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Leaving Home: Canadian-Mennonite Literature in the 1980s

Canadian-Mennonite literature had its beginnings among the Russian-Mennonite immigrants. Emigré writers such as Jacob H. Janzen, Gerhard Loewen, Arnold Dyck and Fritz Senn, to name the most outstanding among them, had several things in common: they all had received their education in pre-World War I Russia; they immigrated to Canada in the 1920s; they wrote in both High and Low German; and in their works, both prose and poetry, they lamented the loss of their homeland.

While Russian Mennonites had begun to write creative literature toward the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, a case can be made for the view that had it not been for the destruction of Mennonite life in Russia, the creative impulses among the Russian Mennonites might not have broken forth to the extent that they did. When the Mennonite world in Russia crumbled in the upheavals of World War I and finally vanished in the aftermath of the Revolution of 1917, the Mennonites not only had a story to tell, but they also found a literary voice to tell their story of loss and suffering.

The first most outstanding Mennonite writers in Canada were Arnold Dyck and Fritz Senn who wrote in High and Low German, and the novelist Rudy Wiebe who startled the Mennonite reading public with his *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962), written in English. Both Fritz Senn and Arnold Dyck are backward-looking, lamenting in their poetry and prose the loss of a world and way of life as they had existed in the past and in another country. The haunting lyrics of Fritz Senn's "Hinterm Pflug" (Behind the Plow) poems, for example, are no doubt the best poetry written in German that Mennonites have produced. Scenes and symbols of village life, work, and suffering evoke images and moods of memorable beauty and pain. Arnold Dyck's only novel in High German, *Verloren in der Steppe* (Lost in the Steppes), describes in minute details the physical world of the Russian Mennonites around 1900, and the longings of its youthful protagonist, Hans Tbews, to become an artist. This highly autobiographical novel, written in

Canada in the 1940s, points symbolically to the need to recreate the lost Russian homeland in another time and place — Canada.

In Rudy Wiebe's early novels, *Peace Shall Destroy Mary* (1962) and *The Blue Mountains of China* (1970) the Mennonite world as it existed in Russia and among the Mennonite pioneers in Canada is in the process of disappearing. Here Mennonites are confronted by new realities and problems, Canadian pluralism, non-Mennonite traditions and values, the English language and ways, and material prosperity. After the loss of their old homeland and values, the characters in Wiebe's novels are in search of a spiritual homeland. Thom Wiens in *Peace Shall Destroy Mary*, for example, realizes that it is impossible to preserve the old ways, including the German language and culture, in a new country like Canada. With the benefit of its historical and spiritual resources the Mennonite community in Canada will have to adapt creatively to the new reality around it and create a spiritual homeland in which to preserve and nurture its members. Similarly, John Reimer in *The Blue Mountains of China* turns his back upon the past and seeks to fashion a new Mennonite spirituality out of a new understanding of the Gospel and Mennonite history. As Reimer says to old Jacob Friesen at the end of the novel, Mennonites are still trying to find their home, "and it isn't anywhere on earth" (227). The spiritual home of Mennonites, according to Reimer, is the church, "a new society that sets all the old ideas of man living with other men on its head" (215).

With the early Canadian-Mennonite writers the theme of home or loss of a homeland predominates. In these works the homeland is perceived as a geographic, physical, real place. Its destruction and loss is lamented, but in the memory and imagination it continues to exist and to exert a powerful influence on the mourners. In Rudy Wiebe's earlier Mennonite novels there is an attempt to come to terms with the vanishing or largely lost past and an endeavor to recreate a spiritual home which in a real sense is closer to the ideals of the Mennonite forebears than the life Mennonites had developed in Russia and subsequently in Canada. In both the German and English writings of Canadian-Mennonite authors, the characters, however much they may struggle against the stifling atmosphere and limitations of their home environment, remain an integral part of the Mennonite community.

In the 1980s a new generation of poets and novelists has emerged which is no longer as committed to the Mennonite community and values as the older generation had been. These young writers, some of whom are no longer practising Mennonites, are asking new questions, raise issues not raised before, and often startle their Mennonite readers with their language and attitude. Their prose and poetry reflects a leave-taking, a certain declaration of independence from their traditional community. While these

writers are still wrestling with their Mennonite tradition and values, their independence from the Mennonite institutions enables them to chart new courses, develop new themes, and to appeal to a reading public beyond their community.

