the very notion of being born "Mennonite" is a direct contradiction of what Anabaptists believed about the church.
cultural distinctives, such as a frugal, plain, agrarian way of life, and an integrated, self-sufficient community acquired religious significance as part of their corporate identity. In particular, language (both the colloquial Plattdeutsch and a religious language) became an identifying and unifying religious imperative. While Mennonites spoke Dutch at first in their churches, they eventually adopted German as their religious language (Urry 45). From the initial circumstance in Prussia where "Hollanders" (Urry 44) spoke a different language from the main society, to Russia where they were now known as Germans, and to Canada and South America, Mennonites have evolved the conviction that keeping a distinctive language is the only way to keep separate from the "world."

The process of change from a religious community which one chose to an ethno-religious community into which one was born was accelerated by the move to Russia. Mennonite migration to Russia was motivated by increasing pressure to pay tithes to the established Lutheran church, a requirement to pay a yearly fine in support of the Military Academy of Kulm, and the increasing shortage of land (Francis 17). Catherine II's invitation to Mennonite settlers in 1785 was a generous one. Vast areas of land had been wrested from the Turks and needed to be settled (Rempel 8). The Mennonites had earned a reputation for good farming, quiet living, and general industry; they could be shaped into an ideal colony (Rempel 9). And "colony" is exactly what the Russian administrators established. Intent on orderly settlement and efficiency, they set aside large tracts of land in what is now Ukraine for the Mennonites, giving them special rights known as the Privilegium. They insisted on dealing with all Mennonites as a
corporate body, regardless of what particular community or church they had belonged to in Prussia. James Urry, in *None But Saints*, has detailed the system of government established by Russia for the colonists and noted the effects of that government. To summarize briefly, the Mennonites were now established in exclusive colonies, were forbidden to proselytize among the surrounding Russian peasants, and were granted complete religious freedom for themselves. Furthermore, whereas Anabaptism had originally proclaimed the separation of church and state, and the freedom of the individual to choose or reject the call to discipleship, Mennonites in Russia now found themselves living in co-operative villages with completely interlinked secular and religious institutions. Church elders enforced the edicts of the village mayor and the village council upheld the concerns of the religious teachers.

Inevitably the original Mennonite belief that faith is demonstrated in all of life combined with the exclusive and all-encompassing nature of their colonies to sacralize every detail of life. The Mennonite identity was now dependent "not only on faith, but also on membership in a colony, a district, and the village" of birth (Urry 57).

Nevertheless, that original tension between individual conscience and the authoritative *Gemeinschaft* remained an integral part of Mennonite consciousness, as is evident in the responses of the colonies to outside influences. In the religious sphere, pietistic influences from Europe, brought in by additional Mennonite settlers from Prussia in the early 1800s (Urry 100-101), led eventually to further schisms among the Mennonites. One of them, the Mennonite Brethren, was formed when a group of men with their wives and families seceded from the village.
church in Gnadenfeld in 1860 and began their own fellowship (A. Dueck 151-53). The formation of this church reenacts original Anabaptist behaviour: a deliberate separation from a church grown formalistic through union of church and secular government. The subsequent efforts of Mennonite elders who acted in concert with civil authorities to suppress the movement mirrored almost exactly the behaviour of the state churches in the mid 1500s, with the exception that the only force the Mennonite authorities used was the threat of the ban (A. Dueck 153; Urry 183-5).

In the economic sphere, the struggle for land reform brought to the forefront the tension between self-interest and community values. Although initially large tracts of communally owned land had been set aside in order to provide for future growth (established plots of land could not be subdivided), the increasingly wealthy "full farmers" found it to be in their interests to maintain village-owned land as pasture and a substantial group of landless cottage-dwellers (Anwohner) as cheap labour. Too often the church elders supported the interests of the wealthy farmers and ignored the needs of the landless, and hence voteless, poor. Urry, situating these conflicts over land in the context of wider economic change, concludes that the over-all effect of economic and social changes was to encourage individualism at the cost of communal values:

Moral space became restricted and individualized. The concept of the person favoured individual endeavour in business; the school system, through a process of competition, rewarded personal advancement and self-
achievement; the religious ethos encouraged the search for personal salvation. (207)

Yet the very fact that Mennonites lived in separate colonies, intermarried, spoke their own language, and acted under a separate system of government and law, continually strengthened their sense of themselves as a people, even as a religious people.

Changes in Russian administration beginning in the mid 1800s also strengthened corporate identity among Mennonites and, more than ever, made individual initiative and contact with Slavic culture an act of betrayal. As long as educational reforms came gradually through the efforts of Mennonites (Johann Cornies, in particular, and Tobias Voth), Mennonites acquiesced, some willingly, some reluctantly (Urry 153-173). Once Russian administrators, beginning in 1830, began actively seeking to assimilate foreign colonists, Mennonite sensibilities became agitated. Mennonite colonies⁴ were now made part of "ordinary administrative divisions" instead of being governed by a separate department (Francis 32): taxes were now required to uphold schools and hospitals, and former Crown land was to be divided into individual holdings; all correspondence had to be made out in the Russian language and Russian was to be taught in all schools (Francis 33). The more conservative Mennonites who viewed such meddling by "worldly" government as a threat to religious liberty required only the ultimate threat--military conscription--to activate their by now "institutionalized reaction to any

⁴ The original two Mennonite colonies, Khortitsa and Molochaia (Urry's spelling - there are many others), had expanded through establishing several daughter colonies.
major threat to the dogmas of their faith . . . withdrawal, flight, emigration" (Francis 35).

This first wave of emigration to Canada in the 1870s included those groups of Mennonites (Kleine Gemeinde, Fürstenländer, Bergthaler) who were most deeply concerned about maintaining a separate identity as defined and enforced through isolation from the "world." As Francis notes in In Search of Utopia, these Mennonites negotiated an agreement with the Canadian government as close as possible to the Russian Privilegium: they were allowed to establish themselves in large tracts of land set aside for them (known as the East Reserve and West Reserve), to govern and to educate themselves, and to remain exempt from military duty. Their goal was to transplant intact the way of life they had known in Russia (Driedger, Conflict 41). The subsequent history of these Kanadier, as they are later dubbed, is one of perpetual struggle to maintain that distinct and corporate Mennonite identity. When Canadian systems of private ownership and provincial educational edicts threatened their insularity, many of them fled yet again, this time to Mexico and Paraguay. Those who stayed managed to maintain a surprisingly strong sense of community, though, as current Mennonite literature testifies, that sense of community is being steadily eroded through education and prosperity.

---

5 According to E.K. Francis, about 15,000 Mennonites, or 30 per cent of the Mennonite population in Ukraine, emigrated to North America between 1873 and 1878 (28). Frank Epp, in Mennonite Exodus, mentions about 18,000 Mennonite emigrants. About 7,000 of those emigrants settled in Canada (Epp, Mennonites in Canada 5), a figure that Francis agrees with.
Those Mennonites who remained in Russia, having negotiated workable compromises with the Russian administration, enjoyed a period of peace in which they became a prosperous "urbanized, industrialized, and capitalistic society with developed institutions of higher learning and a flourishing national literature" (Francis 194). That such developments would eventually have weakened the communal identity and undermined the social controls of the Mennonites is likely, but subsequent events served instead to strengthen Mennonite identity.

During the Russian Revolution, the prosperous Mennonite Commonwealth was completely destroyed. This, the ugliest chapter in Mennonite history, is a story that figures largely in most early and some later Mennonite writing. As German-speaking colonists, the Mennonites were treated with great suspicion at the outbreak of World War I. Their refusal to participate in military endeavour aroused additional hostility. Hence, when the Red army fought for control of Ukraine, the Mennonites bore the brunt of their destructive revolutionary fervour (C. Dyck 140). Within a few short years, most of them lost everything, and many were brutally murdered. As many of them who could fled Russia to Canada (about 20,000 {Epp, Mennonites 178}) and to South America (about 3,000 {Smith 525}), becoming known as Russländer to distinguish them from the already established Kanadier.

---

6 The actual number of dead (estimates range from one to two or even three percent of the population) is "still far below the percentage of dead in Russia generally" (Epp, Exodus 37). The psychological effect was far worse, however, since "for the Mennonites the terror was a sudden shock, as though a hungry beast or Satan himself had entered their Garden of Eden" (38).
Like the Jewish exodus of Biblical history and the Holocaust during the Second World War, the Mennonite experience of the Marxist revolution shaped a unique ethnic consciousness with a heightened sense of "us" against "them." Mennonites had always viewed the "world" with great suspicion lest it corrupt their religious zeal, but now the "world" had proved itself unwaveringly hostile. Subsequent tensions between communal identity and individualism, even in the relatively tolerant country of Canada, would be freighted not only with familiarly intense religious overtones, but also with an ever-present fear of survival, as Christians and as a people. Those tensions in Mennonite communities in Canada become an integral part of the literature written by Mennonites.

With that understanding of the dynamic interplay between a strong sense of community and an equally strong, equally theological, sense of the value of the individual in mind, it is easier to grasp why creative literature among Mennonites is still often perceived as a subversive activity. While this inherent suspicion of creativity is profoundly aggravated, as we shall see, by a specific definition of the artist's role and literature's function, it was not the initial source of Mennonite resistance to aesthetic endeavour.

In the first place, Mennonites have historically been refugees and pioneers, immigrant people who typically have "little time or inclination for artistic or intellectual pursuits" (Keith, Canadian Literature 3). Clasen notes that the majority of early Anabaptists were craftsmen and farmers (323); the original intellectual leaders were martyred, leaving the movement in the hands of untrained lay people. On the basis of a
1776 Prussian register of family names, Driedger concludes that the majority of Mennonites then were farmers, craftsmen and businessmen. Very few were educated professionals (Driedger, Conflict 19). Of those Prussian Mennonites, primarily the landless and poor responded to Catherine II's invitation to establish the first colony, Khortitza, in the wild steppes of Ukraine. The second colony, Molochaia, was established by wealthier, slightly more educated Mennonites, but even so the practical work of establishing viable farms took precedence over all else. Not until pioneering conditions gave way to "years of remarkable prosperity" did the Mennonites pay greater attention to "education, religious, and cultural affairs" (C. Dyck 131-32). Then, just as the Russian Mennonites began to develop an intelligentsia that encouraged literature and music and other arts (A. Reimer, "Experience" 223), though their own contributions to written culture were still minimal (Loewen, "Beginnings" 120), the first World War and the Revolution dispersed the majority of surviving Mennonites. Once again they were pioneers wrestling a living from the land.

The Mennonite antipathy towards creative writing, fiction in particular, however, arises out of more than just a pragmatic concern with material prosperity that seems an understandable cast of mind in light of three successive uprootings and new beginnings. Their suspicion of "lying" fiction has much to do with their attitude toward the authoritative Word of God, an attitude derived from Anabaptist roots. Departing from the Roman Catholic tradition in which church teachings and priestly interpretations conveyed God's teachings to the people, Anabaptists, in their earliest confessional statements, declared:
We believe, recognize, and confess that the Holy Scriptures both of the Old and New Testaments are to be described as commanded of God and written through holy persons who were driven thereto by the Spirit of God. For this reason the believing born-again Christians are to employ them for teaching and admonishing, for reproof and reformation, to exhibit the foundation of their faith that it is in conformity with Holy Scripture.  (Hesse qtd. in Wenger 168-69)

With that clear and unshakeable belief in the absolute authority of the Word of God it is not surprising that Anabaptists would "read the Bible . . . [as] a self-evident duty, and that it was often the only book in the home that was steadily used" (Bender qtd. in Wenger 169). For them, the Bible "was the sole source of spiritual authority; the apostolic church, their model; and the Sermon on the Mount quite literally interpreted their social and religious program" (Smith 21). The Bible thus became the yardstick against which all ethical conduct and all claims to truth were measured. Since Mennonites interpreted the Bible within the community, and held those interpretations as authoritative, neither individual variances in language used to describe faith nor ambiguities of meaning were tolerated.

Of the various strong principles for living that such an acceptance of the Bible as authoritative guide for Christian living gave rise to, none had a clearer effect on the subsequent Mennonite attitude toward culture and literature than the doctrine of the two kingdoms: the kingdom of the world which belongs to Satan (political, social, and even ecclesiastical institutions are all of the world) and the kingdom of God
which is being established within the believers' church. This Anabaptist theology of two kingdoms operating simultaneously gave rise to a new set of values (Anabaptist attempts to follow Christ's example in living), a specific outlook on history (the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness are engaged in a world struggle which the kingdom of God will eventually win), and a new distinct social ethic (individualism is ruled out in favour of an ideal brotherhood) (Friedman, "Doctrine" 110-112). This belief in two distinct realms of being, especially when formulated through a church composed of voluntary "seceders" from the kingdom of the world, developed into an extreme concern for separation. As Friedmann notes, "kingdom theology is hostile to [culture or civilization]" and Anabaptists remained cool "toward human achievement and cultural advancement," meeting it with "suspicion, fearful lest it contain elements of destruction, elements of despondency and nonsalvation, in short, that it miss the essentials of Christ's message and world outlook" (113). When one's entire mission in life is to avoid worldliness, not much room is left for the seductive delights of creative literature. This basic suspicion toward culture, and towards all higher learning, was deepened by the subsequent literal separation of Mennonite communities from their host societies. Such isolation meant a complete divorce from all literary traditions that might have nourished even a Biblically-oriented Mennonite literature.

The physical isolation from other cultures that had been the Mennonite experience from Prussia to Russia and even in Canada initially meant that the "Mennonite religious experience was always in the context of an 'official' language, either Dutch or German" (J.B. Toews 157) that
differed from the language of the host society. Their private schools were conducted by trained Mennonites in German and then in Russian, but not in the everyday Low German that "remained the only mechanism capable of expressing the Mennonite 'soul' experience" (Toews 157). That curious schizophrenic linguistic separation between written material and lived experience meant that "the close-knit world remained profoundly oral, a fact reflected in the strong tradition of story-telling and other forms of popular discourse spoken in Low German" (Urry 154), a language that remained unwritten until recent deliberate revivals of the language. In Russia the linguistic isolation was strengthened by the Mennonite assumption that Slavic culture was inferior to the Germanic culture acquired second-hand through the influence of teachers educated in Germany (J.B. Toews 156). It is no accident that creative writing among the Mennonites in Russia was attempted only after the linguistic and cultural isolation was penetrated by active russification policies and by increasing industrialization. It is also no accident that Mennonites in Canada only began writing creative literature once the language of everyday experience had become English, and Mennonite insularity was breaking down (Tiessen, "Introduction" to New Quarterly 12).

All of the above factors militating against the development of Mennonite literature—rural pioneering practicality, Biblical authority, separation from the world, and linguistic isolation—gain additional force through their integral connection with Gemeinschaft, that essence of living evident in "congregational communities... that were also self-sustaining social communities" (Urry 36). This sense of Gemeinschaft
was cultivated very early in Russian Mennonite children and maintained through strict social controls. While Gemeinschaft referred specifically to the believing congregations, the development of completely integrated communities isolated from other cultures meant that Gemeinschaft came to include all aspects of life, "all cultural exchanges" (Urry 38). What Anabaptist thinkers had conceived of as a believing community in which individuals were voluntarily responsible to one another for moral behaviour had, in the long process of increasing isolation and developing ethnicity, become a homogenous group in which every detail of living and thinking was overlaid with sacred significance. Hence any excursion into higher education, or the cultures of other people (Slavic or, later, English) was an excursion into the "world," and any unusual individual achievement was construed as evidence of lack of loyalty toward the Mennonite people, unless that individual achievement benefited the community as a whole without challenging any of its values (Francis 111-12).

That rather subtle distinction between allowable individualism and prideful disloyalty to the community (C.Redekop, Society 118) was transferred to the Canadian Mennonite communities, and became even more crucial as the Mennonites struggled to adapt to a culture and to a system of law that definitely favoured individual autonomy over corporate values. They did not grasp at first that the freedom offered to them "implied above all the exemption of the individual from governmental control in respect to person and property, religious convictions and institutions, and all matters not plainly affecting the common welfare" (Francis 81), for Mennonites were not interested in the
freedom "of the individual from social controls, but with the freedom of the group as a whole for the exercise of strict social controls over each individual member" (Francis 81-2).

The strength of those social controls is well illustrated in Rhinehart Friesen's biographical A Mennonite Odyssey, in which Friesen tells the story of a member of the Old Colony church who built a mill in a railway town rather than in a strictly Mennonite village. He was ordered, by the church elders, to sell the mill to an Engländor or a member of the Bergthaler Mennonites (who were not as strict) or face excommunication. After all, if he lived in a village with people of other cultures, then his children would be "sure to learn English . . . . Once they talk English, what's to stop them from getting unsuitable jobs, imitating their neighbours in all kinds of sinful activities . . . ?" (98). The miller accepted the edict of his elders because his adherence to the values of the Mennonite community to which he belonged was far stronger than his desire for the money he would earn in a larger town. In such a context in which the loyalty to the church community is placed higher than any other consideration, the pursuit of the education necessary to develop creative writing skills would obviously be construed as a threat to Gemeinschaft.

It is equally understandable that the first efforts at writing in Canada "tended to assert the cohesiveness and unique identity of the Canadian Mennonite community" (Tiessen, "Shibboleth" 179) thus strengthening Gemeinschaft. I should note here that Gemeinschaft and its ambivalent relationship toward literature was understood differently by the Kanadier and the Russländer. While there were differences in
the level of education offered in the Mennonite private schools (Bergthaler Mennonites tended to be less strict than the Fürstenländer, for example), the more conservative Kanadier Mennonites viewed education as a tool to acquire enough literacy to read the Bible and to run the farm or a small business. Intellectual inquiry or creativity was not valued. On the other hand, the Russländer who arrived in Canada in the 1920s had experienced fifty years of modernization in Russia. They had changed all the more rapidly because the 1870s wave of emigration "relieved [them] of the more traditionalistic elements" (Francis 187). In addition, the Russländer group that came to Canada was not even representative of the Mennonites in Russia but "was weighted in favour of the certain better educated and more enterprising classes" (Francis 187). Given these differences in attitude toward education and in definitions of worldliness it is not surprising that the Russländer should choose to use cultural skills to affirm Gemeinschaft rather than see creative writing as a threat to Gemeinschaft as the Kanadier initially did.

One further factor led Russländer to begin writing long before the Kanadier would feel the poetic muse: they felt an overwhelming need to come to terms with "the horrors of the Russian Revolution . . . [through] fictional or semi-fictional personal memoirs . . . . . . Their Heimatsdichtung style was full of nostalgic recollection and yearning for a culture and way of life which had been innocently destroyed by evil forces beyond human comprehension" (A. Reimer, "Experience" 223). While in Russia their writing had been primarily devotional and edificatory (A. Reimer, "Print Culture"), their writing in Canada focused
initially on their own sense of peoplehood, a natural enough concern in light of the hatred they had encountered as Mennonites during the Revolution. If anything, the opposition they had faced strengthened their sense of Gemeinschaft, just as the Canadian efforts in Manitoba to assimilate the Mennonites strengthened their sense of peoplehood.

Much of the earlier fiction thus justified its existence by strengthening the Mennonite identity as that of a separate people who had endured much suffering for their faith. The trail-blazing writers (c. 1930-50) were all Russländer—Arnold Dyck, J.H. Janzen, Gerhard Loewen, Georg de Brecht (pseud), and Fritz Senn (pseud)—who wrote in German for their own communities.

The current group of Mennonite writers, however, many of whom are descended from the Kanadier Mennonites, view their writing to some extent as a betrayal of their communities, as a step of individualism that cannot be reconciled with the prevailing sacralized communal values of their respective communities. It is certain, if Rudy Wiebe’s experience is at all representative (and he is a Russländer), that the communities viewed the novels and poetry with deep suspicion. Wiebe, in "The Skull in the Swamp," summarizes Mennonite response to Peace Shall Destroy Many, that first novel in English that dared to describe a Mennonite community with critical realism. The majority of the letters Wiebe quotes contain a sense of betrayal: "the spirit of the book from its first page to the last one is a purely negative one.... Nothing is being said in defence of our people. It is like washing ones [sic] dirty wash in the front yard of a neighbour" (16). Anticipating a similar reaction,
Di Brandt begins her first book of poems with a foreword that clearly acknowledges the disruption of *Gemeinschaft*:

learning to speak *in public* to write love poems for all the world to read meant betraying once & for all the good Mennonite daughter i tried so unsuccessfully to become . . . shouting from rooftops what should only be thought guiltily in secret squandering stealing the family words.

*questions i asked my mother*.

The title of Maurice Mierau's article on recent Mennonite artists, "Rebel Mennos Move into the Arts," assumes a mutual hostility between artists and communities. As Brandt, quoted by Mierau, comments, "Art . . . has been unacceptable to many Mennonites because it challenges and criticizes the one voice of the community" (19).

Such hostility seems inevitable if art is predominantly individualistic, implicitly or explicitly exalting its own values in opposition to those of the community. That, however, is a peculiarly Western, post-Romantic, understanding of the function of art and the artist. It assumes as a given the existence of a uniquely perceiving self defined in opposition to the prescribed perceptions of society, a self that is intrinsically itself, whole. Booth describes that modern individual as an "undividable centre," the "real 'me,' the authentic self" that must be found through "[peeling] off the inauthentic, insincere, alien influences that might deflect the self from its unique, individual destiny" (237).

Such a conception of a central self that is limited, even stifled, by the surrounding society is the assumption underlying many of the
comments of both Mennonite writers and their readers. Tiessen, for example, in "The Role of Art and Literature in Mennonite Self-Understanding," quotes an emigre writer's rueful summary of how Mennonites have rejected the artists among them, and concludes, "even today the Mennonite artist is likely to feel constrained by a community that explicitly or implicitly denies him artistic autonomy. . . . [He] is likely to have to leave the community or—if he remains—be willing to adopt the role of the apostate" (245). The alternative of developing an art and a conception of the artist that does not undermine Gemeinschaft is not mentioned. Throughout her article Tiessen speaks of "autonomy" and the "emergence of an artist figure", assuming an unreconcilable opposition between artistic self and the society in which that self moves. The artist who chooses to remain within the community will sacrifice a certain freedom of expression. The choice is to give up the right to belong or to give up aesthetic expression.

The complexity and seeming inevitability of the Mennonite writer's dilemma become even more apparent when we look at this dilemma through more general perspectives on the relationship between the individual and society. I would like to summarize two analyses of the Western dichotomy, or rather, continuum of self and community that illuminate Mennonite theology and experience, before examining current critical efforts to re-situate the Mennonite artist within the community. Combining those critical efforts with a historical perspective makes possible a fruitful, even redemptive, reading of Mennonite fiction.

In The Value of the Individual Weintraub contrasts a society composed of personalities to a society composed of individuals. The
former posits "great personality ideals" upon "which men and women model their lives" (xv). The Mennonite concern with Nachfolge Christi (a literal following of Christ's example) falls into this category, as do societies with clear images of such ideal types as the chivalric knight or the perfect gentleman. Very little emphasis is thus placed on the idiosyncratic differences among various approximations of that ideal personality, although their existence is readily acknowledged. A society composed of individuals, on the other hand, is marked "by the conviction that ultimately no general model can contain the specificity of the true self" (xvi). Individuals are encouraged to "fulfil their specific potential to the fullest" (xiii). The self in such societies is viewed as "inviolable," "ineffable," "genuine" (xiii), and is motivated by the goal of actualizing "the one mode of being which only he can be" (xvi). Individual differences are thus "a matter of great value in [themselves]" (xvi).

While the complexities of real life can never entirely fit such pure conceptions, as Weintraub indeed reminds us (xvi), they do provide useful ends of a continuum upon which we can tentatively place existing societies. The ideal Mennonite community would thus come closest to societies that encourage the "identification of the individual with the socially given world" (xvii). "The Mennonite ethos," according to Calvin Redekop, "[assumes] that the individual's meaning is achieved fully in the context of the Gemeinschaft and that . . . undue concern . . . with the actualization of the separate individual is counter-productive, and maybe even profane" (Society 104-5). Granted that historical records describe numerous schisms, Mennonite communities nevertheless
consistently place far more emphasis on conformity to the ideal personality fostered by strict social controls than on the fulfilment of a gifted individual self. Indeed, literature based on the Low German tradition of story-telling glories in precisely those idiosyncrasies possible in the "unprescribed interstitial spaces" among the "required values, virtues, and attitudes" (Weintraub xv). Mennonites in Canada, however, live in a society that, despite persistent deconstructive efforts, still popularly places continuing emphasis on the central self that must be freed from social controls in order to develop its uniqueness. As long as the artist's role and personality is defined within the latter context, Mennonites have difficulty accepting the artists among them.

While the above contrast between the personality shaped by an ideal and the "autonomous self" that establishes its own authentic norms (Weintraub xvi, xiii) places Mennonites in complete opposition to individualism, Lanham's discussion of the self in terms of rhetoric reverses that conclusion. Since part of Mennonite consciousness depends on adherence to the Word of God as authoritative, a look at a paradigm of the self within the context of language seems appropriate. In The Motives of Eloquence Lanham posits two views of self as determined by basic attitudes toward rhetoric: the serious man who "possesses a central self, an irreducible identity" that relates to an exterior reality which can be represented clearly and authentically (1), who "ceaselessly [pushes] through language to a preexistent, divinely certified reality beyond;"^{7} and the rhetorical man who functions within

---

^{7} I have yet to find a clearer description of the essential Mennonite attitude toward language. Words are to be used truthfully and carefully to describe reality, since reality is created by God. That basic belief in
language, in society, not in order to discover reality but to manipulate it (4). Rhetorical man plays roles, without clinging to the "luxury of a central self" (5), and exchanges universal certainties for the pleasures of playing with language. The rhetorical man adapts his language and behaviour to the audience with a frank admission that his reality is public, that his identity depends upon the social situation. Such an adaptability would be utterly abhorrent to the Mennonite "serious man" who clings to the notion of integrity of the self and shuns any suggestion of role-playing. Lanham concludes that Western man is really a mixture of the two versions of self, serious self and rhetorical self, central self and social self (6).

---

the authoritative Word of God as the basis of an objective reality and the guide for all behaviour of that central self has led directly to the Mennonite cultivation of plain speech which is supposed to lead to truth, as lavish rhetoric cannot (see E.F. Dyck's article "The Rhetoric of the Plain Style in Mennonite Writing"). It has also led, as Maurice Mierau suggests, to the Mennonite writer's attraction to "the prophetic and didactic modes of the 'outsider'--the same modes in which their preachers and theologians have announced the all-importance of God's Word" ("personal statement").

---

8 Booth, in his chapter on building character through reading, discusses in detail the difference between character (building personality through the adoption of roles within situations) and the modern individual self. He agrees with the deconstructionist project of de-centring the subject, but notes that "ancient philosophy, classical rhetoric, and traditional religion took for granted [that] the isolated individual self simply does not, cannot exist" (238). Using anecdotal evidence of how we put on roles as we read literature, he concludes that we are composites of the roles we have chosen ("I am a kind of focal point in a field of forces" (240)), exactly what Lanham calls the rhetorical self, a self built of numerous roles accepted and played. What I find amusing and puzzling is that Booth still persists in talking about those roles we try out through literature as though some central integral self is approving or disapproving the various roles. That creative tension resembles the continuing tension within Anabaptist, and subsequent Mennonite, efforts to define and live the Christian life through individual choice but within a community.
Looking at these two paradigms of the self's relationship to the community simultaneously serves to highlight the tension within Mennonite self-consciousness. On the one hand, the Mennonite virtue of Gelassenheit, a "yieldedness to God's will, but . . . equally a principle of self-denial and submission to the will of the community" (P. Reimer 23) means the subordination of individual desires and perceptions to a theologically sanctioned ideal of personality. The self should be lost, not exalted. On the other hand, Mennonites clearly posit a central self that is expected to be honest, plain-speaking, that functions in responsible moral relation to an absolute Truth that defines a clear reality. Both paradigms leave Mennonites unable to accept the Western conception of the artist without compromising crucial beliefs. Serious man has no tolerance for the ambiguity, love of language, and role-playing that is part of writing fiction, while a Gemeinschaft has no tolerance for the novel's usual focus on individual achievement (Bergonzi 53). As long as Mennonite artists define themselves in a context of seeking individual potentiality their relationship with the community remains problematic, and "many artists . . . have left their community of origin . . . deliberately [taking] the stance of outsider in order to find their artistic voice" (P. Reimer 10).

This is, however, not the only possible paradigm for understanding the function of the artist. Other conceptions of the self and the community exist that could produce different definitions of the artist's role, as Chinua Achebe's description of mbardi art in "The Writer and His Community" demonstrates. While the Igboland culture gives individuality special sanction by positing a unique god-agent for each
individual, that individuality is held in check by "[subordinating] the person to the group in practical, social matters" and by "a moral taboo on excess which sets a limit to personal ambition" (39). That individuality, moreover, has no part in the role of the artist who is chosen by the community, usually together with other artists, to create a "home of images" (sculptures and paintings) in which the community members can worship. Once the works of art are made the artists disclaim all ownership (33), rather unlike Western culture in which the artist is anxious to claim ownership. Art so produced by and for the community, Achebe suggests, is important "because it is at the centre of the life of the people and so can fulfil some of that need that first led man to make art: the need to afford himself through his imagination an alternative handle on reality" (39). I have summarized Achebe's essay at length partly because he outlines so clearly the workable balance established when a theologically-validated individuality is yet subordinate to the community, but primarily because his description of an art that becomes an act of worship on behalf of the community suggests an answer to the anguished questions of Mennonite critics who are unwilling to accept an either/or proposition.

For the most part, their objections arise more from a reluctance to abandon their religious and social heritage than from any criticism of the conception of artist that seems to require such abandonment. John Ruth, for example, a critic and writer of Swiss Mennonite background, advocates an artistic vision that would explore and ultimately endorse the values of the engendering community. In a scholarly dialogue at the Mennonite Self-Understanding Conference (May 1986) Ruth responds
to Tiessen's "The Role of Art and Literature in Mennonite Self-
Understanding" by asking pointedly if the "artistic autonomy" she
assumes to be essential is necessarily desirable. His objections to
Tiessen's approach are expressed somewhat tentatively, hedged about
with recognitions of the accuracy of her observations. He concludes,
however, that the artist's role is not just to make familiar objects
strange, thus alerting a reluctant audience to the power of art, but to
remain morally accountable to the community, to express its values, and,
quoting T.S. Eliot, to come to know "'both a new world/And the old made
explicit'" (258). Ruth's description of his own project as novelist
defines his requirements of the artist's role more directly. He rejects
as unnecessary and less imaginative the work of the artist who "has
become disgusted with the tradition's short-comings and found it a
threat to his self-realization" (Identity 64). "The greater artistic
challenge," according to Ruth, is "to penetrate and articulate the unique
values of [the Mennonite ethos]" (63), to speak from "a centre of
conviction and commitment to that heritage" (65). His goal is to attempt
the "larger work of making the seminal values of [his] covenant-ethos
concretely 'experienceable'"(64). Such a project clearly resembles
Achebe's description of the role of the artist in the Igboland community.

Whether such a larger work of making a "covenant-ethos . . .
experienceable" could be accomplished by an individual artist working
independently is not a question that Ruth addresses directly. In fact,
having endorsed the covenantal nature of the Mennonite community, he
still does not question the right or possibility of the artist to choose to
reject his community rather than to celebrate its values. His sole
response to the sometimes unpleasant results of such a choice is to assert that moral values rank higher than aesthetic values. He does not problematize the basic opposition between individual and community.

The validity of that opposition is the concern of Jeff Gundy who consciously draws on current theories of social constructionism. The notion of socially constructed selves (de-centred subjects) "constituted in a kind of counterpoint of inherited 'languages' [as] a multiplicity of voices" (Booth summarizing Bakhtin 238) has probably not had much appeal for Mennonite critics because it undermines Christian assumptions of absolute truth, objective reality, unwavering moral standards, and the meaningfulness of individual choice as these have been traditionally articulated. In "Humility in Mennonite Literature," however, Gundy points out the similarity between the Mennonite suspicion of the exalted individual and the deconstructionist insistence that such an individual does not exist. Gundy notes that the teaching of humility (Gelassenheit) was central to the Anabaptist understanding of Christianity. Instead of seeing the artist as an individual in conflict with Gelassenheit and with the Gemeinschaft, Gundy, drawing on the Swiss Mennonite heritage of greater emphasis on humility, believes that "no artist is truly an isolated individual. Whatever the particular relation to the community, both artists and their works are inevitably and complexly linked to their social and physical environments" (11). He suggests that the modern school of thought known as 'social constructionism' affirms the Anabaptist claim that "valid interpretation and discernment take place within the community of believers, not in isolated individuals" (11). In the words of Kenneth Bruffee "the matrix of thought is not the
individual self but some community of knowledgeable peers and the vernacular language of that community" (qtd. by Gundy 21). Gundy concludes that Mennonite writers, and readers, can avoid the difficulties caused by "our habitual dualistic thinking (inner and outer, spirit and flesh, subjective and objective)" (21)---and, I would add, individual and community---by recognizing that "the interdependence and mutuality essential to the humility tradition are ontological realities as well" (20). In the words of Booth, to continue exalting the "lonely, bravely honest battler for freedom, [who] breaks the fetters of a hostile past" (250) in search of a genuine self, is to exalt what does not and cannot exist, because the very notion of the "bravely honest battler for freedom" is a communally-constructed notion.

Thus the familiar Mennonite artistic project, that of freeing the artistic individual from the constraints of a repressive, aesthetically unresponsive community, is itself proof of the social constructionist position. As Weintraub and Booth have noted, the modern conception of the self as a discrete identity that must be true "to itself" is a socially produced entity, a communally agreed-upon meaning, a product of the language we have learned to speak and the roles that we have been offered in literature and other media. Part of the cultural shock that Mennonites experienced in Canada as their isolation gradually broke down was the exposure to a concept of freedom that opposed the self to social control. It is interesting to speculate what would have happened

---

Booth takes delight in disarming Stephen's heroic stance, in Joyce's The Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man, by noting that his refusal to accept any traditions or beliefs is itself a particular social inheritance (246-50).
to the development of Mennonite art, once the rigors of pioneer living had eased, had the host society also been one organized on communal values. Then the development of the aesthetic satisfaction already present in activities characteristic of the Mennonite community (quilt-making, gardening, canning, furniture-making, telling of stories in Low German) could have continued. As it was, however, Mennonites newly educated in English and exposed to a literary culture were directed by the doctrine of the central self into seeing only a paradigm of dichotomous alternatives: to give up one’s right to belong to the community or to prostitute one’s gift for the didactic purposes of the community.

It would appear, then, that Mennonites would have a choice between allowing themselves to be constructed, defined, by the Mennonite ethos of Gelassenheit and Gemeinschaft or by the modern ethos of individualism, a choice which sounds suspiciously like the Anabaptist foundational dichotomy between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world. Even Gundy, for all his talk of ontological realities that resemble the "Anabaptist worldview, not as a deliberately chosen or rejected alternative but as the way the world works whether we like it or not" (21), nevertheless speaks of humility as "worth all the distribution we can manage" (21). Some choice evidently remains, even in a socially-constructed world.

What that choice entails is what I wish to examine in subsequent chapters. My argument is that, contrary to the initially aroused Mennonite suspicion of creative expression, Mennonite fiction can be situated within Achebe’s definition of truly communal art. Whether or
not the writers themselves recognize the extent to which they have been shaped by a Mennonite consciousness, they have created "[homes] of images" in which Mennonites can worship. Or failing that profound identification, Mennonite readers can nevertheless grasp an "alternative handle on reality" (Achebe 39) through seeing themselves in fictional communities. By presenting the continuing conflict and balance between individual and community, Mennonite writers of fiction reenact Anabaptist theology and Mennonite experience more truly than Mennonite readers have often recognized. To demonstrate that as clearly as possible I have deliberately chosen texts that reclaim, rather than reject or uncritically validate, the Mennonite birthright. While Ruth may not recognize it, from his Swiss-Mennonite perspective, several Russian-Mennonite writers have already begun the "larger work of making the seminal values of [their] covenant ethos concretely 'experienceable'" (Identity 64). Through their very probing of the tension between the self and the community they lead their readers into a modern Anabaptist experience of choosing anew to subordinate the self—or not to subordinate the self—to the values of the corporate body. In each case, that exercise of choice, however it is defined within each novel, serves to strengthen the consciousness of that corporate body. Without a clear historical perspective, however, it is too easy, given the larger society in which these novels are read, to see the delineation of the tensive balance between self and community as conforming to the Western paradigm of the self.
CHAPTER TWO

Evasion, Irony, and Mediation

For many reasons, Arnold Dyck's *Verloren in der Steppe* (five volumes, 1944-48) is the appropriate novel with which to begin my examination of the relationship between writer and engendering community as Mennonite fictional writers depict it. Dyck is not the first writer the Russian Mennonites produced: recent surveys of Russian Mennonite beginnings in literature¹ list several authors such as Bernhard Harder (poet in Russia), J.H. Janzen (educator and minister in Russia and in Canada, as well as writer of fiction), and well-known poet (among Mennonites, that is) Gerhard Loewen (pseudonym Fritz Senn). Critical evaluations of their work vary from sympathetic dismissal to determined approval, but critics generally agree that Arnold Dyck has produced the most mature work. Of Dyck's writings, *Verloren in der Steppe* (translated as *Lost in the Steppe* 1974) has received the most critical acclaim.² Furthermore, *Lost in the Steppe* directly addresses

---


² Dyck's Low German writings have also received increasing attention and Al Reimer, for one, seems to prefer Dyck's *Koop enn Bua op Reise* books ("Creation of Arnold Dyck's 'Koop Enn Bua' Characters" 257). The hilarious Low German sketches undoubtedly gained a greater popularity among Mennonite readers than did his one novel, but
the issue of the artist's relationship to the Mennonite community through the protagonist, young Hans Toews, whose greatest dream is to become a world-famous painter. That *Lost in the Steppe* finally concentrates more on Hans' desire for higher education than on his dreams of painting merely highlights the necessity for openness toward education before artistic dreams can be realized, or indeed, are even dreamed.

Arnold Dyck himself had ample reason to know of Mennonite resistance to education and to the arts. When Dyck arrived in Manitoba in August 1923, he, the former teacher from Russia, was promptly put to work on the harvest fields (Intro. to *Verloren* 5). His intentions of earning a living by drawing portraits or teaching art soon proved hopelessly "unrealistic in the harsh and uncultivated prairie environment" (Intro 5-6). In 1926 he began a career as editor and publisher, editing the *Steinbach Post* (1926-35) and the *Mennonitische Volkswarte* (1935-38), a cultural and literary magazine, and managing the the Echo Verlag, a publishing company begun by a group of former students of the Chortitza Zentralschule. The *Volkswarte* was an unprecedented venture among Mennonites, encouraging as it did writers and would-be writers from all over Canada to publish their efforts; however, the community of "twenty-five or thirty thousand was just too small to support its own periodical, no matter how popular" (G. Wiens 81), and Dyck could not continue subsidizing the magazine from his own meagre finances. The Echo Verlag survived through modest membership

*Verloren in der Steppe* has achieved recognition among German scholars as worthy of serious analysis (Hadley 199).
fees and through Dyck’s judicious publishing of works, such as his own *Verloren in der Steppe*, in volumes small enough to be sold for a dollar (Intro. 7).

On the other hand, Dyck’s experience of Mennonite attitudes toward culture and education was not all negative. Unlike the *Kanadier* among whom he lived in Canada, Dyck had grown up in Russia during the years when higher education was becoming increasingly acceptable, even encouraged. He himself had attended the *Zentralschule*, and the *Kommerzschule* before studying art in Munich and in St. Petersburg, though always under the official aim of becoming a properly trained high school teacher (Intro 5). His perceptions of the ambivalent Mennonite attitude toward education and the arts become the basis of *Lost in the Steppe*. Many of the details of his own life, as recorded in *Aus Meinem Leben* resemble the experiences of Hans in *Lost in the Steppe*.

His technique in *Lost in the Steppe* is judiciously chosen. Instead of drawing lines of open conflict between the artistic individual and an oppressive, resistant community, Dyck works within the limitations created by Mennonite attitudes toward literature and their way of life. In the first place he evades direct confrontation with Mennonite principles by presenting issues in their least threatening guise, focusing more on educational progress than on artistic endeavour, and depicting a secular community rather than a religious one. Secondly, Dyck chooses a consistently ironic, but also consistently evasive, narrative stance, so that the novel can be read simultaneously as a celebration of an earthly paradise now lost to his immigrant readers and
as a critique of the narrow prejudices characteristic of self-serving, deliberately isolated Russian Mennonite communities. The celebration is kept from shameless nostalgia with realistic descriptions of hardships and prejudices, and the critique is softened with a warm understanding of the most conservative villager. Finally, Dyck's delineation of the artistic figure emphasizes aesthetic mediation, not alienation or rejection.

To avoid the problem of freedom of creative expression by focusing on education instead would not seem, at first, to be much of an evasion of conflict, since "for the orthodox Mennonite, education implies alienation. It is seen not so much as preparation for life, but as a threat to the preservation of that life" (Hadley 200). The fear that education inevitably alienates the educated from his community and, indeed, threatens the continuity of that community is aptly summarized in a common proverb often levelled at me as a child and that I have since frequently encountered in Mennonite literature and criticism on that literature: "Je gelehrter, je vekehrter" (the more learned, the more confused or warped). *Lost in the Steppe* quotes exactly that ubiquitous proverb and on several occasions demonstrates the alienating effect of education, particularly through the sensitive relationship between Hans and his mother. Hans, the youngest of the surviving children (Mother Toews has lost six of her eight children), is particularly close to his mother. Once he attends school, however, and discovers the difference in pronunciation between the everyday Low German and the scholarly High German, Hans begins to "educate" his mother: "So when you read from Revelation again sometime . . . you must say Johannes not Johaunnes, else, I may not understand, pretty soon. Shall we speak
High German right now, Mother?" (96). For Mother Toews this rejection of her "straightforward language" for the "frivolous, mocking . . . German" constitutes a rejection of the word of God itself, and just as painful a rejection of herself by her precocious son. The "cold school" becomes something that she must "defend herself against" (97). Years later as Hans gains his wish to leave Hochfeld for Chortitza to enter the Central School, Mother Toews thinks bitterly:

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

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

What the villagers of Hochfeld understand as desirable education is a controlled process of socialization that forestalls any incipient move toward an individually defined independence. Without ever explicitly criticizing such a narrow view of learning, Dyck reveals, both directly and metaphorically, how Mennonite boundaries of experience are
established. In chapters 5 through 10, having already described five-year-old Hanschen's home, Dyck describes the surrounding yard and barn by enumerating the animals who live there. To an unsuspecting reader, especially to an exiled Mennonite who with Dyck would relive his/her own childhood in just such a village, these chapters are a pastoral delight. This is a world untouched by any evil more threatening than sparrows who steal bird houses built for starlings. The chicks are cute, if somewhat ungrateful to their "young foster father," Hans (40). The kittens are even cuter, and who wouldn't enjoy the gambols of a young puppy, a would-be "bull-biter and moon-devourer" (49)? The subtext of these chapters, however, makes it clear that village life is fully integrated, communal, and purposeful. One must either fill one's predetermined role or be ruthlessly excluded: those kittens not needed for the control of mice must be "done away with" (46). Chicks are raised into hens for the sake of eggs and Hühnerbraten (chicken dinner); piglets are fattened into "so-and-so many pounds of liver sausage, spare ribs, smoked sausage, hams, crackling, pickled meat, salted meat and so-and-so many cans of lard" (55). Hans is absolutely in agreement with this utilitarian philosophy of life. He may not enjoy helping his father "do away with" kittens, but it doesn't even occur to him to protest. In a later chapter when Hans assists with pig-butcheriing he has no difficulty, for pigs "are meant to be stabbed" (222).

The prevailing discourse of education underlines the utilitarian purpose for which each animal is included in this self-sufficient community. A kitten must learn "to accept [its] subordinate role in this
peculiar society of the two-and four-footed" (47), and if it "proves teachable, becomes housebroken, doesn't pilfer, catches mice, and lives up to its responsibilities in general" it is "conclusively accepted" (48). Even more revealing is the comment that dogs learn their "dog duties" from older, already trained dogs (50). Dyck never makes explicit this comparison between young animals learning time-honoured duties from older animals and young children learning their roles in the communities from the parents (called "the old ones" in Low German), but the parallels are obvious. Just as villagers sometimes observe that dogs, for example, are not always "endowed with all that is needed" and turn out to be "pretty dumb, bungling dogs" (50), so Hans' father sees with dismay that his middle son, Berend, does not display the usual young man's delight in "horse talk" (59).

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

All of this is not to say that Hochfeld does not allow for individual initiative or that the villagers are all alike. The Mennonite community does clearly "prescribe for the individual certain substantive personality traits, certain values, virtues and attitudes" (Weintraub xv), probably best embodied by Father Toews, who "is exactly what a humble villager should be" (301). Yet such a personality ideal allows for, perhaps even encourages, idiosyncratic differences as is amply demonstrated through Hans' friend Isaac, and Bergman's Andrei. Isaac is the novel's clown, always in difficulties at school, always with holes in his pockets, always in the middle of droll scenes that meet Hans'
boyish need to "die laughing" (285). Despite his unruly nature and lamentable lack of civilizing qualities, Isaac is "a good boy" (171) who will obviously become a full member of the community. He will swing his manure fork like the rest of the village boys. Equally a part of the community is Bergman's Andrei who, as the wild boy of the village, consorts with Russians and freely uses his fists to resolve difficulties. Yet he also does not directly challenge the values of Hochfeld or threaten its communal identity because Andrei represents "the unofficial police authority of the village, acknowledged by all the youth and the Russian workers" (183). Andrei's presence means that Mennonite farmers can avoid Russian police. In this way, his departure from the ideal of the humble Mennonite farmer, nevertheless allows that ideal to be pursued. Communal identity is all the stronger for the unifying effect of reacting with sham displeasure to slight variations within that identity.

Mennonite pedagogical practices similarly harnessed individual initiative to communal goals. Seating pupils according to achievement and examining them publicly at the end of the school term was meant to spur reluctant pupils through shame, and to motivate more gifted pupils through competition. Hermann, Hans' friend in his last year in the Hochfeld school, demonstrates clearly the continuity of communal values through such a limited appeal to individual pride. Despite the ease with which Hermann equals Hans in intellectual ability, Hermann channels his cleverness into farm management. He will take over his father's extensive farm with confidence, something even Hans recognizes as a "real achievement" (287).
Having begun the novel with a disarmingly detailed description of the integrated agricultural community, and having throughout the novel noted the village perception of education as an instrument of conformity to community ideals and purposes, Dyck nevertheless depicts education in Hans' life as a widening of horizons and a freeing of the imagination (Hadley 202). Such a distinction between the communal educational process and the very different process of education in Hans, places Hans' personality outside the boundaries of admissible individualism.

Even before Hans sets foot in the village school his already active imagination endows the cracking paint on the table leg with vivid life and sees hair-raising adventures in the grain of the wooden ceiling beams. His first trip outside Hochfeld to Kronsweide exposes him to a wilder landscape without any "evidence of human interference" (75). That glimpse into a world of beauty so different from his own "prosaic village in the steppe" (81) transforms Hans' future imaginings, and creates inner discontent over his generally beauty-deficient, entirely useful surroundings. In Kronsweide he also meets, for the first time, a boy as imaginative as himself. Jasch tells Hans fairy tales and awakens in Hans desires he can't explain; Hans has discovered "life in an uncorporeal world that lies in his own breast and isn't bound by space or time - the world of dreams" (84). From then on, since Hans has now realized that there are other ways of being in the world than what is evident in Hochfeld, he continually escapes his own circumscribed world through highly romantic dreams.

Though this early opposition between the earthy practicality of village life and Hans' wildly improbable dreams is vast, Dyck softens the
effect of Hans' unbridled imagination by making it clear that Hans has not totally fallen away from his family tree.\(^1\) After all, his brother Berend is fond of exaggerated stories and his father also willingly tells tall tales from the past (76). The family calendar, a popular source of reading material, includes stories whose veracity may not always be vouched for. The Low German culture, as a matter of fact, had a strong tradition of story-telling (Urry 154), which, as Al Reimer explains, "consisted of never-ending streams of earthy, often humorous stories, everyday experiences fancifully embroidered, homely and pungent anecdotes, parodic wordplay, irreverent character sketches, and endlessly elaborated narratives passed on from generation to generation" (Literary Voices 13, italics mine).\(^4\) The marvellous and the imaginative are not as removed from Mennonite life as the sombre public speeches of the "old ones" might suggest. Dyck thus locates the imaginative widening of Hans' horizons within the traditions of the community. What sets Hans' imaginings apart from Berend's, for example, is Hans' perpetual reaching for distant worlds of adventure and beauty whereas Berend dreams of technological inventions such as airplanes. In the growing industrialization of the Mennonite commonwealth such dreams were not all that far-fetched, nor did they threaten Mennonite identity.

\(^1\) A common proverb among Mennonites can be translated roughly as "the apple hasn't fallen far from the tree" meaning that individuals rarely depart completely from what they have inherited genetically from their parents or experienced as children.

\(^4\) Jack Thiessen's and Andreas Schroeder's collection of translated Low German stories, The Eleventh Commandment, makes this hilarious tradition of story-telling available to English-speaking readers.
Berend wants to make Mennonite life better, easier, which is acceptable; Hans wants to experience different ways of life, which is not.

His response to formal education is also different from the majority of the Hochfeld children. Granted, Dyck makes Hans a typical boy in his love of games and wrestling, and initially Hans is distinguished by no unusual ambitions. What does set him apart is his imaginative grasp of the limited material presented to him and his sensitive response to the personalities of his teachers. He is immediately drawn by the "completely alien" (105) and the beautiful. Repelled by the unfair beatings of his first teacher, and bewildered by the Russianness of the succession of Russian teachers sent to Hochfeld, Hans responds with warmth and near idolatry to Teacher Dyck. Mr. Dyck enraptures Hans by reading aloud stories and poetry until Hans makes the discovery that he can read on his own. Eagerly he devours everything available in the library, German and Russian:

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

(130)

The existence of such a dream world, so fascinating to Hans in its infinite variety and its dramatic colour, alienates Hans from his own surroundings: "Once more, as in Kronsweide, Hans quarrels with his
fate. What is Hochfeld to him, this insipid village with its straight lines and right angles . . . . Everything is a thirty-fold repetition of the same pattern" (131). His growing purpose is "to participate in the beauty and adventure, in the greatness, which the outside world has to offer" (132).

Teacher Dyck's influence furthermore determines the direction of Hans' rebellion against prosaic farm-life. Hans has realized for some time that he is different from his classmates, but he has early learned to keep his dreams to himself lest they be ridiculed or misunderstood. Then he grasps that Mr. Dyck is also a "dreamer." That sense of kinship between the two gives added impact to Hans' discovery that Mr. Dyck is also a painter: "That's a real painting, as beautiful, no, much more beautiful than those shown by passing book and picture vendors. Hans regards his teacher as a true magician. There is such a thing, then, as doing it oneself" (135). Hans' dream of becoming a world-famous painter is born. Since Mr. Dyck explains that drawing can be taught in higher schools, Hans' immediate purpose becomes more education. Altogether Mr. Dyck has a profound influence on Hans, encouraging his interest in art and in music, teaching him good morals, and declaring by example that a man can be an artist and a highly educated man without being alienated from his community.

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

However, one of Dyck's shrewd techniques in this novel is to raise a point of contention (in this case, the merits of higher education), demonstrate the seeming validity of the community position (Hans does seem to relish his own status in the school just a bit too much), and then undermine that village viewpoint with contradicting evidence, all in an ironic tone that utters approval and implies disapproval or vice versa. Thus, while Hans "isn't one of those to hide his light under a bushel" (253) he has, through Mr. Dyck's gentle coaching and through absorbing the loyalty within the community, learned that sometimes personal ambition must be submerged within the overall "honour of Hochfeld school and that of his beloved teacher" (253). Mr. Dyck himself has quietly relegated to spare time activity his own painting ambitions (likely not realizable in any case in any existing Russian Mennonite village at the time) in order to awaken in school children some greater appreciation for the arts, and to educate, gradually and tactfully, the larger village community.\(^5\) Furthermore, Dyck reveals that

\(^5\) The best example of Mr. Dyck's deft use of his education to further the cause of culture and the arts generally is his speech to the parents and school at the Christmas concert at which some of his daring innovations may have offended some of the "old ones." Mr. Dyck, the "master of language" (255), "considers cautiously and cleverly those
a good part of the suspicion with which the villagers treat the highly educated is actually mixed with deep respect. Father Toews, frequently presented as the ideal villager with his excellent farming, his warm generosity for the poor, and his strict adherence to traditional ways, yet defers willingly to the judgment of the educated (171-72). As for the matter of "pride," again Dyck uses Father Toews' perceptions to give the lie to village gossip: among the teachers that Father Toews meets at Hans' final examinations, not one "showed any sign of presumption or arrogance. On the contrary, all gladly conversed with him, unabashedly speaking Low German and treating him with the respect due an honest farmer" (307). Yet Dyck's pervasive sense of irony does not let the issue of pride rest without ambiguity. In the same mental breath that Father Toews notes the unassuming nature of the most educated teachers in the larger colony, he revels in the esteem those same "humble" teachers grant him when they discover that he is Hans' father: "Oho, he told himself, just look at that: his Hans' glory already rubs off on him, his father, and raises his social standing" (307). Pride definitely is the result of an education that allows even the barest hint of individuality; the question is whether that pride necessarily undermines the overall aims of the community. Dyck, through the characters of Mr. Dyck and Father Toews, argues that it does not.

That the furtherance of individual creativity and independent thought does not, contrary to usual Mennonite fears, destroy the questions that have occupied the old as well as some of the early aging young . . . . He says everything beautifully and convincingly, making it ring warm and true, and many are helped by it" (170).
solidarity of the community is further evident in the care with which Dyck locates Hans' strangely different nature within a developing tradition of the larger Mennonite community. Hans' mind is not set in complete opposition to all that surrounds him, but is begotten of the proclivities of his grandfather and father, and is nourished within a growing educational reform movement. Even before Hans has begun to articulate his subversive dreams, Dyck introduces us, through Hans' uncomprehending eyes, to Hans' grandfather. He is a peculiar man, silent and respected by all in the community. The little Hans suspects that Grandfather "broods over things; maybe he is a thinker" (111). His private corner in the house is full of books and papers. In a quick flash-forward Dyck shows us an older Hans, now in a high school uniform, visiting his grandfather. Berend, also with him, observes, "our little grandfather is a great man, only nobody knows it.... It has become clear to me today that we aren't different from our kind in our dislike of horse talk. Grandfather isn't interested in it either" (113). To Hans' objection that Grandfather remained a model Mennonite farmer, Berend replies, "he is a clever and efficient man, who deployed his energies in the place in which he found himself and from which he couldn't escape" (113). Hans' father is thus reasonably disposed toward education long before his sons lose themselves in books. As Mother Toews ruefully reflects, "Isn't he, rather stingy in all other things, ready for any sacrifice the school asks?" (97). When Hans then requests attendance at the higher Central School, Father Toews doesn't need all that much persuasion. It is also noteworthy that as Berend
and Hans bring books home from school, Father Toews is soon as absorbed in them as his sons.

Dyck is also careful to describe the change in general attitude toward education within the Mennonite community as a whole. At the year's end examination, the ruminations of the fathers and grandfathers demonstrate clearly that changes have occurred: they needed only to learn the catechism and basic arithmetic, while these grandchildren of theirs deal "with princes and tzars, as if [they] had herded calves with them" (254). The educational reform instituted in the last two or three generations makes it possible for Hans to appeal to precedents set by other students who have advanced to higher schools. Some have even acquired their education through colony scholarships (209). What is more, industrial progress throughout the colonies has required some members of each village to become bookkeepers and take up other professions beneficial to the community.\(^i\) Since Dyck's focus is on Hans' development he does not describe the enormous technological advances that have taken place in the Mennonite Commonwealth, other

\(^i\) On one occasion, in the face of Hans' excellent performance in school, Father Toews reflects common village assessment of higher education: village teaching "is a beautiful profession . . . , but a teacher too doesn't achieve anything, materially, all his life, and often doesn't know how to provide for his children's future. It is much worse for the bookkeepers and clerks. . . . Of course, if high school graduates continue to study in the city for many years, they also become doctors, attorneys, or engineers. That's quite something; they earn much money, can take care of their families, and are respected. And how satisfying it is to be able to speak with the doctor or lawyer in German or even in Low German" (172).

See also Urry's *None But Saints* and Adolf Ens' "Mennonite Education in Russia" for detailed discussion about the spread of education among Mennonites.
than to note briefly that Chortitza had become "a city rather than a village" (307) and that windmills no longer turned (325).

Dyck himself viewed education as the means of heightening Mennonite self-consciousness but through developing a more cosmopolitan awareness of surrounding culture rather than inculcating a blinkered conformity to tradition. In reference to Dyck's *Koop en Bua* Al Reimer states, "One gets the impression ... that Dyck thought of himself as a kind of sly and unobtrusive teacher to his people--especially to his more culturally deprived Canadian Mennonite readers--as well as a civilizing writer who tried to broaden the intellectual and cultural horizons of his readers" ("Creation" 259). The comment is just as relevant for *Lost in the Steppe*. Not only does Dyck describe Hans' growth through education, but he gives us an ideal agent for such growth, the village teacher, revealingly also named Dyck. Just as Mr. Dyck uses his yearly speeches to the village as opportunities to widen village perceptions, so Arnold Dyck uses his novel as an opportunity to widen readers' perceptions and to defuse their objections to new ideas. Nowhere is his educational purpose more evident than in his depiction of Hans' Russian teacher, Varvara Pavlovna. After a long diatribe against the prejudices of unfairly privileged Mennonites, Varvara describes to the startled Hans a vision of the worth of education that seems to be Dyck's own vision for education among his people:

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

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

That Dyck would, in his overall argument in favour of education,
include the suggestion that education would improve spiritual life, is
almost unintentionally ironic in itself, for one of Dyck’s main techniques
in defusing potential conflict between artistic individual and community
is to present the Mennonite village community as a secular community,
not a religious one. Thus those who challenge tradition are at least not
defying sacred tradition. Yet the prevailing, finally unanswerable, argument for establishing and maintaining separate communities that block out any influence of "worldly" culture, including education, has been the preservation of the Mennonite faith. Even today many Mennonites will argue that "Mennonite" is not an ethnic term, but a religious one, denoting voluntary adherence to a Mennonite church (Tiessen, "Intro" to New Quarterly 9). According to Urry, a non-Mennonite anthropologist, Mennonite is "at its core ... about faith. Mennonites live in Christian communities" (22). To participate in the culture of the host society is therefore not merely a betrayal of family customs or an abandonment of ethnic ways; it is apostasy. Mennonite historians consistently describe the various Mennonite emigrations, from Prussia and Russia, and later from Canada to Mexico and Paraguay, in religious terms. Always it is faith that determines resistance to military service, to learning Russian or English in schools, or even to changes in dress. Participation in the church is the most important activity, at least if one accepts Mennonite descriptions of themselves. Nevertheless, Lost in the Steppe, which so faithfully describes so many village activities, hardly mentions a church. Not once do we see Hans in church, though he knows his catechism backwards and forwards. That skill in the catechism becomes merely another demonstration of Hans' intellectual gifts; the beliefs uttered in it make no discernable impact on

---

1 C. Henry Smith, whose The Story of the Mennonites (published in 1941 but periodically revised since then) is "one of the most widely used general histories of Mennonites, world-wide" (Regehr 150), particularly emphasizes the religious motivations of all Mennonite exoduses. P.M. Friesen, a Russian Mennonite historian, whose work contains much primary source material, similarly bases Mennonite distinctives on religious conviction.
his life. Dyck does mention a few details about church practice: the Ohms (the ministers) lack education and must struggle to educate themselves after being appointed (118); Father Toews is precentor in the church. These are incidental facts about village life, treated with no greater reverence than facts about spring seeding or harvesting. To any one knowledgeable about Mennonite history and familiar with Mennonite fervency over small differences among the various schisms, this complete absence of religious coloration is astounding.

In place of the religious discourse we would expect, Dyck uses terms denoting tradition and race. Hans is not resisting the expectations of a religious community; he is resisting the expectations of a "hundred-year-old peasant tradition" that rejects any innovation that could threaten the ancient connection to the land (302). Again and again Dyck gives us glimpses into the villagers' instinctive, traditional reactions, but he never includes the sacred context that most Mennonites take for granted and commonly articulate. ⁸ The issue that causes Father Toews the greatest conflict when Hans declares his intention to pursue higher education is Hans' defection from the time-honoured practice of farming. To whom will he give his prosperous farm if Hans, and perhaps even Berend the avid bookworm, refuse to

---

⁸ It is possible that I am here extrapolating from my particular Mennonite heritage, which differs from Arnold Dyck's. According to the Mennonite Brethren story passed on to me by my immigrant parents, the Kirchliche Mennonites (of whom Dyck was one) had become exceedingly lax in all matters of the faith, hence the need for the pietistically influenced "Brethren" to break away. Dyck's casual references to smoking and drinking certainly suggest that his context is the more secularized Kirchliche community. However, even allowing for schismatic differences, Lost in the Steppe does seem to present an unusually secular viewpoint.
become farmers? The tradition has always been to work hard, and
purchase farms for all sons but the one who would take over the
original farm (297). Warmly as Father Toews advocates this
Bauernkultur, though, he does not view it as sacred obligation as many
Mennonites have done. Hans' rebellion is against the life of a farmer,
not against the decrees of God. For Mennonite readers that context
defuses much of the anger that could otherwise be raised.

Whereas the discourse of tradition rather than of belief makes
Hans' eventual defection from the community less controversial, the
discourse of race rather than of belief makes Hans' complete defection
impossible, and therefore less of a threat. Dyck's choice of the term
"German" rather than "Mennonite" (not once does he use the word
"Mennonite") ignores complex questions of origin and ethnicity: the
Mennonite knowledge of German culture was second-hand at best, and
the German language itself was adopted rather pragmatically during
their development of an ethnic identity. What is important here is that
Dyck's choice of the term "German" rather than "Mennonite" makes Hans' identity very much a matter of birth and of inherited culture. Racial identity is not easily erased, particularly when one sees oneself as part

---

9 In using the term "German" rather than "Mennonite", Dyck was following a trend already well-established as many Mennonites, in the wake of Russian reforms that challenged separate identity, chose to strengthen ties with German Lutheran colonies and to articulate "more clearly than previously the connection between the German language, their customs and institutions, and their religious identity" (Urry 261). Epp, in Mennonite Exodus, similarly explains the value the German language gained in Russia: "these Germanized Mennonites automatically became a part of, and were identified with, a much larger German populace in Russia. . . . Surrounded by an alien and less developed culture, it was natural for the Mennonites to cultivate their heritage and to solidify into a strong sociological group in the German tradition" (12).
of a race that is superior, a Mennonite assumption that Dyck acknowledges throughout the novel, though, unlike some other emigre Mennonite writers such as Gerhard Toews in *Heimat in Flammen* and *Heimat in Trümmern*, Dyck makes every effort to present the Russians in as favourable a light as possible. In his discussion of the antagonisms between Russians and Mennonites he mentions economic injustices but emphasizes primarily basic differences in culture and in patterns of thinking: "Marya Ivanovna embodied the Russian being, while the village community represented a far deeper consciousness of the German nature than she realized, or deeper than one would have thought possible after a hundred years of lostness in the Russian steppe" (106). The effect of such discourse is to anchor Hans rather firmly within his ethnic community, despite his desires to experience the wider world. It is telling that Hans' escapist dreams are always peopled with Germans (147). Despite Varvara's passionate dream of educated Mennonites acting as mediators between Russians and Germans, such mediation, if Hans attempts it, which is doubtful, is not likely to blur his sense of being German.

In this context, Dyck's brief glimpses into the future acquire particular relevance, for if anything else was yet lacking to cement the Mennonite sense of a peculiar identity, the experiences of the Revolution fulfilled that lack. The child Hans is merely bewildered by the "problem" of the untrustworthy, hostile Russians; the young man, Hans, whom we see only briefly, is bitterly confirmed in his loyalty to his people:
They [his grandfather's books and papers] were burnt when all Russia burned, when the hundred-year-old house with the blue-edged white shutters, with grandmother's chest and grandfather's corner cabinet went up in flames, when all of Neuhorst was reduced to ashes.

It is good that the old man did not see all that. If, like his grandson, he had been forced to stand before the burning Neuhorst, before the smoking ruins of all the other colony villages, and before the countless graves of those overtaken by this cruel destruction, he would have joined his grandson in a bitter accusation of those who, a hundred years ago in Danzig, caused the emigrant wagons to roll.

(114)

Typically Dyck allows the reader to extrapolate from such juxtapositions of past, present, and future. These painful flash-forwards occur even before Hans' dreams of becoming a painter and seeing the wide world have turned to ambitions. Toward the end of the novel, however, the references to Russian-German antagonism increase and the reader cannot help remembering what will happen, especially when Hans, in conversation with Berend about his leaving Hochfeld, finally expresses his growing fear of the Russians: "Berend, they will kill us all one day... I want to leave here, and I want you and father and mother and everybody to go away, else they will kill us all" (329). Dyck has abruptly conflated Hans' individual need to leave Hochfeld with the Mennonites' need to leave Russia, thus implying Hans' continuing ties with his people. Hans imagines that he "wants Hochfeld to remain
behind completely" (351), but Dyck has given us sufficient evidence to convince us that Hans will take his Mennonite/German legacy with him.

Dyck's cautiously ambiguous stance toward the controversy inherent in the tension between artistic individual and shaping community is most evident through his complex, distanced, ironic narrator. The few critics who have dealt with Arnold Dyck have noted his "artistic Abstand" (J.Thiessen 83) without giving it much further analysis. Warren Kliewer has begun the task by discussing the point of view in the opening chapter of *Lost in the Steppe*. Kliewer aptly points out the skill with which Dyck creates a resonant gap between the childish perceptions of the five-year-old Hans and our adult perceptions of the death of Hans' little sister. However, I disagree with Kliewer's assertion that *Lost in the Steppe* is narrated by a child (85). The centre of consciousness for most of the novel does appear to be Hans (the diction and perceptions accordingly reflect the growing maturity of Hans), but the narrator provides adult as well as childish perspectives. Al Reimer's discussion of Dyck's ironic narrative stance is more helpful. He suggests that Hans' limited boyish perspective is widened by "the sophisticated author who is at every step aware of the social, ethical, and philosophical implications which accompany the boy's largely instinctive and subconscious exploration of his environment and of himself" ("Experience" 232). Reimer thus locates the irony in the differing perspectives (Hans' and the "mature recording voice's" (232)), but is restricted by the comprehensive focus of the article to noting only one instance of the "ironic interplay" (232). I would like to expand on Reimer's observations by exploring in some detail the narrator's
rendition of many sometimes opposing perspectives, seemingly without taking sides.

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

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

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

   More obvious, though still never bitter, is the irony arising out of the narrator's frequent adoption of other characters' viewpoints. In keeping with the novel's focus on education the differing viewpoints with their implied opposition appear most often in scenes at the schoolhouse. Sometimes the narrator frankly expresses the thoughts of the villagers: "But in the case of the Loewens and the Ennses it's pride, nothing but pride. They consider themselves better than the other villagers and carry their noses two inches higher than is proper for farm people. And that's just what Hans Toews is becoming" (301). More frequently the narrator chooses to enter the consciousness of Father Toews or Mother Toews in order to expose through them the general
village perspective: "should he take him to Chortitza? The question is not so much the expense, but what will become of the boy later on. Such educated ones are spoiled for farming" (172). Father Toews, particularly, becomes a figure of fun without losing his respectability, since the narrator treats Father Toews as he does Hans, beginning with Father Toews' respectable thoughts and then gradually letting his own urbaine voice emerge. For example, during the winter months Father Toews has time on his hands. At first the narrator simply relays facts that could be objective reporting, but could also be Father's thoughts: "Then he sits in the corner room again, with outstretched legs, and reads. He would really have liked a pillow behind his back, but mother doesn't tolerate that .... Before he read in the Bible only, but with the years and as his sons grow up, he too has become more 'worldly'"(159). The wish for comfort is certainly Father's, but what about his worldliness? Then the irony becomes particularly delicious, as the narrator catalogues Father's changing reading materials:

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

Berend, the rascal, laughs up his sleeve for having seduced his father to sin, and because he now has 'got his man' as far as the matter of books is concerned. (159)

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

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

And the old grandfathers, with the furrowed faces, faded hair, and stern eyes, that haven't felt a tear in six decades because it wasn't allowed, because one was a man, had to be a man because they too, the third generation since Danzig, still had to struggle hard - what are their thoughts at the sound of 'Silent night, holy night,' sung softly and appealingly as never before? (169)
These serious, seemingly objective evaluations serve to place the mainly comedic account of Hans' developing personality into a larger perspective. It is not that the narrator thus trivializes Hans' struggles (his omniscient descriptions of some of Hans' experiences are as moving as anything he says of the larger Mennonite colony), but that he creates a balance between mockery and sympathy.

That careful balance is really the tour de force of Dyck's narrator. The villagers are exposed as narrow and uninformed, but also well-meaning, shaped by very harsh circumstances, and about to be placed into yet another crucible of hatred and war. Hans is presented as a sensitive, artistic figure caught in a stiflingly narrow community, but also as fun-loving boy ready for any prank and delighted with the simple pleasures of village life. The very structure of the novel supports this balance: serious discussions about art or education are followed by chapters of mostly farcical activity: Hans' unfortunate attempt at spring riding is followed by a trip to the city in which he sees his first real painting; epiphany is followed by the carnival of pig-killing. What that balance means for the reader is an intimacy with Hans and with the villagers that resembles family ties, that is, healthy family ties that let love outweigh and outlaugh the inevitable conflicts of interest.

Dyck does not, however, evade the question of the importance of art, nor does he minimize the imperatives of the artistic personality. He does temper his serious assertions about art with ironic wit (usually directed against the substitution of artificiality for art), yet what disarms the usual Mennonite resistance to artistic pursuits is Dyck's
focus on the aesthetic and mediative benefits of art, rather than on the prophetic, disturbing role that art often fulfils. In doing so, Dyck has established something of a pattern for subsequent artists to follow as a means of educating their Mennonite audiences into a greater sensitivity for and appreciation of works of art. Hildi Tiessen, in "The Role of Art and Literature in Mennonite Self-Understanding," has traced that "route by which the fine arts could create for themselves a place within the Mennonite community" (235). She suggests that by "aestheticizing objects, customs, and modes of speech which have conventionally served to define Mennonite identity" (235) Mennonite artists have divorced those objects and customs from their utilitarian purpose and context, thus leading their audiences to perceive them as art objects with line and form and colour and structure, but not necessarily as art objects that threaten the Mennonite identity or way of life. The very familiarity of those objects actually serves to strengthen the Mennonite identity. Her analysis of Lost in the Steppe as an example of how the Mennonite artist has worked within the familiar in order to extend Mennonite boundaries of acceptance is very helpful. She points out, for example, that the Hochfeld community already had an appreciation for the beautiful art object, but still needed to veil that appreciation with labels of functionality. Thus "sugarthings", as Dyck's suave narrator explains after a digressive explanation of how little Mennonites actually use sugar, "do not exist because of the sugar, but stand empty and unused decade after decade in the china cabinet of the great room because of their external splendour" (25). In the same way, the women take delight in embroidered pillows heaped to the ceiling on their guest beds. The
pillows have an ostensible use, as does the beautiful "big coal oil lamp
with the spherical shade of dimmed glass" (25), but their real value is
their decorative function. Plain and "bare of pictures" (11) as Hans' home is, it is not without signs of a developing aesthetic sense. As
artist figure, then, Hans does not wish to criticise his world so much as
he wishes to enrich it with beauty. He is more interested in noting
colour and line than in challenging values—or endorsing them, for that
matter. His taste appears to be strongly romantic. His response to
nature favours the sublime, rather than the beautiful (the Dnieper falls,
the forests free from "human interference" (75), the kaleidoscopic colour
and disorder of the Russian villages). The paintings that move him so
profoundly are landscapes with the heightened shadows and latent
intensity of emotion characteristic of romanticism. A further indication
of Hans' romantic bent is the content of his dream world: gypsies,
fairies, princesses, knights, and other figures of adventure. Hans
himself becomes something of a romantic figure as Dyck describes his
increasing dissociation from his village friends and his reluctance to
share his dreams with them. He stands apart, isolated by a sensibility
that no one else, even the inventive and clever Berend, can share (339).

Whether Dyck also sees this artist figure as romantic in the sense of
assuming prophetic stature is debatable. Mennonite experience is not
unconnected to the prophet. Their very history has been shaped by
individuals who dared to stand against the society around them and
declare, "This is what the Lord says!" While the more ethnicized
Mennonite society that Dyck depicts had grown wary of prophets, it still
revered truth. Hence Mennonites were prepared to tolerate only two
forms of fiction: wildly improbable romance "so exotic . . . it could not possibly be confused with 'real' life," and didactic works that proclaimed divine truth (Reimer, "Experience" 222). The secular nature of the Mennonite community Dyck presents precludes the didactic purpose of art, and, in any case, one cannot imagine the romantic Hans ever thinking about religious instruction through art. Yet, distanced romance is not what Hans really wants to paint. The only picture we see him imagining himself creating is one of astounding realism (the little Hans on horseback in the corn field) and the impetus for its conception is the harsh reality of Hans' own farm life (213–14). Hans' discovery that the subject of art need not be "something grand or something remote" (213) could be a defence of Dyck's own writings. Like Hans, Dyck is letting "those on the outside find out that there are such boys and how hard they must struggle" (214). If this suggests that Hans (and Dyck himself— the autobiographical note in Lost in the Steppe is strong) is assuming the prophetic stance, concerned about conveying truth and challenging communal values, it is only a very brief suggestion. Immediately after his epiphanic discovery of art's varied contents, Hans is lost in his usual contemplation of colour and forms in the evening sky of the steppe. As Dyck's description of the sunset reaches poetic intensity, Hans is busy interpreting the clouds into castles and dragons and threatened kings' daughters. Having just introduced the possibility of art's disturbing reflection of truth, Dyck draws back and maintains instead the aesthetic figure, not the prophet. Subsequent Mennonite authors will not be as tactful.
Dyck's mediative stance throughout is made explicit in his specific
descriptions of the function of the aesthetic sense. Mr. Dyck becomes
his spokesman and model for extolling an appreciation of beauty as a
medium of virtue and redemption. Before Mr. Dyck arrives, school has
become a place of unjust beatings and empty recitations that "little
advanced [Hans'] spirit" (126); he hated his German teacher and mocked
his Russian teacher. But Mr. Dyck is different:

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

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

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

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

Dyck's act of writing Lost in the Steppe is, in some ways, a
demonstration of just such a mediative act of reconciling unreconcilable
opposites. Through evading direct presentation of the conflict between
aesthetic expression and religious tradition, and veiling his implicit
criticism of the narrow parochialism of the Russian Mennonite
communities in a subtle irony comprehensible only to those already
prepared to accept its conclusions, Dyck makes it possible for his
Mennonite readers to accept his novel as a validation of communal
identity, not a threat. He has thus maintained a role within the
community without sacrificing aesthetic integrity.
In *Lost in the Steppe* itself, however, the realization of such an ideal union of aesthetic escape and realistic struggle, of free artistic expression and community acceptance, remains as evanescent as the lark’s song. Hadley reads *Lost in the Steppe* as expressing a valiant struggle against "a closed society's self-estrangement and fear" (200) adding that survival in such circumstances "demands that one overcome the obstacles, or else escape. But escape, as with Dyck’s protagonist, means denial of the culture one has been nurtured to preserve" (401). That, it seems to me, is painting the cultural conflict in unnecessarily clashing colours. Dyck has throughout maintained a precarious ambiguity, alternately emphasizing Hans’ resentment against the peasant tradition he has been born into and Hans’ appreciation of the soil:

Lightning-like, the great moments which the tilled field has given to him to experience through the changing of the season, come to his memory - the thrilling of the lark in spring, the beating of the quail, the scent of the border hay, the rustling and the running waves of the green grain, the singing and sounding of the ripening crop, the golden yellow stubble. He has forgotten all the grief, which the land certainly has brought him. Ah, Hans doesn’t really know how intimately he has become bound to the soil . . . .

(352)

What is more, Dyck has gone to some lengths, not only to demonstrate Hans’ adaptation to that peasant tradition, but also to demonstrate how much Hans is a product of the changes taking place within that tradition. The increased opportunities for education make it possible for
Hans to leave Hochfeld, just as economic progress creates increasing prosperity and the leisure with which to indulge aesthetic inclinations. That Hans should envision his first picture to be a painting of a small boy in a Hochfeld cornfield indicates his connectedness to his own roots, an admission that his "inner equilibrium" depends upon an acceptance of "past suffering" together with a pleasure born of "the satisfaction felt after a piece of hard but purposeful work had been completed" (265). That is one reading of *Lost in the Steppe*.

The essence of Dyck's subtle art is that Hadley's sense of painful conflict between Hans and the community he must leave can also be supported by the text. As Hans prepares to leave the village to go to Chortitza he "gets a notion that the world, the small Hochfeld world . . . takes damned little notice of his leaving" but "if nobody needs him here, he doesn't need anybody either . . . . Hans says it not without bitterness, but with a spontaneously rising feeling of defiance" (351). The only ties he finally recognizes as worth retaining are his family ties, and his family members, with the notable exception of his mother, have supported or at least recognized his gifts. Berend, as a matter of fact, articulates most clearly Hans' dilemma as he persuades Father Toews to let Hans go: "He, Berend, knowing Hans, feared that Hans would sooner or later break up and fly away, because with his passionate nature he would in time not be able to withstand his inner urge. That's why it would be better and more intelligent to let the boy go into the world in an orderly way . . ." (298). The temporary "equilibrium" that Hans achieves at the end of the harvest, a seemingly approved equilibrium, is thus elsewhere undercut by the narrator: "Hans
has once more lost his inner balance. He has recently gotten away from his artistic considerations, after he lost faith in his ability and because he lacked encouragement" (338). For one of Hans’ nature, equilibrium is not a good to be sought; it will always remain temporary.

While a similar, delicate equilibrium between sturdy individualism and strong communal conformity (such as has always existed in Mennonite community), has been maintained in Dyck’s novel, one senses that it is an unstable equilibrium. Had Dyck, for instance, placed a boy of Hans’ temperament within the Dietrich Harms family, open conflict would have been inevitable. Or had Dyck chosen to make the sacrificial Berend (who reluctantly chose to remain on the farm so that Hans could leave (327)) the protagonist, whatever equilibrium could have been achieved would have been at great personal cost and too volatile to maintain.

It is those other stories with their theological and personal depths, the ones that Dyck deftly avoids, that Rudy Wiebe, in his two earliest Mennonite novels, dares to write. In doing so, Wiebe explores, much more directly and confrontationally than Dyck, the value and inherent instability of an equilibrium between individuality and communal. Before I discuss Wiebe’s novels, however, I want to examine a recent re-visioning of the probable fate of the Hanschens within the Russian Mennonite community, Al Reimer’s My Harp Is Turned to Mourning.
CHAPTER THREE
Potent Prophets and Impotent Artists

Examining Al Reimer's *My Harp is Turned To Mourning* is important not so much for the value of the novel as literature as for its explicit articulation of the dilemma of the Mennonite artist. Together with Reimer's critical discussion of the relationship of the Mennonite artist with his community and selected early Mennonite novels whose plots Reimer deliberately continues or re-capitulates, *My Harp Is Turned To Mourning* gives us a clear formulation of the problems faced by a writer or painter whose originating community rejects creative expression. Reimer's novel is published in 1985, but as an historical novel it grapples with the problematic role of the Mennonite artist in the era described by Arnold Dyck and in the subsequent years of the Russian Revolution. What is more, Reimer foregrounds the disturbing, prophetic role of the artist that Dyck so carefully avoided and that Rudy Wiebe so instinctively assumed. Thus, my seeming leap in a chronological discussion of Mennonite fiction is designed to give added understanding to Rudy Wiebe's task in 1962 when he published *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, the first Mennonite novel written in English and without the familiar nostalgic Germanic gloss.

Reimer's critical discussions of the Mennonite artist's dilemma receive clearest articulation in his latest publication, *Mennonite Literary*
Voices: Past and Present (1993). In his final chapter "To Whom Are the Voices Speaking?" Reimer endorses the long critical tradition of seeing the artist as "divinely inspired, a bearer of the highest truths" (56). As such a prophet, the artist has "access to insights and forms of knowledge that do not necessarily come from the collective experience and communal wisdom sanctioned by the community" (63). Thus, while he agrees with Ruth's call to Mennonite artists to "wrestle through the issues in the artist's personal encounter with a special tradition" (Ruth, Identity 43), Reimer assumes that that wrestling may end in a repudiation of much of that tradition:

That is a chance the artist of integrity must take, and that means exercising autonomy as an artist, to be free of even the most reasonable or cherished "scruples" in his/her tradition. . . . What the artist creates should come from the power of his imagination and be guided only by his sense of artistic integrity, that is, the degree of personal commitment he is prepared to make, the extent to which he is willing to accept or reject the values of the community. (62-63)

Reimer acknowledges the truth of Gundy's assertion "that no artist is truly an isolated individual. Whatever the particular relation to the community, both artists and their works are inevitably and complexly linked to their social and physical world environment" (Reimer 61-62), but he argues that that truth does not prevent an artist from challenging his environment. Indeed, he points out that the environment in which Russian-Mennonite writers have cut their literary
teeth, including both the Western literary tradition in which the "literate artist is by nature and calling an outsider" (60), and the particular heritage of the Russian-Mennonite formulation of faith, fosters the "individual ego at odds with the group mentality in important ways as a critic, probe, exposé, and ... celebrator" (61). Reimer thus advocates a complex definition of the artist that nullifies the critical quarrel over the Mennonite artist's role in his community. The Russian-Mennonite artist is not called to choose between remaining inarticulate within his community and exiling himself by his opposition to the community. The very faith he appears to deny has originally called him to be a prophet. No prophet is welcome in his home town, however, especially when he clothes his prophetic utterances in the aesthetic dress declared anathema to his home-town's values. That artistic role of prophet is what Reimer explores in his own prophetic gesture, *My Harp Is Turned To Mourning*.

Reimer's most obvious first step as prophetic artist is to reveal the unaesthetic core of the Mennonite community. In this exposure of its indifference toward beauty and artistic creativity, Reimer's approach resembles Arnold Dyck's in *Lost in the Steppe*. Just as the creator of Hans Toews focused on the bare walls of Hans' house and on the pragmatic mind-set of the Mennonites of Hochfeld, so the creator of Wilhelm Fast (who, like Hans, is a would-be famous artist) focuses on "a tiny Mennonite village [Blumenau] in the middle of nowhere, a drab, empty place where there is little for the senses to feed on—no beauty, no art, no real variety of life" (116). Wilhelm's Russian art teacher in the Mennonite high school at Halbstadt characterizes Mennonite villagers
as ignorant of "art and beauty" since they are raised in "ruthless conformity," are taught "stern self-denial," and are preoccupied with "monotonous toil" (45). Wilhelm's father demonstrates the resultant pragmatism in his curt response to Willy's early nature sketches, "Na, boy... aren't you a little old to be drawing flowers and birds? Leave that for the [high school] girls in Halbstadt. Maybe it's time you stopped mooning around with your pencils and crayons and got on with something useful" (51). Such an atmosphere of hostility toward art creates a handicap for Wilhelm that he despair of ever overcoming. In a conversation with the beautiful, cultured Clara Bock, he bursts out, "Here I am with my undeveloped senses, my narrow range of sensory experience, my vocabulary as an artist far too limited. It's like trying to write poetry with the words of a peasant, or painting pictures with your toes" (117). Dyck's protagonist has felt a similar "cultural inferiority" as Wilhelm calls it (Harp 117), but in the deliberately secular atmosphere of Lost in the Steppe, Dyck never allowed Hans to articulate the spiritual basis of that cultural inferiority.

Reimer, on the other hand, does not avoid the troubling relationship between the lack of aesthetic sensitivity among Mennonites and the rigid formulations of their faith. In part, the Mennonite suspicion of the arts rests on an unquestioning acceptance of their agricultural economy as God's will for them. Given that Wilhelm's father, "like other Mennonite farmers... believed in his land in the same direct way he believed in God" and worked it as "a sacred trust, a divine command from the Almighty" (49), Wilhelm's dreams of painting
pictures instead of taking over the family _Wirtschaft_ can be nothing but apostasy.

An even more insurmountable spiritual objection to Wilhelm's pursuit of art is his own conviction that an artist cannot accept the "uncompromising attitude" of the Mennonite believer and still be true to his artistic vision. To see life in black and white terms only, as Mennonites do ("believe it or be damned" {118}), is, declares Wilhelm, "death for the artist. He must remain detached, uncommitted.... An artist can't be a _dogmatic_ believer. He mustn't be forced to take sides, not even in religion. His faith must be in his own vision as an artist" (118). Such spiritual neutrality is absolutely unthinkable for a Mennonite, particularly for one raised in the then prevalent atmosphere of spiritual revival, who listens to and believes the passionate sermons of Erdmann Lepp who presents all of life as a preparation for the Second Coming (69).

Furthermore, the very basis of the separate colonies of Mennonites is the fervent fear of worldliness. As the chapters written in the voice of Daniel Fast (Wilhelm's great-great-grandfather) demonstrate, the prevailing passion of the Mennonites is to establish a pure church, to remain in "isolation from the world" (79). Only by complete separation from everything that might contaminate believers could the Mennonites remain pure. While the original intent of such separation was surely to avoid outright sin, over the generations the resultant physical and political separation bred an intensely ethno-centric mind-set that rejected every cultural practice not specifically Mennonite as worldly. Living all their lives in small self-contained villages, Mennonites
developed "shells that protected their view of themselves as a superior, privileged people in a land they still considered somewhat suspect after living in it for over a century" (207). Such a narrow view of life is inappropriate for an artist, as Wilhelm realizes when he joins the medical corps in the early days of World War I. No honest artist, intent on reflecting and refracting all of life, can be content with blocking evil out of his consciousness, whether that evil is perpetrated by non-Mennonites or Mennonites. As he tells his holy friend, Jacob Priess, "If I'm ever going to be an artist . . . than [sic] I've got to drink my cup—all of it—no matter what's in it. . . . If I don't I'll never develop the courage, the emotional toughness, a real artist must have" (211).