Of the more important published writers of the 1980s are Rudy Wiebe, Al Reimer, Patrick Friesen, Sandra Birdsell, Di Brandt, and Audrey Poetker. There are other writers of note, but it is the works of these novelists and poets in which the theme of leaving home takes on major proportions. My treatment of these writers will of necessity be cursory and indicative rather than detailed and exhaustive.

With the publication of *My Lovely Enemy* (1983), Rudy Wiebe shocked the Mennonite public as never before. In 1962 when his first novel appeared Wiebe was forced to resign as editor of a Mennonite magazine; now, more than 20 years later, some Mennonites wondered aloud whether Wiebe was still a Christian. No wonder, for here is a novel in which the ex-Mennonite, Professor James Dyck, breaks all the rules in the Mennonite moral books. Dyck is a married man who apparently loves his wife and family and who at the same time has a continuous affair with another woman without visible regrets or feelings of guilt.

There is more in *My Lovely Enemy* to which Mennonite readers objected. Not only does the protagonist engage in sex outside his marriage and expresses many un-Mennonite views concerning religious and theological issues, but he also comes close to being blasphemous as far as Mennonites are concerned. In a hotel room, with 'the other woman' at his side, he converses, even argues, with Jesus about love, sex, Jesus' manhood and possible temptations. Moreover, the novel questions the validity of the Christian Church's age-old neo-Platonic tradition with regard to the relationship between the physical and spiritual aspects of life, and wonders whether the spiritual is superior to the physical or material.

While Wiebe's novel is complex and moves on many levels, dealing symbolically and metaphorically with the deeper issues of religious faith and life (Redekop), there is no doubt that many Mennonite readers see this work as a blatant disregard, even rejection, of many important Mennonite-Christian assumptions and values. Certainly James Dyck, whatever his past connection to a Mennonite community, is no longer a part of the faith and ethics of his former church. Indeed, Professor Dyck at the end of the novel, when asked by his mother to say something, does not mention anything about re-establishing his Mennonite connections or 'coming home.' The past for James Dyck remains 'irreversible,' he merely yearns for love and oneness with the persons who are close to him, finding fulfillment and meaning in this oneness. As the novel concludes: "So for a time he looked at each of those who were, the people he loved and who loved him, and he

prayed to see them all at once and know them all, not distinct and separate, even himself, but all one" (262).

Another important work of the last decade is a first novel by Al Reimer, *My Harp is Turned to Mourning* (1985). Written by a professor of English and a member of the Mennonite church, this novel deals with the Russian-Mennonite world prior to and during World War I. The war, the Revolution of 1917, and its aftermath destroy an existence in which Mennonites had been rooted for some 130 years. Like Arnold Dyck's Hans Toews in *Lost in the Steppe*, the protagonist Wilhelm Fast endeavors to become an artist. Unlike Hans Toews, however, who leaves his closed community in order to re-establish himself as an artist in another environment, Wilhelm Fast experiences the destruction of his world with no hope of ever finding a new home. He destroys his art — "all his sketches, drawings and paintings" — thus symbolically acting out the destruction of his own existence and that of his people (412). As Fast and his wife emigrate to Canada, the old world and the Russian past remain mere memories. There is not even a suggestion that they will re-establish the old homeland in Canada. With reference to the Fast's now in Saskatchewan, the novel concludes, "While they agreed that they would probably never feel completely at home here, they had never regretted turning their backs, along with so many others, on their old homeland" (436). All they had was each other. "Their love for each other had brought serenity and purpose to their lives, and they thanked God for it" (436). Not only is there no regret about leaving their former home, but there is also no hint at finding solace and strength in the institutions and values of the past. Like James Dyck in Wiebe's *My Lovely Enemy*, Reimer's protagonists find contentment and fulfillment within love and in their own hearts: "The disturbing ghosts from the past that sometimes haunted their dreams made them cry out and cling to each other in the dark. But with dawn's budding they would rise together to face the inexorable light that swept them forward from day to day" (436).