The problem is that his strict Mennonite upbringing with "its accepted prejudices" and its "church and community conformism rooted in a carefully prepared soil of custom, rules, and tradition" (207) makes him recoil from much of what he experiences. In his high school days, his art teacher derides Wilhelm's "false style," his tendency to portray his world as "larger than life, as an unsullied paradise on earth because that's the way he's been taught to see it" (45). Wilhelm's conclusion is that he must take his art teacher's advice to get out "into the world if he [wants] to become a real artist" (207). It is not sufficient to sample the Russian way of life and culture, as he does in his year at the art academy in St. Petersburg, to acquire a veneer of sophistication and remain a Mennonite underneath (207). What is needed is to "cut himself loose, and not just see how far the rope would stretch" (207).

Reimer thus faces without hedging the conflict between art and faith (which Wilhelm sees as a conflict between religious conformity and
individual vision) that Mennonite values make inevitable. Wilhelm's conclusion that only leaving the protective Mennonite shell would enable him to become an artist appears to be substantiated by his own experience. He accepts his assignment in the AZU (medical corps) as a needed step, not only of honest Christian caring in a world torn apart by war, but also of entrance into the world hitherto just sampled. Only after Wilhelm has endured numerous train trips to the front and a direct shell attack that wounds him, is he able to produce worthwhile art. The drawings he pours forth in an orgy of sketching while home on recovery leave are the first that ever satisfied his ideals. Years later, after active service in the Mennonite Self-Defense and then in the White army, Wilhelm finds these sketches, and recognizes them as "really first-rate, drawings brilliantly alive and dynamic even if, paradoxically, their subjects were images of violence and killing in war" (411). Their quality proves Wilhelm's earlier bitter conclusion that he would never become a true artist unless he left his community entirely.

Ultimately, however, Reimer leaves the tensive relationship between Mennonite faith and artistic endeavour almost as unresolved as it is in Dyck's Lost in the Steppe. Dyck's protagonist, at the end of the novel, is about to leave for school, a step he considers as a momentous step into the world, but we never know whether Hans actually left the Mennonite values he has so clearly internalized. Wilhelm, of course, leaves the security of his Mennonite village in far more dramatic fashion. Indeed, the Mennonite village life as he knows it is almost entirely destroyed by anarchist bands. His artistic dreams, however, are equally destroyed. Even as he gazes at his drawings, seen again
after years of wandering and fighting with the White Army during which his beloved wife, pregnant at the time, has been raped and murdered by pillagers, he concludes bitterly that these drawings are of no use in a world gone mad. Without having shown any of those drawings to anyone else Wilhelm throws them all into the stream behind his father's old barn, convinced that his former idealistic dream of making "something of lasting beauty and worth for his world" (412) is dead.

Understandable as that repudiation of his artistic self is it leaves the whole vexed question of art against faith, individual against community, unanswered. Would Wilhelm have been able to achieve artistic greatness if the Mennonite commonwealth had remained intact? Or would he have had to sever himself from his roots in order to achieve success? Now that his community, so to speak, is no more, he is free to paint, but ironically is no longer able to paint. Instead he returns to his devastated family and takes up the traditional role of farming again. Granted, the epilogue gives us a maturer, healed Wilhelm now living in Canada, prepared, after some years of farming, to take up an artist's career in Winnipeg. The details here, however, exhibit greater faithfulness to the actual circumstances of the lives of known Mennonite artists than to the artistic unity of the novel itself. The problem is that after Wilhelm's grandiose descriptions of his artistic dreams (descriptions that remain vague and never include specific

\[\text{\textsuperscript{1}}\] Wilhelm's life resembles both Klassen, the sculpturer, and Arnold Dyck, the writer. Klassen spent the war years serving in the train ambulance service, but unlike Wilhelm refused to join the Self-Defense units (Loewen, "Letters" 34). Arnold Dyck also served in the medical corps, then joined the Self-Defense, and later immigrated to Canada, beginning his life there as a farmer (\textit{Aus Meinem Leben} 482-500).
details about techniques or subject matter) and his equally theatrical renunciation of his dreams, Reimer's abbreviated account of Wilhelm's return to drawing and his willingness to work for a commercial art firm (435) fails to capture our imagination.

On the other hand, it is only fair to acknowledge that Wilhelm's career as artist takes up a relatively small portion of the novel. The issue of the artist's relationship to his community achieves its full development only in the light of Reimer's much broader exploration of the role of prophecy as a whole in the Mennonite community and even in the wider scope of Russian history.

That Willy's dreams of an artistic career have a prophetic dimension to them never suggested in the life of Hans Toews, Dyck's artistic figure, is evident early in the novel. No sooner has Wilhelm's art teacher given voice to Wilhelm's unspoken ambitions than his friend hails him, "Hey, Rembrandt, you look like an Old Testament prophet with a vision" (46). Wilhelm himself, as a student in St. Petersburg, sees his art as a "vision," even a "religion." His one brief interval of success as artist is signalled by the freedom of his drawing, as though his pencil moves of its own accord. He is now inspired: "his inner channels, his secret, vital channels had been opened at last, as though by some unbidden force" (255). When Wilhelm finally destroys those "brilliantly alive and dynamic" pictures, he does so because "the self that believed that through his art he could make something of lasting beauty and worth for his world" is now lost (412). That "confident air of assertion . . . the bold faith in life" expressed even in the early days of "war's insanity" is now gone (411). The vision has proved to
be useless, inoperative. As he rides the train that takes him from his homeland to a new existence in Canada he smiles "at the memory of his father relegating art to an idle pastime for schoolgirls. In Papa's world it had been so. And now in his as well. In Canada he would be too busy carving out a new life--as a farmer probably--to concern himself with such chimeras as drawing and painting" (426). It would appear that the prophetic role of artist that Wilhelm envisions for himself is inherently a luxury--inappropriate at best, useless at worst.

Wilhelm as prophet, however, must be viewed in conjunction with other key prophets in the novel. Daniel Fast, for example, the great-great grandfather of Wilhelm, is the embodiment of that early Mennonite vision of a pure church which in later stages made Wilhelm's effort to break away from Mennonite isolationism so difficult. The dream Daniel Fast brought from Prussia was to establish a "closed community of pure believers" that cared about "true discipleship as practised in the Early Church. No man could enter the Kingdom by himself, but only together with his brother" (79). That Gemeinschaft, the very essence of the religious community, Fast thought, could be established and maintained only by rigid codes of conduct and strict conformity, even though membership into the Gemeinschaft was granted only upon individual decision. Ironically, Fast's experiences with that closed community soon demonstrate that purity is not achieved through isolation and that the very desire for purity, based as it is on individual conscience and individual experience of God's grace, gives rise to individual dissent.

As Fast leads a splinter-group of dissatisfied church members into the formation of a new church, then endures the subsequent
disruptiveness of false visions of the End Times, and finally accepts his own excommunication, Reimer uses Fast's bitter reflections to expose the inherent instability of the original vision. Fast finally concludes that if all their efforts to separate themselves lead only to material progress then "the quiet path to God" he wanted to build has become instead "a highway to the world," paved with "spiritual pride" (140). Fast, the prophet with a dream, has seen that dream turn in upon itself and produce the opposite of what it was supposed to.

Fast's successor to prophetic utterance, in Reimer's novel, is Erdmann Lepp. Aware from boyhood on that he is "set apart from others, as consecrated to a sacred destiny . . . as personally marked by the warm finger of the Almighty" (169), Lepp pursues his dream with a fanaticism that is matched only by Makhno, the Ukrainian peasant anarchist leader who destroyed the Mennonite way of life, with whom Lepp is deliberately compared. Lepp's dream is to bring the gospel of Christ to the Russian peasants, a proselytization specifically forbidden by the Tsarist government, and fearfully viewed by the comfortably separated Mennonites worried about what to do with Russian converts. With a fearless disregard both for the threat of imprisonment by the government, and for the cautious reprimands of his fellow Mennonite preachers who are more interested in maintaining special Mennonite privileges than in preaching to the despised Russian peasants, Lepp preaches on, passionately, hypnotically. Through the vicissitudes of World War I and the chaotic brutality of the revolution that follows, Lepp tirelessly pursues his vision of winning countless souls "among false believers [renegade Mennonites] and heathen non-believers" (182).
As educated as Wilhelm is and more widely travelled, Lepp mingles easily and without fear of "worldliness" among Russian nobility, among Christians of various churches and nationalities, and among peasants, yet maintains his identity as Mennonite—if that identity is seen in terms of fidelity to the early Anabaptist ideals rather than to the ethnic insularity of most Russian Mennonites. Toward the end of the novel, when he has encountered the fiery Makhno himself and survived, he becomes known as a starets, the Russian word for prophet, or holy man. Always a tall, lean man he is finally identified by his blazing yet loving eyes, and his powerful voice, rushing "like the wind through tree-tops" (396), a clear symbolic connection with the Holy Spirit. As such a Spirit-filled prophet, Lepp directly confronts not only the violent Makhnovites but his fellow Mennonites, who he claims have become fat and complacent in their worldly prosperity. He sees the inconsistencies and narrowness of the Mennonite community as clearly as the disillusioned, confused Wilhelm does, and yet Lepp clings unwaveringly to his faith, to his vision.

Lepp's alter-ego, the fiery, ruthless Makhno, leader of the anarchist group that repeatedly plundered Mennonite communities, whom earlier Mennonite writers present as an incarnation of unmitigated evil, is, in this novel, not only justified to some extent for his behaviour but also given prophetic dimensions. Relating the dramatic confrontation between them, Lepp later admits to Wilhelm that Makhno also is a suffering human being, finally provoked to murderous rage (420). In the "black stinking hole" of Butyrki Prison Makhno shapes his vision and his plan of action: "He would form his own activist group, a pure
anarchist group of peasants and workers. . . . Liberty, equality, solidarity! The sacred principles of revolutionary anarchism. A free brotherhood of peasants" (262-63). Just as old Daniel Fast rejected the Babylonian evil of his Prussian birthplace to form a dream of a pure and holy community, and just as Lepp rejects the complacent cautious materialism of his Mennonite heritage to envision a widespread revival in Russia during this "prelude to Armageddon" (280), so Makhno rejects the servitude of his peasant way of life to envision a new brotherhood of justice governed by those immediately concerned. The loyalty he inspires in his followers is akin to the loyalty of disciples to their prophets, their gurus. Nikolai Fast, in his first meeting with Makhno, recognizes him as a "relentless idealist . . . . A fanatic, yes, but a tough-minded fanatic born practical. A dreamer for whom the truth would always have the force and finality of a bullet through the brain" (333), someone whose "cause would give meaning to his life as nothing ever had" (339). Makhno's mission was "peasant freedom" (335), freedom from "so-called civilization with its cities and governments and churches and burzhui culture" that is nothing but "exploitation based on greed and hypocrisy" (395).

To expose injustice, exploitation, and sterile materialism, and to present an alternative dream of a better way of life has always been the role of a prophet, whether that prophet articulates his dream in specifically religious terms or in artistic terms. In My Harp is Turned to Mourning, Reimer makes all his prophets, Daniel Fast, Erdmann Lepp, Nestor Makhno, and Wilhelm Fast rail against the materialistic, often hypocritically self-preserving, blind Mennonite community. Those who
follow these prophets do so because the vision appeals to their sense of justice, their selfless love of other people. Fast has his friends (admittedly few, but Mennonites do not flock to the side of the excommunicated); Lepp has his disciples, Jacob Priess and others who become martyrs at the hands of Makhno; and Makhno has his loyal followers including Wilhelm’s brother, Nikolai, who rides against his fellow Mennonites determined to fight for "a free, natural, self-contained agrarian society. . . . The Mennonites had always pretended that they had that kind of system, but of course it was all sham and pretence. The church and the big landowners in the volost had all the control" (305). Even Wilhelm, whose barely articulated artistic vision seems impotent in this time of extreme conditions and even more extreme remedies, has his followers, notably his wife, Katya. They plan to "start a school together, a special school devoted to the finer things . . . . something new and wonderful for [their] Mennonite bauernkultur . . . " (294).²

The presentation of these prophets and their visions allows Reimer to accomplish two things, both of which I believe are deliberate goals. In the first place, Reimer uses these prophetic characters to articulate

² Only in this briefly noted dream does Reimer pick up Dyck’s theme of art as mediation, aesthetics as education. Actual works of art in My Harp either remain impotently hidden, if they are Mennonite (Wilhelm’s drawing of the school children in the bottom desk drawer of an abandoned school {411}, his portfolio of war drawings concealed under the bed in his family farmhouse {411}), or, if they are Russian, they are very public like the architecture in St. Petersburg that draws rapturous exclamations from the educated Bocks and Wilhelm (94-5) but only a disdainful, "all this wealth and magnificence, after all, belonged to Satan’s kingdom," from Erdmann Lepp (180). Art, in this last sense, is not mediative but inflammatory.
his own prophetic analysis of the Mennonite way of life, his own community of origin. It is in this connection that his detailed historical account of the revolutionary years (as crucial to the Mennonite identity as the Exodus or the Holocaust is to the Jewish identity) is finally more important than his discussion of the problems of the artistic protagonist. His re-telling of the Mennonite understanding of its own paradise in Ukraine and its own Armageddon-like fall into the hands of the evil one allows him to question the Mennonite values that form the historical basis of the present Mennonite communities in Canada.

Most obviously, Reimer exposes the inherent futility and essential anti-Christ-likeness of the Mennonite assumption that purity can be achieved through separation from the world. Daniel Fast's reminiscences about the power struggles within the early Russian Mennonite churches give ample evidence that to build "separate little worlds" (140) is a mistake. For one thing, he recognizes that to despise the worldly state and yet depend on that worldly state for protection and privilege is not a complete separation from the world at all. \(^1\) He also recognizes that to "live in our little world like ducks on a pond, without ever letting the fox get near us" is also inadequate, since the fox "knows how to coax the ducks to the shore" (140). The essence of worldliness—the struggle for power and the grasp for material security—is within the

\(^1\) While Daniel Fast himself evades the moral ramifications of accepting protection from a world one rejects (141), Reimer includes several discussions among Mennonite students in Petersburg, and with P.M. Friesen, the actual Mennonite historian, that raise the issue of the selfishness inherent in the Mennonite stance of isolation. Throughout the novel Reimer makes it clear that the Mennonite support of the Tsarist government, and later of the German occupation troops, is entirely selfish and completely ignores the larger problems of Russia.
Mennonite community itself, not in some alien culture. His bitter acknowledgement that the principle of separation has merely provided safety in which to "build bigger wirtschaften and richer estates" reaches forward to condemn all Mennonite communities that similarly refuse to involve themselves in what they define as worldliness yet grow fat in the safety of their isolation. It is an inconsistency that Rudy Wiebe points to with more direct language and more immediate application in Peace Shall Destroy Many. Daniel Fast's words are echoed later by the equally perceptive and prophetic Erdmann Lepp:

The greatest sin of temptation for Christians is to avoid exposure to hostility and oppression, to seal themselves safely off from the world, as we Mennonites have done here in Russia. I sometimes think that what we have created here is not really an image of God's will but an illusory world created by the collective Mennonite will in defiance of God's will. (421)

In his depiction of the wealthy industrial empire built up by August Bock, Sr., and the prosperous Loewen estate at Voronaya, Reimer exposes the evils inherent in that illusory world in order to undermine the basic Mennonite assumption that prosperity is the result of God's blessing on their dream of isolated, pure communities. Through the angry voices of Makhno, once an abused employee on the Loewen estate,

---

4 Nikolai Fast also denounces that inconsistency, labelling Mennonites as "arrogant people of alien race and culture" who "like parasites ... have sucked themselves fat on the backs of the Russian peasant and worker" all the while seeking additional privileges that allow them to solidify their "state within a state" (160).
and Marusya, once a despised maid at the Bock residence, Reimer makes it clear that Mennonite prosperity rests as much on exploitation as on Mennonite diligence and faithful tilling of the soil. Even as Reimer does illustrate the "lack of order and industry," the "slovenliness, and lack of ambition" in the Russian peasant (126), he also points out that the Mennonites were originally given much larger tracts of land than the peasant had ever dreamt of. Political privilege, not divine blessing, is the source of the Mennonite wealth, and narrow prejudice against the peasant, not Christian charity, is the result of that privilege.

In this sharp critique, Reimer differs strikingly from Gerhard Toews, whose two novels, *Die Heimat in Flammen* and *Die Heimat in Trümmer*, depict the same political events that *My Harp* does. Toews relates the dismay of the Mennonite farmers as their property and their whole secure world is turned upside-down by the newly-formed soviets, by wholesale confiscation of their animals and personal wealth, and then by the wanton destruction carried out by Makhnovites. Throughout the sometimes excellent descriptions of the mayhem and murder, Toews remains firmly within the narrow viewpoint of the Mennonite victims and does not seem able to recognize the provocation of rich isolated communities in the midst of abject poverty and oppression. The Russian peasants in Toews' novels are, for the most part, child-like and foolish, unable to do anything useful with property even when it is given to them. The only good Russians in these novels are those who have adopted German diligence and thrift. The Mennonite men who form the *Selbstschutz* (Self-Defense) become heroes, their acts of violence and
even bitter revenge all justified. Their prejudice against Russian peasants and against all things communist is uncritically presented.

In contrast, *My Harp* unflatteringly shows both the understandable desire for physical protection and the greedy clinging to wealth that gave rise to the Self-Defense units. Reimer does not hesitate to point out the possessive arrogance of Snapper Loewen (as Wilhelm's close friend he is mostly a sympathetic character) as he leads a group of estate-owners' sons on recovery raids when the German occupation army sends the Bolshevik officials and the Makhnovites into temporary hiding. Though Reimer does not condemn all the Mennonites as abusively as his character, Nikolai, does, he still gives ample evidence that Mennonites have, in the words of Erdmann Lepp, been "peacetakers" not peacemakers (421). That unfortunate selfishness has led directly to the hitherto unknown act of becoming "peacebreakers" (421).

Pacifism, the "sacred Mennonite practice of nonresistance" (224), the refusal to bear arms, had been in the words of Father Fast "an example for a quarrelsome world since Anabaptist times" (224). In daring to criticize that stance, Reimer most clearly takes upon himself the role of prophet. Through the contrast between Wilhelm Fast, who at the outbreak of World War I joins the Red Cross, and his black-sheep brother, Nikolai, who enlists in the Russian army, Reimer asks some difficult questions about the meaning of pacifism. Is pacifism really a selfish evasion of involvement in the wider world as Nikolai maintains (163)? Wilhelm asks himself the same disturbing question: "was he enjoying the grace of God [instead of 'obscene cuts in his belly'] only
because he was a Mennonite and didn't have to fight at the front? . . .
What had he done to earn that exemption other than get himself born a
Mennonite?" (236).

In parallel descents Wilhelm and Nikolai are forced to test their
visions of war and peace against reality. Nikolai is captured by the
Germans, endures years of forced labour in Germany, returns to Russia,
rides briefly with Marusya's bandits, and then joins Makhno in his
anarchist dream of bringing change through "violent, fundamental
upheaval" (240). Wilhelm is wounded at the front, then, after recovery,
returns home to Blumenau, only to be driven into the Selbstschutz by
Snapper's persuasions, by the fearful ravages of anarchy around them,
and finally by the horrible knowledge that Nikolai's association with
Makhno enabled him to spare the life of their uncle. Whereas Toews'
novels simply glorified the Mennonite boys who took up arms (and later
Mennonite theologians and historians have flatly condemned the move
toward self-defense5), Reimer uses Wilhelm's agonizing self-examination
to explore with sensitivity the problematic nature of pacifism. Perhaps,
Wilhelm thinks, a simple refusal to bear arms under any circumstances
was an oversimplification, "a state of self-righteous, hypocritical
passiveness" (354) that allowed him to keep his own hands clean while
depending on others to enforce order.

Alternating between scenes of Nikolai participating in violence
even as he deplores the need for it and of Wilhelm equally involved in

5 "The Selbstschutz action was later officially condemned by Mennonite
conferences as a tactical blunder as well as a violation of biblical peace
principles" (Epp, Mennonite Exodus 35).
violence though more involuntarily, Reimer demonstrates great understanding for those who choose violence even as he carefully reveals its ultimate futility and its betrayal of principle. In one poignant scene, Reimer portrays Wilhelm's first close fight against Makhno, in which he unknowingly shoots his brother, Nikolai, giving him a star-shaped wound in the palm of one hand, that Nikolai thereafter treats with almost superstitious awe. In yet another scene of departure from Mennonite principles, August Bock tries to justify (or conceal) his manufacture of shells and gun carriages in such a way that he will not damage his relationship with the bruderschaft. For Bock, "the respect of [the] Mennonite people and--above all--the spiritual benefits of the church" are worth more than his "firm and all the money and power it has brought [him]" (266). It is Lepp's voice that finally seems to conclude the pacifist debate as he differentiates between peacemaking and peacetaking, noting that passive peacetaking eventually leads to peacebreaking, not to redemptive witness (421).

Having thus used his prophetic characters to denounce the insularity and narrowness of the Mennonite community, Reimer concludes the novel with scenes of closure for each main character. Some of these scenes have a satisfying inevitability about them; others suggest a manipulation of characters and plot for the sake of a final prophetic statement. Daniel Fast's painfully disillusioned evaluation of his protectionist dream of purity in isolation is not a problem, since it is
The depiction of Fast's last days on earth, spent helplessly on his comfortable \textit{wirtschaft} (now run by his son), filled by guilt-ridden efforts to make sense of his life is emotionally convincing as well. It seems logical that those who take the concepts of \textit{Gemeinschaft} and \textit{Gelassenheit} seriously should develop just such an agonizing habit of spiritual introspection.

That Makhno's dream of creating a brotherhood of free peasants through violence ends in military defeat, his troops decimated by typhus, is also historically accurate. Makhno dies in Paris, "his lungs ... rotting like a carcass in the sun" (436), without friends, without anything to show for his once powerful dream. He never does quite understand why his vision of peace and community couldn't be established through his violent efforts. Makhno's final thoughts are not related to the welfare of the peasants whom he claimed to speak for, but of Katya Loewen whom he had worshipped and lusted after.

Reimer gives the collapse of Makhno's prophetic vision an additional sense of futility through Nikolai's more lucid last words. Even as Makhno still maintains some power an increasingly disillusioned Nikolai concludes Makhno's anarchism is just "words in the wind" (399). His earlier reluctance to set the "red cock" over the prosperous Mennonite farms becomes, on his death-bed, a complete repudiation of Makhno: "I can see now that Makhno ... was just a brigand. Wanted

---

\footnote{Reimer clearly followed historical accounts of splinter-groups among the Mennonites, and even the prevalence of hysterical visions about the Second Comming are well-documented. See Urry, chapters 3 and 10, and P.M. Friesen's \textit{The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia}, which gives details of church conflicts (92-93) that correspond closely to Reimer's account.}
to steal what he could from a bourgeois world he despised but also feared. Tried to destroy it because he didn't understand it" (409). What makes Nikolai's death less grim than Makhno's later existence in exile in Paris is that Clara Bock, daughter of the hated rich industrialist, is his nurse. She soothes and comforts him, thus demonstrating the forgiveness of the enemy that Anabaptist teaching had always stressed, and that Nikolai had always mocked as self-serving. The coincidence of Clara's presence in the makeshift hospital where Nikolai dies is even more incredible than Nikolai's earlier presence at the scene of Clara's rape by Marusya's bandit followers, but it does suggest Reimer's basic commitment to Anabaptist theology and practice.

The closure that Reimer gives to his protagonist, Wilhelm, is probably the most unsatisfying of all. The bewilderment of the hasty flight out of Russia and the heart-rending farewells to those few of the Fast family who decide to stay in Blumenau are historically accurate and emotionally honest. After all that Wilhelm has endured, particularly the death of his raped wife Katya, his utter discouragement is credible: "he had nothing left to clutch to himself. Neither the impervious blanket of faith that warmed his mother, nor the mystic trust that kept an Erdmann Lepp following God's pillar of fire in an insane land" (426). His career as an artist had been "stillborn, dead before it ever started" (432). What is less credible is the sudden appearance of his former love, Clara Bock, on the same train out of Russia. Their conversation about previous events, Nikolai's death and Clara's rape, does tie up all the loose ends as the characters now learn things about each other that we have known all along. It would have been well, I think, to have left
the story there, with just a suggestion that new faith and hope might appear again.

Instead, in the epilogue, "The Bread of Exile: 1933," Reimer informs us that Wilhelm and Clara now live in Canada, and are about to move into the big city of Winnipeg. Wilhelm will begin a career as commercial artist, and will also "paint portraits for Mennonites of means" (436). Does that imply that Wilhelm's dream of committing himself to art, abandoned as useless in the war-torn steppes of Ukraine, is nevertheless still a valid vision? Is this final glimpse of Wilhelm an answer to the questions raised throughout the novel about connections between faith and art? The difficulty is that, as one reviewer noted, "Wilhelm Fast remains thinly drawn, his private conflicts regarding vocation . . . being rather perfunctorily rendered" (Beck 91). There are moments when Reimer's depiction of Wilhelm's inner turmoil about his community and his faith conveys the same intensity as his descriptions of Wilhelm's great-great-grandfather's self-analysis. That brief resemblance gives us a glimpse into the sort of conflict that Mennonite artists, shaped by Gemeinschaft and Gelassenheit as they were, must have felt. Toward the end of the novel, however, as historical events take precedence, Wilhelm is indeed "thinly drawn." That Wilhelm should finally become a commercial artist coincides well with the actual ambitions of Arnold Dyck when he first emigrated to Canada, but it seems an impotent end to Wilhelm's originally lofty visions, perhaps because those lofty visions remained more lofty than concrete.

On the other hand, Lepp's final appearance (and he has the last word in the novel so to speak) is entirely fitting. Pursuing his dreams
of preaching the gospel to Russians to the bitter end, Lepp knows very well that he will be "an anachronism in Soviet society . . . a cog in the machine as obsolete as Makhno" (422). Nevertheless Lepp remains in Russia, living finally in the worst of all labour camps, Solovki, as a "wild-eyed, half-crazy starets" preaching "like an angel to anyone willing to listen, including the hard-bitten guards" (438). While not many treat him seriously, he has "become to many there a living symbol of hope. As long as this starets lived and poured out the honey of his words, they knew that not everything was lost for them either" (438).

Lepp is certainly an unevenly developed character. His early appearances, when he poses such a threat to Wilhelm's peace of mind, evoke ambivalent reactions. He seems to be entirely the mad prophet, ridiculous in his single-minded drive to convert the nation. His love affair with the Countess Mathilde is not only quite incredible but also needless, a bit of sensationalism that does not fit in with his character as a whole. Yet toward the end of the novel "Lepp gathers strength and plausibility . . . and eventually emerges as a towering figure of indomitable faith, awesome courage, and deepened compassion" (Giesbrecht 258). Since his vision is the only one that remains (not counting Wilhelm's unconvincing return to artistic endeavour, and not counting the briefest of glimpses of Mother Fast's naive Gelassenheit), My Harp finally endorses the essential beliefs that underlie the Mennonite way of life. Lepp is the only one who successfully turns the other cheek and who, for that reason only, remains alive and still preaching.
That final sorting out of prophetic visions raises the question of prophetic role of *My Harp* itself in the current Mennonite community out of which Reimer writes. Since he has so deliberately raised the prophetic dimension of art in this very Mennonite novel, as well as in his critical writings, it is only reasonable to ask how well this novel performs as a prophetic act. As Ervin Beck noted in his review for the Mennonite Quarterly Review, "*My Harp is Turned to Mourning* is a book that had to be written. It will probably shape our knowledge of Russian Mennonite history for many years to come, since more Mennonites will read (and believe) this novel than they will scholarly books or MQR articles on the subject" (91). Since the novel consciously incorporates the themes and events of early novels such as those of Gerhard Toews and Arnold Dyck, and retells in more coherent and overarching fashion those stories that we, as present Mennonite readers, heard our fathers and mothers tell, it is not only "a book that had to be written" but it is a book that must be read.

For that very reason I would suggest that the novel functions more as a written form of oral tradition, a story of a people, than as a prophetic text. Its criticism is directed at a generation of Mennonites already gone. The present generation, within the church, within the ethnic community, has routinely re-evaluated critically the Russian era and questioned the whole basis of that separated Mennonite commonwealth. Reimer's novel simply places those questions--and their already accepted answers--in a fictional context. While it is still too recent a novel to allow for general comments about its function within the community, to my knowledge the novel has been immensely popular.
Reviews have all mentioned its content favourably, even if many have been critical of its artistic unity. It has raised none of the anguished opposition that Rudy Wiebe's first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, provoked among Mennonites stung by the implication that their separated world had not been, and was not, paradise.¹

However, whether or not *My Harp* is a failure in its declared aim of prophetically examining the Mennonite community, it does succeed in its second goal of laying bare the continuing tradition of prophecy among the Dutch-Russian Mennonites. The numerous prophetic voices in *My Harp* do more than just criticize the Mennonite falling away from grace or resist the pull of conformity in their community: their very existence testifies to a stubborn individualism that exists among those most concerned about the Mennonite way of life. As Daniel Fast, that embodiment of the Mennonite Weltanschauung, so clearly demonstrates, Mennonite beliefs encourage the examination of individual conscience and support individual action against the community if that action arises out of redemptive purposes. Thus, while the official voices of the community condemn someone like Nikolai Fast out of hand, he is, in actuality, true to the Mennonite ethos. His rebellious examination of Mennonite beliefs and condemnation of Mennonite hypocrisy have been nurtured by his heritage. Selfishness and pride are anathema, of course, since the individual ego has no place in a community composed of those who have submitted themselves to the discipline of the

¹ In 1962 physical separation was an immediate issue. In 1990 it remains an immediate issue only for Mennonite colonies in Mexico and South America, not for the largely integrated, more urbanized Mennonites of Canada.
community. But that community was originally, and theoretically still is, composed of those who chose to belong, and hence a spirit of individualism and redemptive dissent remains. As Magdalene Redekop notes, "The writers who are on the periphery, challenging the very idea of being Mennonite, may paradoxically be the most true to the spirit of the Reformation dissenters" (Prairie Fire 46). Reimer's many prophets testify that that spirit of Reformation dissent is both officially suppressed and essentially encouraged within the Mennonite community. It is in the presentation of this paradox that My Harp is most useful.

Nevertheless it is only fair to admit that Reimer is able to say what he does about the Russian experience because it has now become safe within the Mennonite community to criticise that past experience. As Rudy Wiebe discovered in 1962 when he published Peace Shall Destroy Many, the truly prophetic dissident is not welcomed in his home town.
CHAPTER FOUR

Being in the World as Mennonite

After the early literary efforts by German-speaking authors such as Arnold Dyck, Gerhard Toews, and Gerhard Friesen (poet), "an era in Mennonite writing had come to an end" (Loewen, "Beginnings" 123). These writers (all of them Russländer) had focused largely on the Mennonite colonies in Russia in an attempt to come to terms with the loss of a homeland and the destruction of a way of life. Hence, as Hildi Tiessen notes, as long as these early Mennonite creative writers retained the mother tongues, Mennonite communities were prepared to read their work. The pragmatic, literally honest soul of the Mennonite may have been briefly bothered by the intrinsic frivolity of fiction, but ultimately the "intimate expressions of Mennonite community life, written in either mother tongue, tended to assert the cohesiveness and unique identity of the Canadian Mennonite community" ("Shibboleth" 179). As the popularity of Dyck’s Koop und Bua sketches testifies, Mennonites welcomed a familiarly glossed picture of a separated people. The choice of Low German, a language specific to the Mennonites and rich with its evocation of the rituals of daily life, strengthened ethnic identity and set at a distance the threat of the worldly world. Rudy Wiebe, however, with the publication of Peace Shall Destroy Many in 1962, began a new era of Mennonite writing. He wrote in English, as did the numerous
writers who followed, and shifted the focus "from a description of loss and destruction of a physical homeland to a reflection upon questions of identity as individuals and as a people and Mennonite values in a modern society" (Loewen, "Beginnings" 123).

Wiebe's first novel, Peace Shall Destroy Many, and his second specifically Mennonite novel, The Blue Mountains of China (1970), are of crucial importance for the developing body of Mennonite literature as a whole: Wiebe has often been seen as the one who dared to break the unspoken prohibition against realistic and public analysis, through artistic depiction, of the Mennonite way of life. His novels are of particular importance in understanding the seemingly unavoidable conflict between fulfilling one's aesthetic potential and submerging one's individuality within communal conformity. I would argue that both of Wiebe's Mennonite novels, far from establishing the intrinsic value of the individual over that of the community or emphasizing the separation of the individual from the community, actually define the individual as inextricably part of the community. What Wiebe does in these novels, without ever bothering to address the controversial position of an author within a resistant Mennonite community, is to lay out several ways of being in the Mennonite world and to ask Thom in Peace Shall Destroy Many, and then the reader in The Blue Mountains of China, to

---

1 Al Reimer, for example, suggests that Wiebe "almost single-handedly" started the "prophetic-visionary mode of Mennonite writing" (Literary Voices 23) and created "a Mennonite literary world real enough and spacious enough to make it possible and indeed respectable for other writers to 'write Mennonite' even if they were themselves no longer practising Mennonites. He gave them a literary context in which to express Mennonite experience never before accessible to the creative imagination" (25). Kasdorf also quotes writers such as Patrick Friesen and David Waltner-Toews on Wiebe's influence.
choose among those ways of being. The terms of the choice are clearly
determined by the tensive balance of Anabaptist thinking that places
eternal value on individual conscience yet cannot imagine that
conscience as functioning except in integral relationship to the
Gemeinschaft. Wiebe's technique is to establish the possibility (indeed,
the necessity) of choice and then to offer roles in the community among
which to choose. Thus the self, in Wiebe's Mennonite world, is not an
autonomous human being, who "sets the law unto [himself], who follows
[his] self-given norms" (Weintraub xiii), but a personality seeking an
"exemplary way of being human" (Weintraub xv) within the Gemeinschaft,
patterning itself after the role model that comes closest to the ultimate
ideal of Christ himself.

Peace Shall Destroy Many, Wiebe's first novel, is didactic and
overt in its depiction of the choices available in salvaging a seemingly
threatened Mennonite birthright. Whatever techniques of evasion Arnold
Dyck used in Lost in the Steppe—a focus on ethnic identity instead of
religious belief, an ironic, ambiguous presentation of the delicate balance
between individualism and conformity, and a definition of aesthetic
activity as mediative and healing—Rudy Wiebe ignores entirely. Long
before increasing education and urbanization had made Reimer's critique
of the Russian past a necessary step in preserving an identity that
could no longer conflate faith and ethnicity, Wiebe directly challenged
the familiar theological reasoning that made existing ethnicity sacred.
Instead of defusing the potential conflicts between the sensitive
individual and an unresponsive, even oppressive, community threatened
by the individual's refusal to conform (as Dyck does), Wiebe deliberately
heightens that tension in order to recover the original Anabaptist vision.

By ignoring the importance of ethnic customs with their unifying effect and focusing instead on religious beliefs, Wiebe appeals rather directly to the Mennonite reader's convictions of conscience, and invites the non-Mennonite reader similarly to "respond to the interweaving of religious and secular imperatives" (Keith, "Voice" 89). Whereas Arnold Dyck's protagonist, Hans, quarrels with his Mennonite fate because of the lack of beauty, the lack of intellectual development, the peasant tradition of farming, and the simplicity of the Mennonite way of being (all part of Mennonite ethnic identity), Wiebe's protagonist, young Thom Wiens, is completely in accord with the outward manifestations of Mennonitism. As a farmer who senses "within himself the strength of his forefathers who had plowed and subdued the earth before him" (12), who comprehends "by instinct . . . the world of work" around him (83), Thom exults in his relationship to the land (18), and has no quarrel with the dictum of "children, stay frugal and decent"; he cannot "see how there might be a better formula for life" (33). Quite unlike Dyck's imaginative protagonist, Thom is not at all drawn by the outside world. The alluring Razia Tantamount, the ultimate outsider who reads Ernest Hemingway and smokes cigarettes, has no particular effect on Thom. He does not rebel either against the centrality of the Wapiti church. As a loyal church member who knows within himself the experience of standing "separate yet united, one body crying with one voice to the one great known worthy of worship" (50), whose soul responds
automatically to the familiar hymns (79), Thom is the complete insider, a Mennonite among Mennonites.

What Thom does learn to question is the way the Wapiti Mennonite community lives out its religious beliefs. Whatever pattern of behaviour receives theological justification is probed for its faithfulness to Scriptural principles. In the very first chapter when Wiebe raises the matter of pacifism, Thom thinks through the Mennonite stance against war and concludes that Christ's teaching about loving one's enemies is true and "truth [necessitates] following" (13). He does not question this basis of Mennonite existence that belief must be demonstrated in action. Throughout the novel, as Thom faces crucial problems, his inner conflicts are not depicted as an individual's rebellion against the narrow, unsophisticated customs of his community but as a responsible believer's effort to translate known Biblical truth into action.

Such a sincere, religious questioner as protagonist inevitablyforegrounds the tension between individual conscience and religious traditions, a tension that has existed throughout the history of the Mennonites. Wiebe does not hesitate to make that tension explicit in private and public dialogue. Again and again Thom contrasts Pete Block's frequent unthinking "Papa says" with his friend Joseph's conviction that "a man has to follow what he cannot but see as the truth" (71). Deacon Block, so clearly the spokesman of the religious community, summarizes the traditional position: "the great matters of moral and spiritual discipline have been laid down once and for all in the Bible and our fathers have told us how we should act according to them. They cannot change" (202). Thom, on the other hand, realizes
that the essence of being Mennonite is to give personal assent to whichever traditions one chooses to follow, and asks, "should one talk about Mennonite tradition before one spoke of the only possible basis for that tradition: the personal commitment to Christ?" (178–9). The erosion of Thom’s confidence in the tradition of the fathers occurs not because Thom feels personally oppressed by those traditions, or because he is irresistibly attracted by "worldly" traditions, but because he sees gaps in integrity in those who profess to uphold those traditions. The unloving isolation and then excommunication of Herman Paetkau for no clear Biblical reason, the prejudice against the "breeds" which seems inextricably entwined with the need for more land and the desire for a comfortable retention of customs, and finally Block’s inhumane treatment of his own family and others that results in unthinkable sin are the catalysts in Thom’s gradual disillusionment. In his examination of every doctrine held sacred by his community, Thom is not influenced by the worldly education and aesthetic pursuits traditional Mennonites feared. Instead his initial implicit trust in the tradition of the fathers is eroded by his thoughtful examination of Scripture in the context of daily living, exactly the conduct advocated by the Mennonite leaders in Wapiti and by the Mennonite readers who nevertheless denounced Peace Shall Destroy Many.

In his direct confrontation with the very basis of Mennonite exclusivity, Wiebe adopts the stance of passionate prophet. He does not merely depict, as Dyck does with such gentle, evasive irony, the erosion of traditional faith that could follow from the pursuit of education and aesthetic expression; Wiebe’s novel enacts that distancing. His aesthetic
activity, the act of writing and publishing the novel, is not at all meditative. It is inflammatory. Peace Shall Destroy Many in its stance and in its effect resembles the prophetic books of the Old Testament. Through dialogue and through plot, Wiebe criticizes prevalent attitudes among Mennonites and bases that criticism on the authoritative Word of God. Whatever doubts characters may raise about the validity of certain actions or even about their own ability to believe, none ever questions the authority of the Bible.

That assumed authority allows Wiebe to develop dramatic juxtapositions of pious words and impious deeds. His irony is not an evasion or a device of aesthetic ambiguity as it is for Dyck: it is an abrasive lashing of conscience. At the school Christmas concert, Deacon Block, who has recently bribed and threatened the whole half-breed community into moving away, speaks blandly about "the peace [they] experience here now... undisturbed by the world" (233). Similarly other church members seem unaware of the irony of sending David Wiens to India to preach the Gospel out of love for all people all the while staring aloofly at neighbouring Indians and Métis "as they would at any good land that needed clearing" (30).

---

\(^2\) In "The Skull in the Swamp," a retrospective on Peace Shall Destroy Many, Wiebe comments ruefully that publishing what he knew and "could imagine about life" was "a dangerous act" (9). The novel was published in September, 1962 when Wiebe was "living in Winnipeg and editing a weekly church paper." By March, 1963, he "was no longer editor and by August... had left Canada" ("Skull" 8). Though he had been an influential and recognized man in Mennonite Brethren circles, readers accused him of degrading Mennonites, of spilling out personal venom, and of betraying the values of his heritage ("Skull" 16-18).
The persistent foregrounding of such gaps between word and deed develops an apocalyptic sense of impending doom as Thom's family gradually learns to put into words their troubled awareness of Deacon Block's ultimately selfish domination of the community. Thom's fearsome dream of the burning bush around Wapiti that toppled "trees like patriarchs" (164) and Mrs. Wiens' dread that "too many things would have to break" (216) if non-Mennonites were to be admitted to the church prophesy the explosion of violence at the end of the novel that appears as a kind of final judgment on Block and his unthinking followers.

While Wiebe judiciously keeps the centre of consciousness primarily within Thom rather than writing as omniscient narrator, the prophetic application of the novel to all Mennonites is clear. The defensive yelps of pain from Mennonite churches across Canada when the novel was published (and the efforts to identify the specific church Wiebe must have had in mind) demonstrate more than just the prevailing Mennonite inability at the time to distinguish fiction from fact. Clearly the novel was received in the same manner that the Old Testament prophets meant their visual parables and stories to be received--as a direct call to see the conflict between personal devotion to God and the traditions of the selfishly materialistic community.

In this prophetic denunciation of what being Mennonite has come to mean and in his call to a more profound and Biblical definition of being Mennonite, Wiebe focuses on three controversial issues: the use of the German language, the geographical isolation of Mennonite communities, and the rejection of violence, particularly military violence.
All three issues concern identity through separation, preservation through exclusion. All three are presented as dilemmas that require personal choice and personal responsibility even within the Gemeinschaft.

Language has functioned throughout Mennonite history as a technique of separation (Tiessen, "Shibboleth" 175-177): whenever the host society began to impose educational standards and insist that Mennonites learn the language, the most conservative of them moved to another country. Magdalene Redekop notes that the separated life of purity that has always been a Mennonite goal has traditionally been viewed as possible only through a separated language. From the first Anabaptist move from Holland "into the swamps near Danzig" where the believers "spoke Dutch in a German-speaking area" through the subsequent moves to Russia and then to Canada and to Paraguay, it was not so much the language itself as its difference from the host society that was theologically important ("Translated" 100-101). As Deacon Block declares so emphatically early in Peace Shall Destroy Many, "all of us agree that our children know the Bible and the traditions of our fathers because we have been separated from the worldly influences which bother many other Mennonite churches. We also know that much of this separation has been brought about because we have held to the German language" (59). As the medium of expression within the community and the determiner of who can participate in that community, language is thus the most sacred of the community's self-definitions.

While later novelists and poets such as Armin Wiebe, Patrick Friesen, Di Brandt, and numerous others use syntax and vocabulary to
suggest the language used by a given speaker, Wiebe's challenge to theological justifications for linguistic separation necessitates a direct explanation of the languages spoken by his Mennonite characters and in what contexts:

The peculiar Russian Mennonite use of three languages caused no difficulties for there were inviolable, though unstated, conventions as to when each was spoken. High German was always used when speaking of religious matters and as a gesture of politeness towards strangers; a Low German dialect was spoken in the mundane matters of everyday living; the young people spoke English almost exclusively among themselves. (20)

Linguistic contexts are determined by unstated principles of exclusion and inclusion. High German elevates faith (and discourages realistic questioning) by excluding the everyday; English, as the language of education, includes ideas not acceptable to the older people of the community who deliberately refuse to learn English, allowing one spokesman to transact necessary business with the outside world (57). Wiebe highlights the social and theological implications of linguistic contexts by noting the unusual: Thom's awkwardness in clothing religious concepts in the "unaccustomed suit of workday English" (16) for the benefit of his small brother; Block's refusal to make such a transition, preferring to shift to High German to answer Thom's questions about tradition (201); Thom's choice of English to order young Hal out of hearing range of a tense discussion (67).
Contrary to what we might expect and what Wapiti Mennonites seem to believe, language does not necessarily determine the speaker's perspective. After all Deacon Block, who is fluent in English while most of the older men are not (57), is still the most conservative of all the Mennonites. In keeping with his emphasis on choice throughout, Wiebe demonstrates that a speaker may choose a new perspective through choosing a language. Joseph Dueck, for example, chooses to speak English at an outdoor meeting for the young people (itself a startling innovation subject to criticism) in order that the listening Métis and Indians might understand his discussion about living out the love of God. He is held responsible for the effects of that choice on the community. In an ironic foreshadowing of the criticism that Peace Shall Destroy Many aroused, Joseph is taken to task publicly by Deacon Block for daring to break traditional language rules: "You took pains to speak a language they could all understand to slander our church?" (60).\(^1\)

Joseph's defense that he wanted to spread God's word to "unbelievers living beside [them]" (58) is brushed aside by Deacon Block's passionate appeal to maintain a "witness in the land" by remaining "firm in the ways of our fathers" (59).

The moral responsibility underneath seemingly customary decisions about language is further underlined through the exposure of private motives. Joseph Dueck, pointing out the inconsistency of supporting a

---

\(^1\) In "The Skull in the Swamp" Wiebe quotes the words of an MB minister: "You have pointed out some of the dark spots in the history of our people, leaving the reader under the impression, that this is the general situation. Nothing is being said in defence of our people. It is like washing ones [sic] dirty wash in the front yard of a neighbour" (16).
missionary in India (who must, after all, learn the language of the "heathen" there in order to preach to them) while refusing to speak in a language the nearby Indians and Métis can understand, suggests that the church is really concerned about its reputation for being a missionary church (58). Their goal is to appear to be preaching the Gospel while maintaining traditional prejudices against those who do not share the Mennonite passion for hard work and cleanliness. Thom's effort to continue Joseph's Bible class with Métis children eventually exposes the unsavoury reasons for and results of Mennonite insistence on separation through language. Pete Block, son of Deacon Block, articulates Thom's hitherto repressed misgivings about his activity among the Métis children: "They can't join our church.... You know they could never become members of our Mennonite Church.... They're just not like us" (194). Herman, who marries Madeleine Moosomin, is excommunicated from the church, even though Madeleine has become a Christian.\(^1\) Deacon Block eventually bribes the whole Moosomin family to move away. Thom, his soul in confusion, finally asks his mother, "Why must we in Wapiti love only Mennonites?" (215). The dual answer seems to be that Mennonites prefer material security to the heavenly security they claim to seek and protection from perceived evil to the salvation of other peoples.

The ability and moral responsibility to choose linguistic contexts is also made clear through numerous occasions of positive integration. English is not a colonial instrument of subjugation in *Peace Shell*

\(^1\) Madeleine herself is excluded from that second dramatic, confrontational church meeting because she can't "speak a word of German" (115).
Destroy Many. It is, instead, the means whereby friendship extends beyond the narrow limits of Mennonite experience. Herman can tell Madeleine about Christianity because they both speak English. Thom can tell Razia about what loving one's enemies might mean because he is fluent in English (175). Most telling of all, the friendship between Jackie Labret and Hal Wiens is possible because the children all speak English. Nevertheless, Wiebe does not naively present a common language as the solution. Block, after all, uses English to threaten Louis with castration (184) and a common language doesn't prevent the final brawl in the barn. Separation or integration, with all the Biblical overtones these concepts carry in this novel, is determined by inward attitude, not outward tongue. As Thom, pondering the ultimate futility of his efforts with the Métis children, remarks, "Language one can learn, but love . . ." (198).

Just as the desire for separation through language is exposed as a selfish exclusion of other peoples (a clear disobedience of the Biblical command to love one another), so Wapiti's geographical isolation is exposed as a thinly disguised need for control that is justified as an escape from worldly evil. The isolation is first of all physical. Wapiti is a small community located in northern bushland "two hundred miles from nowhere" (120) where radio provides the only contact with the "outside" (123). The bush itself becomes a literal and symbolical barrier between the Mennonites and the rest of the evil world (48). This far away from other settlements, Block, as the pioneer settler in Wapiti and its

---

⁵ Hildi Tiessen, in "A Mighty Inner River: 'Peace' in the Fiction of Rudy Wiebe," sees Hal as symbolically important in his lack of contempt for the Indians.
spiritual leader, can determine just how much knowledge of the outside world will penetrate: "if the children could be taught just enough to know about the world's evil, they would be happy to remain in their seclusion" (70). Block's argument that Mennonites have "to remain apart from the world" in order to prepare themselves "for the world that is coming" (202) is supported by Pastor Lepp (87) and Thom's father David Wiens (21) among others.

The validity of this theological justification, however, is undermined by Wiebe's revelation of the economic security that is thereby maintained and the ruthless manipulation of other groups of people that is required. Wapiti exists as a fulfilment of Block's personal dream of a controllable community in which to raise his only son protected from the starvation and cruelty that he himself experienced in Siberia (124-25). To create this isolated community he has bought out all the English and will buy out the "breeds" in order to secure additional land (21). To himself Block excuses the forcible exclusion of the "breeds" as a necessary step to maintaining the purity of the community ("The breeds must go. Too many years he had allowed them to remain on the edge of the settlement, where their dark wolfish faces could betray weak women" (153)), but others in the community greet the news of their leaving with "What does he, with one son, want with all that bush?" (216). Even after his discovery of his daughter's sexual liaison with Louis Moosomin that makes his dreams of a separated, pure community a mockery, Block clings to control: "The Devil would not break him, nor the church and district he had built for his son. . . . No towel-wrapped bundle on a chair was going to wreck this separated
community" (145). With his tendency to handle "everyone, Mennonite and half-breed, as if they were pieces of farm machinery" (207), Block begins to resemble, on a smaller scale, Thom's earlier vision of "a Hitler who has tasted power like a boar's first gulp of warm blood" (13). To hide from such danger there are not "enough trees and hills and rocks in all Saskatchewan or all Canada" (13).

While the isolation of Wapiti is imposed for some members of the community, notably for the women who are powerless to leave, most Mennonites have willingly chosen the isolation they experience. Wiens, for example, delights in the physical isolation, hoping that it will allow the development of a secure moral world, like the one he had known in Russia (21). Pete Block, Junior, also welcomes the separation from the world, regretting only that the world is "still too close, usually" (123). Thom also does not consider leaving Wapiti despite Joseph's advice to see how other Mennonites live elsewhere (69). Even Herb Unger, the local derelict who cannot name a single friend in the community, chooses to remain (172).

Even when conscription takes the choice of location out of the hands of the Mennonite young men, they still choose their attitude toward their location. Pete, for example, is grateful to be excused from military service because of farm work (once again his father's policies, including his father's greed for more and more land, save him the bother of making choices), while Herb resents the exemption granted for physical reasons. Other young men must either join the military or obtain CO status. Wiebe is careful here to underline both their responses to their involuntary exposure to a wider world and the moral
implications of those responses. Some of the men in the CO camps "don't understand or care what is really going on outside in the world. They're happy that their own conscience is satisfied" (92); they thus remain in Mennonite isolation wherever they are geographically located. Others, however, such as Joseph who after much thought chooses the Restricted Medical Corps and Annamarie's brother who is troubled by planting unnecessary trees in Jasper while tragedy occurs elsewhere (92), repudiate both isolation and its spurious theological justifications.

In choosing to place his novel in the time-frame of World War II, Wiebe raises the knotty problem of pacifism in a context that is immediate enough to demand a response but removed enough to permit withdrawal. Since Anabaptist beginnings that refusal to go to war has been the raison d'être of Mennonites, and a source of much controversy. Over and over again the threat of military conscription became a compelling reason for Mennonites to emigrate to another country in hope of finding peace. But just as Wiebe questions the separating effect of language and the efficacy of geographical isolation, so he pushes this orthodox refusal to participate in military violence to a more basic, immediate consideration of violence in personal relationships. If pacifism is chosen out of obedience to Christ's command to love one's enemies (45), how does that love show itself in more immediate contexts than the European battlefield? Here too the problem is one of personal

---

This time-frame does not allow Wiebe to divide Mennonites into martyrs or courageous fighters as authors who discuss the Russian revolution are apt to do. Then the Mennonite choice was to resist (take up arms) or be slaughtered. The choices in World War II are more ambiguous.
responsibility within a *Gemeinschaft*. To emphasize that personal responsibility Wiebe juxtaposes several theoretical viewpoints concerning conscientious objection with several examples of personal coercion right within Wapiti.

The official Mennonite position of non-resistance is alluded to rather than clearly explained. Various individuals argue about that position, probing its application, as if in demonstration of Thom's early insistence that "truth necessitated following" (13). Thom and Annamarie, after Joseph's talk to the young people, wonder if it is right to maintain a minority position on pacifism when the majority must go to war to maintain such a right to follow conscience (45-46). Joseph accepts the dictum to love one's enemies but chooses to join the Restricted Medical Corps, a service reluctantly approved by the larger Mennonite Brethren Conference and roundly condemned by Deacon Block (63). Annamarie's brother questions the wisdom of planting trees in safety while others die (92). Thom, in replying to Razia's question about his still being at home, insists that as a Christian he can't kill, but he isn't sure about the fairness of his position (174-75). Annamarie makes explicit the knowledge that most Mennonites suppress: their work on the farm or in factories is as necessary to war as the actual killing. The key difference is that Mennonites grow rich raising food and have none of the risk (47). Through her acid comments Wiebe once again makes the connection between a separated way of life and material prosperity and questions the integrity of such a position.

More immediately disturbing than Wiebe's exposure of uncomfortable ambiguities in the pacifist stance, both for the characters
in the novel and for Mennonite readers, is the consistent revelation of violence within individuals in the community. Deacon Block, leader of the community, has killed a man in Russia in his fight to keep his starving son alive (128-131), but recognizing the evil of his deed is "driven to confess and repent" (131), and then to establish a community in which survival itself need not take precedence over Biblical principles. Block is, by this point in the novel, definitely the villain of the piece, but Thom as respected protagonist is equally tempted to brutality: in his continuing quarrel with Herb Unger, the lazy, mean neighbour, Thom's anger is explosive. The tense baseball game at the beginning of the novel awakens in Thom the desire to smash Herb with his bat, and in the barn brawl at the end of the novel, Thom does smash Herb with his bare fist. Yet even though Thom has become disillusioned about Mennonite practices, he is nevertheless, like Block, repulsed by the "paths of conscienceless violence" (237).

Less obvious but more profoundly important for Wiebe's examination of what it means to be Mennonite are the examples of subtle coercion, of violence against the freedom of individuals to choose. Anabaptist churches were founded on the right of adults to choose their beliefs and their adherence to a community of believers. Yet in subsequent isolated, tightly conforming Mennonite communities children are coercively socialized into the church and the community. Block, for example, controls his family and also the community in an effort to prevent clear choices. Pete has never thought through any issues of belief until he is confronted by Razia the outsider, with whom he becomes infatuated, and by Elizabeth's death. Thom's relentless
questioning may also have had its effect on Pete. In any case, Pete does explode in violence at last and does not even regret it: "Pa, you have to do what you think right" (236). Elizabeth is equally sheltered, from outside influence that is, not from brutal, endless work. Forbidden by Block to marry the man she loved, she becomes a colourless, almost sexless, farm-hand, "dumpy, uninvolved, oddly wasted" (25). Her final words to Thom, "go away from here . . . you’ll be buried here under rules that aren’t as important as this chaff" (140-41), are a cry of protest against oppressive control. Block exercises the same single-minded power over the "breed-brood" (185), bullying them into leaving so that "his community" could remain pure (185). His familiar "decisive summing up" at the church meeting early in the novel that leaves no room for further disagreement (59) demonstrates his authoritarian control over other members of the community, a control that Elizabeth recognizes as a contradiction to the ideals of Mennonite life ("A church is supposed to be brotherhood--all equal--that gets its direction from Scripture--not rules!" (141)). While Mennonites have traditionally spoken about loving one's enemies in reference to national war, or in condemnation of physical brutality (whipping children, however, is acceptable {73} as was whipping of Russian servants {129}), Peace Shall Destroy Many makes it clear that a faithful following of Christ's teaching means loving the enemy next door and loving your children by setting them free to decide their own loyalty to Mennonite principles.

In all three issues, separate language, geographical isolation, pacifism, Wiebe has contrasted the traditional teachings as embodied within Block and older supportive members of the community with the
prophetic biblically-based questioning of other Mennonites. Both positions are presented with sympathy and a recognition of the complexity of the issues at stake. At the centre of the novel is Thom Wiens who initially holds traditional views but gradually gains new understanding. Wiebe has clearly presented these issues as demanding choice, but the choice is not between being a Mennonite or not being a Mennonite, as Deacon Block would see it. Instead the terms of the choice are as Elizabeth would see them: to be one among equal brothers or to allow oneself to be smothered by rules. Wiebe does not pit the individual against a community, but presents the individual choosing among ways of being within the community.

Peace Shall Destroy Many certainly has been read most often as a discussion of the bitter conflict between the "church's authority, which is patriarchal, rigid, centred in seclusion from the world and unswerving adherence to the tradition as defined by the church leadership" (Gundy 13) and the protagonist, Thom Wiens, a "sensible and sensitive" young man "searching for identity and self-knowledge" (Suderman, "Universal Values" 73). Such an interpretation, however, valid as it is, especially for the non-Mennonite reader, does not do complete justice to the text. When Thom cries out in despair at the "dreadful responsibility of being a man and being morally required to make a choice, either this way or that" (197), he is not reaching within himself to find his own way apart from the "sure guarded path of the fathers" (197) but is choosing among several paths laid out for him. All of these paths are ways of being Mennonite, all are in some sense a continuation of roles already well established among Mennonites, and all

129
appeal to something within Thom. Wayne Booth's comments in *The Company We Keep* apply very directly to Thom: "regardless of my intentions, my behaviour will be chosen from among the paths opened by my society and its languages" (242).

The role of patriarchal authority that enforces already accepted truth is enacted in Deacon Block, who initially appeals to Thom: "Could he but know himself strong, like Peter Block" (14). If only he could speak with "the same conviction as Deacon Block's son, 'It is against my conscience!'" (22). In some ways Thom does demonstrate Block's strength of unthinking conviction: in his outrage at Herman's marriage to Madeleine (108) he insists that "there have to be rules" (109). Thom is similarly drawn to the Deacon's efficiency and decisiveness (135), and his faint disapproval of his father's inadequacy (68) resembles the Deacon's ire against Unger's weakness (75). Furthermore, Block's authoritarian role is not unique to him or to Wapiti. The story of Herman Paetkau's past contains mention of an Elder Quiring who "was so terribly strict he would let his girls do nothing" (114). The acquiescence of other men in the community, men who have also emigrated from Russia, suggests that they were accustomed to a traditional authority. What causes Thom eventually to discard this role is his discovery of the Deacon's ruthless, utterly unscriptural disregard for the "breeds," and his observation of the effects of the Deacon's regimen on his own family (207). His angry outburst to Block, however, when he realizes that his work with the Métis children is in vain, contains the same kind of righteous passion we have frequently seen in Block. Given the Mennonite conviction about moral absolutes, such
passion is inevitably part of being Mennonite. While Block is something of a villain, his stance is not totally rejected. His strength of conviction remains a way of being Mennonite that retains some validity for Thom. He, too, at the end of the novel, willingly affirms the necessity of "pushing ahead" to victory (238).

Such courage to act on conviction is what Thom misses in the model of the quiet, good Mennonites in Wapiti who recognize the truth of Christ’s example but are unwilling to confront authority in order to live out that truth. Chief among these good Mennonites is Pastor Lepp. He is re-elected as leader year after year because of his gentle diplomacy (54). When necessary he can articulate Mennonite traditions with their religious justifications as smoothly as Block (87), but Lepp can also tolerate doubting questions (87–88). To cover his own uneasiness about Block’s domineering insistence on obedience to tradition, Lepp works toward synthesis, reconciliation: "Obedience to authority goes against our human nature sometimes, but godly behaviour is always difficult. Discipline and restraint can only strengthen our spiritual convictions" (88). In response to Thom’s intense feeling of responsibility toward the Métis children, however, Lepp does reveal his own dissatisfaction with Block’s traditional exclusion of all non-Mennonites. His difficulty is his unwillingness to "take it upon himself to smash almost every single belief that a man—that a group of people hold essential" (90). For the sake of communal harmony Lepp chooses the role of quiet diplomat giving only surreptitious support to the single individual who dares to act on his own ("God bless you, Thom. You can do more than I" (90)).
Thom's mother plays a similar role of covert encourager: "you know neither your father nor myself objected for a moment to your teaching those children" (215). Like Pastor Lepp, she diplomatically refuses to endorse confrontation, believing that love avoids such conflict. When Thom begins to grasp the depth of Block's sin against Elizabeth, Mother Wiens admits the near-impossibility of genuine Christ-like love yet insists that it is mandatory:

Christ left us no easy way out. Only love. Hard. Probably impossible. After having seen as good an example of impossible love as ever there was in the world. Elizabeth. For all the unhappiness that came to her; all that one may think her father did wrong towards her, she loved him to the end. (216)

The support of people like Pastor Lepp and his mother, as well as Annamarie and his sister Margret, who all question any lack of integrity while seeking themselves to live consistently, makes it possible for Thom, and for his brother David earlier, to confront the unbiblical traditions of Mennonites. That Thom and Margret and David Wiens all thus seek a consistent living out of Christ's teachings and that Annamarie Lepp and her brothers similarly work toward a genuine faith is, ironically, an illustration of the validity of Block's assertion, "every person on earth, generally speaking, lives in the way he has learned from his fathers" (201). Thom, in deciding finally, to push ahead to learn of "conquest by love" (238), is walking in the best traditions of the Mennonites. As the sheer number of examples of gentle sincere goodness in Peace Shall Destroy Many makes clear, this role model is as
common a way of being Mennonite as is Block’s single-minded adherence to tradition.

More disturbing is the role of the derelict, or lapsed Mennonite, yet these Mennonites who live on the periphery of Mennonite community, and who present a continuing challenge to traditions, are also well-known. Wiebe makes it clear that Mennonites can be marginalized for more than one reason. Herman Paetkau lives on the fringe, initially because of his poverty, and then because Block makes an issue of his bastard birth. Rejected by his community, except for David Wiens as long as David remains in Wapiti, Herman finally marries Madeleine Moosomin. Driven by loneliness he defies traditional rules, but strictly maintains Scriptural teaching (108). As such an outsider Herman becomes a living rebuke to conscience: he befriends the Métis (25, 31) and speaks out clearly on their behalf (61). His behaviour prompts many of Thom’s questions. At Elizabeth’s funeral he and his wife and baby form a cameo picture of possibilities that becomes a rebuke to Block (155).

Herb and Hank Unger are also outcasts in the community, but for different reasons. They are sons of a reasonably respectable family, though Block considers their father weak and injudicious (73,75). Hank, the younger favoured son, outrages the community by joining the Air Force. His delight in the killing ("will he blow or fry?" (223)) contrasts strangely with the polite conformity he had always demonstrated as a youth (224). Though everyone in the community, except perhaps the easily-impressed children like Hal, feels only horror at his behaviour (223), he demonstrates vividly the possibility, and the ultimate
uselessness, of mere outward niceness. Unless personal conviction underlies the outward decency, a basic tenet of Anabaptism, the Mennonitism will be superficial. And Hank is Mennonite, if nothing else than in his earthy humour that the rest of the Mennonites appreciate (224). Herb also is considered Mennonite, despite his slovenly habits and run-down farm. Block cherishes a hope that "he will someday become a Christian" and then they can "welcome him into the church" (205), and Mrs. Wiens begs Thom to be lenient (67) and pities "this embittered man" (100). That such lapsed and lazy Mennonites are also a familiar way of being Mennonite is suggested by Mr. and Mrs. Wiens' reminiscences about Herman's birth: "slutty" Mennonites lived in Russia too (114-15). 7 Herb himself, while denying that he is a Mennonite (171), cannot imagine moving away, "almost as if he needed to remain in a place, among people he hated, to give some meaning to his existence" (172). Wapiti Mennonite community gives him something to rebel against, though had Margret accepted his proposal of marriage he might gradually have conformed (98).

The Unger boys' role as rebellious outcasts is not outwardly appealing to Thom, but Thom does recognize that he carries within himself the predilection to sin in similar ways. Herb, particularly, goads Thom to violence on several occasions and at the Christmas program

7 Peter Epp's Agatchen gives ample evidence of the continued existence of the poor and of the lazy (as labelled by the more prosperous Mennonites) in the Russian colonies. Their presence in the community serves to prove the virtues of Mennonite industry and allows opportunity for other Mennonites to demonstrate charity. In Blue Mountains of China Wiebe will further explore the way Mennonite values of communal oneness make it possible for parasitical, conviction-less Mennonites to thrive on the margins.

134
Thom discovers "that if he allowed his mind a corner of leeway he could think in unison with Herb" about Razia's body (227). Having rejected the example of Block as utterly unsatisfactory, Thom toys briefly with the possibility of living "as you could and [dying] as you must. And he had the example before him. The brothers held to no law of the fathers: they were animals" (226-27). The very choice of words already indicates that Thom will not follow the example of the brothers. After the brief brawl in the barn, when Thom momentarily gives way to the impulse of violence within him, Thom finally refuses such a way of being Mennonite.

The way of being Mennonite that ultimately holds the most attraction for Thom is embodied in Joseph, who could be described as a Christ-figure. He is a teacher who cannot be depended upon to "behave traditionally" (33). Without thinking, seemingly, Joseph goes fishing with Louis Moosomin and with Herman (33), the undesirables. Like Christ, Joseph is rebuked by the traditional church authorities. In an obviously suggestive scene, Joseph teaches the young people at the lakeside; he himself draws attention to the parallel (56). In his letters to Thom, Joseph challenges him to continue the work he began with the half-breed children, and to work toward a peace that is not a "sham slothful peace" that allows Mennonites to grow good crops and stay out of war, but an "inward peace" that remains in the midst of life's struggles (162). Joseph's example combines the loving goodness exemplified by Pastor Lepp and others with the strength of conviction of Block. It is Joseph's friendship that "[unlocks] new thought possibilities of which Thom had formerly had no conception. . . . [he]
had stumbled after Joseph's rambles regarding the meaning of existence, the nature of Christianity, the Christian's relationship to his fellow men" (17). Joseph's letters become a chorus in Thom's mind, raising questions and motivating behaviour (179), until others accuse Thom of having talked "to Joseph too long" (88). At the climactic moment, when Thom rejects the Unger model of "conscienceless violence" and the Block model of "one man's misguided interpretation of tradition," and chooses instead to follow Christ's teachings in the Scripture as scraped "bare of all their acquired meanings" (237), he remembers first of all Joseph's direct words of instruction to him (238).

While Joseph Dueck is sometimes read as an example of the "ubiquitous and threatening figure of the stranger" common in Mennonite "literary creations" (Tiessen, "Shibboleth" 175), Wiebe actually makes him very much a Mennonite. His name is Mennonite, he speaks Low German and High German fluently, and he is a member of the Wapiti church (61). Since he has grown up elsewhere than Wapiti, however, and has travelled more widely, he is also familiar with other Mennonite communities and can thus speak of Mennonitism in a wider context: "There are Mennonites . . . [who] 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 . . ." (69). That is the essence of Thom's final choice: to live out the common Mennonite faith as close to the example of Christ as possible.

Throughout the novel the emphasis on personal responsibility has been clear: Mrs Wiens encourages Thom, "Sometimes you have to do something just so you can finally master yourself doing it. You cannot
avoid everything" (37); Joseph explains to Block, "A man has to follow what he cannot but see as the truth" (71); Pastor Lepp tells Thom, "but one man, young--alone—he can start it" (90); Thom senses within himself, "I have to make a choice" (197); Pete confronts his father for the first time, saying, "Pa, you have to do what you think right" (236). Even the existence of Wapiti itself is the result of Block's decision to refuse to live as the Russian Mennonites of his village had lived (132). Yet equally clear is Wiebe's consistent placement of these individual decisions within the context of the community. Even Block himself admits "that as an individual he was not sufficient to himself" (125).

The paradox that Wiebe makes central in both his Mennonite novels is that only the individual action done in self-forgetful passionate obedience to Scriptural principles and for the sake of others succeeds in being truly individual while the choice made out of selfish instincts under the cloak of obedience to tradition undermines both the individual and the community. Thus all decisions directly affect the community: prophetic dissent from the community ultimately benefits it the most, while unthinking conformity to tradition ultimately destroys what is most worthwhile in the community. The Deacon's choices are eventually self-destructive and destructive of the community's coherence generally because he shapes and exploits the community's traditions for his personal needs, first in Russia ("that other villagers would be forced to make up his deficit he cared not at all" (127)) and then in Wapiti ("Wapiti was clean for his son" (185)). On the other hand, Thom's actions, which seem to disrupt the community by opening it up to the influences of the world, are occasioned by his genuine unworldliness.
The community's emphasis on conscience and moral accountability before God creates an individualism that makes the prophetic dissent of a Joseph or a Thom, not only possible but inevitable, thus making a place for a writer like Rudy Wiebe, and later Al Reimer, whose *My Harp is Turned to Mourning* both demonstrates and defends such prophetic dissent. As Loewen notes, "The Mennonite writer, coming from a Mennonite-Christian tradition, regards himself as a prophet whose function it is to witness to the values of that tradition and to critique his community when it deviates from those values" ("Witness and Critic" 113). Wiebe's prophetic probing of the relationship between the choosing self and the nurturing community certainly witnesses to the values of the Mennonite community and critiques it "when it deviates from those values."

*Peace Shall Destroy Many* thus criticized very directly certain deviations from Mennonite principles, through characters who typify various ways of being Mennonite and who defend particular theological positions (Joseph's last letter, for example, is an exposition of meanings of peace). Wiebe declares his own preference among those ways of being Mennonite through the events of the plot (Block's methods bring disaster on himself and the community) and through the evaluations of the questioning protagonist, Thom, with whom the reader is invited to identify. *The Blue Mountains of China*, however, refuses any such didacticism, choosing rather to involve the reader in an act of judgment more informed than Thom's.

Rather than examining one Mennonite community and measuring it against ideals of Mennonite community, *Blue Mountains of China* depicts
several different Mennonite communities that span the history of Mennonites from before the Russian Revolution to the present. Through centres of consciousness placed in different geographical locations (Gaadenfeld, Molotschna in Ukraine; Schoenbach, Manitoba; Schoenbach, Paraguay; Moscow; a village by the Amur River; a prison camp in Siberia) and different historical moments (settling of Mennonites in Manitoba and Saskatchewan after 1870, emigration to Paraguay in 1920s, Mennonite exodus from Moscow 1929, Mennonite prosperity in Canada, 1967), Wiebe retells the crucial events of Mennonite history, and draws the reader into emotional identification with Mennonite suffering and with the Mennonite quest for a secure place "just for themselves" (Blue Mountains 227).

If the prophetic stance in Peace Shall Destroy Many resembled that of the Biblical prophet Amos who thundered relentlessly against the sins of the Israelites (he came from Judah anyway and could maintain a certain objective distance), the prophetic stance in Blue Mountains resembles that of Jeremiah who stubbornly remained with his people weeping as they wept in their confusion of loyalties and fears. While by the end of the novel we will be aware of an authorial vision, in the meantime Wiebe defers moral evaluation by choosing several centres of consciousness. In chapter two, for example, the centre of consciousness is Jakob Friesen V, just freed after six weeks of prison and torture. The narrator, whose presence is largely effaced in his intimate immersion in Jakob's mind, includes no condemnation, except Jakob's self-condemnation for his lustful and murderous propensities. Instead the focus is on Jakob's disorientation at the loss of all communal
support and of every secure signpost of meaning. Through Jakob we 
glimpse the destruction of the prosperous Mennonite way of life. 
Similarly, in chapter nine, David Epp’s conscience-ridden recollections of 
the terror-filled night flight across the Amur River in 40 degree below 
zero temperatures during which one child was inadvertently smothered 
immerse us in the refugee’s confused experience of "getting away" and  
"getting there," neither of which is "simple" (61). Our immediate 
interest is not the ideological differences between Mennonites and 
communists or between Mennonites and the worldly "English," but the 
psychological fall-out from such conflicts. Because Wiebe’s focus is now 
not on dogma, but on "the individual believer" (Keith, Intro. 1) and on 
his/her perception of the events, what prophetic criticism exists is 
filtered through sympathetic tears.

Such a "representative epic-story of a whole people" (Keith, Intro. 2), who struggled to maintain faith and community in the midst of 
suffering, disarms potential Mennonite resistance to the novel. Wiebe 
does here what Al Reimer would do later in My Harp Is Turned to 
Mourning: he tells again the stories of exodus that shape and 
strengthen Mennonite identity. A key difference is the scope of the 
story. Reimer would focus on the Russian exodus as experienced by 
Russländer, the more educated, and less "separated" Mennonites out of 
whose ranks the early Mennonite writers came (part of Reimer’s purpose 
being to examine the Mennonite attitude toward aesthetic effort). Wiebe, 
himself a Russländer, gives us the two exoduses of the Kanadier as well, 
the first flight from education laws in Russia in 1870, and the second 
flight from Canada’s increasing efforts to integrate immigrant groups in
the 1920s. Thus Wiebe shapes into story the identity of the more 
conservative branch of Mennonites who would not produce any serious 
writers of their own until Patrick Friesen (The Shunning in 1980). In 
this weaving together of two sets of stories of suffering and of 
adaptation to new contexts, Wiebe has written what I feel is the 
definitive Mennonite novel. No novel written before or after, so far, has 
distilled to its essence the Mennonite project of incarnating a 
transcendent faith into concrete action¹ and so involved the reader in 
the varied experiences of being Mennonite.

Yet the complexity of the narrative structure within which Wiebe 
has set this epic-story does discourage potential Mennonite readers who 
would most likely misinterpret, and thus feel threatened by, Wiebe's 
sensitive and accurate exposure of the ambiguities and inconsistencies in 
Mennonite self-consciousness. The abrupt shifts among narrative 
perspectives disorient the reader who expects linear progression and 
gradual character development, an expectation particularly keen among a

¹ The essence of Anabaptism and thereafter Mennonitism was the 
rejection of any separation between mystical belief and practical living. 
In the words of Thom Wiens, "truth necessitated following." The failure 
to understand this principle of incarnation leads to a failure to 
understand the novel. Ina Ferris, for example, correctly recognizes 
Wiebe's focus on the "problem of belief" (88) but she sees a 
contradiction between the form of the novel, "traditionally tied to 
mundane reality in all its concreteness, confusion and complexity and 
implicitly locating value in the time-bound world of the here and now" 
(89), and "transcendent, timeless vision" (89). Consequently she reads 
the complex narrative techniques as demonstrating the existential moment 
of the individual and Wiebe's final chapter as an unsuccessful attempt to 
impose transcendent vision upon concrete moments. For the Mennonite 
no such contradiction between the transcendent and the concrete 
moment exists. Each specific intersection of time and space is an 
opportunity to translate transcendent vision into concrete action. The 
juxtapositions of several such translations in the novel prepare for the 
final chapter long before Wiebe introduces John Reimer as spokesman for 
his Mennonite vision.
people taught to follow the Word literally as far as possible. Even the
narrative techniques within each chapter make the novel inaccessible to
those who are not already sophisticated readers and therefore capable
of working through the "unpredictable and unstable narrative process"
(Ferris 89) to the implied analysis of Mennonitism. The simple,
chronological account of Frieda with its quality of Gelassenheit is
certainly accessible to all Mennonite audiences. All other chapters,
however, refuse dependence upon linear progression and a guiding
authorial perspective, thus postponing possible judgments until further
perspectives are provided. Chapter 2, "Sons and Heirs," mixes
objectively recorded dialogue and bits of chronological narration with
Jakob's interior monologue and external perceptions so thoroughly that
several rereadings are needed to reconstruct events. Chapter 4, "Black
Vulture," sets a self-reflexive, symbolically dense retelling of Moscow's
horrors in the context of the meeting between a young "Canada boy"
and an elderly Paraguayan Mennonite, Franz Epp. Only in later
chapters do we identify the young "Canada boy" as John Reimer,
youngest son of the pernicious "Balzer" in Epp's story. Similarly,
Chapter 9, "drink ye all of it," condenses the event of an entire
village's dangerous flight across the Amur River to China into cryptic
dialogue, sacramental symbolism, and snatches of memories, all in a
mixture of past and present as David Epp, one of the village's leaders,
perceives it. The reader is perforce engaged in a "struggle in a

---

† Wiebe once read "parts of Frieda's monologue to several hundred
Canadian Mennonites and they laughed themselves silly" ("In the West"
209).
narrative wilderness" (Ferris 89) much as Mennonites themselves have been engaged in struggles to make physical wildernesses habitable and spiritual wildernesses negotiable. What Wiebe does in this highly complex novel is to draw the reader into an experience like that of being Mennonite, before asking the reader to weigh, Anabaptist fashion, the claims of various ways of being Mennonite as defined in broadened contexts.

The initial confusion engendered by the lack of connections between chapters replays the dislocation of the Mennonites themselves, pushed from context to context, forced to adapt traditions to strange new settings. Their stubborn transference of optimistic place names from country to country ("there had always been such village names: Gartental, Blumenau, Rosenfeld, Friedensruh" (96)) and equally stubborn exportation of a self-sufficient rural way of life suggest a belief that successful retention of a Mennonite identity depends on ethnic tradition. We as readers, however, are taught that a reliance upon tradition (here the traditional narrative tools of linear time and directly imposed meaning) will deprive us of new and necessary perspectives, just as the Mennonite reliance upon tradition deprives individual Mennonites of new and necessary perspectives. In each chapter we must grasp for foundations anew. Again and again we must adjust our imagination to a new set of characters, a different historical context. We begin each chapter expecting that what happened in the previous chapter will have some relevance for this chapter, will give us some continuity, but it does not. Not at first, anyway. The boundaries of accustomed story-telling have been abandoned and like Liesel, in "Crossing the Red Line,"
we may feel at times as if we have slipped through the railing and dropped into an ocean of muddled narrative and unfathomable suffering, neither of which makes sense.

Neither narrative nor suffering can make sense unless we remain in the complete context that Wiebe offers. Ina Ferris, for example, in "Religious Vision and Fictional Form: Rudy Wiebe's The Blue Mountains of China," suggests that the lack of linearity and the fragmentation leave the reader in "existential chaos" (89). The problematic narrative process thus becomes a metaphor for the individual's existential "test of self" (90). Just as the reader struggles to find "an authentic, integrative vision" (90) within the "discontinuous sequence" of the novel, so each character must find, within the disrupted expectations of his life, "some possible self-definition" (90). Ferris is interpreting the novel within the paradigm of the Western, alienated self that seeks definition through inner resources and against the confines of the larger society. Such an interpretation fails to take into account the Mennonite sense of community that, as I shall argue, overrules the disjunctions within the narrative. Hence, while Ferris finds the final chapter unsatisfying (93), I find the final chapter the logical culmination of what Wiebe has been doing throughout the novel. The narrative dislocation is the necessary first step, not only in experiencing Mennonite dislocation, but also in re-experiencing Mennonite community.

In the second step of that experience Wiebe makes the reader play the "Mennonite game" as desperately as any Mennonite ever sought for familial names: "among Mennonites," notes Redekop, "the discovery of family relationship is itself a kind of in-joke; wherever two Mennonites
are gathered together they will inevitably discover that their mother's father's aunt is their uncle's cousin" ("Translated" 117). In Blue Mountains Wiebe tosses in names here and there with a typically Mennonite assumption that the names will, of course, be recognized. The connections between chapters, among characters, are supplied gradually, cumulatively, so that the reader finally grasps at the familiar with the same eagerness with which a Mennonite welcomes another Mennonite face or the sound of Low German in a new context. Long before the motley collection of Mennonites from three continents meets in the ditch near Calgary and begins to indulge in "long hard relative sniffing" (207), the reader has been doing the same, noting village of origin or matching family names, and often identifying a character through Wiebe's typically Mennonite reference to a nickname or peculiar habit ("brother Hoppity" (78, 103)). On first reading, the fleeting recognitions may be more frustrating than enlightening, but further rereadings intensify the simulated Mennonite experience of recognizing kinship ties. As Redekop accurately notes, "the fascination with genealogy is owing not only to the high value placed on the family but also to the fact that the Russian experience fragmented many families and estranged individual members--like Friesen" ("Translated" 117). The reader thus becomes a Mennonite for the duration of the novel, feeling both the dislocation of

---

10 These references to minor characters who create familial connections and establish a historical framework for the reader, also act as symbolical connections. In this case the mention of brother Hoppity Hiebert links the stories of Liesel Driediger (who pushed against Mennonite boundaries until she felt them no more, becoming the sophisticated Elizabeth Cereno, professor) and Anna Friesen, who almost unconsciously remains within far more conservative Mennonite boundaries. Thus Wiebe continually juxtaposes different ways of being Mennonite while deferring judgment until the final chapter.
removed traditions and the hope of reclaiming ethnic connections that might allow a meaningful whole to be built again.

Whatever meaningful whole is rebuilt within the novel, however, cannot be based on a reestablishment of insular traditions and intact families. Wiebe makes that clear through the symbolism of the ever-receding blue mountains (Mennonites never will find their promised land of isolated peace (Blue Mountains 227)) and through the story of Frieda Friesen. As Redekop points out, Frieda's physical absence in the final chapter where so many connections are finally made and the various isolated stories of individual protagonists are finally brought together is crucial. Frieda is mentioned directly as the one who could complete the "relative sniffing" if she were only there (208), but "Frieda has vanished back into the separated world of 'die Stillen im Lande'' (118-119). Redekop thus notes the failure of the Mennonites to translate the "warmth of Frieda's simple world into our complex one" (119). The desire to recapture that world of simple certainties with its security of multiple ties to a coherent community nevertheless remains a poignant part of Mennonite identity.

A further Mennonite experience granted to the reader is thus the continuing torment of finding a viable way of being Mennonite, or

---

11 The label, "the quiet in the land," has long been applied to Mennonites and refers both to the quiet simplicity of life that has so often characterized Mennonites and the Mennonite refusal to participate in political institutions.
rather, of remaining Mennonite, in relation to a changing or static community and in relation to the changing context of the world, defined variously as godless communists, worldly English, heathen Indians or Chinese. The dilemma of Thom Wiens in *Peace Shall Destroy Many* who had to choose among several possible responses to perceived truth concerning language, separation, and pacifism within the Wapiti *Gemeinschaft* is enlarged to become the dilemma of the reader who, as a temporary Mennonite, must choose among many possible perceptions (or rejections) of traditional truth within several different Mennonite *Gemeinschaften*.

The issues that demand choice in *The Blue Mountains of China* are not as easily isolated as in the more didactic *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. Moreover, the issues that several of the protagonists perceive are not the same ones that the reader is confronted with. Jakob Friesen V, for example, would likely describe his choice as giving in or not giving in to fleshly temptation. For Frieda's family the choice is choosing Paraguay or Canada, separation or integration. For Liesel, as for Anna Friesen, the choice concerns crossing "worldly" boundaries, though the boundaries are differently drawn for each. Taken together and viewed in the light of the motifs Wiebe makes explicit in the final chapter, the choices of the protagonists finally concern what is obviously the heart of Wiebe's Christian vision: the relationship of the self to a believing community.

The inevitability of that relationship is evident in the intricate linking of individual acts within the novel. Not only does each action have ripple effects throughout the larger community, but the acting
individual has already been heavily influenced by the community in which he/she acts. As Franz Epp, speaker in Chapter 4, tells John Reimer, observer of David Epp, Jr. in Chapter 11 and carrier of the cross in Chapter 13, "before you were even born a lot of things about your life were already decided" (54-55). The final chapter makes it clear that what the community has given to the individual by way of language and family ties and values is never totally lost. Low German unites the various Mennonites in the ditch in a "sudden oneness" (209) made warmer by the usual Mennonite recourse to food. And the strength of family connections and communal approval is evident in the estranged Friesen's shame that these barely-met Mennonites should know of his betrayal of his son. An existential act of self-definition is impossible. The various ways of being Mennonite, therefore, are differentiated by their degree of closeness to the Mennonite community, and by the degree to which materialistic self-interest (the key issue in this novel) has undermined the internal unity of the community.

Frieda Friesen, so obviously an example of separated traditional Mennonites, has seemed to many readers to be the essential Mennonite.

---

It might appear that Liesel Driediger at least does make such an existential choice. She is the one major Mennonite character who chooses to cross boundaries into the secular world. As her father's wistful remark, "We can't lose everything beautiful at once" (85), suggests, Liesel has rejected her family long before she ever marries Ceren (Bilan 55). She resembles Joseph Hiebert with whom she is briefly juxtaposed, Joseph "tall and handsome" and "breaking his father's heart by not attending church" (78). It is appropriate that Hiebert is the different Russländer who briefly tempts Anna Friesen at the well. He is later seen in Buenos Aires "drinking at a table with a painted woman" (104). In the context of this novel such deliberate ex-Mennonites lose individuality and merge into the larger world. Their fate will become the focus of later Mennonite writers.
other protagonists being outside the margins of community to greater or lesser degree. She is the only one for whom faith and ethnicity mesh completely. As a Kanadier, born, raised, and married in Manitoba, who eventually moves to Paraguay, she belongs to that conservative group of Mennonites that can boast of having moved twice for their faith, unlike the more adaptable Russländer who found it possible to learn Russian and to remain in their prosperous communities until their land was taken away (Blue Mountains 100). At no time does Frieda indicate an awareness of the irony that her father, Isaak, actually left Russia because of scarcity of land (26). Instead she retells her life's experiences with an unquestioning acceptance of God's direct guidance in whatever happens. For her the continuing tradition as articulated by the current Elders is sufficient reason for enduring the drought, the sand-storms, the typhus epidemics, the lack of education and comfort:

"[Elder Wiebe the Older] intoned that the Bible, the Catechism and the Kirchenbuch, the plow and the shovel were the faith of their fathers. It was enough for them, and it is enough for their children and

---

13 The most extreme version of this view of Frieda as within and all other characters without is given by Pierre Spriet: "All characters in this strange novel except Frieda Friesen, live apart from the group. Their individual stories are precisely the narratives of their temporary or lasting separation from the community; in all cases, it is an estrangement and often an explicit rejection of some or all of the most-cherished habits of the traditional Mennonites" (59). I disagree vehemently with this reading; the only way it can be upheld is to assume that the Mennonites living in Paraguay in self-imposed isolation are the only real Mennonites. Spriet demonstrates his unfamiliarity with Mennonitism throughout the article; however, his comments are valuable in demonstrating the necessity of historical perspective in interpretation. His assumption that the Mennonite writer pits an autonomous self against a repressive community leads to several serious misreadings.
children's children, now and for evermore" (100). It is only fair, though, to note that Frieda lives her plain life with a kind of zest Elder Wiebe the Older would have regarded with suspicion. Her joyous affirmation of life that distinguishes her from Elder Wiebe the Younger's ideal conception of the humbly submissive Mennonite woman with "a bowed head and eyes fixed upon the dust" (98) is based apparently on her personal decision, during a crisis of faith, to endorse what she has always been taught: "Then I knew what my father said each one has to take and know for himself" (46). Thereafter she never probes the definition of being Mennonite that she is given. Even on a return visit to Canada in her old age she resists the notion that Mennonites could change and still remain Mennonite: "They prayed and sang and read from the Bible; it was all English and not Mennonite but the most people there came from us and to me it sometimes looked they were stretching themselves around for what they weren't" (149). As Redekop notes, "Anabaptist emphasis on the 'priesthood of all believers' affirms the separated community itself as the living church. Frieda Friesen's voice is symbolic of the presence of that community" ("Translated" 99, italics mine). And her voice, with its peculiar Low German syntax and wit, is both joyfully representative and distinctively individual.