Patrick Friesen's narrative poem *The Shunning* (1980) tells the tragic story of Peter Neufeld's alienation and expulsion from his Mennonite community. Unlike Wilhelm Fast, Peter Neufeld does not find the love between himself and his wife Helen sufficiently strong to enable him to survive his expulsion from 'paradise.' Using the Bible and pious God-talk, the leaders of his home community drive Peter to despair and eventually suicide. While pride (Peter's) is at the root of Peter Neufeld's downfall, causing him to oppose the church and its rules, there are many factors which contribute to his death, including betrayal (30, 33, 43), violence (36), and various attacks from all sides. Ironically, his 'paradise' is filled with serpents (16, 26), and the sun, the usual bringer of light and warmth, cannot enlighten and warm closed and cold hearts. "All this light he said/all this

cold light" (39). Already in an earlier poem, included in *bluebottle* (1978), Friesen called his "brethren" "stiffnecked mennonites" who sing their "amazing grace" and at the same time are "idle worshippers" (15). No help can be expected from such brethren and spiritual fathers.

In another collection of poems, *Unearthly Horses* (1984), Friesen continues to rebel against his Mennonite tradition. The so-called "pa poems" register the narrator's growing independence and opposition to aspects of Mennonite patriarchy. Almost humorously, this independence and rebellion begin shortly after the narrator's birth, to the great surprise of his father. "pa dropped the baby/when he heard it speak/scared as hell to hear the young one talk/thinking of the devil/and the tongue that can take you anywhere" (15).

The father who punishes his rebellious son is both a Christ figure and a "one-eyed monster" (18). The father's "Goddamned love" almost kills the child (19), but the son will not submit to the demands of his stern yet weak parent, for he must be true to himself: "think of me as lost," he says, "living/with one foot in the shade/trying to be true and double-crossing you every step of the way/it's something to live with" (21). Yet leaving home is difficult for both the child and his parents. The parents grieve over their "lost son" and the son, as he removes himself from his home, is left with painful memories:

I was alone
you know how it is
when you're haunted...
I was alone once
I was the wonder mother's last joy
before I crossed the threshold...
can you believe that all these years
I felt the burden of your love?
that I am a child of god
with no way to tell you?... (64-65)

I was dreaming the impossibility of love
the perfection of memory... (73)

And again later:

father standing on the stone
learning to be alone
I was dreaming his broken love
how he curled fingers around his pain
and held it until the end
I was dreaming the impossibility of love

the hello
hello
good-bye. (73)

Like Patrick Friesen's narrator who startled his father when he began to speak, Di Brandt, another Winnipeg poet, also became a 'rebel/traitor/thief' by speaking and asking many questions which her parents could not answer. *Questions i asked my mother* (1987), Brandt's intensely autobiographical poem, deals with a southern Manitoba Mennonite community which the poet leaves behind. Similar to Pat Friesen, she writes in the Foreword to this collection, "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."

The poet's father is annoyed at his daughter's wish to learn grammar and to write. "Where i come from," he objects, "the reason you learn to read is to understand God's Holy Word/i only went to school 7 years & it's done me okay what are/you going to do with all this hifalutin education anyway" (4). The poet asks questions about Mennonite religious faith and morality, the role of women, and the human body. Her father says: "everything you say has this questioning tone i don't think you're/really interested in grampa or your faith what you really want is to/make trouble for mom & me" (5-6). And her mother says: "you're asking me something/i can't tell you... now help me punch down the dough" (7). The poet internalizes her quest, knowing that "someday i will find out i will find out everything" (7).

Questions about the female body and physical beauty are especially troubling to both the parents and their young daughter. Having strayed with her mother into an art gallery and seen "naked women in various poses" (11), the young girl hoped to speak about this experience at home. But her mother "never mentioned the room full of naked women ... there/didn't seem to be any words for it but it stayed in my memory as/a kind of promise touching some deeper hunger than i had/known untouched by more familiar shades of sin" (11).

Like Patrick Friesen's mother who loved to dance in her private hideout (*Flicker* 3), Brandt's mother also enjoyed the natural pleasures of life, although she too had to enjoy them in private: "my mother found herself one late summer/afternoon lying in grass under the wild/yellow plum tree jewelled with sun light" (15). Later in winter she remembered the joy and freedom in nature: "she was listening to/herself in the wind singing" (15).