That the shaping influence of the community is vital to Frieda's quiet absorption into her chosen way of being Mennonite is clear from the sharp contrast between Frieda's experience and Jakob Friesen V's experience. The most wrenching shift between perspectives in the novel occurs between Chapters One and Two and Chapters Two and Three as Wiebe sandwiches Jakob's story in between two sections of Frieda's.
Frieda's detached tone, with its "peculiar kind of survival-humour" (Morley 75) that accepts all suffering as temporary, and in any case God-sent, contrasts sharply with Jakob's tortured inner voice mixing prayers with violent imagery, grasping for meaning in the midst of intolerable loss. Like Frieda, Jakob "had been trained well, a good Mennonite boy; learned quiet joy and denial and prayers . . . ; had been taught his sins and cried over them and asked the Lord Jesus forgiveness, and his parents too; been baptised to calm happiness . . . " (28). Two factors, I think, make the difference between Frieda's faithfulness to Mennonite beliefs and Jakob's violent apostasy. One is the complete withdrawal of community and family support. Frieda is always surrounded by Mennonites, family and larger circle of church members, but Jakob loses that protective milieu. After six weeks in prison during which Jakob maintains his sanity and control through thoughts of his family, he returns home to "this huge empty house" (28), to "silent shrubbery where no chicken sings" (13). The Mennonite Gemeinschaft of Gnadenfeld has been replaced by a Soviet commune in its anarchic beginnings and his family has fled. That the flight is perceived as betrayal is made clear from Muttachi's disdainful "runners and hiders and liars" (28) (a sentiment that Jakob shares), Jakob's father's perpetual self-condemnation for leaving his son behind (114, 196, 224), and the stark contrast with the actions of old Mr. Epp who wouldn't "leave one child behind. God had given them to him and he would not leave one in the godless country Russia had become" (62). For Jakob this abandonment means confronting "dark, fearful forces deep within" (Ferris 90) made visible in Escha, Jacob's doppelgänger.
Jakob's temptation to indulge in sexual lust and violence is made worse by Escha's repeated reminders that there is now "nobody to yell, 'No! No!'" (19), "no pa to see the turds fly" (21). Freed from the restraining influence of the community and family, Jakob keeps repeating learned prayers, "blessed savior make me pure make me pure" (25), but the prayers become shorter and less coherent, until the last "remnants of do not" (35) disappear before the "blackness" of his mind (35). It is clear that Jakob, unlike Frieda, has never taken "and known for himself" (46) the principles of Mennonite belief; hence whatever conformity he demonstrates depends upon the presence of other Mennonites.

The other factor that makes Jakob's abandonment of Mennonite principles seem inevitable finally is that Jakob's father has long before abandoned the most basic of Mennonite principles, that of submerging self-interests in the good of the community. Instead, as the rest of the village of Gnadenfeld flees, Jakob Friesen IV remains behind, buying up abandoned property. Later in Moscow Friesen is known as one who uses his rubles only to secure his own position (57), not to work for the community at large as Driediger does (191). Jakob V's unconscious utterances of prejudice against the Russians ("Russians belonged in the barn" (14)) and frequent focus on the wealth of the hof indicate that he has absorbed the example of his father's actions as much as he has absorbed the correct dogma. The difference is that his selfish interests are sexual rather than materialistic.

The temptation to become complacent in the inevitable material results of Mennonite thrift and hard work is ever-present, as Wiebe
already made clear in *Peace Shall Destroy Many* where the Mennonite practices of sharing and helping one another yield eventual economic success for all but the most lazy and indifferent farmers (Herb Unger, for example). At the same time that economic success can foster increasing selfishness as Deacon Block demonstrates in his convenient conflation of the need for a separated life and the need for more land. Similarly, in *The Blue Mountains of China*, the Mennonites in Russia, then in Canada, and finally in Paraguay (at least to some extent) demonstrate that communal effort brings economic prosperity in the grimmest of settings, yet ironically that prosperity becomes the greatest threat to the community that created it, because it most clearly pits the self against the community.

In the first place, selfish greed leads the individual to betray the values of the community, as Wiebe points out through the juxtaposition of Jakob Friesen IV, the wealthy Russian, and Dennis "Williams" the Canadian. Just as Jakob Friesen IV shamelessly took "everything the revolution and anarchy and hunger could bring" (65), prepared to "fit in when a little changes or some stupid communist says don't preach so much" (27) rather than let them take his wealth from him, so Dennis profits rather handsomely from the war and finds it convenient to anglicize his name (149). Friesen’s choice of possessions over all else pays a grim reward: as classified kulak not even all his "Karatow rubles" mollify the GPU (62). By the time he has spent 10 years in Siberia and lonely years working wherever he could until he returned to his village, now completely collectivized, Friesen "[has] no longer anything with the Mennonites" (193). Wiebe never says directly that he
sold his soul for a mess of pottage, but John Reimer, in the final gathering in the ditch, does suggest that Dennis Williams exchanged his "undying soul" (204) for his millions. Moreover, just as the kulak Friesen was stripped of his wealth, so Dennis Williams is snatched from life (217, 226) as abruptly as the rich fool in the Bible (Luke 12:13-21). These men then not only ignore the teaching of Mennonites by choosing to invest in the kingdom of this world rather than the next, but their actions are a betrayal of the oneness of community among Mennonites, metaphorically often presented as oneness within the extended family (Redekop, "Translated" 117). Jakob’s betrayal is the more obvious since his greed risks the lives of his entire family, but Dennis’ determination to stay in a more prosperous Canada also divides his wife’s family.

In the second place, the possibility of exploiting the unity of the community for one’s own material benefit undermines the very qualities that make exploitation possible, thus fracturing the community into smaller nuclear family units, each concerned ultimately with "making" it (204). Just as the Unger family in Peace Shall Destroy Many survived because of the charity of the community and Deacon Block’s willingness to lend money (77), so the Reimer family in Blue Mountains in China survives because the father, Samuel Reimer, Sr. "[latches] tight where he [can] without any extra effort" (60). Reimer (called "Ernst Balzer" in Franz Epp’s story to protect the feelings of the listener, son John Reimer) has managed to survive in Moscow only because his cousin, David Epp, Sr. took in their family. His essential selfishness leads him to carp bitterly at Jakob Friesen IV’s tendency to avoid connections with Mennonites if risk is involved but to claim connections when it
suits (57)—not realizing that he himself operates under the same principles but with fewer rubles to hand—and then to rejoice at his own escape even as Jakob Friesen IV is dragged away from his sobbing wife.\textsuperscript{14} Such "nose-aimed myopia," as John Reimer later calls it (155), provokes Franz Epp, who is about to risk his own life in an effort to free the Mennonites, to see Reimer as a "big leech" (60). Not surprisingly, Reimer’s son Samuel Jr. likewise fattens almost parasitically on the community of which he is a part. Though he is not a very successful farmer he still manages well enough because other Mennonites loan him money "without a signed note or expecting interest" (175) and family members assist in various ways. What Samuel discovers, however, is that the myopic focus on one’s immediate family and on whatever benefits the community can provide undermines both family and community. When he attempts to respond to the call of God to "go and proclaim peace in Vietnam" (158), his brother-in-law refuses to take responsibility for his wife and children (168), and his fellow Mennonite church members make it impossible for him to do anything except share the general materialistic drive for respectability (176). Whenever the Mennonite community as a whole adopts materialistic aims, it makes an individual’s prophetic dissent nigh to impossible.

It is the prophetic disturbance of self-abnegation for the sake of the community, rather than parasitic self-preservation at the cost of the community, that Wiebe presents as the authentic way of being Mennonite. The clearest example is David Epp, leader of a small village in a

\textsuperscript{14} It is "Balzer's" utterly selfish "Ohh God, my God how marvellous are Thy ways, how He answers prayer!" that provokes David Epp, Sr. to rebuke him, "Ernst, I think Mrs. Friesen was praying too" (66).
Mennonite colony in "the Amur River district in far eastern Russian, north of China" (55). After leading his village to safety and freedom across the river David leaves his wife and son to return to Russia in hopes of saving other Mennonite villages from savage reprisals for their escape. Whether his action, which risked almost certain death, benefited Number 4 village, the one left behind, Wiebe leaves uncertain ("They don’t know about them. They never heard" {172}).

Putting aside for the moment the possible benefit to the community of David’s "act of martyrdom" (Solecki 7)\textsuperscript{15}, let me point out that David’s action arises out of a consistent Mennonite mind-set that calls for voluntary denial of self-centred desires\textsuperscript{16} for the sake of the larger good of the community and is therefore made possible by that community. In his plea to Greta Suderman to give her achingly full breasts to the starving babies in the group of refugee Mennonites, David reminds her that they all share responsibility for the present plight and for her baby’s death (123). In order to allow the entire village to flee to China each family had to leave behind its precious possessions. There had to be a unity of purpose and a willingness to abandon personal wish for the sake of all. Had only one family fled, the rest of the village would have suffered reprisals. It had to be all or

\textsuperscript{15} M. Redekop describes it as a useless gesture epitomized by a "circle of futility" from "louse to louse" (107) made by a man who is severely myopic. She sees his action as "mock-heroic" and leading not to "a redemptive new perception but to cynicism" ("Translated" 107).

\textsuperscript{16} In this chapter, particularly, Wiebe makes clear the contrast between Mennonite voluntarism and the violent coercion and self-interested betrayal of others that are required to establish and perpetuate the comparable Communist dream of "everyone living for everyone else, working in peace and harmony on the common land" (127).
none. Once across the river, when their plight intensifies, the good
of the community becomes even more important. While some probably
are hoarding food (120), David himself willingly gives up his few clothes
and a blanket to prevent one young girl from being raped. Nor is he
the only Mennonite prepared to sacrifice. Aaron Martens leaves his own
group of Mennonites safely in the city of Nen-chiang in order to travel
back at considerable expense to find out what happened to the fifth
bus-load of people from the village, and Bernhard, David’s friend, is as
ready as David to sacrifice.

Such self-denial, that includes also denial of immediate family, is
not only called for by the community but is made possible only by a
close-knit community. David has to explain little to his friend Bernhard
who willingly accepts the responsibility for David’s wife and son. Their
"life-long trust" in each other and in the basic Mennonite loyalty within
the larger community frees each to make the appropriate decision,
"though neither could have said who faced the bigger task" (138). The
very juxtaposition of David’s remembrance of the village’s secretive
escape with the Lord’s supper ("this is my body which is broken for
you" (128)) endorses David’s sacrifice. Here, as elsewhere in Wiebe’s
writing, it is evident that the Mennonite "sense of community is
predicated upon a religious attitude to life" (Solecki 7), and that
religious attitude to life begins with a voluntary individual commitment
to being "a radical follower of the person of Jesus Christ" (Wiebe

11 Unfortunately the definition of community, of the "all," becomes
ambiguous in the circumstances of the time. In order for this village to
escape safely, its members had to refuse to reveal their plans to family
members in another village. The conflict between family and community
doubtless intensified David’s compulsion to return.
quoted in Solecki 7). That means, as John Reimer puts it in the final chapter, loving enemies, trusting people, serving others, forgiving offenders, sharing money (215), and above all "hating" one's own life (217).

That any such living out of the radical principles of Jesus Christ can occur only within the context of a similarly committed community is clear not only in David Epp's story. He can leave his wife and infant son without guilt because he knows that Bernhard and others of the Mennonite community will care for them. Samuel Reimer, who is inspired by the story of David's action and by the words of David Epp, Sr. ("Mrs. Friesen was praying too"), also assumes confidently that the community will care for his wife and children if he should go to Vietnam (177). Ironically, though, his community has become so thoroughly integrated into a materialistic society in which everyone works to get ahead, caring for their nuclear families as a kind of extension of themselves, that the very solidarity of the community in its selfish pursuits prevents Samuel from obeying the voice of God. Because the entire community is more dedicated to making its pile (215) than to living out any principles of Christ, or even the traditions of the fathers, Samuel is balked in his attempt to respond to the call of God. He cannot get the references he needs for a passport. He cannot sell his land or house. While his determined action is utterly individual it cannot be carried out without the support of other people, just as John Reimer later will not be able to walk the highway with his cross unless people are willing to feed him.
It is in Samuel's story that the underlying motif of "nothing" and its relationship to the perceived everything of the *Gemeinschaft* becomes overt and insistent. Wiebe challenges the materialist version of Mennonitism which insists on practicality and profits (even to the point of measuring spiritual actions in terms of visible, recognizable results {170}) with the ultimate necessity of choosing to do what helps nothing. Initially the older Mr. Epp's poignant reminder that Mrs. Friesen "was praying too" (66) remains tantalizingly ambiguous. Her prayers were obviously not answered: Mr. Friesen went to Siberia and she never saw him again; three of her five daughters died within the next two years; her son Jakob was executed in Gnadenfeld. What good did her prayers do, either for her family or for other Mennonites? Certainly that is what Jakob Friesen himself says when years later in Canada John Reimer tells him about the incident in Moscow: "It helped her exactly nothing," Friesen concludes, "it helped us all, all these forty years of lifetime exactly nothing" (225).

By the time Jakob utters those bitter words, however, Wiebe has elevated "nothing" into the ultimately self-less action that completely sets aside any possible gratification or profit, even as John decides to "forget about doing something, even about doing what [he] thought good; forget about getting ahead; building [his] mind, preparing, about trying to be useful" (225). David's return to Russia is that kind of action. When Samuel relates the story to his psychiatrist, the psychiatrist dismisses David's act with "So what did his going back help?" (172). Samuel's wife similarly questions Samuel's proposed action of going to Vietnam with "what would it have helped? What?" (179).
Even Samuel himself admits that such action "would have helped nothing" (179), but nevertheless insists that he should have done it. His kids, he thinks, "wouldn't be such brats if I hadn't always been just working for them so much" (170). If he had done "something, anything, just some little thing maybe about what he [thought] was worst" (172) his children "could see . . . that [he] was doing something needed . . . that had to be, for others, not just so our family has it softer" (170). Samuel's reflections about his own family-centred myopia redefine David's earlier unusual short-sightedness into a morally appropriate refusal to consider the farther outcomes of his actions. The important question is not, will it help, but is it right.

Paradoxically, such refusal to measure the possible effects of one's actions (often a subtle way of maintaining one's own interests) has, according to Wiebe, the farthest-reaching results for the community, although those results may initially be profound disturbance, as they were in Peace Shall Destroy Many. In that novel Block's imposed outer peace for the community created painful inner disturbances for individuals, whereas Thom's search for inner harmony would create rifts within the community, both Mennonite and Métis. According to Solecki, Wiebe's heroes generally "seek a spiritual 'inner peace' that can be translated into the 'outer peace' of the community" (7). That process of translation is more difficult to detect in The Blue Mountains of China, as though the deferral into the nebulous future of the Mennonite search for a promised land of peace applies equally to the reader's search for justification for the revolutionary acts of "nothing" that Wiebe holds up for admiration. David's action that helped nothing does actually
transform his son's life ("he's made his whole life around what he knows his father did" (172)) and through his son the life of the Ayeroonas with whom he lives, though here again the reader is left to "understand nothing" (155), to wonder if the missionary David Epp's life makes any more sense than his father's. Samuel's attempted action and his reflection upon David's self-sacrifice influence his younger brother John into choosing an action—walking across Canada carrying a wooden cross, declaring himself to be "just a tired, dying human being, walking the land" (225)—that seems to help nothing. Yet initially it brings together several Mennonites, Elizabeth Cenero, Dennis Williams, his youngest daughter, Irene, and Jakob Friesen IV, who are all thereby led into a brief confrontation with their past and with their own mortality. Whether or not John's action will have the kind of ultimate results the other "nothing" actions had is, appropriately, left ambiguous.

The motif of nothing thus becomes explicit in the final chapter as the various characters meet John Reimer with his seemingly useless cross. Chapter 13 has begun with another wrenching shift in perspective from Samuel's unexplained death\(^\text{18}\) to the utterly frivolous verbal game between two relatively wealthy women. The only functional reason for the scene, besides allowing Wiebe to mock writers who focus on selfish gratification instead of a larger vision, is to contrast the suffering of Jakob Friesen IV with the superficiality of Elizabeth's life.

---

\(^{18}\) Samuel's death of unexplained physical causes after giving up his attempt to go to Vietnam makes literal the Biblical dictum that without vision the people perish (Prov. 29:18 KJV). Realizing that he cannot fight his materialistically-minded community, Samuel buys a huge life-insurance policy for his wife and then gives up. His death becomes a living out of the principle of his father—looking after his family materially.
Both Elizabeth and Jakob declare themselves, either directly or indirectly, as believers in "nothing." The nothing here is absence, vacancy, disillusionment, not deliberate self-negation for the sake of others or because God asked it of them.

Nevertheless, as Wiebe will make clear through the snatches of dialogue among the Mennonites in the ditch, the "nothing" of disillusionment is still more hopeful than either too much self or too many things. Elizabeth Cereno's nothing will remain since it contains too much unbridled self and not enough awareness of others. She does acknowledge the futility of all the pleasures the naive, fun-seeking Irene envies ("what does it help once in a while on a long winter evening in Edmonton . . . "{213}), but is unwilling to exchange the profitlessness of pleasure-seeking for the nothing of self-denial: "We need a world where everybody can live for himself, just be himself" (216). To that assertion of the independent self, John Reimer replies, "You want everyone except you dead?" (216), and then advises, "Hate your life. Just a little, more" (217). It is unlikely that she will, since she has cut herself off from the community that would make hating one's life possible.

Jakob Friesen IV, however, comes closer to transforming his nothing into positive possibility. Even though he once chose personal wealth over loyalty to fellow Mennonites, and though he maintains he now believes "nothing" (193), it is telling that he can only state his non-belief in terms of Mennonite or not-Mennonite: as Elizabeth Cereno notices, "Like some little grandmother who had never seen beyond her darp street, despite his lifetime wandering there was for him still only
one thing to believe or not believe" (193). His most important question to her is "Are you still a Mennonite?" (191). Consequently she doubts his declared rejection; she "knew it was a lie" (196). He is but one of those "who believe they believe nothing" (197). As his probing questions to the escaped prisoner in an earlier chapter, "Cloister of the Lilies," indicate, Friesen has continued to seek reasons for his suffering. He can no longer cling to the "impossible waving lily fields of Mennonite childhood" (115), yet he does ponder "necessary possibilities" (114–15) including the possibility that the "holy wisdom" of the prisoner—"survive as God is good" (114)—is indeed wisdom. His connections to the community that shaped him continue to exist, as he demonstrates in his eagerness to walk with John Reimer.

In the last section of the last chapter, when the other Mennonites have left, these two, young idealist and disillusioned ex-prisoner, break bread together over a simple campfire, and talk about the "nothing" actions that have shaped John's present journey that will probably also help nothing. Jakob does not explicitly return to faith. To John's detailed explanation of his own motives and of the Mennonite search for the promised land Jakob complains that the "big trouble with Jesus" is that he "never gives you a thing to hold in your hand" (227). He appears not to be ready for the denial of the materialist grasp for measurable success. What he is ready to acknowledge—that "it is nothing for one to drink alone when there are two by a fire" (220)—is, nevertheless, a profoundly important step. In Wiebe's world of "Christian communalism" (Solecki 7) and in the world of this novel,
Jakob has correctly identified and abandoned the nothing of "atomistic individualism" that leads to the "dark night of the soul" (Solecki 7).

Jakob's modern counterpart in materialism, Dennis Williams, will not grasp his opportunity to welcome nothing. Wiebe emphasizes the contrast between the two men by shifting perspective abruptly from Jakob's condensed story of suffering to the prosperous Dennis at ease in his Cadillac, busy dictating business letters, and delighting in the company of his family. As he calculates how many millions his oldest son might have amassed by now, he thinks briefly of Frieda Friesen, his mother-in-law, who has always had the peace she is named for "despite her nothing, absolutely nothing" (201). Dennis, however, concludes that "most people need all the things they can get" (201). He cannot comprehend any motive that is not based on profit. "What do they have now?" "What's that to get ahead?" (211) are his only responses to Jakob's brief comments about life in Paraguay (Jakob's daughter is now Frieda's daughter-in-law).

Dennis' choice of full pockets rather than the possibilities inherent in a voluntarily chosen nothing is thus contrasted specifically with Frieda. Her acceptance of poverty and sickness had earlier been contrasted with Dennis' smug self-congratulation: "you always said like Grandpa, 'it all comes from God.' So okay, but it's not always just sickness and want, eh?" (149). Now, in this final chapter, that contrast is renewed with an increased emphasis on choice and on the redemptive value of nothing. Frieda's true role within the novel and within the larger Mennonite community is here revealed in Dennis' mental comparison of his need for things with Frieda's inner peace: "He had
thought of this [the drive for more things] sometimes, before, but he had not felt then like he felt now. It had seemed more distant, and hardly personal. Mrs. Friesen with her calm, as if she had once had a chance and deliberately cut it off, forever, with her calm nothing" (201, italics mine). Though as conservative Kanadier in Paraguay she seems to have little in common with the gathering of the more modern Mennonites in the ditch, by virtue of her decision in favour of "calm nothing" she takes her place among those Mennonites whom Wiebe affirms in their self-less nothing.

Seemingly useless, recklessly sacrificial acts without profit, like those of David, or of Frieda, ultimately affect the quality of the community that remains, not by changing things dramatically, not even necessarily by making life better in measurable ways, but by presenting individuals within that community with clearer choices. Wiebe is thus not content to present the outward Mennonite life, the warmth of ethnic customs that are best retained through unthinking conformity such as that of Anna Friesen. Nor does Wiebe make explicit any conflict between an authorial individualistic self and the Mennonite community. What appears in both his novels, though less adeptly in Peace Shall Destroy Many, is the Mennonite community "on the way", always

---

19 Though Anna is given the briefest of opportunities to contemplate another way of being Mennonite (and is through that given what individuality she possesses) she hardly makes a choice as much as she simply follows what is already given. Her life is essentially the same as that of her mother, Frieda Friesen, yet receives much less implicit approval. In Anna's chapter, "The Well," the implied author is most distanced from the centre of consciousness and is thus able to register the most critical evaluation of Paraguayan Mennonites in the novel.
struggling with the mutually contradictory, mutually supportive tension
between the choosing individual and the shaping community.

Having led the reader into the experience of being Mennonite,
Wiebe leaves the novel open-ended. Any one of the ways of being
Mennonite that he has presented may need to be let go once it has
"finished [its] usefulness" (214). What he has done is to make the
reader look beyond the past and present Mennonite incarnations of
transcendent truth to the over-riding imperative of seeking whatever
incarnation of truth will most reflect the principles of Christ. That
search for ways to live out truth within a supportive community that is
still situated in a worldly context is the portion of the Mennonite
heritage, according to Wiebe, that can be and must be reclaimed. His
vision of the Mennonite Gemeinschaft thus foregrounds the inherent
necessity of community without diminishing the freedom of the individual
to lose his self.

Compelling as Wiebe’s vision is, however, that last pronoun is
deliberately chosen. Given the patriarchal nature of the traditional
Mennonite community, it remains an open question whether women are
also encouraged to make the choices that constitute the essence of true
Gemeinschaft and that make literary expression within the community
possible.
CHAPTER FIVE

The Silent in the Land

While Rudy Wiebe may have been able to present several valid ways of being Mennonite concluding finally that Mennonite Gemeinschaft provides a necessary context for a healthy individuality, such a range of possibilities with a profound religious choice at the core is not possible for a Mennonite woman. According to the little historical evidence available about the lives of Mennonite women and according to fictional representations of Mennonite women by mostly male authors, there is only one way of being Mennonite if you are a woman, and that is silent. For an aspiring writer, a model of silence is problematic.

That some marked difference exists between the expression of creative imagination by Mennonite men and by Mennonite women is clear just from the range of texts available for examination. According to the lists of early Russian-Mennonite writers such as those provided by J.H. Janzen in 1946, by Cornelius Krahn in 1969, by Harry Loewen in 1983, none of those recognized authors was a woman. J.H. Janzen, it is true, does mention one woman, "our 'Tante Marie' (Mrs. Marie Penner)" but labels her work "beautiful fairy tales" written for "our youth" (25). Her name appears in no later lists. The translation and publication of The Diary of Anna Baerg 1916-1924 in 1985, and recent biographical studies such as Rich's Mennonite Women which are based on letters and
similar documents, make it clear that women did write, but what they
wrote was personal (journals, letters) and not meant for publication.
Anna Baerg did write poetry; none of it was published at the time, but
some is included in the Diary.

Later Mennonite writers writing in English, beginning with Rudy
Wiebe, are still mostly male. Given the parameters I had set myself
(texts that reflect and foreground intimate knowledge of Dutch/Russian
Mennonite community and have received critical attention), choosing
texts for this chapter on feminine narrative techniques was a problem.
Barbara Claassen Smucker writes her novels for children, and apart
from Days of Terror her focus is the Swiss-Mennonite experience. Sara
Stambaugh's novels, I Hear the Reaper's Song and The Sign of the Fox,
fully deserve critical attention, but her focus is also the Swiss-
Mennonite experience. The short stories of Lois Braun and the fiction
of Sandra Birdsell include only minor references to Mennonites and both
women have noted their rather peripheral connections with Mennonite
communities (Prairie Fire 11.2 {Summer '90}, 179, 191). Neither
foregrounds an intimate acquaintance with Gemeinschaft that parallels
that of Rudy Wiebe, for example, or Al Reimer. That leaves for my
consideration Anne Konrad's The Blue Jar, a collection of linked short
stories with a child-protagonist similar to Arnold Dyck's Lost in the
Steppe, and two sets of companion narratives written by Magdalene
Redekop and her sister Elizabeth Falk.¹ These texts deal directly with

¹ If I were discussing poetry as well as fiction, my choice would be
slightly wider: Di Brandt, Audrey Poetker-Thiessen, Sarah Klassen, and
others who have not yet published volumes of poetry. Why women have
tended to choose poetry as a mode of expression rather than prose

168
the experience of Mennonite Gemeinschaft and demonstrate some specifically feminine techniques for countering Mennonite resistance to creative writing.

Actually, the scarcity of women writers and the later dates of their publications suggest that the point at which the Mennonite community's resistance was felt was not in the exercise of creative imagination itself, since by now the Mennonite community was learning to see itself in print, but in the daring of women to write for publication at all. Male authors were able gradually to undermine or defuse some of the Mennonite suspicion of fiction. Whether through strengthening communal identity with a focus on ethnic particularity as Arnold Dyck does, or through adopting an accepted prophetic stance in order to strengthen theological integrity as Rudy Wiebe does, or through retelling the stories that shaped Mennonite consciousness as Al Reimer does, male authors have been able to gain a voice within the Gemeinschaft. When we look at women's fiction, what little of it there is, it is apparent that these strategies are not as readily available for women.

The unique difficulties faced by would-be women authors among Mennonites are scarcely articulated except by the most recent women writers, particularly those who have seemingly cut themselves free from their communities. These difficulties can, however, be inferred quite clearly from direct religious teaching, from the fictional representations of women in the fiction written by men, and from the far more subtle

could be the subject of further research.
techniques used by the women writers who seek to gain a literary voice within the community.

That Mennonites have generally taken very seriously the Apostle Paul’s instructions ("women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says" [I Cor. 14:34 NIV]) is evident from any reading of historical accounts. A quick count of Mennonite names in the index of P.M. Friesen’s well-known and detailed history, The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910), yields approximately 289 names, only 10 of which are women.¹ Friesen’s description of "Moria", the "home for Deaconesses" (the one position women were allowed to hold), barely mentions the women and their work within the church at all, giving prominent place instead to a list of "men who have especially contributed to the launching of the work" (819). Since women could not preach, could not take any role in the community that meant having any sort of authority over men, their main role was as wives to the men who preached, farmed, made decisions, and ruled the communities. Carol Penner, in "Mennonite Women's History: A Survey," notes that "women's avenues of service in the church were often routed through their husbands' positions of

¹ Such a method of examining the prominence of women in Mennonite history is misleading on several counts. It gives no indication of how much is actually said about the women mentioned (it could be only a mention of the name; it could be a more detailed account of work done) or what the tone of the information given is, and it also gives no indication of how many women are referred to in the text simply as wives of their more prominent husbands, in which case their names do not even appear in the index. My intent is only to observe that women occupy a relatively small space in historical records of Mennonites. Katie Funk Wiebe’s similar observation is that P.M. Friesen leaves the stories of women "hidden between lines and in footnotes" ("Mennonite Brethren Women" 22).
authority. The death of a husband meant the end of certain types of church work for their widows" (125). Penner's survey includes only books and articles that focus directly on women's efforts within church and service organizations and makes no reference to other careers or endeavours, except nursing and teaching. The focus is revealing. As the common proverb put it, women's place was Kirche, Kinder, und Küche (church, children, and kitchen). If a woman was unfortunate enough not to marry, she was still expected to expend her life in service to others.¹

The literalistic reading of Scripture so characteristic of Mennonites meant that Paul's words, "For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man" (I Cor. 11: 8-9 NIV), definitively relegated women to a secondary place in the church, in the home, in the community. Specifically she

¹ The biographical books that Penner refers to, such as Elaine Sommers Rich's Mennonite Women: a Story of God's Faithfulness 1683-1983, generally tend to present a "great woman" approach to Mennonite history. Rich especially describes superwomen who raise 10-15 children, endure pioneering farming conditions, and still find time to teach children, work as midwives, and begin charitable institutions. As Penner comments, Rich's work seems deliberately optimistic (129), and her picture of active dynamic women is completely at odds with what is generally depicted in fiction. I also wonder if Rich's focus on Swiss Mennonite women reveals a substantial difference between their role and that of women in the Dutch/Russian communities. Katie Funk Wiebe's Women Among the Brethren, however, deals with Russian Mennonite women, yet similarly focuses on successful women. A clue to the tone of these books is their stated purpose of holding up exemplary women and glorifying God's faithfulness to them. That purpose leaves no space for failures, for stories of women left frustrated and silent. Much research still needs to be done concerning the lives of Mennonite women, and it needs to be a little less hagiographic and a little more of a contextualized examination of details of daily living and common attitudes. Marlene Epp's "Women in Canadian Mennonite History: Uncovering the 'Underside'" Journal of Mennonite Studies 5 (1987) is an important first step.
was barred from speaking publicly, from participating in official processes. As Magdalene Redekop succinctly observes in "Through the Mennonite Looking Glass," "while the Bruderschaft [brotherhood] was making the important decisions in the main body of the church, the Frauenverein [ladies’ society] was in the basement, getting the food ready. They might be talking, but they did not have a voice" (240). Small wonder that what writing they found time to do was either directed to children, or designed to maintain family relationships and records (letters, journals). The abnormally high birthrate among Mennonites required hard-working women in the home, and the strong Mennonite emphasis on families united in faith meant that the mothers’ "greatest service to the congregation" would be "through their children" by raising them "as children of God . . . . Mothers are the natural educators of a people" (J.J. Klassen qtd. in Frank Epp, Mennonites 450–51).

On the other hand, Mennonites also placed great emphasis on the priesthood and servanthood of all believers. One point of Anabaptist resistance to the principles and practices of the Roman Catholic church was the rejection of hierarchical authority. As Rich points out, Mennonites held two contradictory views of women: one was that men and women are human beings in need of redemption and with equal obligation to live out the principles of Jesus Christ; the other was that "women have a limited role. They should be primarily in the home. Both at home and in the church they should be subordinate to men. Paul teaches that they should be silent in the church" (232). Based on
her experience and on the stories she includes in her collection, Rich suggests that the first view has dominated.

Fictional representations of Mennonite women by Mennonite men, however, suggests that the second view is far more common, and my own experience in a Mennonite community would confirm that. Katie Funk Wiebe, in "The Mennonite Woman in Mennonite Fiction," summarizes the picture of the Mennonite women in several works of fiction, Canadian and American. The publishing dates of the texts she examines range from 1943 (Otto Schrag's The Locusts) to 1980 (Wilfred Martens' River of Glass). The chief female character type is the "great Earth Mother" who "is an unemotional, stolid domestic beast of burden who marries, bears children, works hard, and goes to her grave, unrewarded and unnoticed" (232). She concludes:

Generally, the Mennonite woman in literature is Eve Before the Fall, a pure and asexual preserver of Mennonite faith and culture. . . . Often she appears as the virtuous girl, the pious mother, or the saintly grandmother; usually she is more naive, or unworldly, than innocent. As a type she possesses great hidden strengths stored in some inner reservoir, but strengths which never threaten men's masculinity or their place in society. (231)

This Mennonite "Earth Mother" is not "a person who personally forges her faith in the furnace of daily living through her own decisions" (241). Rather, she "receives her faith by a process of osmosis through the virtue of being her husband's wife" (241). Whether she is idealized as a madonna (Magdalene Redekop notes trenchant examples of this
idealization in "The Pickling of the Mennonite Madonna") or pictured as an animalistic figure of unthinking hard labour (Katie Funk Wiebe sees that image as the underside of the Great Earth Mother), the Mennonite woman in fiction is essentially passive, denied the privilege of making decisions in daily life as she is denied the privilege of participating in communal decisions.

My own reading of Mennonite fiction yields a similar picture of the Mennonite woman but with slightly more emotion: the Mennonite mother does cry, at funerals, over her children, but she suppresses those tears by reiterating versions of Frieda Friesen's principle of Gelassenheit: it "does all come from God." She is above all the primary supporter and transmitter of ethnicity, of tradition. Women are the makers of quilts and borscht and verenike. They are also the ones to nurture the children, tell the stories of faith, and teach Mennonite values. As Calvin Redekop notes in Mennonite Society, the family was "expected to carry responsibility for the socialization of the children's belief and behaviour and help children achieve conformity by means of physical and moral sanctions" (161). The key to keeping children in the Mennonite community was the "totally submissive" woman (165).† That is certainly

† The corollary to this role of transmitter of ethnicity and tradition and religious belief is the role of blocking progress and staving off doubt. Hildi Froese Tiessen sees a "small myth" apparent in many Mennonite texts: "the Mennonite matriarch as subverter of the arts" ("Role" 243). It would seem reasonable that the mother, deprived of the educational opportunities afforded her sons, unlikely to learn the language of the host society since she didn't need it in the home and her husband always escorted her in public anyway (Penner 126), and kept from participating in religious decisions, would remain as the most conservative member in the family. As a result she would transmit the same traditional role to her daughters. Moreover, since women transmitted ethnic and religious identity it was even more crucial for
the role demonstrated by the mothers in the fiction that I read, and there were few women who were not mothers.

The epitome of this ideal Mennonite woman in male fiction is Peter Epp's Agatchen in *Eine Mutter*, translated by Peter Pauls as *Agatchen*. She is a strong woman who endures, who encourages, who listens, who bakes bread endlessly, and who gives generously to the needy. She never understands economic matters, refuses to think politically, never meddles in church affairs, and defers perpetually to the men in her life (her father, her two husbands, her brothers, then her sons). She embodies *Gelassenheit*, an unquestioning acceptance of circumstances and her role in them as defined traditionally. Peter Pauls calls Agatchen an old matriarch, a "wise and compassionate woman" (introduction). It is true that she spends an inordinate amount of time on the *Ruhbank* (high-backed bench), encouraging and advising, but it is worth noting that she, as first-person narrator, is the one who exalts that role of the wise woman. For the most part others go their way, feeling a bit better perhaps, but under no obligation to heed her words. In fact, as she grows old, her words are often mocked for their naivete. She understands nothing of the modern world and her words of advice are ignored. They lack power and relevance. Like the various old *Muttachis* who appear in Rudy Wiebe's novels, Agatchen is granted decent respect as mother and grandmother, but her voice is not truly heard beyond the family walls.

dughters to remain within the faith than for sons.
Those few women in fiction written before the 1980s who do resist the Muttrachi image usually do so through personal adornment and a flaunted sexuality that reaps disastrous consequences. The perceived opposite to the submissive woman and hard-working mother is the proud woman preoccupied with her own appearance, a picture taken from I Peter 3: 3-4 where the gentle, quiet spirit is preferred above the "braiding of the hair, or jewellery, or dress." Any concern about useless and dangerous ornament is considered the prelude to sexual sin, the ultimate evil for Mennonites. Liesel in The Blue Mountains of China is drawn out of the community by a desire for beauty, evident primarily in her admiration of the English ladies' dresses and make-up. In the same novel, Joseph Hiebert is perceived as lost to the community when he is once seen with a painted woman. In Peace Shall Destroy Many the ultimate outsider is a woman who wears make-up and high heels. The same shockingly sinful personal adornment on non-Mennonite women is mentioned in Dyck's Lost in the Steppe. Dyck never says much about theology but the vast difference between Hans' imaginings about German high-born ladies and his thoughts about the Mennonite girls he actually knows makes it clear that Mennonite women and sexual allurement are mutually exclusive. As K. Wiebe notes, the Mennonite woman is "rarely beautiful in face or figure" ("Mennonite Woman" 231). Indeed, current jokes making the rounds among urban Mennonite youth testify to the endurance of the image of dowdy, sexless piety: "Q. How do you know that Adam was a Mennonite? A. He took the apple, not the naked woman. Q. How do you know that Eve was a Mennonite? A. Adam took the apple." In the fiction written by men particularly, Mennonite women
simply do not turn into temptresses; it is forbidden, or more likely, unimaginable. If the plot or theme calls for the man to be tempted sexually it will be through an outsider, hence making the temptation doubly dreadful.

That suspicion of beauty in general, which we have already seen as a perpetual obstacle for creative Mennonite individuals, is nevertheless routinely circumvented by women in ways which defer to the Mennonite ethos of simplicity and humility, yet allow scope for personal expression. In *Lost in the Steppe*, Dyck noted the decorative plates on the shelf on the wall, and the guest bed piled high with embroidered pillows and delicately stitched quilts, though he does not directly acknowledge those efforts as truly artistic. Hans never does understand his mother's passion for "sugar things," being impressed rather by the paintings he sees later. Many women found creative outlets in cooking or in gardening, or in keeping the house immaculate and tasteful (Rich 231), but male writers have not generally recognized these pursuits as either a point of resistance against male fiat concerning vain adornment or as legitimate artistic expression. Perhaps that is why Mennonite women have generally found it easier to enter the field of visual arts than to write: Hildi Froese Tiessen in "The Role of Art and Literature in Mennonite Self-Understanding" lists several Mennonite women who design quilts and make ceramic cabbages and jars of preserves into artistic objects. To take the fancy quilt off the bed and hang it on the wall is not as blatantly subversive for a woman as it would be to speak out publicly and to publish words that claim authority.
A further difficulty for women in the finding of a literary voice is their strongly internalized ideal of selflessness. While Mennonite theology generally stressed servanthood, the submissive role of women made them doubly servants. The very nature of housework and childcare requires a persistent focus on the needs of others and the injunctions against pride, often applied rather more stringently to women than to men, meant that women tended not to see themselves as individuals with unique gifts. Magdalene Redekop's description of her mother who learned to excuse her interest in books as a function of her supervisory role as mother (reading was so much more frivolous an activity than sewing or cooking) and who scarcely knew how to admit that she had any desire to use her gifts for expression ("Looking Glass") could be a description of my mother as well. It is difficult here to marshall proof for the general denial of self expected of women because so little research has yet been done and fictional representations of women have seldom granted women enough individuality to demonstrate any repression of individuality, either through the required silence or through sublimated energetic service to others. As Calvin Redekop admits, "Because of the generally patriarchal nature of Mennonite communities historically, the subordinated position, and possibly also the oppressed status and role, of Mennonite women has not been studied or, until recently, even admitted" (Society 103). Furthermore since women themselves have so completely accepted their existence as one of selfless service, they have resisted any association with feminist movements (Marlene Epp 93) that might have undermined
their acceptance of their role or exposed its implications in the lives of women who found it difficult to fit into that role.

For the Mennonite woman writer, then, it was necessary either to rebel directly against the community's expectations of women, a rebellion that carried a high cost, personally and socially, or to find ways of subverting those expectations from within. In the daring step of choosing to write she faced one more, equally formidable, obstacle to expression than did her male contemporaries. They needed to find a literary voice; women needed to find a voice.

Anne Konrad's *The Blue Jar*, as a novel of childhood, and often viewed as written for a young audience, appears at first to refuse all possibility of subversion. It seems to maintain the familiar *Muttachi* image as unquestioningly as Peter Epp's *Agatchen* did, although since the centre of consciousness is still really a girl at the end and is never truly the centre of importance, it would be more accurate to say that the novel presents the image of a warm integrated community that is maintained by the *Muttachis* in it. A thoughtful comparison with other novels discussed in this dissertation, however, reveals something quite other than an unquestioning celebration of Mennonite motherhood with its assumed submerging of self into the *Gemeinschaft*.

Its clearest resemblance is to Arnold Dyck's *Lost in the Steppe* and it fulfills the same ground-breaking function—an exploration of the aesthetic possibilities within the tradition—this time for a woman writer. Like Dyck, Konrad chooses as centre of consciousness a child, Annchen Klassen, who bears the same autobiographical resemblance to her creator that Hans Toews bore to Dyck. Because of the childish perspective, the
identity of the community is revealed from within through a description of unquestioned customs rather than through adult self-conscious formulations. Like Dyck, Konrad begins her novel with the death of an older sibling, which the childish mind finds difficult to grasp. The gap between Annchen's bewildered questions about what day of the week it is and the depth of the family's pain serves the same purpose that a similar gap did in Dyck's novel: the reader is immediately drawn into identification with the child and immersed in an interior view of the community life. That community life is rendered vividly realistic through ethnic details, including, as it did in Dyck's novel, Christmas celebrations, school functions, pig-killings, weddings, Sunday-afternoon visiting, and family gatherings. Both protagonists grow up from about age 4 or 5 until almost puberty. At the end of the two novels, both protagonists embark on a new way of life, although Annchen begins her new existence because of a family move rather than a decision to leave home as Hans does.

Konrad thus presents the Canadian Mennonite equivalent of the secure Russian way of life that Dyck presented in Lost in the Stepp. The Russian village of Hochfeld no longer exists, of course, and the informed Canadian reader realizes that the small Rat Lake Mennonite community is probably also much changed since many of its Mennonite inhabitants are moving to where the living is easier. Both novels thus contain a note of nostalgia. Clara Thomas, in fact, suggests that The Blue Jar could be subtitled "Elegy to a simple, hard, Godly--and lost--way of life" (135), a sub-title that could apply equally well to Lost in the Stepp.
That very similarity, however, should alert the reader to possible techniques of subversion. Since Dyck undercut his elegiac impulses with an irony that allowed him to acknowledge the tensions between an artistic temperament and the unaesthetic peasant tradition, it is possible that Konrad also achieves other goals than to celebrate "the Klassens' desperately hard-working, God-driven, Mennonite way of life" (Thomas 135). Thomas appears not to notice any subtext. Either there is none or Konrad's techniques are even more evasive than Dyck's irony. The rather striking differences between the two novels reveal clues to the nature and purposes of her evasions.