For Mennonites there is nothing more sacred than their relationship to Christ and nothing more sinful than sexual irregularities. For the more fundamentalist Mennonites 'testifying' of Jesus and salvation is the height of religiosity; speaking of sexual failings or encounters is frowned upon. Brandt in a daring poem, 'testimony,' combines these two aspects, shocking

her Mennonite readers with her parody of pious Jesus-talk and patriarchal norms:

they shake their heads in disbelief
but it's true i found jesus at last
... he was the world's greatest
lover he was so gentle & rough his
lips & his tongue & his soft hairy
belly... he filled up my
aching my dark, gaping void... oh
yes i was lost & then i was found
while the dew was still on the roses...
i'm saved brothers and sisters
jesus saved me. (35)

In another part of this collection the poet speaks of her "contradictory/most treacherous false heart of hearts," of "independence" and "our new vision" (46). "[W]hat i want," she exclaims, "is the old promises/all the ironies swept away" (46). At the end, in a poem "for les," her artistic husband, the poet is "looking/away into distant nonexistent horizons/i am reading *Paradise Lost* listening for/cries of birds & sleeping children i am /thinking veiled thoughts of secret lovers..." (45).

Like James Dyck and Wilhelm Fast, the narrator in Brandt's poems finds her new home not in the traditional religious-ethnic Mennonite community, but in human love and the poet's imagination. The Mennonite past provides the poet with images and themes, but the values and practices of her parental background are superseded by new ones or none at all.

Sandra Birdsell, originally of Morris, Manitoba, is the author of two collections of stories, *Night Travellers* (1982) and *Ladies of the House* (1984). The stories, while complete in themselves, revolve around the lives of a Canadian family, half Mennonite and half Métis. We learn that when Mika, a Mennonite, married Maurice Lafreniere, her Mennonite community in southern Manitoba failed to accept him and at the same time rejected her. The several children in the Lafreniere family grow up with the tensions which result from the proximity of the two traditions.

In one of the stories, "Night Travellers," Mika's father learns that his daughter is having an affair with another man. One night as Mika passes her parents' house on her way to James, the other man, her father confronts her with remarks about what he might tell the elders of the church and that as a community they are concerned about her wayward ways. Mika replies defiantly: "Look, Papa, you know they don't accept Maurice... they don't invite him into their homes. They don't really accept me, either. So, if you feel it's important to tell the elders, tell them. I don't care." (82).

Her father then speaks of God's forgiveness, sin, and death. Mika counters that it is *her* sin and *her* death: "Leave me be" (83). "She walked away swiftly, and then faster until she was running from him... she wouldn't stop running until she was home, safe, behind the door" (87).

But her father follows her, telling her that she is causing her parents much sorrow. Mika is to think of her soul and eternity. She exclaims, "Eternity? Eternity? Papa, I've spent all my life preparing for eternity. No one tells me how to live each day. Right here, where I am." (88). Nevertheless, Mika agrees not to see the man again, not because she is afraid of eternity, but because she cannot have the man anyway. Even "if I could have him," she reflects, "I wouldn't want him." (89). Mika feels empty, barren, but at peace after this encounter with her father. However, it is not the peace of security, home, and religious faith, but the peace that comes from resignation to the inevitable reality of life.

Audrey Poetker's first collection of poems, *i sing for my dead in german* (1986), moves the reader deeply. These poems express a young woman's feelings and experiences with regard to her body, grief at the death of her family relations, and issues related to Mennonite life. Poetker deals with themes and subjects traditional Mennonites did not even discuss, let alone practice: extra-marital sex, triangles, abortion, adultery, 'the other woman,' and making love in the backseat of a car. In her description of, or allusion to, lovemaking and human genitals, Poetker, like Brandt, is frank and uninhibited, something that is seldom found in earlier Mennonite writers. Brandt shocks and angers her Mennonite readers deliberately; Poetker may no doubt alienate her Mennonite readers with her frankness and vivid images, but she does it without malice.