Though Annchen Klassen initially seems a female counterpart of Hans Toews, an equally uncomprehending child moving with relative security in a generally loving adult world, Konrad's treatment of the childish centre of consciousness differs significantly from Dyck's. She makes Annchen the first-person narrator, thus refusing the possibilities of the dual perspective that Dyck maintains through a mature, ironically distanced narrator. Very occasionally Konrad includes the reflective voice of the maturer narrator, the grown-up Anne, in order to give information necessary for the reader's understanding:

The homestead would always remain a place of isolated memories, of shards long afterward pieced together to understand that place where my parents had struggled to adapt the religious and social order of the Mennonite villages they had left behind in Russia to the Norwegian and English-speaking ways of this forest called Canada. (22)
For the most part the reader remains firmly within the consciousness of the child, who is about 9 or 10 in most of the stories. Her emotions of belonging or not belonging are rendered directly, without defensiveness or moralizing. If judgment on the community or on Annchen is to be rendered it must be on the basis of the reader's values, for the implied author remains elusive. Even to raise any questions about Annchen's reliability as narrator seems impertinent, since Anne is throughout "a listener, a watcher and reporter, a passive, not an active focus of meaning" (Thomas 135). With a complete absence of the kind of controlling irony that shaped *Lost in the Steppe*, Konrad chooses instead to register the perceptions of a child, as bewildered, as contradictory as they may be. If we wish to detect the judgments of the implied author we must look for subtler clues among the details given and omitted and in the overall tone.

Perhaps because of the limited child's perspective, I find the mixture of poignant sadness and hilarious comedy more disturbing than the similar mixture in *Lost in the Steppe*. Hans resists the farm work and cries about it but the narrator's ironic perspective keeps us from also shedding tears, especially when Dyck gives us the briefest glimpse of the horrors yet to come. Konrad, however, never releases the reader from Annchen's point of view, never gives a larger context that could let us laugh at Annchen's tears or realize the implications of occasions when she does not cry. While Dyck began with a funeral, Konrad's stories are so permeated with funerals that they nearly lose their dimension of grief and become simply matter-of-fact. Thomas comments on these funerals only as evidence of the closeness of the community
life (136); everyone goes to all the funerals (The Blue Jar 61) and shares in death just as much as in life.

It is rather chilling, however, to realize that all the mentioned deaths are female deaths. Helen, the oldest daughter, whose funeral begins the book, is a sacrificial angel, almost too good to remain in the world. She has already adopted the role of mother to the younger children. The elderly Mrs. Wedel dies of cancer, something that "ate out [her] insides" (63); Annchen records details of the funeral and notices the usual funeral songs that celebrate the rest finally given to the dead. The youngsters in the cemetery, engaged in a childish rivalry about whose graves have the prettiest flowers (the women plant those flowers), comment on an anonymous "mother-grave" assuming that there is also a "baby-grave" (62). The death of young Susie Mathies, age 12, is caused by a fall from a horse. What is disturbing is the way her complaints about feeling ill are dismissed: "her mother thought it was just girls’ sickness" (67). Katy Franzen’s death from pneumonia seems due to the lack of adequate medicine; Annchen, however, notices how closely Katy’s death follows her one excursion into the sinful world of "box socials" (150). The final death, given in the last chapter, is that of Annchen’s friend Flora’s mother, Mrs. Kroeker, who dies in childbirth. There will be another mother-grave flanked by a baby-grave. Every one of these numerous funerals is accepted as unavoidable. In fact, when Mr. Kroeker blames himself for his lack of sexual control, Anne’s father assures him that her death was God’s will: "God made man to multiply; it is God’s plan" (223). Since Konrad remains so firmly within Annchen’s perspective she imposes on us no conclusion out of this
spectacle of female death. It remains as unprotested "God’s plan" and the oldest Kroecker daughter now automatically becomes the "little mother" (225). I would suggest that Konrad, like Dyck, writes a text that on the surface celebrates, or at least presents objectively without questioning, a way of life that Mennonite readers will recognize, but that contains also a subtext that insinuates questions about female experience within that way of life, if the reader is already prepared to ask such questions.

Another key difference between Dyck’s novel and Konrad’s is Konrad’s recognition of the role of the church in the community. Whereas Dyck allowed the church to remain as assumed background, Konrad foregrounds the centrality of the church within the community. Annchen decides nearly all of her conduct in relation to the dictums of the church. She takes for granted that its teachings are authoritative. Unlike Dyck’s Hans, who saw only a farming tradition that balked his educational ambitions, and definitely unlike Thom Wiens of Peace Shall Destroy Many, who struggled with the correct ethical working-out of major theological issues, Annchen seems wholly preoccupied with the details of what worldliness is. Every activity (skating, box socials), every aspect of living from clothing to reading material is measured according to its relative worldliness. Annchen does not openly resist such a paradigm of living; she simply demonstrates a child’s curiosity about the forbidden (147) and registers as fact that "Mennonite children were told in church, black is black, white is white" (146). Annchen describes details of outward church life: baptism, worship services, Sunday school, and the teachings of salvation as children comprehend it.
She gives few details of the sermons preached because her mind is taken up with immediate concerns such as when lunch will be served and who is singing too loudly (181-2). She also says nothing about church business meetings, except what she overhears adults mention, because as a child she is excluded from such meetings.

Here again, however, Konrad includes a sub-text of implicit criticism through her focus on Annchen’s childish perception of the applications of Mennonite theology. At no time does Annchen directly criticize the theology itself, but she does register frequent puzzlement over the complexities of human relationships and over seeming inconsistencies of application of the theology. For the most part, this questioning tone is only briefly registered and invariably left unresolved, as though the issue raised was a problem only for a childish mind that had not yet internalized what adults automatically assumed to be correct. Quite often, too, the implied criticism of the Mennonite way of thinking is disguised as young girls’ quarrels with each other over trivialities. For example, Annchen’s description of the Dirks family that would soon provide her with her first brother-in-law includes the following:

[Edith Dirks] was also bold enough to buy the first pair of toeless high-heeled shoes. Naturally Preacher Rahn’s big girls noticed right away and soon Edith (she was baptized) was asked to explain her ‘worldliness’ in front of the church council. Later, as more and more girls ordered similar shoes from Eaton’s catalogue, it didn’t seem to matter as much. (173)
Neither Annchen nor the implied author makes explicit the conclusion that the all-male church council is the entity guilty of triviality here. Less comic is Annchen's response to the church meeting called to discuss the excommunication of a young married man and the young woman, not his wife, that he was said to have visited. In this story, "The Geranium," Konrad chooses visual symbols to carry the emotion of the story, rather than the vivid dialogue she usually depends on. Noting the lack of sexual information for girls ("Boys learned all of these things in the barn, but whom could girls ask?" (213)) and the subsequent recourse to forbidden love stories in the papers and overheard, often misunderstood, adult conversation, Annchen finally records only bewilderment: "Ausgeschlossen [excommunicated]. Henry's free-going arm? Lizzie's love stories? Gold rings, red geraniums, lilac irises--how could there be so many colours in one black and white word?" (216). Annchen never does relate what the church decided regarding the offending couple. Konrad's point is obviously made just in registering the levels of confusion and pain within individuals affected by church rules. The explicit condemnation of rules uttered by Rudy Wiebe's character Elizabeth Block is not possible in the mouth of Anne Klassen, ostensibly because she is a child. One is tempted to ask whether that evasiveness is necessary for a woman writer.

Annchen's enduring childlikeness also differs from Dyck's treatment of his protagonist. Her sister Tina's progress from graduated school-girl to young wife and mother is more noticeable than any development in understanding in Anne herself. She is a passive bystander at the beginning of the novel and a passive bystander at the
end. She knows a bit more about sexuality, but she refuses to discuss it. Knowledge is largely manipulative: it enables Anne to feel older and to treat younger girls as disdainfully as she was once treated (211). It changes nothing in Anne's behaviour or in her awareness of herself. While Hans Toews finally leaves home at the end of Lost in The Steppe to begin a new life on his own as a student, Anne Klassen simply moves away from Rat Lake because her family moves: "her identity is as much a part of the composite Klassen family identity as it was when, a small child, she began to look around her" (Thomas 135-36). She certainly accepts more tasks at home as she grows older but never speaks of much resistance to those tasks, or any growing maturity in taking on those tasks.

These differences from Lost in the Steppe would seem to support Magdalene Redekop's observation that a good Mennonite woman would likely see herself as essentially "self-less, as being without self" ("Looking Glass" 238). Every one of the key differences between Hans and Annchen highlights Annchen's refusal, or inability, to become a choosing self. The most that Annchen can do is to report her experiences; it is the reader who then notices the boundaries of those experiences. The female identity remains essentially child-like, part of the composite family identity, passive, lacking understanding of larger issues. It is terrifyingly expendable (the anonymous mother-graves and baby-graves) and ultimately replaceable ("the young married brides, the Sarah's, Lena's and Tina's, were beginning to replace their mothers in the babyroom in the back of the church" (210)). The adoption of the ethnic emphasis that Dyck used with such effect to teach his audience
to appreciate an aesthetic sensibility that could mediate and give identity to the community seems to create a different effect in the pen of a woman. I would suggest that since the Mennonite woman is so clearly the transmitter of ethnic tradition, any emphasis on that tradition serves to blur individual identity, rather than to provide a context for an emerging individual identity.

To adopt and adapt the prophetic tradition, as Rudy Wiebe did so effectively and as Al Reimer also did, is a possibility that Konrad rejects, first through her choice of a child narrator with her necessarily limited perspective, and then by discrediting the notion of authoritative prophecy itself. If the reader chooses to see criticism of the Rat Lake community in the novel, or a call to return to theological purity, Konrad will not take responsibility for it. Moreover, the exposure of prophetic judgment as manipulative reminds the reader that any such judgment is itself open to question.

While Annchen, as an unknowing child, appears simply to record her perceptions and her emotional reactions to what happens in the community, her very naivete provokes questions. Her questions, however, are not of the kind Rudy Wiebe raised concerning major issues among the Mennonites. Konrad notes the same aspects of separation, of course, but they do not trouble Annchen as they troubled Thom Wiens in Peace Shall Destroy Many. The difficulty of language receives attention only in the story of Tina's wedding when the guests are bewildered with the "'high' words" of the imported English preacher (198), or through Annchen's occasional observation of the unusual ("Talking English in our church" {98}). Of greater importance is the
difficulty of Annchen's mother who cannot speak enough English to converse with her Norwegian neighbours who come to help on various occasions (17, 192). Konrad balances that picture of enforced isolation, however, with a clearly celebratory picture of the mutual help and laughter that exists between Mrs. Klassen and her Norwegian neighbours. Whereas Rudy Wiebe wondered if love could be learned as easily as language, Konrad seems to imply that the women, at least, have already learned the love, even if they have been denied an opportunity to learn the language.

The careful physical segregation that ensures freedom from worldliness is noted, but not questioned. What is emphasized is that the measures of segregation are much more severe for girls than for boys, as though girls are much more susceptible to worldliness than boys: "very few Mennonite girls worked out, at least for the 'Englische.' For boys it didn't matter . . . they worked out by the time they were fifteen on threshing crews, or, in winter, in the lumber camps, but girls - " (147). Their isolation from worldliness is strictly maintained by sending them "by train to southern Alberta where all winter long they boarded in Mennonite homes and went to a Mennonite Bible School" (75). Konrad thus presents a dual concept of separation from the world: the men acknowledge that it "works best if you’re with your own people" (125), a voluntary conclusion drawn from wider experience; the women are kept even from knowing what it might be like elsewhere than with your own people. Boys can be trusted to remain in the faith, while girls will likely fall prey to evil desires, a conclusion that Konrad
nowhere makes explicit but that readers, especially female readers, from communities like Rat Lake will readily interpolate. Similarly the issue of pacifism, so central to the self-identification of Mennonites, touches Annchen only peripherally. That is self-evident since military involvement affects only men directly, not women. As Magdalene Redekop observed, her father quizzed only prospective sons-in-law about the "historic peace witness", not "prospective daughters-in-law" ("Looking-Glass" 239). For Annchen the war exists only as a topic for school discussion and as a motivation for the rash of weddings in the community ("it had something to do with that far away war and the young men, all of whom would rather be married farmers than in a C.O. camp" (186)). Like Rudy Wiebe, however, Konrad brings in the related issue of personal violence, but once again, very indirectly without making any conclusion explicit. The story that tells of the Gunnarsons and the violent jealousy of the husband begins and ends with the children (Annchen and her nearest siblings) playing forbidden cards and games of cops and robbers with Ronny Gunnarson (118). The contrast between the Klassen parents' refusal to let their children play any violent games at all and the Gunnarsons' ugly and violent family dispute is clear. Konrad chooses to say no more.

\footnote{Just as Keith described The Blue Mountains of China as a "novel that works on two levels of interest and resonance, depending upon whether one is inside the Mennonite community or outside it" ("Voice" 93), so I suggest that The Blue Jar works on two levels. The difference is that Wiebe's complex narrative style makes a temporary Mennonite of his readers, while Konrad's superficially simple narrative style allows the sub-text to remain quite unperceived by non-Mennonite and some Mennonite readers.}
Not only does Konrad avoid making prophetic pronouncements on key issues of Mennonite teaching, but she discredits the male-defined prophetic role based on words and authoritative interpretation. Whereas Al Reimer can appeal clearly to the prophetic tradition among Mennonites (Erdmann Lepp, the protest of Nikolai Fast) and identify that "prophetic vision with the role of the artist" (Redekop, "Pickling" 120), Konrad gives us just as many prophets but they are wild, undisciplined, manipulative, even petty. Zeena, an "awkward" older school-girl, uses "her radio authority" (her parents owned a radio when most Mennonites didn't) to predict "Battles of Armageddon" and Jesus' immediate return to order to find "her place in the playground" (32). She succeeds briefly in frightening the younger girls she draws into her exclusive prayer meetings, but she is quickly silenced. Lehrer Zeitig, in a chapter called "The Prophet," frightens not only the children but the whole community. As imported Bible School teacher he reveals the mysteries of Revelation, a topic that has periodically fascinated Mennonites since Anabaptist times. Like Erdmann Lepp in Reimer's novel, Zeitig assumes the role of God's prophet and challenges his audiences to prepare for the Second Coming (78). Unlike Reimer, however, who gradually rehabilitates Lepp's zeal into a respected holiness in order to endorse the prophetic role of the artist, Konrad unmask Zeitig as an imposter and manipulator. His emphasis on the harlot of Babylon, the "smiling, raven-haired woman, with red lips, scarlet and purple clothing, gold jewels" (78) and his ranting against sexual sin, tips over into a temporary madness that becomes ludicrous, not frightening, as Zeitig condemns two half-grown boys to hell for
whispering in church. The resolution of the story, with Annchen's usual objective reporting (she's standing "undecided" at the back of the church), can be read as a resurgence of the warmth and security of the community. The leaders of the community reassert the primacy of "the message of Christ", that is, "love and forgiveness" and not judgment (81). Zeiting is described, by contrast, as an "immaculate figure ... black and white on the preachers' bench" (81). Once again, Konrad deftly introduces the image of black and white and equates it with heartless judgment. Prophecy here is judgment and it is judgment turned manipulative; even Zeiting's forced apology is an evasion (81). The loving community has resisted an unpleasant outsider. Yet in the midst of that revival of loving solidarity, it is noteworthy that only the men can speak: "As father after father now rose to speak, a warmth filled the church. Speaker after speaker agreed with the church leader" (81, italics mine). One more prophet appears in Rat Lake and he is so immediately ridiculous that he creates comedy, not fear. And he is just a prophet for children who mock him mercilessly. He is powerless to retaliate; he can call no bears out of the forest to slay his tormentors. He is simply dismissed as "incompetent," though he "[thunders] like a prophet" (108).

Konrad thus uses the child's point of view not so much to evade problematic issues and refuse judgment (although it can appear that way) but to undermine the notion of received truth and absolute answers so typical of Mennonite thinking. I have already alluded to Konrad's technique of contrasting black-and-white thinking with more elusive, beautiful colours. On one occasion Konrad makes the image
explicit as Annchen ponders the problem of worldliness and box socia
ts: "What was right? What was wrong? Growing up as I was where
Mennonite children were told in church, black is black, white is white,
yet where, at home, both castle-building and pig-killing were accepted
ways of life, I pondered the question" (146). Childishly, Annchen
contrasts the vaguely perceived ability of her mother's family to imagine
romantic adventures with her father's pragmatic family. She never
seems aware that the black and white of sin vs. worldliness is actually
challenged more profoundly by her own bewilderment in the face of
personal emotions. Of the teacher Miss Smith, she notices that despite
the worldliness of her lipstick and her pretty clothes "she cried at
Susie's funeral" (68). Similarly she reports that Leiter Klassen was
swayed more easily by cash in hand than by the pleas of a Mennonite
thresher, Martens, who lived rather far away. The irony of Klassen's
sanctimonious appeal to Scripture even as Martens' Norwegian
neighbours moved in to harvest his grain for him is left for the reader
to perceive.

Over and over again, Annchen sees what is not black and white,
what cannot be made sense of in the terms of reference she has been
given. The very structure of the narrative, with the short stories
linked through common characters, yet not causally connected, favours
open-endedness, not closure. The reader is often left frustrated,
wanting more information, convinced that, in the words of Magdalene
Redekop's father, "Daut haft uck noch dei Seid (it has also that side)"
("Looking Glass" 235); the received version cannot be the only version,
yet the narrator cannot, or is unwilling to, explore what other versions
might be. She is, after all, not truly involved. The tensest situations in which received truth is most problematic are the situations in which Annchen is the detached observer.

Interestingly enough, those avenues through which it would seem most likely that Annchen would resist the dictums of the community are the ones that she ultimately discredits as useless or simply fails to follow through to their logical results. Her one daring utterance of defiance, her one declaration of self-hood turns out to mean little in the wider context of her life. Admitting that generally she stood "inconspicuously in the background", there were still times when she "participated, hot-tempered, against the adult world that didn't care" (35). Her next statement that "in black and white, we learned in church, God had made fathers the head of the house" (35) would seem to forecast a major revolt against patriarchy. It turns out that her protest concerns the fate of a horse she doesn't like anyway. The end of the story reveals her father as a compassionate man, unable to resist the pleas of a poor mink farmer. Annchen's resistance to her father is revealed as both misguided in the overall scheme of mutual charity in the community and not very important in the novel, since the incident is never alluded to again.

Much more explicit is Annchen's awareness of the world of romantic and imaginative possibilities that education opens up for her. Here, at the beginning of a chapter discussing the school, it would seem that Konrad focuses on a point of resistance between Annchen and her community: "The public school, for me and for my older sisters and brothers before me, was the window to a wider world. Like the church,
the school drew straight lines and used the same books for everyone, but here discovery, I thought, not fear was the impetus” (69). It is difficult to tell if this is the voice of the implied author, the mature Anne, or if this is still Annchen. I would suggest that it is the implied author making the generalized comparison between the need for conformity in church and in school, and noting the pervasive appeal in church to a fear of final judgement. Annchen goes on to talk of "books that stimulated the imagination" and the "beautiful young women" who brought in perceptions of a wider world (69). That wider world is again symbolized by colour as opposed to black and white: "I listened and thought, why was it that everyone else, all the storybook people, Miss Waterford, anyone who had some colour and drama in their lives, could have so many choices and we had only right and wrong, obedience or sin" (73). Here, for the first time, Annchen makes explicit the matter of choice, the possibility of living differently from the way she has been taught. Yet she never records any such choice on her part.

Instead, she presents a series of disillusionments with that world of colourful choices. Romance in Rat Lake has even less of a chance of flourishing than it ever did in Dyck's Hochfeld. Any attempts to translate the romance of books into the community are doomed to failure. In those failures lies much of the comedy of the novel, of course. Tina's first beau, the handsome Mr. Blair, has really just asked Tina to go skating on a bet and Tina concludes bitterly, "elegant skaters, moonlight and tall strangers, fiction, all of it she knew was just fiction" (169). When Tina does marry a good Mennonite boy with a promising farm nearby, her plans for a romantic "after-wedding" at the lake
"beside the blue waters, amid the calls of meadowlarks and wild geese" (201) where her new husband could whisper romantic nothings into her ear are undone by hoards of mosquitoes. Throughout the novel, Annchen perpetually juxtaposes the earthiest of matters with the most exalted, as if she has internalized the no-nonsense crudity of the Low German language. Cowdung is always evident in the pastures. When late one evening Tina tells Annchen about her romantic engagement, Annchen is only worried that she might have been seen peeing in the snow instead of going all the way to the outhouse (179). When the glamorous Miss Waterford, whom Annchen has idolized, is discovered to have used tin cans rather than walk to the outhouse in winter, Annchen is dismayed: "Velvet plush boots and lace collars, when it came right down to the important questions, like shadows at night, or fear and alone in the dark, was she just like me, her pupil? No magic? No answers? Was that all there was? Tin cans?" (74). It is a richly comic moment that mocks both Annchen's particular idolization of her teacher and the more generalized appeal of the wider world for naive Mennonites.

In the title story, however, the failure to achieve romantic desires loses its comic touch. While Hans' crazy dreams in Lost in the Steppe about being rescued from Mennonite obscurity by a German nobleman are delightfully mocked, the ability to dream itself is finally validated. For Annchen the ability to dream, to imagine beautiful possibilities, leads only to pain through petty greed and inevitable disappointment. The content of her dreams is largely determined by an outside world with its suggestions of glamour and beauty. Annchen's happiness in her
calico kitten derives in part from the stories she has read. That pleasure arouses the envy of Erna Franzen who unquestioningly accepts the value Annchen places on the kitten. Erna, however, does not have to inflate the value of the blue jar in Annchen's eyes. The moment she sees that "small, rounded, brilliantly blue glass" jar high on the shelf in Franzens' pantry she can imagine "the jar being carried by the fairy tale princesses [she] read about in the school library. Delicately the princess dipped her finger into the perfumed jewel jar. [She] could almost smell the fragrance. Roses" (48). Hungrily she imagines the jar in her own house, thinks about what she might put into it that would not demean its beauty. After some hesitation, she agrees to trade her favourite kitten for the jar. The trade goes badly wrong. Erna finally reveals that the jar isn't hers in the first place to give away and she refuses to return the kitten. When the kitten is subsequently run over the two girls "are even" (51). Neither has what she desired. Annchen tells us no further stories of her own imaginings or desires for beauty. Except for the account of her disillusionment over Miss Waterford, subsequent chapters concern the pain and happiness of others.

Only one other point of female resistance against community expectations is given some prominence and that is sister Tina's bid for higher education. She is supported in that bid by her mother who "had been a teacher" (82) and who had come from a family that had valued education in Russia, even university education. When Tina first begs to go to high school, her father responds typically: "Mama needs you at home - and besides, girls don't need high school" (164), but her mother, for once, is not quite submissive. She herself had had to fight for her
education and the bitterness of that struggle made her vow, "should I ever have a daughter, she'd go to school" (165). Mrs. Klassen now acknowledges the pioneering conditions under which they live but still determines to do something for Tina.

All of that sounds hopeful, but isn’t quite. Tina is finally allowed to work at home on the correspondence grade nine if she helps with the housework as is proper. The following year she is allowed to go to Bible School (165). The Bible school is not altogether the evasion of the matter of higher education that it seems to be since many Mennonite young people at the time used the readily accepted Bible school as a step toward the education they sought (F. Epp, Mennonites 469), but in Tina’s case it turns out to be the rather more familiar step to matrimony than to further education. Once Tina falls in love with Walfried Dirks we hear no more of her desire for education. In fact, she is as preoccupied with her hopechest as any other young girl in Rat Lake, and any further resistance she demonstrates toward the ways of the Mennonites is directed harmlessly against wedding customs. In essentials she has acquiesced completely in the role of Muttachi.

Annchen herself remains the observer in this process and never reveals her own aspirations either for the expected role of wife and mother or for any other role, educated or otherwise. As far as she observes, Tina is perfectly happy on Walfried’s knee or with her baby on her own knee. In any case the only other examples of womanhood that she is given are the bad girls who work for the Englische and either die of pneumonia or give birth to illegitimate babies and remain ostracized by the community.
Whatever efforts the women in this novel make toward resisting patriarchal expectations or achieving personal desires are thus doomed to failure. They are scarcely articulated as points of resistance. Annchen herself, once she has found it impossible to attain the blue jar (symbol of vaguely felt romantic impulses) for herself, remains the passive by-stander watching the dynamics of the community unfold. She remains outside the actions even while remaining within her community.

That stance of being simultaneously outside (passive, held apart from knowledge, prevented from making decisions) and inside (securely loved, filling a recognized role) may be Konrad's analogy for the stance of women generally in Mennonite communities. Certainly, the novel contains an emotionally intense motif of inclusion and exclusion, although the terms of that belonging are childishly perceived. Over and over again Annchen notices subtle distinctions of belonging, from the richer Mennonite women's disdain toward the poorer "Relief-Fraîters" (12), to the heart-breaking differences between the Kirchliche and Annchen's kind of Mennonites (152) that prevent a young couple from marrying. The cost of not belonging is high, whether it be just the pain caused by quarrelling little girls or the severe economic and social hardship of excommunication. Konrad never directly criticizes the coercive nature of

---

6 The actual theological differences between the Kirchliche Mennonites (who now carry the name of General Conference Mennonites) and the Mennonite Brethren Mennonites to whom Annchen belongs are not as important in this context as the mutual suspicion that had developed between them. The Mennonite Brethren conviction that they alone held absolute truth meant that intermarriage with any other Mennonite resulted in excommunication.
Mennonite socialization, or the exclusiveness that builds Mennonite community; in fact, incidents of exclusion are frequently balanced by stories of inclusive mutual aid between Norwegians and Mennonites. At no time, either, does she suggest that women suffer any pain of exclusion from the adult world of men that can make decisions. What she does is to create a close emotional identification with Annchen, who in many ways remains on the margins of the community yet is directly affected by that community. We feel the urgent necessity of belonging and sympathize completely with both Tina’s and Annchen’s willingness to belong. That perpetual play on the dynamics of "us" and "them" is in large part responsible for the perception that the community itself is the protagonist in this novel (Thomas 135). This is not a milieu in which an independent self could exist or would want to exist.

One of Konrad’s strategies in finding a voice for herself as Mennonite woman writer is to adopt and extend the recognized role of teller of family stories. She does not assume the task of telling the larger epic story of the Mennonite faith or of the exodus from Russia. Rather she, as a transmitter of ethnicity, tells the tales it is appropriate for a woman to tell. One could easily imagine a mother telling such stories to her daughters, mixing tales of laughter and earthiness with tales of painful childhood experiences. Among the simple, vivid incidents of school and home appear basic assumptions of Mennonite living (definitions of worldliness, centrality of church). Identity is forged through the delineations of "us" and "them." Role expectations are modelled. All of that is the clear text of The Blue Jar. The stories do have the sense of orally-related tales. One can almost visualize the
story-teller shaping loaves of bread or stitching a patchwork quilt as she talks.

That, however, is text. The sub-text is evident in the selection of the details (all those funerals), the stance of the chosen narrator that allows for questions without answers, and the emotional involvement required of the reader. Konrad herself refuses to play her hand openly but depends upon perceptive readers to notice the subtle dissonances.

In the companion pieces written in tandem by the sisters, Magdalene Falk Redekop and Elizabeth Falk, points of resistance and dissonances between official theology and feminine experience become much more explicit and even confrontational. It is not that these two women claim the privilege of prophetic dissent as openly as Rudy Wiebe does, but then nor do they discredit prophetic dissent. Instead they work within the personal modes of writing traditionally granted to women in order to reveal the underside of *Gelassenheit* as it is experienced by women. Their intent is not to deconstruct Mennonite identity, at least not without reconstructing a Mennonitism that just might be home for women as well as men. Elizabeth Falk’s metaphor in her personal statement of herself as Mennonite writer is floral: her intent is to "up-end the root system," that "amorphous mass of Mennonite roots" in order to choose "those parts of the system" worth nurturing (Prairie Fire 46). Magdalene Falk Redekop’s intent is to "scribble in the margins" because the "church histories written by

---

*Magdalene Falk Redekop does actually declare herself to be a writer of dissent from the margins (Prairie Fire 46) but her fictional work declares its prophetic challenges in more muted tones.*
Mennonite men . . . leave out everything that matters most to [her]" (Prairie Fire 46). Her feminist emphases, however, are not a denial of her Mennonite roots, but an effort to recover the "egalitarianism that was a feature of anabaptism" (46). Their techniques are not evasive at all, for they place themselves in the foreground as writers so that their own struggle to gain a voice becomes the overriding plot, not the events of a story that they can relate at one remove from themselves.

Their narrative stance is then personal and directly autobiographical. They have taken the mode of writing that Mennonite women have generally been restricted to, that of letters and family records, and made it into a literary form that generates an astonishing suspense and emotional depth. Whether Falk or Redekop writes the first reflection on an object or a picture, the other sister responds both to that objective correlative and to what her sister has already written. The short stories are thus a correspondence between the two, but because they are also writing for a general audience, the stories are much more than intimate letters. While the careful texturing of language and the intricate resonances of their images demonstrate literary crafting, the details within the story are perceived as "true." The reader assumes that Falk's actual son, Darcy, was killed in an accident, and that Redekop actually did adopt her two children. The similarity of tone and the correspondence of details between Redekop's critical articles and her short stories supports the factuality of details in the stories, even though Redekop denies such factuality: "I admit that this is all made up from the beginning to the end. This is not really family history" ("Moving" 44). Such a blurring of fiction and history, of
genres, creates a peculiar narrative stance. The traditional concerns of a short story—suspense, conflicts within the plot, character development—give way to a focus on emotions and nuances of meaning that resembles poetry rather than fiction. Indeed, the short stories have a lyrical concentration on the moment of experience and the persona’s experience of and reflection on that moment of experience. As in a lyric, the degree of overlap between the author’s experiences and the persona’s experiences is part of the ambiguity of the whole. The dialogue between the two sisters heightens that sense of tension between revealing and concealing because each sister responds simultaneously to the moment in question and to the sister’s response to that moment in question.

The choice of the objective correlative for each of these two sets of stories is revealing in itself. The "Side By Side By" stories ("Still Life with Menno" by Redekop and "No Stone" by Falk) respond to the picture of a child’s coffin flanked by two little girls—the authors. The dead baby is their little brother, Menno, born dead. In their far-ranging reflections on that picture the sisters explore the cycle of birth and death as it is experienced by the women who give birth and who die and whose babies die. Menno’s stillbirth arouses memories of other family deaths, including the death of Falk’s son, Darcy, and Redekop’s inability to give birth at all. Whereas Konrad restricted herself to the objective noting of mother-graves and baby-graves, Falk and Redekop unearth the tangled emotions Konrad left for the reader to deduce. They examine in detail the usually repressed pain, through their dreams,
through their childish memories, through symbols, through a prose as dense with ambiguous, allusive meaning as poetry usually is.

The "Moving" stories ("The House" by Falk and "The Little Dipper" by Redekop) focus similarly on a realm of existence considered especially feminine: the family home. In that pair of stories the sisters examine their memories of the old farmhouse, the specific rooms, the activities they pursued as daughters of their mother. The literal moving of the old farmhouse they no longer live in becomes the metaphor for other moves from house to house and for their efforts to discover/uncover the individuality blotted out by traditional feminine functions and by the family-ness of their Mennonite heritage.

Thus they place in the foreground, not the epic stories of Mennonites, not the major theological issues, and not even the community itself as Konrad does, but the spheres of women's lives (collectively and individually), the everyday living and dying that composes the taken-for-granted foundation on which men wrote their lives and their stories. Their focus means, then, that they examine the quality of family itself, both as Mennonites defined it and as they actually experienced it. Like Wiebe in Blue Mountains of China, Falk and Redekop ask their readers to experience what it is like to be Mennonite, but they provide a Mennonite experience that is clearly feminine, yet daringly individual.

In their process of gaining a literary voice, Falk and Redekop respond to the Mennonite community precisely where it has traditionally denied women a voice: the submerging of the female self, and the authority of Scripture as masculinely interpreted. Their techniques--
and the sisters do not necessarily use the same techniques—undermine the authority of the Word and claim unique individuality for each writer and by implication for each Mennonite woman. A thorough feminist examination of their metaphors, and their use of language is really needed to reveal the complexity of their writing. I will be able only to mention briefly those techniques which demonstrate most sharply their peculiarly feminine definitions of the role of writer in the Mennonite community.

Since the literal interpretation of the Word held sacred by Mennonites denied women any official voice within the community, Redekop particularly finds it necessary to challenge the very notion of received truth. Because the basic assumption of authority and rightness of given beliefs keeps women silent and disenfranchised, her response, like Konrad's, is to question whether truth can be absolute and known.

In the first place, Redekop focuses on the play of language and on the elusiveness of meaning. Her careful analyses of language and the techniques of translation implied in Wiebe's The Blue Mountains of China ("Translated into the Past: Language in The Blue Mountains of China") is based on her intimate knowledge of the Mennonite polyglot experience of speaking English in the school, High German in the church, and Low German in the house and barn ("Translated" 98). In her own stories the Low German and the High German phrases not only indicate the possibilities of varied perspectives that she noted in Wiebe's novel, but foreground the impossibility of one ruling perspective. Her argument is that black and white are not all there is,
nor can all answers be known. In "Still Life with Menno" the child, Magdalene, did not weep over her dead brother but demanded "mama-biet", supposedly the Low German rendition of marmalade. The adult Redekop notes that the phrase, "Eck vell Mama-biet [I want marmalade]" could also have meant "I want a bit of Momma, or I want to bite Momma" (14-15), meanings that have frightening contradictions, especially in light of the absence of that desired Momma. In "Moving" Redekop speculates about meanings of words: "I'm not sure having more words for bleiv [blue] really helps, unless maybe I remind myself that it is a verb--bleive, meaning to lie or, alternatively, to break wind. Words, by definition, do lie" (30). That belief is a direct contradiction of her father's well-known command, "Bleev bloz be de wohrheit" [stay just with the truth] (41). Even her assertion that Low German is a "brutally correct" language ("Still Life" 10) refers not to absolute truth, theological accuracy, but to its correlation with experience. To say bluntly that Menno was born dead (the Low German dautgebore has the harsh guttural sound of a hammer blow on a coffin) is preferable to hiding behind the High German formulation of "Der Herr hat's gegeben; der Herr hat's genommen [the Lord has given; the Lord has taken]" (10). In either case, whether stated with Low German crude accuracy or High German pious acceptance, the sensations of the bereft mother in response to the formulations are what really concern Redekop. Only by allowing language its intrinsic ambiguity, its ability to embody contradictions, is it possible to render the sensations individual women feel.
The stability and certainty of language is also undermined through allusiveness and punning. Both sisters indulge in puns and layers of meaning. To Redekop’s repeated references to the giving and taking of the Lord, Falk replies, "Menno’s day was March 1, 1949. Forty years. Give or take" ("No Stones" 22), and "Thanksgiving weekend . . . two minutes . . . the stone cold table . . . my son’s long body six feet two give or take draped with a white sheet" (25, ellipses hers). The simple colloquial phrase that disdains accuracy has now taken on divine significance—or the divine action of giving and taking has been reduced to colloquial indifference with an undercurrent of bitter resentment at the arbitrary arithmetic of God ("Still Life" 16). The puns in the title "Still Life with Menno" are even more subversive. At one level the title refers to the picture of the dead child, a picture that can be discussed, as Redekop indeed does, as a composition of lines and forms as if it were a painting of flowers or fruit (14). At another level the title is a macabre variation on the concept of stillborn. It also alludes to the frequent title given to Mennonites in general, "die Stillen im Lande [the quiet in the land]" (10). This Menno is indeed very quiet and will never create a disturbance in the land. Still another level of meaning requires an awareness that women in the communities begun by Menno Simons were truly the silent in the land, kept voiceless by theology and tradition. Redekop foregrounds that level of silence by noting that the picture in question was a "picture of my absent mother" (15). In fact, the picture becomes a symbol of what is not said: "There are so many stories untold--so much that is not in the picture. It is the picture of Mennonite family history forever unwritten. Church
history the men write, yes, but this, this is what hysterical women do" ("Still Life" 18).

With the casualness born of lifelong exposure to the Word, the sisters permeate their prose with allusions to Scripture, allowing the formerly definitively interpreted Words to gain a multiplicity of meanings. The most notable example is Falk's reclamining of the breaking of bread as a sacrament for women. At first, the reference is only to the miracle of the five loaves and two fishes after which the disciples gather up twelve baskets of fragments: there were twelve Falk children. But then miracle becomes mixed up with the refusal of miracle. Christ's analogy of a father not giving his son a stone when he really asked for bread together with Ezekial's record of God's promise to remove the heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh gets all mixed up with the familiar metaphor, "all flesh is as grass." Falk conflates these metaphors and the story of the raising of Lazarus in her effort to make sense of Menno's death and Darcy's death: "Who was it that took Menno's grave clothes wrapped around Darcy from birth and loosed him? ... Somewhere there is betrayal here. The bread is stone. Stone figures. ... flesh is grass ... stone is flesh ... we have disturbed the universe and rocks are warring with each other. All for a piece of bread with marmalade" ("No Stone" 26). Though the bread is at first only the symbol of the family story of marmalade (Mama-biet) that both Falk and Redekop claim as theirs, that bread is broken as is the sacramental bread, and wine flows freely in Falk's utopian dream (27). However, even before waking up from the dream, Falk wonders if the bread will "rot like manna in the wilderness by tomorrow" (27). Falk
then mentions another dream in which Father Falk "was partaking of a basket of stone wafers" and laughing (28). His daughter beside him did not even receive the stone wafers. The images and words of Scripture are combined and recombined in ways that defamiliarize them. Instead of certainty to which women and men are asked to conform, Falk and Redekop give us shifting meanings and uncertain allusions that allow space for the pain of actual living and for the questions that have no answers. Furthermore the stories are equally permeated with allusions to other texts, frequently from Margaret Atwood's poetry, so that Scripture is not differentiated at all or given special authority.

Received authority is equally undermined by the very structure of the stories and the deliberate focus on the telling of the stories. As Falk and Redekop muse over the same incidents it becomes evident that they do not remember the same details. They do not agree on the lay-out of the house that appears in the picture of baby Menno ("No Stone" 23); they do not dream the same way about the house (Falk is in the house trying to lock out strangers while Redekop cannot enter the house at all {"The Little Dipper" 34}). Both mention other siblings who might well remember different details of family living or even disagree with the details Falk and Redekop recall. As Redekop confesses that she has changed names of friends to conceal identity and yet feels

---

8 The sisters' reflections on the photos of Menno and other family pictures resemble the subversive atmosphere of Atwood's "This is a Photograph of Me" and other poems. Occasionally Redekop quotes Atwood directly ("I have managed to enter the house but I will not presume to enter your dream" {"Moving" 39}). Yet their only direct reference to Atwood concerns some flowers from Atwood's garden ("Moving" 20).
guilty for thus submerging their stories, she concludes, "There is no escape, apparently, from error" ("The Little Dipper" 38).

Both Falk and Redekop undermine their own authority as storytellers by focusing on the process of telling. Redekop may repeat her father's words, "Bleev blosz be de wohrheit" [stay just with the truth] ("The Little Dipper" 41), but defiantly admits that she is making things up (44). After all, her "memories cannot be kept apart from what [she] has read . . . from what [she has] seen and heard and from what others in the family make up or remember" ("Still Life" 13). The perpetual blurring of difference between remembering and making up points to the story-teller's urge to make the story support a needed assumption: "It is about how I make things up because I need to believe I was made in the spikja. It is about how we all need to believe that we began in love and will end in love" ("The Little Dipper" 44). Since, as Redekop notes, "we have no choice but to live according to some version of those early years handed to us by our elders" ("Still Life" 12), it is important to think also about the assumptions that guided the shaping of those stories.

Falk's treatment of the role of story-teller is less obviously feminist and less deliberately metafictional. Instead she reveals her contradictory emotions about writing: "I have been afraid to write. You want it to help somebody too, yes?" ("The House" 20). The suggestion of Low German syntax here and the pervasive Mennonite impulse to do what is useful indicate how completely Mennonite values still influence Falk's writing. An uncertainty about the propriety of writing or even about her personal ability to write underlies her more deferent, less
angry, style. Her association of images and her shifts from incident to incident initially seem more random than Redekop's. For her the writing is even more personal, even more a painful uncovering of layers that have always been left covered. Her discussion of restoring old furniture becomes a metaphor for her own writing; she is stripping off layers of paint, remembering past events, but like stripping wood, "all the colours mingle and everything seems to come out aqua" and the process, once begun, cannot be halted at some convenient point ("The House" 24). The "rich primary colours" may be there but their clarity is quickly "muddied and blurred again" (24). What conclusions she reaches, what resolutions she achieves are more tentative than Redekop's. There are fewer quotable feminist statements about suppressed stories and her questions have an anxiety about them ("Is this true?" ("The House" 23)) that suggests she would still wish to believe in a stable authority, an unwavering truth, but can no longer do so. Less self-consciously aware of her own words and possible contradictory interpretations of those words, Falk reveals her feelings, her dreams, her perpetual questions as if her version of her own experiences is at least trustworthy. Yet her bewilderment comes through so clearly ("I sure hope this helps somebody" ("The House" 26)) that the powerful juxtaposition of images seems accidental, as life is accidental, without pattern and without meaning. That in itself is an undermining of the authority that she seems to assume is still available.

Another technique the sisters use to undo the effects of the Scriptural injunction against women speaking in public is to blur the distinction of public and private. As Redekop noted in "The Pickling of
the Mennonite Madonna", she responds to the blocking of the creative spirit by banishing it to a world of private terror rather than allowing it communal celebrative expression "by publishing a dialogue with my sisters, by consciously transgressing the boundaries that normally separate our public and private lives" (122). Redekop and Falk transgress boundaries in several ways, by appropriating sacred language normally reserved for men ("You have 'priested' to me, Magdalene, by making space beside you for my separate story of Menno's still life" {"No Stone" 27}), and by highlighting feminine experiences normally ignored as unspeakable or simply trivial. Konrad had also done that simply by placing a girl-child at the centre of her stories. Similarly Redekop dares to include in her reminiscences of the family home the details about dumping drank [slop] out the back door⁹ and relieving herself beside a sheltering hedge when the outhouse seemed too far away. Redekop anticipates the proper protest: "I can hear a voice say: are you sure you want to do that in public, Magdalene?" {"The Little Dipper" 33}. Like Di Brandt, whose frankly erotic poetry exposed the sexual repression implied in the words of hymns and Biblical imagery, Redekop is aware of the need to unveil the hidden if women are to be granted a voice and an equal place within the Mennonite community.

⁹ That drank is later mingled with the passion of desiring God's presence through the similarities of the words, Drang and drank ("Moving" 34). Redekop here blurs the distinction between sacred emotions and sordid garbage in order to celebrate her mother's irrepressible ability to laugh. Women can also claim the Mennonite talent, embodied in the earthy language of Low German, for self-mockery.
While Redekop’s stories serve as better illustrations of deliberate defiance of traditional authority, Falk’s stories serve as better illustrations of the establishing of individuality that must equally be a part of women’s claiming of literary voice. If their writing is to be more than a redefining of ethnicity, more even than an angry rejection of a tradition that denied them freedom, women will have to appropriate the tensive balance of self and community that is the heart of Mennonite identity. If Katie Funk Wiebe is correct in her suggestion that Mennonite women have been denied "the right to full humanity" ("Mennonite Woman" 242) they have then been unable to make the choice to deny self in order to participate voluntarily in the community of believers. It is not possible to deny a self that has not been allowed to exist in the first place. Both Falk and Redekop are aware of that paradox and their stories demonstrate deliberate efforts to affirm individuality, not in order to separate themselves from community, but in order to participate fully in community.

Initially, however, Falk’s images, particularly, intimate a frantic grasping for private space. In her dreams of the family farmhouse she is inside the house, alone "with her fear" ("The House" 22), running frantically around barring the doors against intruders. She longs to have the house, now moved, returned to face the right direction and then she could walk out the doorway to the well: "I would feel focused, and even if I felt pulled in seven directions at once, I would be at home, knowing just what waits, at least by daylight, in any given direction" (25). Her story is full of references to her many moves, her recent divorce, and her uncertainty about her roles. It is evident that
she has been pulled in "seven directions" trying to be an adequate wife and mother as she understood it, but without time to find out where she wanted to go: "I have spent all this time fixing other people's rooms... why don't I attend to my own room... finally... I am on the floor in the centre of the empty room" ("The House" 26, ellipses hers).

Her resistance to the blurring of feminine identity and loss of self finds expression in her clinging to memories trying to make them her own and manageable. She saves some of the family furniture in order to restore the wood to its original beauty. Like her grandfather she likes working with wood and like her grandfather she likes "straight lines" ("The House" 23). Her "pièce de résistance" is the "old oak high chair" in which she remembers refusing to recite the familiar grace (24). The choice of the French term is a telling pun. As Falk notes, "God knows I pray but still very rarely on demand" (24). While she is able to gather family heirlooms and make them her own through restoring them and through revisioning the memories she associates with them, she is unable to deal with the traditional feminine occupations of gardening and needlework except by dissociating herself from them, even as she indulges in them. The problem is that both the flower gardening she prefers and the embroidering (she does a picture that hangs on the wall—nothing truly useful) represent a kind of resistance to the Mennonite values that she still attempts to defend. It is Redekop who states frankly that their mother never could grow flowers successfully, just "potatoes and watermelons" ("The Little Dipper" 29), a direct acknowledgement of the Mennonite prohibition against the uselessly aesthetic. Falk only notes that, while her greatest desire is to
have a perennial flower garden in heaven, here on earth she perpetually transplants flowers even during the short time that she lives in one house, and excuses herself by claiming a restless gypsy "great, great grandmother" (20). Similarly she both claims and disowns her embroidery, by dismissing it as "mindless labour" that had to be done during times of crisis, and by associating each part of the picture with the event that precipitated its stitching ("I started it the first time he and I separated" {"The House" 27}). Her ambivalent attitude toward both the Mennonite value of practicality and the usual feminine evasion of that practicality claims for her at least something of the privilege of choice, and the demonstration of individuality.

Both Falk and Redekop explore the significance of names and their relationship to individual identity. In "Still Life with Menno" Redekop notes the Mennonite custom of using familiar names over and over again. The names of children who died were often given again to new siblings and the names of parents were given to children generation after generation: the new-born daughter is named Sarah for the mother who has just died giving birth; "The Lord gave and took a William, then gave another William. The Lord gave and took an Anna" (13-14). The articles before the names deny individuality. Redekop herself is grateful that she was "Magdalene" rather than yet another Anna (17), and rejoices that the "pattern of substitutions is shattered, leaving difference" (17). In "The House" Falk, after relating her futile visit to an elderly relative who couldn't tell if Falk was "her 'brother Bill's' wife Elisabeth or her own sister Elizabeth" (and she focuses on the importance of the 's' or 'z'), concludes, "I wonder if it is this lifelong
process of claiming my personhood that has me running up and down the stairs securing my house against violation" (26). Both Falk and Redekop as girls rehearsed the motto, "Eck see eck en dü best dü. I am I and you are you" (17).

The claim to individuality becomes especially clear in the differences between the sisters. They may have been the "singing Falk sisters" but they have differences, and those differences become evident not only in their different styles of writing, their different recollections of family events, but also in their understanding of their mother. Redekop, the more directly feminist writer, struggles with accepting their mother's frustratingly background position. In her dreams, her mother gets in the way ("The Little Dipper" 40), swells up like Alice (41) and can't talk. But she can "howl into [Redekop's] story" (40). Over and over again Redekop recalls her mother's laughter, her irrepressible story-telling complete with crude Low German vocabulary, and her love of colour and flowers. At the same time, Redekop faces her mother's role as quiet supporter of the bishop, subject to migraine headaches (40), unable to make her conversation public. In "Still Life With Menno" the mother is absent, not in the picture, or if she is in a picture her "face is lost in the shadow of her black hat. It wasn't supposed to matter what pain was on the face hidden in this mocking chiaroscuro" (14). Her stories are a deliberate protest against the fact that "Mother" is so often "left out--understood" ("The Little Dipper" 36). Falk's stories, however, have less of a direct focus on her mother. It is Redekop who notes that Falk's mother can talk in her dreams and remains a normal size ("The Little Dipper" 40-41). It is also Redekop,
infertile herself, who is most conscious of her mother's desire for her to have children and continue the proper role of a woman ("Still Life" 12). Falk scarcely mentions her mother.

Despite the pain and anger that surfaces in these stories so dense with imagery and ambiguous, subversive language, both writers attempt resolution. It is not a black and white resolution, however, but an affirmation of the right to differ and to claim difference. The layering of imagery in "Still Life" concludes finally with a perpetual multiplying of "side by side by side by side. . ." (20). A single received version of truth is rejected in favour of new definition of community: "All washing our feet in the same pink bathtub; all telling different stories. Always another side, another layer, another angle. This is the limit that turns us back to life" (20). To refuse to force truth into a narrow doctrine frees individuals to grasp a real sense of community:

The stories urgently demand to be told side by side, lovingly, because only this love prevents the body of the mother from being torn apart. It is only on those rare occasions when toddlers are busy loving each other that they forget about fighting for their piece of the mother. Side by side by my sister I can respect my mother's absence from all my reconstructions of this picture. I respect her difference. ("Still Life" 19)

As she notes in her answer to "Why I am a Mennonite", to recover imagination and an individual's ability to identify with another is crucial: "To go beyond the solitary reflection and to reach out to identify with the other is to aim at the fulfilment of a vision of
communal identity where the church is one body" ("Looking Glass" 228). Her efforts to resist the form of Mennonite Mutachi is not in order to free the self from the community but in order to envision a self that can be "integrated with a community" rather than alienated (228). To claim literary voice, and in a sense a prophetic voice if the persistent use of dreams is recognized as prophetic, is a way of freeing the feminine self enough to enable her to give that self to a newly defined community that is truly egalitarian.

Yet, in all fairness, Redekop's vision remains tentative. The optimistic assertion that "death is an explosion of life that cannot be taken away from you" ("Still Life" 20) yet gives way to doubt. Perhaps this is not resurrection. The stone of silence may not have been rolled away but just dropped to "the bottom of the pond" (20) where it will continue to cause ripples. The final allusion to T.S. Eliot's indecisive, finally despairingly silent Prufrock argues a less hopeful vision of the possibility of a complete belonging for women.

Falk concludes her half of "Side By Side By" with her utopian vision of a communal meal of bread and wine shared equally by all the family: "Mother's face is radiant and raised in confident anticipation. She turns and extends her hand and there is room beside her. The other Sarah. We are all here" (28). But the vision fades as abruptly as Falk's mother once returned to her body after a near-death experience ("I confess I plumped" (28)). Now all that is left is fragments that don't make much sense. Her voice becomes suddenly tentative, almost despairing: "I don't know if we should wait here any longer, Magdalene. There is no one here. They have all gone away. I wonder
if our brothers will like what we have done" (28). The reference to her brothers is revealing. Falk is unprepared either to make feminist demands for equality explicit or even to dare to express personal pain without fear of masculine response. She can dream of a true community but she cannot imagine it coming to pass: "I don't think there is anything more we can do here . . ." (28).

The same difference in tone appears in the resolutions of the "Moving" stories. There, too, Falk ends her brief revelations of pain over her failed family with a refusal to "make a pretty ending" (28). Nothing finally is sacred and nothing holds much promise either: "To tell the truth, this year I'll be glad when all the leaves stop spinning, finally, and the cold winter comes. That's no lie" (28). Redekop, on the other hand, affirms the power of creative imagination to envision a renewed family. Her effort to reenter the house, which she had been locked out of by a group of strange men (34)—her dreams call out for a feminine Daniel—succeeds finally and she emerges from the basement to see that "the door leading up from the basement to the outside is already wide open to the sky" (44). Mother Falk is at the bottom of the stairs and throws up a little dipper for drinking water. She doesn't succeed in throwing it up to her daughter; "gravity is too much for her" (44). Gravity here needs to be read also as a masculine, sacred gravity very different from her mother's almost hysterical sense of humour. Redekop, however, can still claim an imaginary dipper with which she can offer her sister water (44), or rather a story shaped just for her. The story is of her parents. Her father often planted a field of flax just where her mother could see it and rejoice in the unearthly
blue of flax flowers. It is possible for Mennonite men to give gifts to women. For Redekop one of those gifts is the Anabaptist vision of community that confirms the self rather than submerges or alienates the self. The difficulty is finding a way to grasp that imaginative dipper.

For women writers the difficulty in claiming the Mennonite heritage lies in their distinctly different experience of community. Because they have, for the most part, never been fully choosing members of a community, it is not possible for them to celebrate the mutually contradictory and mutually supportive tension between the choosing individual and the shaping community until they have recovered some sense of self, some dimension in which they can choose. That individuality cannot be grasped until the narrowly patriarchal definition of authority is to some extent undermined, a process that is inevitably painful, both in the challenging of previously cherished beliefs and in the revealing of the suffering women have experienced through the unequal application of Gelassenheit. Nevertheless, as Falk and Redekop demonstrate (Konrad less so since she chooses to veil her criticism under the naivety of a child narrator), the Anabaptist heritage of egalitarianism, of equal servanthood, still grants women possible space in which to manoeuvre.

It is among women writers that the subtle differences among branches of Mennonites demonstrate vividly the influence of the shaping community. I have noted elsewhere that it was among the Russländer that writers had their first opportunities. Both the greater tolerance of education and the more highly articulated emphasis on the need for personal conversion rather than mere conformity to increasingly
ethicized religious doctrine made it possible for writers to articulate their religious vision in fiction. Not until Patrick Friesen began publishing in the late 1970s did Kanadier gain a literary voice. Similarly, women of Mennonite communities that placed greater emphasis on religious choice (Mennonite Brethren and Russländer [Konrad] and Rudnerweider, a more evangelical group of the Kanadier (the Falk sisters)) have found it easier to find a literary voice without separating themselves entirely from the Mennonite community. That crucial difference in community is even more vividly evident among the women poets. Di Brandt, for example, who comes from a tightly conforming Kanadier community, has found it impossible to establish herself as a writer without repudiating her heritage in rebellious anger and declaring herself to be a "rebel traitor thief the one who asked too many questions who argued with the father & with God" (foreword questions i asked my mother). Sarah Klassen, on the other hand, who was nurtured in a Mennonite Brethren home and not in an exclusively Mennonite community, demonstrates no need to establish her own identity before she explores the larger Mennonite identity. Klassen does not even struggle with her own position as writer, as Falk and Redekop do and as Brandt most vociferously does; she simply retells the stories of her people (Journey to Yalta especially) as unapologetically as Rudy Wiebe does—though with greater emphasis on feminine experience and much less debate about doctrine.

Perhaps because women have had to undergo such wrenching redefinition of themselves in order to write at all, those who decide to endorse Gemeinschaft and remain within it demonstrate a more complete
understanding of the tensive dynamics of that *Gemeinschaft* than men. They have had to find a self before they could lose it; therefore their surrender to the pain and the love of the community is all the closer to the spirit of Anabaptism. As Redekop concludes, "The writers who are on the periphery, [and who is on the periphery more than women] challenging the very idea of being Mennonite, may paradoxically be the most true to the spirit of the Reformation dissenters" (*Prairie Fire* 46). Her chosen task of "letting the questions" pour out ("The Little Dipper" 34), of putting "things side by side" (43), of making fiction, of challenging orders ("Still Life" 10), and of reclaiming the role of mother without being "[locked] up in the Book" as a maudlin Mary Magdalene ("The Little Dipper" 37) is accomplished in part by declaring that "I am not her. I am not you" ("The Little Dipper" 37), but in greater part by refusing to carry out her task alone (*Prairie Fire* 46). Over and over again Redekop chooses images that make explicit the need for community: "Three pairs of eyes are better than one in the half-darkness of the root cellar" ("The Little Dipper" 39). Nevertheless, the feminine experience of community remains tentative, often more a dream in "half-darkness" than a reality.

In conclusion, then, male writers could initially gain a hearing and a place for themselves in the community through a focus on ethnic identity that desacralized implied criticism or through directly reclaiming prophetic prerogatives. Female writers, however, found the process of gaining a voice more difficult. To focus unproblematically on ethnic identity was redundant; women were already the primary agents of continuing ethnicity. To attempt to claim prophetic status meant
claiming a role that had always been denied them precisely through the prophetic claim to revealed truth. Hence, Konrad initiates a feminine voice by adapting the traditional feminine role of telling family stories and infusing those stories of community with subtle dissonances. Falk and Redekop reclaim the Anabaptist understanding of freely-chosen community by adapting the traditionally feminine modes of writing in order to establish themselves as choosing individuals. Both Konrad and the Falk sisters find it necessary to undermine the prophetic role as it has been traditionally and patriarchally defined in order to reaffirm the egalitarian nature of Gemeinschaft.

The question that still remains concerns the continuing viability of Mennonite Gemeinschaft. Now that Mennonite writers have gained for themselves the privilege of creative expression within the community, their continuing challenge is to find ways to reclaim their Mennonite heritage in a changing, increasingly urban world.
CHAPTER SIX

Requiem or Reclamation?

i will open my mouth
in the low german tongue
surely i will prophesy
unto you my beloved
that menno's beauty is eternal
his house without end

(Audrey Poetker-Thiessen)

The words of Audrey Poetker-Thiessen may embody the vision of some recent Mennonite poets, but not that of recent Mennonite storytellers. Certainly the Low German tongue is gaining new literary prominence as Mennonite writers frequently incorporate Low German words and syntax into their writing (Tiessen "Shibboleth") and Mennonite scholars and writers attempt to reclaim the language before it is no longer spoken in house or barn at all (Loewen and Reimer "Origins"). What prophecy in fiction is uttered, however, whether with Low German colour added or not, does not suggest, at least explicitly, that "menno's beauty is eternal" or that "his house" is "without end." On the contrary, the consensus seems to be that Menno's house is disintegrating and the community in which it was built is no more.

It is not only that recent Mennonite writers have personally made transitions from closely-defined, rural Mennonite communities to urban centres, although this is certainly the case. As Tiessen notes in her introduction to The New Quarterly's issue on Mennonites, "virtually all of [the Mennonite writers included] have at one time moved from the
cohesive minority culture of the relatively isolated rural villages and towns in which they grew up to large Canadian cities where the distinctive forces of church, family, and community that nurtured them have all but disappeared" (12). More importantly, for my thesis, it is that the "relatively isolated rural villages and towns" the writers allude to have greatly altered: the "distinctive forces of church, family, and community" no longer exist as they once did even in rural districts that still remain largely Mennonite. While some writers, like poet Di Brandt, feel free at last to "dance on [the] brittle bones" of the fathers and elders who defined the limits of the Mennonite community (questions i asked my mother 48), others are more inclined to let poignant regret temper their requiems. Nevertheless, at least at first glance, the requiems outnumber the efforts at reclamation.

Among Canadian Mennonite fiction writers none demonstrates the frustrated anger of Di Brandt's first volume of poetry or the harshness of critique evident in Patrick Friesen's The Shunning. Instead, recent fiction reveals an uneasiness of stance and ambivalence of attitude toward the Mennonite ethos. Much of it reflects to varying degrees the wrenching shift from rural enclave, in which the writers' parents may still live, to urban dispersal. The experience of that dislocation is displaced in some Mennonite story-writing into an effort to re-examine the effect of the Russian experience on the Mennonite identity, although

1 Among American Mennonite fiction writers, Gordon Friesen demonstrates the greatest anger against the Mennonite community in The Flamethrowers (1936). Its Mennonite characters are so pathologically drawn that Elizabeth Horsch Bender commented, "There are no normal human beings, to say nothing of normal Mennonites, in this Mennonite community" (quoted in K. Wiebe, "Mennonite Women" 238).
now, of course, at one remove. Sarah Klassen's *Journey to Valta*, for example, is a subtly told account, in poetry, of Klassen's revisioning of Mennonite identity through her parents' stories, an historical tour to Valta, and her own Canadian experience of being Mennonite. Al Reimer's *My Harp Is Turned to Mourning* is a critique of the Mennonite commonwealth in Russia that could not have been written by one who had lived there, yet, as we have seen in Chapter 3, it is definitely not a wholesale repudiation of that history and its effects. Many of Rudy Wiebe's Mennonite narratives (Blue Mountains of China, "Sailing to Danzig," "Except God Who Already Knows") are a clear effort to recreate a historical, and above all theological, basis for continuing community. The list of recent fiction based on the Russian-Mennonite ethos included in the catalogue of Mennonite Books in Winnipeg indicates an almost anxious effort to hold on to the stories of those who directly experienced both the isolated integrated community in Russia and the loss of that safe world (for example, H. Dueck's *An Orphan's Song*).²

What I want to focus on in this chapter, however, is the effort of Mennonite fiction writers to come to terms with the presently existing Mennonite community as it responds to current forces of change and assimilation. Two approaches are evident: Armin Wiebe, writing *The

² See Harry Loewen's "Canadian-Mennonite Literature: Longing for a Lost Homeland" for a survey of Mennonite literature’s expression of loss. He suggests that the "older, German-speaking Mennonite writers, who themselves had experienced the breakup of their world, deal primarily with the loss of the physical world. The younger generation of writers, most of them born in Canada, also 'remember' the external, physical world of their forebears, but their 'remembering' is more spiritual and existential. (They)...through the loss and uprootedness of their ancestors, 'remember' the spiritual home of the Anabaptists and Mennonites of the sixteenth century and deal with questions of identity and what it means to be Mennonite in today’s society" (77).
Salvation of Yasch Siemens in the ethnic and comic tradition of Arnold Dyck, reflects the life and thinking of Mennonites who still live in a geographically defined community although it is definitely no longer isolated; Doug Reimer, in Older Than Ravens, and Anne Konrad, in her second collection of stories Family Games, reflect the life and thinking of Mennonites whose attachment to either the ethnic or religious identity of Mennonites is tenuous at best. These stories appear to be not so much an effort to reclaim the Mennonite heritage in order to gain a voice (that work had already been done by earlier writers) or to give prophetic impetus to a theological renewal (that goal seems to require a focus on history) as they are a regretful record of the forces disintegrating the community. The relationship of the individual to the community is no longer a source of much tension. In these fictions, little community is left against which and within which the self can define itself, a fact which is in itself evidence of the waning of the power of "menno's house." Nevertheless, the fiction does include some efforts at re-defining community even if it is much more limited than the Gemeinschaft earlier generations of Mennonites had experienced.

The tentative techniques of reclamation of Mennonite community that I see mingled with the songs of requiem in these texts are much better understood with reference to recent sociological studies on the current nature of Mennonite community and the threats to its continuity. Ironically, the very Mennonites who chose to pursue the higher education so persistently perceived by conservative Mennonites as a threat to Mennonite communal identity are now often the ones most exercised about that Mennonite identity and the most qualified to
provide reasons and methods for preserving Mennonite distinctiveness. According to Calvin Redekop, sociologist, who has published extensively on Mennonite issues, education or even the English language are not by themselves the greatest destroyers of a cohesive community, though they certainly opened the community up to other influences. Essentially, the community, according to Redekop, is characterized by a separated life, a disciplined community, and mutuality and mutual aid (Mennonite Society 280). These characteristics are threatened primarily by those outside influences or trends which found an answering susceptibility within the community: the pietistic influence, already strong in Russia, with its emphasis on individual holiness left Mennonites especially open to the evangelical movement\(^3\); the secular emphasis on material prosperity and individual achievement appealed to hard-working, thrifty Mennonites who remembered the prosperity of the Russian Mennonite colonies; and the increasing institutionalization arose out of the desire to preserve purity through strict rules and increasing bureaucracy, a method that had been common in Russia (281 passim). Both evangelicalism, with its emphasis on subjective individual experience and its missionary zeal in trying to "convert" other Mennonites, and secular individualism tended to pit Mennonites against Mennonites even within a particular schism and to erode the sense of Gemeinschaft, while the increasing efforts of elders to uphold tradition

---

\(^3\) As I stated in Chapter 1, the definition of the Christian believer as his own priest and responsible directly to God for his obedience to Scripture creates a mindset that is already akin to the individualistic emphasis of evangelicalism. Travelling evangelists found a fertile field among the Mennonites.
and define too precisely the worldliness children were to shun undermined the voluntarism essential to viable Gemeinschaft. Once these forces of disruption are identified it is possible to argue that much of the supposed rebellious rejection of all things Mennonite by some writers is actually directed at these forces, not at the Anabaptist core of Mennonite ideals.

The Salvation of Yasch Siemens by Armin Wiebe illustrates most clearly the effects of the increasing pressures placed on Mennonite communities. The imaginary Gutenthal (meaning "good valley") is located in southern Manitoba, home of the more conservative Kanadier Mennonites who came to Canada in the 1870s intent on re-establishing isolated communities that were completely integrated and self-sufficient. That was then. Wiebe places Yasch's adventures in the era of television and modern farm equipment and revival campaigns. Though Yasch is primarily a comic Bildungsroman that describes the picaresque adventures of a young man on his way to becoming a mensch, Wiebe's vivid details of everyday life in Gutenthal paint a realistic picture of a Mennonite community adjusting to monumental changes. Wiebe presents Gutenthal through the eyes and with the tongue of Yasch Siemens, a "dow-nix" ("do-nothing") living "on the wrong side of the double-dike" (96). From his position on the margins of Gutenthal, Yasch comments bitingy on what he perceives as hypocrisy and notes unconsciously the agents of change that have made Gutenthal less than the Gemeinschaft it should be.

That the traditional isolation of Mennonite villages is completely undone by television is evident in the very first chapter, where the
young Yasch thinks of his sexual longings and experimentation through the metaphor of the TV tower just across the border in the United States. By locating that TV tower in the States, Wiebe is able to play on mainstream Canadian sentiments about Americanization as well as provide a rich metaphor for the way secular influences have infiltrated Mennonite boundaries. Later in the text, the most villainous figure, Forscha Friesen, is characterized by his connection to a television culture. His "place was the first one around here to get television and so he always wanted to play cowboy like on TV" (120). Forscha carries an air rifle, imitates programs like Gunsmoke or Maverick or Have Gun Will Travel, and augments his verbal bullying with physical violence. Anne Konrad's Annchen would have been horrified at such blatant disobedience to the rule of non-violence, but Yasch seems unaware that Forscha's actions do not fit the rule of Wehrlosigkeit, a word he doesn't even use until he is a mature adult (163), and even then Yasch uses the term ironically, knowing that its theological imperative is no longer felt in the community. During Yasch and Oata's courtship, the television is still novelty enough that, when they spend their first night in a motel watching it, Yasch's running commentary demonstrates a tourist's innocence. By the time their first son is twelve years old, however, many Mennonites have satellite dishes and "those games that you play with the TV" (165). Several times in that last chapter Yasch uses the television as a familiar term of reference; it has become a continual influence, a fact of life no longer classified as "worldliness." That term is, in fact, not even on Yasch's lips, an indication of how far Gutenthal is from Konrad's Mennonite community at Poplar Hill.
Similarly Yasch records with little specific comment the increasing influence of secular values in Gutenthal. Chapter Three, which Strauss dismisses as "of no significance for the progress of the novel, since it only depicts the episode in which Yasch takes his mother to the 'right-maker'" (103–4), actually provides a cameo picture of the conflict of varying interests in Gutenthal and the success of secular materialism. Muttachi, dressed in a "Robin Hood sack-dress" and "four-buckles" with manure still on them (Yasch 31), is the epitome of Mennonite rural thrift and poverty. At Knibble Thiessen's clinic, though, Muttachi sits beside "States women with red lips and earrings" and "fishnet stockings" (36). The entire scene is full of such hilarious comparisons between mainstream culture and Mennonite rural simplicity and ignorance, as well as examples of Mennonite efforts to shed that rural, ethnic simplicity. Yasch himself sifts through Young Ambassadors (an evangelical magazine from the States) to find a Time magazine instead (37). Knibble Thiessen's sign doesn't say "right-maker" (a direct translation from trachtmoaka) but first "'Knockenartzt' in German letters, and then 'General Massage'" (35–6). When Knibble Thiessen returns from California his sign becomes "Foot Masseur" (36). Unlike his nibbling ancestors who set bones as a contribution to village self-sufficiency and for only a partial income, Thiessen makes a good living catering to his female "States" clients and resists having to deal with poor Mennonites.

While this scene remains comic throughout and Yasch never makes any judgment explicit, other scenes contain a more bitter criticism of the way material goals have eroded community concerns. Nobah Naze's funeral, for example, gives Oata a way of revenging herself on a
community that rejected her and her father, and gives Yasch a chance to comment specifically on the class differences within a supposedly egalitarian community. At the graveside, Zamp Pickle Peters, who comes from the "wrong side of the double dike just like the rest of us" (82), says plainly that Nobah Naze was never really given a chance to get ahead: "every time he got close to the top [of the side of the dike], people would push him and then he would roll into the ditch back" (82-3). Nobah Naze's effort to borrow money to get more land was blocked by the Credit Committee, not because Nobah Naze was too great a risk but because two other much richer people wanted the same land (80-81). When Oata asks those same people from the Credit Committee to be pall-bearers, Yasch remarks acidly, "and so the Credit Committee from the Credit Union did what they didn't want to let the Credit Union do, they carried him to his new land" (81). Yasch thus frequently comments on the differences between the rich farmers and the poor ones, noting their machinery and their pride in their land and protesting the selfishness that is becoming endemic:

Now you tell me if it fair is. I mean if Ha Ha Nickel wants to be such a neighbourly with-helper all of a sudden, why doesn't he do it himself? For sure it's easy to help out when all he has to do is tell the oabeida [hired hand] to do it. Then it doesn't cost him very much. He doesn't even have to get close to the person that help needs. He doesn't have to feel nothing or deal with nobody. And he gets stars on his crown real easy. (56)
His criticism implies a Biblical ideal of selfless sacrifice for the sake of others and a disdain for material success.

Yet Yasch himself has little basis for self-righteousness. Even in this most serious indictment of materialistic individualism, the predominant note of self-pity indicates that Yasch is also chiefly self-interested. Yasch is far less concerned about Nobah Naze's heart condition than he is about his antipathy toward Oata. His descriptions of the richer farmers' cars and machinery is tinged with more envy than criticism. Though he despises Pug Peters' efforts to get a farm by sleeping with Ha Ha Nickel's daughter Sadie, Yasch has had the same dreams and follows the same procedure with Oata. The Mennonite love for the land, which Driedger identified as the fourth stake in the protective sacred canopy (Conflict 39), has obviously become considerably more important for Yasch and for other Mennonites in Gutenthal than the other stakes (Biblical theology, a caring community of disciples, and Germanic culture (Driedger 38)). Nevertheless, the ironic parallels between Yasch's and Pug Peters' efforts to gain land, which so hilariously reveal Yasch's own weaknesses, do not nullify the implied criticism of the community which now judges a man by the amount of wild oats in his grain and the amount of land he owns rather than seeing him as equal with other men before God (83). They simply demonstrate how pervasive secular values have become.

Gutenthal has been drawn away from the schmalen Lebensweg (the narrow path of life) in other ways as well. Yasch uses the phrase when he notes that Flat Germans have learned to speak English and go to educated doctors, "sometimes to a Catholic yet! Even the Flat German
[doctors] have often learned themselves away from the schmallen Lebensweg—even so far as the United Church!" (35). He thus blurs the categories of higher education and church denomination, seeing both as a departure from Mennonite living. The Biblical metaphor of the narrow road refers to a strict obedience to the example of Christ; it is both an ethical and theological concept. Yet in Yasch's world it has come to mean merely an ignorant suspicion of Catholics and United Church people. Just as Yasch's only other use of a High German term, Wehrlosigkeit, indicates a purely formal association with the concept that leaves it fit only for ironic use, so schmallen Lebensweg becomes a humorous allusion to a worldview that is narrow through prejudice, not choice. In both cases, Yasch expresses the general community ignorance of what it really means to be Mennonite.

The implied author here depends on a knowledgeable Mennonite audience to comprehend the level of criticism that he directs at the Gutenthal community, since the Gutenthal inhabitants themselves no longer remember the historical and theological basis of their identity. They see themselves as Flat Germans, not Mennonites, and the church remains nameless, almost generic. When Hova Jake plans his New Year's Eve pantomime version of Mennonite history, Yasch knows nothing either of the old brummtopp custom or of the "olden days... how it was with the Flat Germans long ago in Russlaund and Dietschlaund and Hulaund right back to the time when everybody in the whole world was a Catlicker and prayed to Mary and paid money to the pope to be forgiven their sins" (16). None of it "makes sense" to Yasch (27). Though the pantomime clearly alludes to the voluntarism of Anabaptism,
Yasch entirely misses the ironic parallel with his own outburst against the lack of "freewillingness" in his community where everybody has to come to church (17) and where his own desire to "have the land and Oata" means that he will "have to live with the church along. Here around that's how it's done" (135).

The strength of Mennonite pressures to conform to the ways of the community and resist other influences is illustrated in the brief references to the Mennonites who went to Mexico to preserve their faith in continued isolation. Yasch himself never indicates much knowledge about the issues that were at stake. All he registers is the horror of knowing that his Futtachi [father] is dead because the "darp" that he visited "thought riding in cars was sinful." An angry Futtachi "picked up a Spanish girl then drove through the darp honking. Two days later they found Futtachi at the bottom of a cliff with a knife in his back" (48). Yasch gets the story from a "come back again burro" (a Mexican Mennonite who returned to Canada). In the context of Yasch's growing up into a compassionate Mensch the story provides a basis for Yasch's warm understanding of Oata's grief at her father's death. For readers who know about the Mennonite quest for separation from the world, the story evokes all the ambivalence and futility of that quest. To eschew cars and tolerate murder is hardly the schmalle Lebensweg as either Christ or Menno Simons would have envisioned it, yet Yasch does not move beyond his personal grief to larger questions of

---

\(^{1}\) Henry Wiebe's suggestion that Futtachi is killed for flirting with a Spanish girl (192) misses the reason that Futtachi had the Spanish girl with him in the first place. It was an act designed to taunt the too-strict Mexican-Mennonites.
Mennonite ethics, problems of worldliness, and unholy coercion to conform, except as these questions arise in the conflict that he experiences between older Mennonite traditions and American fundamentalism.

Here again, Yasch scarcely registers any criticism or consciously discusses the implications of the revivalist movement among Mennonites. He merely notes the contrasts between what Mennonites used to do and what they are now expected to do. Smoking, for example, was an acceptable activity for "some olden days' preachers" but Hova Jake is forbidden to smoke at the "Stookey House" school (17). Hova also discovered that "Flat Germans used to dance, too, until some States preachers came to say that it was wrong" (17). As in the story about the television tower, baleful influences come from the States. The irony here is created as it was in Konrad's The Blue Jar, in the gap between an uncritical observation and the reader's more sophisticated awareness of inconsistencies. In Hova's pantomimed Mennonite history one of the evil figures is a "States preacher" dressed in a "Brunk Tent Crusade jacket" (28). In little details that carry significance primarily to those readers who have experienced the same things, Wiebe depicts a community whose comfortable ways, which include allowing young men to sow their wild oats before they learn the catechism, get married and join the church (150), have been disrupted by outside religious influences: the Danny Orlis books (55); the evangelical magazines (37); the pressure to provide testimony of a born-again experience (124); Yasch's terror during a revival meeting altar call when the song "Just As I Am" "grabs on to [his] tears" (156).
While in *Salvation of Yasch Siemens* these disruptive influences remain part of the background to Yasch’s personal dilemmas, in another story about Yasch, "The Well Woman," Wiebe puts these revivalist influences into the foreground. A much younger Yasch is left utterly bewildered by the new categories of sin and of Mennonites outlined for him by the superficially zealous Gerald, his first acquaintance in a new town (179–180). Here, as in *Salvation of Yasch Siemens*, Yasch innocently chooses what he sees as harmless pleasures rather than accepting the restrictions laid out by the ironically named Free Church. Yasch’s puzzled efforts to grasp the finer distinctions among degrees of sin ("maybe smoking was only a sin when a woman with lipstick did it" ("The Well Woman" 185)) resemble Di Brandt’s similarly ironic analysis of worldliness: "it just didn’t make sense a necklace was acceptable to God up to say two strands if the beads were not too large or too brightly coloured but the tiniest bracelet plunged you immediately over into heathenism" ("shades of sin" 175). The difference is that Wiebe presents these narrow definitions of sin as essentially alien to the Mennonite community. They are, after all, derived from the "States preachers" and are intrinsically contradictory to "freewillingness." In any case, the process of change itself receives more direct emphasis than any effect of changes. Yasch is no historian or prophet. For him the change from Preacher Funk’s German sermons to Preacher Janzen’s English sermons "that he had learned himself to preach in the States" (81) is no more momentous or more annoying than the change in church music from country style to cantatas (63).
Nevertheless, while the detailed description of ways of life in Gutenthal records the gradual erosion of Gemeinschaft through the disruptive agency of secular values and a fundamentalist definition of Christianity, other aspects of the novel suggest continuing possibilities of community.

Primarily it is language that redefines Mennonite community in The Salvation of Yasch Siemens. Yasch speaks a "buggered-up language" that in syntax and vocabulary is a mixture of English and Low German with snippets of High German. That kind of direct translation ("Over-setting" as Mennonites call it in yet another example of direct translation) has been a source of humour among Mennonites, probably since the first Mennonites began learning English, but Wiebe extends the in-joke for an entire book. One immediate result of his distinctive linguistic style is a clear focus on ethnic identity rather than on theological distinctives. As Strauss comments, "there is no mention of the Mennonites but only of the Flat Germans [an over-setting of Plautdietsch], an indication of the progressive secularization of the Mennonites, who here distinguish themselves from the majority only through their linguistic otherness" (103). I would agree that Wiebe's peculiar language indicates a loss of religious purity, a breakdown of the barriers that once separated Mennonites from other peoples: English is now so much a part of the minds of Mennonites that they can no longer restrict its use to the school and marketplace. The theological convictions that once led Mennonites to define themselves so persistently through language have evidently been eroded.
Yasch's buggered-up language, however, not only points out the gradual secularization, but also evokes anew a particular ethnic community that still understands enough Low German to laugh with an insider's delight at Yasch's hybridized version of it. Tiessen has pointed out that Mennonite writers' use of Low German in texts meant for mainstream Canadian audiences actually "embraces... (implied) Mennonite audiences" by asking them to "recall a seemingly lost world where the coherence of community was assured by the resonating, integrating power of familiar verbal ritual" ("Shibboleth" 182). She goes on to conclude that "Mother tongue as a source of resonance for the insider is used by many contemporary Mennonite writers to restructure ritualistically the ethos, the cultural and spiritual texture of a Mennonite world that no longer exists as an entity separate from the society around it" (183). In this way, The Salvation of Yasch Siemens functions as Lost in the Steppe functioned: it recreates a sense of community through the depiction of a recognizable, and possibly preservable, ethnic identity.

Furthermore, Wiebe here continues the Mennonite tendency toward self-mockery based on clear differences between themselves and mainstream society. Such tongue-in-cheek self-deprecation tends to underline rather than undermine ethnic distinctiveness. In that

---

¹ At a reading given by Armin Wiebe in Saskatoon, I was pleasantly astonished to realize how readily Mennonites in the audience recognized Yasch as one of their own despite his "prost" vocabulary, and how warmly the knowing laughter united us, gave us a sense of understanding one another, though I, at least, had never before met any of the Mennonites at the reading. The ease with which we all spoke a "Yasch-deutsch" over coffee later was an outward indicator of a keen common interest in one another's reaction to Yasch's world, which was also our world.
humorous awareness of difference Yasch is the direct descendent of Arnold Dyck's Koop enn Bua. Those two bush-farmers from Manitoba, who first appeared in Dyck's column Belauschte Gespräche (overheard conversations) in the Steinbach Post and then became the protagonists of three comic novels (Reimer, "Innocents Abroad" 30), travel as ignorant bumptoons through an English culture they scarcely understand and attempt to negotiate their way through homespun philosophy, sheer perseverance, and an ability to laugh at their own mistakes, at least in Bua's case. Their task is really to find "ways of accommodating their isolated Müisdarp (mouse village) with its homely ethnic values to the larger world outside" (Reimer, "Role" 36), a task that is also Yasch's.

Whereas Dyck employed the technique of a peculiar comic irony, derche Bloom räde (literally "talking through the flower"), familiar to his Russian Mennonite audience, Wiebe employs humorous techniques similarly embedded in the Low German language. Al Reimer, in "Derche Bloom Räde: Arnold Dyck and the Comic Irony of the Forstei [Mennonite forestry service in Russia]," discusses the wild flights of fantasy and deliberate understatement of "talking through the flower," noting Dyck's success in using that "dry, gentle self-irony" (63). Reimer's further comment, that this "anti-language" was "only for the initiated" (63), is helpful in understanding what Yasch's language accomplishes. Reimer notes that the young men in the Forstei re-established community by insisting that everyone speak Low German, even if fluent in Russian or in High German, and by creating mock-familial relationships. What he does not comment on is that later Canadian readers of the Koop enn Bua series would likewise have experienced a sense of community simply in
reading the novels and sharing in the laughter provoked by the comic irony and self-mockery intrinsic in the language.

Similarly, Wiebe develops a sense of community among Mennonite readers through his use of another comic technique intrinsic in the Low German language, the earthy, outrageous metaphor. Yasch and Oata's first sexual encounter, for example, becomes an uncontrolled truck ride along a muddy road:

... the half-ton is schwaecksing from side to side on the slippery mud and the canal is half full with water and I am turning the steer from one side to the other as fast as I can ... and I try the brakes to use but the truck is going already down and it is too late to be afraid of anything there could be to see and I just let myself feel what there is to know. (73)

Another illicit sexual encounter is described as "riding the horse without a saddle" or measuring "the water in the ditch" without "gum boots on" (137). Strauss sees Yasch's tendency to describe things through comparisons to "agricultural equipment and cars" (105) as a means of "informing the reader about the degree of secularization reached by the Mennonites of Gutenthal, since ... the inner experience and consciousness are completely de-romanticized, indeed 'technicized'" (107). It is true that Gutenthal has modernized considerably and Yasch is very anxious for the machinery of progress. To see Yasch's outrageous flights of metaphor, however, simply as a sign of mechanization is to miss much of the humour and its effect in recreating community. Many of his metaphors are, in any case, not mechanical,
just rural. The key point is that Yasch’s metaphors are drawn from immediate, even intimate and private experience. Low German is by definition, according to many Mennonites, an earthy, crude language (M. Redekop, "Translated" 100) that revels in the elemental facts of human existence. Yet by its tendency toward spontaneous comparisons between farming activities and moments of emotional ecstasy it transforms a crude language into a kind of metaphysical poetry capable of conveying intense emotion. That is yet another act of "over-setting" that recreates a sense of community for those who, with warm laughter, recognize the irreverent habit of thought.

Wiebe’s complete mixing-up of languages then becomes also a mixing-up of categories that has important implications for his definitions of community. In the Mennonite polyglot experience, High German was the language of the church, English was the imposed language of the school, and Low German was the language of daily experience in house and barn (M. Redekop, "Translated" 98). In other words, the realms of soul, mind, and body can be kept so completely separate that it is possible to tolerate different ethical behaviour in each realm (Kreider 29). Certainly Yasch’s behaviour in church is at odds with his behaviour elsewhere as is that of many other characters. Di Brandt, in her review of The Salvation of Yasch Siemens, notes that this "multi-dimensional sense of reality . . . has allowed [Mennonites] to camouflage conflicting values and behaviour in a split more radical and permanent than Luther could have wished for with his two Kingdoms" (Mennonite Historian 7). She points out that Wiebe’s blend of three languages becomes a "truly Anabaptist attempt at integrating the
contradictory elements of experience in one vital, committed whole" (7). That is really what the Mennonite schmalle Lebensweg is all about: a living-out of the example of Christ in daily communal experience. Yasch achieves that wholeness briefly in a prophetic moment of feeling "all connected up with everything" (30) when Hova's pantomime and song recapture the joy of immediate religious experience.

Putting aside for the moment the question of how long Yasch remains "all connected up with everything", I want to point out another related crossing of boundaries, an incarnation really, that translates remote religious truth into immediate experience, albeit not in terms traditional Mennonites would have recognized. Just as Wiebe blurs the categories of language, and along with them, the categories of Mennonite experience, so he blurs the categories of present events and Biblical events by giving Christ-like actions to his marginal characters. The technique is rather obvious, some might say too obvious, in the story of Emmanuel which becomes Yasch's testimony. Strauss lists the parallels between Emmanuel and Christ: the name, the absence of parents, "his charismatic leadership," "his oratory skills," the incident of walking on the water, the miracles, the twelve disciples, and the final betrayal and torture (110-11). Whereas Henry Wiebe finds the development of the parallel stories "too literal, too unsubtle" (194), Strauss sees the scene as comic exploitation of "the Mennonite method of interpreting the Bible, the practice of applying the teachings of the Bible to the everyday life of individual Mennonites" (112). I would agree that the translation of Christ-like behaviour into the nastiest of present situations is a Mennonite method of interpreting and applying the teachings of Christ,
but I read these scenes as definitely less than comic. Perhaps Knibble Thiessen’s version of foot-washing is funny (Yasch 37), but the story of Emmanuel is anything but comic, and the story of the disgraced Foonkuh Lena in “The Well Woman” is a moving parallel to the story of the Samaritan woman. Wiebe’s act of making Christ an old Hutterite water-diviner (“The Well Woman”) or a juggling clown-figure (Yasch) appears radically disrespectful, but surprised laughter is mingled with the realization that in comparison to the hypocritical, judgmental Gerald, or the clumsily, pathetically evil Forscha Friesen, the Christ-figures offer spiritual healing along with and perhaps through their laughter. Whatever vengeful motives may have initially led Yasch to give his testimony, he does conclude with a realization that he is as guilty and hypocritical as any Forscha or Ha Ha Nickel that he condemns: “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). That is the kind of connectedness that builds the egalitarian community that is truly “menno’s house.”