In a poem "for Grandma Wiebe" Poetker writes about a woman who felt like leaving her husband, but did not because of the many children she bore. "She's wanted to leave him/so many times/but lost the reasons/in the years/each child another gold ring/to weigh her down/to the flat earth" (34). In a "Father's Day Poem" she speaks of her inability to communicate with her father:

halfway up the stairs
i turn around
dad's in the living room
i give him the paper
thank-you he says
i go upstairs & cry
into my pillow. (17)

And again in the same poem:

What can I say
when you don't listen
or don't want to listen
or pretend not to listen
as you & your father & his
perpetually sinned against
storybook fathers...
you say well let's discuss
it then steal my words
& shoot them
back into my face. (18-19)

This attempt and the apparent failure to communicate with her father and grandparents ends with the lines in a poem "for Grandma Wiebe": "*grosmana* i say *grosmana*/but can't remember the low german word/for love" (21). It may be characteristic of Mennonite lack of sentimentality that there is no Low German word for love — at least not one that is generally used (Mennonites say, *Etj si di goot* — I'm good to you). All the poet can do to express her love for the dead is to sing for them in German. These German songs may be symbolic and reminiscent of Mennonite past solidarity and community, something that is rapidly disappearing. Can that love for and memory of a vanishing existence not be adequately expressed in another time, place and language? Perhaps not in the fullest sense.

It would be simplistic to suggest that all Mennonite literature of the last years is preoccupied with rebellion against traditional Mennonite norms and values. Nevertheless, we do find that much of this writing is a coming to terms with the Mennonite tradition. There is, moreover, a new tone in the works of the young Mennonite writers. To be sure, earlier writers were "witnesses and critics" — as Rudy Wiebe called writers — and they often found themselves on the edge of Mennonite society, but those writers and their characters remained part of their Mennonite community. Most of the younger writers, on the other hand, are not only non-practising Mennonites, but they also raise questions and issues which earlier writers either did not think of or did not dare to raise. The tone in their works is often defiant, and the language and images are at times provocative, even shocking. There is, it seems, a deliberate attempt to leave behind a way of life which according to these writers is antiquated or inadequate in today's society. These writers probe and expose religious and ethical values that either have outlived their usefulness or stand in the way of these writers' pursuit of truth and a richer human experience.

In their declaration of independence from the traditionally limited and often stifling Mennonite community, these writers often exaggerate past Mennonite negation or rejection of all art forms (Mierau). Some of them seem to believe that a provocative language and crass images are the only

means of changing their elders' attitude toward art and literature, although there is some doubt whether they are trying to do this. These writers sometimes overstate their case and make pronouncements rather than write good literature.

Yet the tie to their community had to be cut no doubt. The comforts of home often limit artistic talents, hence they have to be left behind. The creative writer needs the freedom and independence to develop his artistic sensibilities and skills. The writer, however, also requires the tension that exists between the community and the past on the one hand and the artist's desire and necessity to be free and creative on the other.

There are indications that Canadian-Mennonite literature is coming of age and beginning to contribute to Canadian literature in general. While such writers as Rudy Wiebe and Al Reimer remain active members of their Mennonite communities, they are sufficiently independent to write works of maturity and artistic value. Both Wiebe's *My Lovely Enemy* and Reimer's *My Harp is Turned to Mourning* rank among the best novels written by Canadian-Mennonites in the last ten years. These writers interpret Canadian-Mennonite, indeed human, experiences within the context of modern life and portray the changing Mennonite world both realistically and convincingly. The characters of their novels know that in the real world there is no turning back and seldom a 'paradise regained.' Yet while the protagonists in these novels have to find or create a new centre of existence for themselves, they are guided, at least in part, by the values of their former community.

Patrick Friesen and Sandra Birdsell are also evolving into writers of note. While they are not formally connected to a Mennonite religious community, they draw their themes and images from that tradition. Their characters suffer because their communities have either expelled or shunned them. In Friesen's poetry there is an emphasis on a father's love from which the son removes himself in order to find a voice as an individual and artist. Birdsell's characters, most of them women or young girls, are aware of their background, but in the world in which they live they have to fend for themselves without the support of that tradition.

Brandt and Audrey Poetker have just begun to publish their work. There is an impatience, even a rebellious mood, evident in their poetry, especially in Brandt's verses. Their poetry shows promise, but only time will tell whether the promise of their early work will find fulfillment in sustained literary quality — especially after their questions, the questions they asked their mothers and fathers, have been answered.

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