Yasch’s earlier ecstatic religious experience, appropriately triggered by Mennonite singing, lasts only until he sees the Englische Serena in church the next morning. Then “everything [is] connected loose again” (30) because he prefers to see her as a figure of worldly allurement and sexuality, “separate, something special” (30) who doesn’t belong in a Mennonite church. Yasch needs to understand that, in the true schmalen Lebensweg, categories of belief and behaviour cannot be kept separate, any more than Mennonites and Englische can be kept
separate, or Rudnerweidner Mennonites can be more holy than Hutterites or lipsticked women ("The Well Woman"). As long as the self-righteous Gerald refuses to talk with Hutterites he won't meet Christ no matter how many times he goes through the fundamentalist ritual of being saved ("The Well Woman"). As long as Yasch prefers to see church simply as something Mennonites do to be part of the community as he is part of the ball team (122) he also is unlikely to recognize his own resemblance to Forscha. His salvation comes in seeing his oneness with other people. His willingness to identity with Oata's pain of rejection (69), to become a mensch, even a fruemensch, prepares him to see the significance of his relationship with Emmanuel, something that he has wished he could forget (119). Thus it is Oata that has "made [him] to see things different, like maybe it's not so bad to do things that other people do, like go to church and get married and be a farmer" (150). This is hardly salvation in a religious sense and certainly not salvation in the Brunk Tent Crusade sense. However, as Al Reimer notes, Yasch's "gaining status in the ethnic community ... as a conservative farmer and landowner" is important: "as a somewhat aimless and self-destructive individualist, Yasch has to learn how to 'connect' with the community and with the other individuals in his life, how, in short, to become a useful member of Mennonite society and a caring human being" (Voices 30).

The problem with reading Yasch's salvation as a new recognition of the importance of a redeemed community without the schisms created by ignorance and prejudice and selfish interests is that that reading doesn't hold in the light of the last chapter. As Strauss points out, the
"following chapters show how the church, tradition and social customs have receded to the background of Yasch's consciousness" (112). Even though Yasch had planned to learn the catechism and "let the eltesta pour water over [his] head" before he and Oata get married in church (150), after his testimony experience—and not incidentally discovering that Oata is pregnant—they get married by the "judge in Emerson" (167). As far as Yasch is concerned that was "just as good as in the Gutenthal church" (167). Yasch and Oata become relatively comfortable on their farm, though they avoid the conspicuous consumption of some of their neighbours. Yasch does attend church with Oata but he is "a still one in church, too . . . . It's a good place to rest after a week's hard work" (168). If one focuses on these details of Yasch's purely nominal associations with the church, it is difficult to argue with Strauss' conclusion that "Yasch is 'saved' from the narrow-mindedness of the Mennonite culture which has been so strictly controlled by religious dogmatism" (112). Strauss concludes that for Armin Wiebe "Mennonites are people like Yasch after his salvation": an ethnic group that "can no longer find its 'ethnicity' in the religious aspect of its culture" (112).

I would agree that the Mennonites in Wiebe's literary world have become more of an ethnic group whose hold on religious values is slackening. Wiebe has certainly alluded to the major agents of change within the Mennonite community and noted how those agents have weakened the force of Mennonite beliefs, particularly the commitment to ideal Gemeinschaft. Wiebe's tongue-in-cheek criticism of a debased community nevertheless coexists with an emphasis on the importance of
whatever community is at hand, and Yasch, as befits a comic hero, eventually becomes very much a part of the less-than-ideal Gutenthal community. Moreover Gutenthal, with its fairly uniform acceptance of modern farming methods, its greater tolerance of worldly entertainment, and its adaptation to the fundamentalist influence from the States demonstrates the theory that Mennonite communities often adapted to the larger society as a whole while retaining their own identity (Francis 217). What looks like an acculturation that would probably destroy any semblance of Gemeinschaft "may frequently be but a device by which a minority adjusts itself to the large society as a group, so that both conflict and absorption are successfully avoided" (Francis 217). Yasch is not forced to rebel as an individual in order to find a way of life that is comfortable; his eventual conformity to the community allows him to retain his idiosyncratic personality while pursuing his very Mennonite love of the land and maintaining a stake in a group identity that he sees as crucial.

Thus I do not see in The Salvation of Vasch Siemens a theme "of the isolation of the individual in a strict religious setting" as Strauss does (113). Yasch may well begin the novel as a "somewhat

---

§ T.D. Regehr, in "Communities Transformed: The Canadian Mennonite Experience, 1939-1970," traces the process of accommodation that allowed Mennonites to rebuild a newly-defined community in urban centres such as Winnipeg. See also Leo Driedger's discussion of "saved communities" that survive by finding a balance between allowing ties with the larger society and maintaining strong inner ties such as family and social networks ("Mennonite Community Change: From Ethnic Enclaves to Social Networks"). The final chapter of The Salvation of Yasch Siemens clearly demonstrates the working of such a community that participates in national political activity and yet gives genuine loyalty only to other Flat Germans.
aimless and self-destructive individualist" (A. Reimer, Voices 30), at odds with the expectations of his community and resentful about the lack of "freewillingness" granted to its sons and daughters, but Wiebe obviously does not validate what individualism Yasch demonstrates. Yasch himself recognizes clearly that isolation carries a high price. Not only his own experiences of rejection in Gutenthal when his family first moved there (69), and his recognition of Oata's rejection, but also the tragic example of Oata's mother underlines the need to belong: "you want something to be part of, and in a place like Gutenthal you don't have much choice of freedom there at all. . . . 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 Yasch concludes, "A mensch has to deal with other mensch. . . . For sure, it's no trouble to play catch with yourself. . . . And in your head you can dream that such a good ball player you are" (75–6), but playing catch with oneself is ultimately very unsatisfying. At the end of the novel, Yasch has become the completely integrated member of the Mennonite community, a good farmer raising his children on the land and attending the church. Like the rascally Isaac in Dyck's Lost in the Steppe, Yasch is an example of a personality, not an individual. He is both a "dow-nix," a "schaubel-kopp," a laughable half-orphan from the wrong side of the double-dike, and a good Mennonite who belongs completely to the community and whose peculiarities only provoke laughter, not exclusion.

Unlike Rudy Wiebe who is more interested in exploring the Christian dimensions of community and the act of choice that allows a self to subordinate itself to the community, thereby finding itself, Armin
Wiebe is more interested in revealing the dilemmas of the already subordinated self that is shaped by an ethnic community. Not surprisingly, then, the novel finds approval from Jeff Gundy who sees in it a clear demonstration of the community as "the prime location of all meaning and knowledge" (11), as "Yasch finds his life seeming to be one lesson in humility after another" (17). From his state of being "only almost sixteen" when "the whole world seems to get in the way of things that you want" (Yasch 1) to his adulthood of twenty-three when "it matters nothing what I want to do, there is always something to make me do what I don't want" (59), Yasch feels like a "tumbling weed that the wind just rolls over the field any old way" (92). Certainly his life seems to be run by the decisions of others. He's a hired man, forced to endure Nobah Naze's stinginess, and to accept Ha Ha's abrupt dismissal of him. His mother orders him around, fly-clapper applied to his "narsch" (31). Sadie teases him, Oata manipulates him and eventually proposes to him. Forscha Friesen, with the help of Oata and Yasch's mother, makes it impossible for him to refuse to testify. Nevertheless, the decisions that really matter, that give evidence of a compassionate mensch who puts others' interests ahead of his own, are made by Yasch. When he really wants to "claw out from under there" to Mexico or Thompson (75), Yasch chooses to stay. Even before he realizes that Nobah Naze's land has become available, he is learning to accept the responsibility of dealing with other people, and the lack of freedom that inevitably accompanies such accepted responsibility. Though he can no longer "control the game," he acknowledges that it is "better than catch all by yourself" (76). That way lies madness, as Oata's mother proves.

249
One last point needs to be made about Yasch's individuality and its relationship to the community. As protagonist, Yasch is more completely integrated into his community at the end of the novel than any other protagonist I have discussed. His initial rebellion has its source merely in his desire for more pleasure and less church. Since this rebellion dissolves as he matures, it comes to resemble the fuss and fury of an adolescent phase. Yasch is definitely not a thoughtful seeker like Thom Wiens or any of the characters from Blue Mountains of China whose salvation depends upon a resolution of opposition between the self and community. He is most certainly not an anguished soul like Wilhelm Fast in My Harp Is Turned To Mourning. Unlike Hans Toews in Lost in the Steppe (the novel most akin to Salvation of Yasch Siemens), Yasch is a born farmer, not an artist.

Or is he? Wiebe leaves this fact quite unobtrusive, but Yasch does have a way with words. Since he is the narrator of the novel, we must see him as the originator of the marvellously funny metaphors and the flashes of poetic cadence. Yasch's diction is also not totally buggered-up either: when the occasion suits him he uses more elevated diction to good effect ("I can't gribble out if Oata is nerking me or trying too hard with 'limited resources'" (60)). Though he does couch his interpretation of the poem "Twa Corbies" in his usual bastardized English, and includes some debatable "translations" of phrases, he responds sensitively to the tone of the poem, relating it to his own experiences and using the image of two crows in surprising contexts. He is also the author of the English version of "Oata, Oata", the playground verse used to taunt Oata. Yet, once Yasch matures and
settles down to his role as farmer within the community he loses most of his "former wit and originality" (Strauss 112). The diction of the last chapter contains much less twisted syntax and fewer Low German words. I do not see justification in this, however, for suggesting that Wiebe here maintains that an artist cannot find a place within the community, or that the individual is inevitably submerged in a Mennonite community. Yasch maintains his distinctive character, even as he, along with the rest of the community, demonstrates the continuing change of the community in relation to the mainstream society.

In summary, then, The Salvation of Yasch Siemens depicts a Mennonite community in the process of change. What criticism is directed at the Mennonite ethos concerns the current religious construction of that ethos. An ideal community based on a Christ-like compassion for the outsider and a mutuality that includes especially economic matters is contrasted with the current Gemeinde [church group as distinct from Gemeinschaft which includes social ties] shot through with hypocrisy and heavily influenced by "States" revivalism. While The Salvation of Yasch Siemens also depicts ethnic changes, such as modern farming methods, a tolerance for education, and an increasing use of English, the novel itself re-establishes the force of ethnic community through its language and style, its peculiar humour, and its reliance upon Biblical knowledge, all of which draw Mennonite readers into remembering community. Temporary though it may be, that is reclamation of a sort.

In her most recent collection of short stories, Family Games, Anne Konrad does not locate her Mennonite characters in a specific
geographical community like Gutenthal but in the urban world of the Fraser Valley in British Columbia. Whereas Armin Wiebe presents a rural Mennonite community in the process of adapting to outside forces of change, Anne Konrad presents urban Mennonites still trying to maintain some semblance of community, whether ethnic or religious. Without any of Rudy Wiebe's explicit discussion of theological issues, Konrad pursues the careers of the Charleses and Irenes and Elizabeth Cerenos that Wiebe introduced briefly—with a certain disapproval—in the last chapter of *Blue Mountains of China*. Wiebe's Charleses and Irenes and Elizabeths were drawn away from the Mennonite community by the world defined either as materialistic success or educational prestige. Konrad's already educated and successful urban Mennonites are trying somehow to recreate Mennonite community through the network of family ties.

The stories in *Family Games* are not connected by a central consciousness as they are in *The Blue Jar*. What connects these stories is the central metaphor of family. That is evident structurally in the choice of several members of the Wieler family as protagonist and thematically as every story explores the complexity of family relationships that often include at least three generations. The families depicted are all Mennonite and all have already made the transition from rural enclave to urban centre. The misunderstandings among generations, the quarrelling that often overlays unavoidable connections, and the games family members develop to mask the pain of those quarrels come to symbolize the entire Mennonite dilemma: to own or disown the family heritage.
Keeping that Mennonite family heritage in an urban setting where children, and adults, are immersed in other ways of living, is obviously even more difficult than it is in a setting such as Gutenthal. Konrad's stories give ample illustration of the ways in which the threats Redekop listed in Mennonite Society undermine Mennonite community. Aunt Betty in "Family Games" chooses to consider herself "Anglo Saxon" and attends a United Church (73). She deliberately distances herself from her husband's five "Manitoba sisters" who irritate her with their "cooking for heritage museum sales, church functions" (72); Betty's linking of museum and church is doubtless deliberate. Aggie Wieler Hiebert worries about her liberated daughter Linda who attends university and leaves her children at day care: "If Linda had just gone to Winnipeg Bible School one year, maybe she and Ted wouldn't have separated" (18). Since most of her family has abandoned what she considers crucial, her observations have a certain fatalistic tone: "Nobody was talking about voluntary service like she and Herb used to... Most never went to church, any church" (26). Her brother Hank congratulates himself on the three children who didn't give any "trouble at all" but despairs over Sharon "who turned on us when she went to Art College. She wants to be like them, liberated, you know, hippies" (31). For Lena, narrator of "Queen Picker", Mennonitism has come to mean a concern with an "appearance of sin" (86). She knows very well that their family moved to British Columbia so that the children could attend a Christian school (84), but cynically notes that B.C. Mennonites don't mind picking hops since "the hops [they] pick all go to make yeast" (86). Her Uncle Abe's zeal to earn money overrides religious
concerns and even basic human dignity (87-88). Aggie Hiebert's rather obsessive efforts to maintain "Mennonite ways, make people feel at home" (22) by making and giving away ethnic foods and volunteering at Mennonite service organizations (24) are on one level a continuation of her mother Susanna's typically Mennonite female role ("dear Mother, was it worth it? Cooking and baking and giving, was that what you wanted from life? Was it enough?" [20]). On another level both women's efforts to continue rural traditions of self-sufficiency through preserving home-grown food and giving it to children who no longer bother with such activities or even care for the products suggest the futility of trying to maintain community as they understand it in an urban setting.

Family Games, however, is by no means solely a requiem for a lost community. The rural economy is certainly gone and the religious community no longer holds many of the ethnic Mennonites, at least not the religious community defined by too great a concern with the "appearance of sin". What does remain is the family. Though many members may not go to church, and though some younger members may be experimenting with hippie lifestyles, the Wieler family still gathers at Easter and Christmas and on occasions of death or other emergencies. Family relationships are foregrounded in every story. Konrad here develops text and sub-text much as Dyck did in Lost in the Steppe; the difference is that Dyck appealed simultaneously to conservative Mennonites and to more enlightened Mennonites willing to see flaws in their heritage, while Konrad appeals to readers of any culture with her subtle and sympathetic exposure of family living and to specifically Mennonite readers who will see both the universally familiar family
values—and quarrels—as well as the wider Mennonite family caught in
dilemmas not always of its own making. That definition of Mennonitism
as an extended family to a certain extent avoids the problem of
reclamation or requiem: one does not disown the family without serious
emotional consequences, if it is even possible to disown the family.

If the position of narrator is any indication, objective distance
from the family may seem desirable many times but it is ultimately
impossible. As in The Blue Jar, Konrad adopts the narrative stance of
the uninvolved, yet keenly observant, reporter. All of the Wieler family
stories are written with the tone and control of an outside narrator.
The centre of consciousness may be Jacob Wieler, or his daughter Aggie,
or his granddaughter Sharon, and the emotions of that centre of
consciousness are carefully rendered, but the implied author refuses to
narrow her perspective to that of the centre of consciousness. The
facts and feelings of the characters are recorded in great detail, as
contradictory as they may be, in order to reveal the impossibility of
final judgment. "Ruby Red," for example, depicts Jacob and Susanna
Wieler's move from their house to an apartment. Hank Wieler is the
efficient practical son, packing their cartons and furniture, and tossing
out the "worn-out slippers, stained straw placemats, dust-covered glass
sealers . . . cereal box full of old church bulletins, a clump of plastic
tablecloths" (29). His objective evaluation of his elderly parents' needs
can hardly be argued against, yet Konrad contrasts it with his daughter
Sharon's sympathetic understanding of Susanna's need to keep "family
treasures" (39), a plastic red wastebasket, plastic flowers, and old green
damask curtains. Because Konrad so deftly lets us see Susanna's
sentimentality, Hank’s practicality, Jacob’s helplessness, and Sharon’s rejection of materialistic values, the final irony of the accidental discarding of a collection of valuable silver coins calls for no blame, just a recognition that all the players in this family game meant well. Though the family disagreement becomes an issue of gender as well (Sharon sides with her grandmother in her wish to keep memories alive, while Hank resembles his father in his willingness to replace old things with new, more prosperous things), Konrad avoids taking sides. That thorny problem of what to keep and what to throw away, made so explicit and so personal in this story, additionally applies to the Mennonite tradition as a whole. Over and over again, in these stories, characters choose whether to keep old ways or to adopt new ones, whether to focus on memories or on new dreams, but the narrative stance remains objective. Konrad refuses to tell her readers which perspective is to be privileged.

Her objective stance, however, does not mean distanced. Just as in The Blue Jar she asked her readers to identify with the feelings of inclusion and exclusion that Annchen experienced, so in Family Games Konrad asks her readers to identify with all generations in the tensions of adapting to new ways of living. In "The Suitor" Jacob Wieler's memories of Russia and the loss of his beloved horse, Masya, are as carefully rendered as his present feelings of bewilderment in the Old Folks' Home; both experiences are equally unavoidable. His daughter Aggie's exasperation at his demands are no more justified than his deliberate manipulations of her guilt. The delicate reciprocal relationship between guilt and control is depicted in several stories as
the older generation of Mennonites tries to continue ethnic and church traditions while the younger generation attempts to discard or adapt those traditions. Konrad gives us emotional reasons to agree with both sides of the debate.

The impossibility, and ultimately the undesirability, of remaining aloof from the struggle to come to terms with the bondage of the family heritage is most evident in the title story, "Family Games." The first-person narrator depicts herself as a listener, a watcher in the nasty family games between her mother and her Aunt Betty. The older-generation women replay the hostility so often felt between those Mennonites who cling to the ethnic heritage and those who are anxious to leave the Mennonite upbringing behind. Aunt Betty deliberately gives English names to the traditional foods she no longer cooks, provoking her sister's angry retort, "don't you know the proper name for porzelky any more? . . . What is this with 'fritters'?" (78). The narrator and her sister, Lisa, though they declare themselves above the silly rivalries the older sisters perpetuate, unconsciously parallel their mother and aunt in their attitude toward family and toward the Mennonite heritage. Lisa avoids family reminiscences, refuses to hear "about 'Mother's tormented relations'" (73), while the narrator continues her interest in them. Both sets of sisters eventually prove Konrad's implied thesis that Mennonite community may be as quarrelsome as a family but those games (or rituals) are necessary for the survival of the community as a whole and of the individual. When Aunt Betty's husband dies, she who spent "her life moving away, distancing herself from her past, from impossible filiations" now attempts to reconnect with "the
relatives, the ones she'd rejected" (71) and even sends her husband's ashes "to Winnipeg to be buried in the plot with his parents in a Mennonite cemetery" (79). When the narrator's sister, Lisa, commits suicide, she leaves no note, "only the mute row of family photographs. Lined up on a polished table" (80). The narrator and Lisa refused to play family games, insisted on burying tensions, and yet their efforts to remain aloof from defining themselves in terms of the family (whether with or against), an act they see as a kind of bondage, results in greater alienation.

The results of the absence of a larger social network are also depicted in "In the Heart of Old Vienna". This story of John and Marianne Wieler, who have moved for a year to Vienna with their three children, reflects the larger Mennonite dilemma in several ways. The quarrelling of the children who are bereft of their usual setting and are now aliens in a hostile society suggests the dilemma of Mennonite immigrants in whatever host society. More particularly the horrible plight of Mr. Gesindel, hated by everyone, especially by his ex-family, depicts the loneliness of those who have no community in which to find their role.

The metaphor of family for the essence of Mennonite community is appropriate, especially since Mennonites, in an effort to maintain an egalitarian fellowship rather than a hierarchical structure, have traditionally spoken of their fellow church members as brothers and sisters. For those familiar with Mennonite history and its record of acrimonious schisms, the family also captures both the intensity of the quarrels and the sense of kinship that nevertheless remains. Hence,
Konrad's foregrounding of family ties would suggest an effort to reclaim Mennonite community. That, however, is on the level of implied, perhaps more accurately, imposed metaphor only. Konrad never makes explicit the comparison of family to the larger Mennonite community. Her narrative stance with its refusal to place weight on any one perspective keeps the stories realistically ambiguous.

In fact, the cumulative effect of the stories suggests desperate effort rather than achievement. Konrad's urban Mennonites attempt to maintain Gemeinschaft through family connections and food. Whether family and food are enough to sustain community is a problem left to the reader. As she did in The Blue Jar, Konrad asks the reader to lose herself/himself in the intensity of the emotions felt by each protagonist. In that act of imaginative identification we do participate in and perpetuate community, even if only briefly. At least we participate in the desire to maintain community, although the very anxiety felt in the efforts to continue community suggests that Gemeinschaft may be impossible to maintain. Nevertheless, living without such Gemeinschaft in an undefined and alienated individuality is a very uninviting alternative, a conclusion that Oota's Muttachi in The Salvation of Yasch Siemens would agree with.

Such an alienated individuality that arises out of deformed and devalued Gemeinschaft is the focus of the short stories of Doug Reimer's Older Than Ravens. The milieu is a Mennonite community, Altwelt, that is quite akin to Gutenthal in some ways but without the laughter and without the distinctive language. Not all of the stories have Altwelt as the setting, but in stories that take place elsewhere, the characters
have come from Altwelt. Though the stories are not the linked sequence of Konrad's *The Blue Jar* or of *The Salvation of Vasch Siemens*, which have a single centre of consciousness throughout, many of Reimer's stories are narrated by Peter Regier. Since Peter is a teen-ager in some of the earlier stories and a married man and father in the later stories, *Older Than Ravens* does convey a sense of chronological progression. Any resemblance to Konrad or Wiebe ends here, though. Reimer's tone, his depiction of community, his attitude toward all things Mennonite conveys a disenchantment with the community. *Older Than Ravens* is indeed a requiem and not a particularly regretful one.

The name of the village already indicates the stance of the book. Altwelt is German for "old world." Mennonites did indeed give their villages German names but the names expressed hope of a glorious environment, or nostalgia for a place now gone, or simply facts about its residents: Blumenthal (meadow of flowers), Rosenort (place of roses), Chortitz (a harking back to the colony in Russia), Altbergthal (old mountain meadow). Altwelt has none of those specific associations. It is a generic term that could refer to any number of Mennonite villages that now have no real relevance or importance for their inhabitants: "the place is an anachronism for the most recent generation of Mennonites growing up in it" (Al Reimer, *Voices* 31). What specific Mennonite characteristics Doug Reimer gives Altwelt, however, aside from the many Mennonite family names and brief references to Mennonite organizations, resemble Redekop's lists of threats to the Mennonite community more than they do the Mennonite community that a Frieda Friesen might recognize.
Ethnicity and familial warmth have been largely purged from this community leaving only religious connections. The Ennses and Wiebes have lunch at Harry Wong’s Diner (14-15), the young men work at factories in Winnipeg and feel up the Eileen Schantzes in their spare time (8). There is no sense of geographical rootedness or even of a tightly-knit community such as Gutenthal. Neither Low German nor the often communally-shared ethnic foods appear here. If anything does hold Altwelt together it is gossip: "At such times Principal Wiebe felt like quitting his job, felt like moving out of Altwelt to Winnipeg or maybe Brandon where everybody’s dog yap yap yap didn’t know him and bother itself every minute with what he was up to" (37). The bothering about others is far more of a religious judgmentalism than it is a genuine mutuality.

Altwelt, in fact, is primarily defined not by the Anabaptist vision of mutual support in faith, but by an evangelical outlook that is "profoundly pathological" (Janz qtd. in Mennonite Literary Voices 31). As in Konrad’s Poplar Hill, people speak much of sin and worldliness, the evil of working on Sunday, drinking beer, playing cards, dancing, but unlike Poplar Hill, Altwelt has little warmth of community and even of family to balance the perpetual admonitions about sin. Walter Regier, for example, who sleeps with his wife’s sister on weekends, is not bothered by the resultant exclusion from social and family circles since "righteous people stop forgiving even before seven times" (29). Certainly Thomas Regier (if he is Walter’s relative, Reimer does not say), in his self-righteous zeal, demonstrates that judgmental attitude in his
aversion for the messy Indians (73) and Charles Hildebrand describes a Sunday evening testimony with bitterness:

Poor Mrs. Ginter giving her testimony. Asking the congregation and God to forgive her for being envious of the richer ones in town. Thanking everyone for the second-hand clothes she'd gotten from the good people of the church in the Christmas care basket! Listing her sins for the whole self-righteous herd to sniff at. You think the Friesens or the Wiebes would stand up there and do what they expected her to do? Not in a thousand Sunday nights.

The rich didn't have to. They didn't sin. (23)

As Al Reimer notes, "the solidarity of the traditional Mennonite community is breaking down, its rigid codes of belief and behaviour expressed as mindless piety" that leaves the Regier brothers suffering from "crippling feelings of guilt and religious angst" (31). Altwelt allows no place for genuine mutuality at all; it is a place in which individuals judge and are judged.

Such an atmosphere fosters not the voluntary submission of the self to the Gemeinschaft in order to be nurtured, but the forceful repression of whatever threatens superficial decency. What is repressed also rebels. Individuality is heightened by the very efforts to deny it. Reimer's stories depict plenty of that rebellious individuality especially through a defiantly expressed sexuality. For Peter and his friends, mothers exist to "[deny] their sons' desires" and sons must "[earn] the right to wear the penis erect through disobedience" (56). From Peter's use of his father's shovel ("Phallic shovel?" {47}) to the series of
pranks on Halloween ("The October Rebellion"), sons are defined by their refusal to conform to what is expected. In the thoroughly masculine viewpoint of these stories daughters remain objects of conquest, "delicate, [occupied] with charity projects (Christmas Cheer Boards, the Gospel Mission Centre) and the evangelical charismatic movement" (97). Their equation with evangelicalism makes them doubly the target of conquest or at least disobedience, and the defiantly erect penis becomes the symbol of an individuality defined against religious oppression. In "Going Home" the protagonist Charles Hildebrand brings that individuality to a perverse extreme. Already institutionalized and supposedly rehabilitated, Charles pursues his own deviant interests at the expense of the well-being of whoever stands in his way. Young girls are targets of desire and school trustees meddling obstacles. The result is self-inflicted death.

Charles is only one of the numerous dangerous outsiders that people this book. The rebellion of the sons against their restrictive Mennonite fathers in Altwelt yields not necessarily a healthy individuality, however that might be defined, but a threatening deviance. That deviance may be literally threatening, as in the case of Charles with his predilection for young girls or Arnold Regier with his violent, vengeful impulses, or it may only be perceived as threatening as in the case of Daniel the recluse in his own house, or Benny who is just different, clumsy, uncomfortable with his own age-group. The narrator, Peter, may claim that "B.C. is a haven for the depraved" (127), but Altwelt is a haven for the deformed, perverted and retarded.
What is more, those of the community who reject these outsiders are scarcely more sympathetic. Arnold's parents are weak and pathetic in their fear of their son. Charles Hildebrand is an unsavoury, self-deluded character, but his criticism of the hypocritical Sunday evening testimonies and his comments on the suspicious deals of the respected church elders (17) seem altogether justified. The Altwelt boys who form the centre of many of the stories also make themselves despicable with their callous treatment of the retarded Dycks. Both insiders and outsiders are equally lacking in the ability to sacrifice self-interest for the sake of others.

Though he presents this concept of a necessary self-sacrifice with pronounced pessimism, Reimer nevertheless counters the futile and largely adolescent penile individuality of Altwelt with glimpses of possible community, all the while making it clear that such community is unlikely to happen in Altwelt. The self-conscious imitation of Christ's sacrifice that Thomas Regier insists on in "The Picture of Jesus" is unconvincing. Thomas himself is emotionally unstable: his hysterical reaction to his mother's knife suggests that his willingness to take punishment for other boys is more masochistic than altruistic. Certainly the slightly older Thomas who is protagonist in "Red and White" is motivated entirely by a pervasive sense of guilt, and his view of others is so clouded by narrow judgment that he is unlikely to act out of genuine love for anyone. In "The Retarded Dycks" the narrator, Peter, writing from the maturer perspective of mid-forties, recalls his school-age responses to the family of retarded children watched over by the one normal child, Brian. Peter now sees Brian as a "Christ, taking the
burdens of the world on his own shoulders" (88), and realizes that, in effect, "we are all retarded kids, ignorant of what's being done for us" (88), needing a "simple faith in a sane father, someone who has a plan" (89). The trouble is that, though Brian's kind of sacrifice creates a warm community ("they were a close-knit family" (86)), it is impossible to maintain. After rejection and harassment from the larger Altwelt society, Brian hangs himself. The narrator admits to wanting to be rid of the Dyck family, "rid of the evidence that we really couldn't keep the Christian fellowship, or maybe that we still had a lifetime of that sort of sacrifice or reminder of failed sacrifice ahead of us" (87).

The last few stories in Older Than Ravens in which Peter Regier is now a father himself suggest, however, that the kind of failed sacrifice that humans are capable of is still better than the judgmental self-interest that has come to rule Altwelt. Peter had already learned something of identification with others through his solitary and involuntary baptism as a teen-ager, when he grasped how drowned gophers might feel or sailors lost at sea. In a very real way he has identified with death and risen to a less self-interested life. As an adult he displays both a deeper sympathy with others who experience the anguish of death ("Fishing Men") and a continued failure to sacrifice enough of himself. He is himself not always the "sane father with a plan" but is a breaker of promises (139) and a hypocrite who doesn't want his son to "hear the swearing" or see the drinking of beer (140). He is also helpless to prevent his children's injuries (149) or their quarrels (152-53). He seems helpless even to prevent himself from stupid authoritarian behaviour (155). Nevertheless the imperfect human
beings in Peter Regier's own family are more sympathetic than any who inhabited the Altwelt of his adolescence.

It is noteworthy that Peter still lives in Altwelt. Nothing of this later Altwelt, however, resembles the narrowly pietistic town presented in the earlier stories. Whether Altwelt has truly changed or whether Reimer has chosen to narrow his focus to one nuclear family rather than including the whole town is uncertain. Family does finally seem to be the only community defined in Older Than Ravens that seems worth retaining. As Peter comments, in reference to the Regier family gathering, "Blood is thicker than water my grandfather always told me and I never doubted it, times like these. A pre-rational primeval kinship force rolled up in us and we were gibbons and orangutans" (98). In the earlier stories, the family relationships certainly seem as elemental and as mutually competitive as one might imagine ape families to be. The Regiers are "genetically noisy" (100), given to indiscreet comments made too loudly. While Father Regier does demonstrate something of Christ's concern for the outcast, his son Peter disdains that view of the world as a mission field (105), and son Thomas is a zealous "Christian" witness motivated primarily by guilt and fear. It is only once Peter has learned something of the ability to identify with others, and to recognize the common weaknesses he shares with others that he can begin to establish, in his own family, what could be called community. Tentative as that picture may be, it is far more positive than the various deviant forms of individuality that arise inevitably out of the repressively religious Altwelt.

266
Thus, in rather roundabout fashion, and through the mouths of the retarded, and others whom the world of Altwelt would consider weak and foolish and contemptible (see I Corinthians 1:27-28), Reimer utters the words of Anabaptist wisdom: it is through the loss of self for the sake of others that deviant individuality can be curbed and a supportive community created. Those words are spoken so tentatively, however, and so full of the recognition of human tendencies to make messes of relationships that it is easier to read the book as an angry, disillusioned rejection of all things Mennonite. Unlike Armin Wiebe, who separates the warmth of community from the invasive judgmental influence of the "Brunk Tent Crusade" by his emphasis on ethnic characteristics, Doug Reimer makes no attempt to depict a Mennonitism apart from the warped evangelicalism that pervades Altwelt. And unlike Konrad who recreates both the pain and pleasure of Gemeinschaft through the reader's identification with multiple perspectives, all within the family, Reimer asks his readers to identify with the bewildered alienation that results from enforced religious community.

While I suggested earlier that recent Mennonite writers can be read as rebelling not so much against the Mennonite community as against the threats to the community, it is only fair to admit that versions of these threats, evangelicalism, secularization, institutionalization, have been very much a part of Mennonite communities in other places and other times. The Mennonite zeal to maintain a pure community, separated from the world, has always had a tendency to slip into rigid legalism, whether that legalism be expressed in a refusal to tolerate higher education or a new fervour against
tobacco and drink and playing cards. The belief in the individual priesthood of believers already establishes an individuality that is prepared for the subjectivity of the "born-again" experience and the willingness to condemn those who do not speak the same religious vocabulary. The increasing prosperity of the villages in Russia (or even before that in Prussia) is evidence of the ever-present temptation to equate the results of hard work and thrift with God's specific blessings; moreover, those blessings have always had the tendency to elevate self-interest above the communal good, thus creating economic disparity and class-consciousness. The pressures that fragment community in Canada are the same pressures that militated against continuity of community and coherence of belief in Russia, for example (see Urry). When writers like Wiebe, Konrad, and Reimer expose the Mennonite community as repressive, hypocritical and narrowly ethnocentric they rail against the pressures that destroy community but they also reveal the actual configurations of that community, or what is left of that community. Though their work can be read as temporary acts of reclamation of an existing community, for the most part it declares that "menno's beauty" is not eternal, his house could possibly have an end.

What these writers, and particularly many of the poets such as Poetker-Thiessen, Waltner-Toews, Sarah Klassen, also agree on is that if Menno's house is at an end, some similar house nevertheless needs to be built. Mennonite writers appear united in their suspicion of the modernistic self that defines itself in opposition to any existing society. In that very suspicion they demonstrate the shaping power of the
community they appear sometimes to reject.
CONCLUSION

Constructing a New Gemeinschaft of Individuals

The placing of these works of Mennonite fiction within a historical and theological context makes it possible for Mennonite and non-Mennonite readers alike to understand their persistent dialectic between the choosing individual and the shaping community, a dialectic that resists a tidy label of either modern individualism or post-modern social constructionism. From the careful ironic evasion of Arnold Dyck and the early Konrad to the recreated Mennonite experience of Rudy Wiebe, and from the assumed prophetic mantle of Al Reimer to the feminist egalitarianism of Falk and Redekop, Mennonite writers have demonstrated that their task is not so much a matter of choosing between belonging and writing as it is a matter of claiming all aspects of their communal identity. The Anabaptist heritage of placing value on the choosing individual and of then seeing that individual as a willing part of a community allows the Mennonite writer to flourish without being forced to sever all roots.

What is even more evident from such an historical examination is that neither the writer's consciousness of his/her role in relationship to the community nor the definition of the shaping community remains static. The Mennonite community that Doug Reimer depicts—and largely rejects—is not the same community that Arnold Dyck depicts, just as
the readers of each are not the same. What Gemeinschaft meant to the Mennonites who first began writing about the dispersion of the Russian Mennonite commonwealth is not what Gemeinschaft can mean in the modern urban world, if, indeed, it can continue to exist at all. Realizing the magnitude of these changes makes it possible to understand that recent Mennonite writers are engaged in a process of redefinition of Gemeinschaft even as they record the passing of the homogenous community that nourished them.

The continuing problem here, one which I have suggested by noting the differing emphases of Mennonite writers, is whether the Mennonite community is essentially an ethnic one or a religious one. The very fact that such a debate is under way already demonstrates a changed Mennonite consciousness: a Deacon Block, for example, would not have been able to distinguish between ethnic and religious definitions of Gemeinschaft, would not have recognized the existence of an ethnic component of community. The terms of the debate, at least as they were articulated in a conference on Mennonite identity at Conrad Grebel College in 1986, restate the seeming opposition between the choosing self and the shaping community that I discussed in Chapter One, and suggest a solution that is once again, not "either/or" but "both/and".

The two sides of the debate are outlined by Donald Kraybill in "Modernity and Identity: The Transformation of Mennonite Ethnicity" and by Calvin Redekop in his reply to Kraybill, "The Sociology of Mennonite Identity: A Second Opinion." Kraybill begins with the assumption that "human consciousness is socially conditioned" (154).
Mennonite Gemeinschaft for first generation immigrant Mennonites in North America, Kraybill observes, was characterized by concrete symbols, practical behavior that encompassed all aspects of living, and a minimum of differentiation between the individual and the community. Under such a "single meaning" and "single interpretation 'read' out of the text of the concrete symbols of traditional ethnicity" (165) artists find it difficult to "work with abstract symbols pregnant with multiple meanings" (165). Under the influence of modernity, however, later Mennonites retrieve an ethnicity that is "situational," that can be chosen according to need and desire:

"What the Mennonite affiliation can do for me," replaces humility and submission to group prerogatives . . . . For some [choosing to be Mennonite] means serving in a church institution, for others wearing a prayer veiling, or for others taking a historical tour. The homogeneity of ethnic practice that bonded Mennonites together in the past is gone, but the individual embraces of ethnicity nevertheless provide cogent adhesives between the individual and the group. (168)

In such a process of retrieval and of redefining the Mennonite identity the role of artists becomes crucial. Kraybill sees the "outburst of abstract expressions of ethnicity . . . pouring forth now in the form of novels, plays, films, music and dissertations" as "functional equivalents of the older concrete symbols" (166) such as plain dress, farming, and the German language.
While this sociology of knowledge with its focus on ethnicity certainly applies to fictional texts such as Arnold Dyck’s *Lost in the Steppe*, Konrad’s *The Blue Jar* and *Family Games*, and Armin Wiebe’s *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens*, it does not altogether explain the intensity of theological debate evident in Rudy Wiebe’s writings or even in Al Reimer’s. *The Blue Mountains of China*, particularly, with its persistent theme of losing the self in a redemptive act of "nothing," cannot easily be accommodated in a newer definition of *Gemeinschaft* that allows the individual to sample degrees of ethnicity suitable to the situation.

Calvin Redekop’s definition of Mennonite identity, however, emphasizes the role of religious commitment in the character of Mennonite *Gemeinschaft*. His argument is "that the Anabaptist-Mennonite phenomenon is and was a religiously motivated utopian movement" (173). Describing the Anabaptist efforts to reform radically the existing religious, political, and social institutions, and the resultant persecution, Redekop defines the Anabaptists as a self-conscious people, not an ethnic group. Their identity was shaped by the "story of rejection, suffering and persecution, and included in the interpretation the idea of faithfulness to the heavenly vision, of the 'unspotted and unblemished' people" (181). Redekop admits that the "enclavement" (183) of Mennonites tended toward ethnicization and acknowledges that their efforts to achieve a blameless life "could develop into a highly codified system of norms and values" (185). Nevertheless he insists that religious vision remains at the heart of Mennonite society:

The consciousness of a "faithful original Christianity" has lurked in the back of the mind of every Mennonite,

273
regardless of how nominal or secularized or "ethnic" he/she has become. When members have relinquished their religious interest and motivations in the Mennonite community, there has been community discomfort and even ostracism. The fact and memory of a religious schism and ostracism based on lack of faithfulness exists in the very centre of the Mennonite genius. (187)

As Redekop points out, that story of the Anabaptist vision with its key definition of Gemeinschaft as a mutually supportive group in spiritual living and economic survival has been transmitted through story (183), and will continue to be transmitted through story. A powerful "self-consciousness . . . has emerged in the collective memory of the biological and proselytized descendants, [which is] fed by the increasing body of autobiography, biography, family genealogies, history, research . . . [and] the increasingly prevalent and aesthetically recounted "Story" (191-92). There is, then, a crucial role for writers even in the religious definition of Gemeinschaft which at one time treated creative expression with some suspicion. This is the role that Al Reimer, Anne Konrad (to some extent) and particularly Rudy Wiebe have adopted within the Mennonite community. Their critiques provide impetus for recovering the utopian vision of their people and for furthering a sense of Gemeinschaft even in a changing urban environment.

As Alan Anderson, in his thoughtful response to both Kraybill and Redekop, points out, the Mennonite community cannot be defined as exclusively religious or as exclusively ethnic. In fact, he finds it noteworthy that both Kraybill and Redekop, regardless of basic
assumptions, emphasize the tendency of modern Mennonites to reach back to Anabaptist roots for their continuing identity: "what has evolved in the face of modernization, industrialization and urbanization, is the replacement of a localized, immediate ethnicity with a generalized, abstract and universal ethnicity, and 'international peoplehood'" that is shaped by concepts of Anabaptist "vision" and "discipleship" and "faithfulness" (Anderson 199).

In that process of replacement, the Mennonite author plays a unique and important role. While sociologists and historians fill academic journals (Journal of Mennonite Studies, Mennonite Quarterly Review) with analyses of Mennonite community, it is the Mennonite artist who helps shape the collective consciousness of that community, who transmits the "Story" in its most memorable forms. From the irrepressible Isaac of Lost in the Steppe to the inimitable Yash, the distinctive Mennonite personality evokes the laughter that includes and unites. From the struggling Hans to the doubting Thom and the anguished Wilhelm, and including the hesitant Annes and more militant Magdalenes and Elizabeths, the Mennonite individualist invites prophetic criticism and calls for voluntary identification with a religious community. And in The Blue Mountains of China, the Mennonite community itself becomes the protagonist and reaffirms the central tenet of Anabaptism—the self that loses itself only to find itself in community.

My thesis throughout has been that the Mennonite writer need not feel divided between an "inherited identity" and a chosen role of writer (Brandt, "personal statement"). While I agree that the Mennonite artist's voice is "generally heard from the margins" (Tiessen, New Quarterly 10),
I see the Mennonite writer as even more than "an interpreter of cultures, one who explores and reveals the manner in which a particular body of people generates . . . meaning" (Tiessen, Prairie Fire 9). The Mennonite writer is also one who actively shapes the manner in which a community generates meaning and participates in the terms of a "covenant group" (Ruth, Mennonite Identity 64). Admittedly not all writers of Mennonite extraction have similarly spoken from a "centre of conviction and commitment to [the Mennonite] heritage" (Ruth 65), but more have indeed made "the seminal values of [their] covenant-ethos concretely 'experienceable'" (Ruth 64) than many Mennonite readers have been willing to recognize.

That last sentence suggests a final caveat to my basic argument. I have insisted throughout my analysis of the chosen texts that these writers (with the possible exception of Doug Reimer) have all repeatedly affirmed the essential nature of community over against individual self-definition. As such spokespersons they have built with words a house in which their people could worship; they have declared that "menno's house is without end" and his "beauty eternal." Nevertheless such a creation of a "home of images" in which the community members can worship (Achebe) requires the participation of readers. Any reader already inclined to see the triumph of the individual over against the restrictive community will find evidence of such individualistic triumph in these texts. The essence of Anabaptism is voluntarism, a freely chosen commitment. Even as Rudy Wiebe demonstrates in Blue Mountains of China, it is definitely possible to refuse to belong, to choose to subscribe to a society of individuals as Elizabeth Cereno does. But it is
better, according to most Mennonite writers, to lose oneself in a

*Gemeinschaft.*
WORKS CITED


Driedger, Leo. "Mennonite Community Change: From Ethnic Enclaves to Social Networks." *Mennonite Quarterly* 60.3 (July '86): 374-86.


---. "personal statement." *Prairie Fire* 11.2 (Summer '90): 46.


Mierau, Maurice. "personal statement." Prairie Fire 11.2 (Summer '90): 139.

"Rebel Mennos Move into the Arts." Midcontinental 4.6 (Midwinter 1987-88): 18-23.


"personal statement." Prairie Fire 11.2 (Summer '90): 46.

Redekop, Magdalene Falk and Elizabeth Falk. "Side By Side By." 


---. "The Print Culture of the Russian Mennonites 1870-1930."


Solecki, Sam. "Giant Fictions and Large Meanings: The Novels of Rudy Wiebe." Canadian Forum 60.707 (March '81): 5-8, 13.


Toews, Gerhard. (Georg de Brecht pseudo). *Die Heimat in Flammen.* Regina, Saskatchewan: *Sonderabdruck aus "Der Courier"*, 1933.


