"Literary and Artistic Voices" in T.D. Regehr's *Mennonites in Canada, 1939-1970*: A Response, Two Observations, and Some Questions

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My experience as a Mennonite student in secular postsecondary institutions was quite different from the experiences of the academics of the generation before me, to judge from T.D. Regehr's account in *Mennonites in Canada, 1939-1970*. I graduated from the Steinbach High School in 1972, after the period of time with which Regehr's book is concerned, and entered the University of Winnipeg that fall. Al Reimer, Lloyd Siemens, Peter Pauls, and Kay Unruh were full and respected members of the faculty of the English Department when I arrived in the early 1970s. The choices they had made about their relationships to the Mennonite community and any accommodations they had made to attain the ranks of the professoriate of a secular institution were invisible to me. It seemed quite natural and unexceptional at the time that I should be taught English literature by Mennonite professors. While my involvement during the 1980s with the *Mennonite Mirror* gave me a broader sense of the sometimes uneasy relationship of the Mennonite community to its artists and educators, one of the most interesting aspects of my

reading of Regehr's book was the way in which it allowed me to contextualize and appreciate the significance of these educational experiences.

The notion of contextualization seems an appropriate place to begin my observations about *Mennonites in Canada*. Regehr's chapter on "Literary and Artistic Voices" is embedded in the section of his history entitled "Preparing the Next Generation," which begins with a description of the theories and methods of the nurturance and training of young people common in Canadian Mennonite communities between 1939 and 1970; it moves to an account of the church and community schools, high schools and colleges established by Mennonites to carry out these theories and methods; and concludes with a consideration of the new leadership that evolved as old authority structures crumbled in the late 1950s and 1960s. Positioning the discussion of musical, literary, and other artistic production in this way allows Regehr to emphasize the social context in which art is generated and received.

This emphasis serves the narrative of the development of music in the Mennonite community particularly well. Choral singing was an established tradition within Mennonite churches long before the period covered in Regehr's book. With the founding of church-sponsored high schools and colleges, musical training "became more formal and professional," Regehr notes (276). Through their disciplined approach to training singers and musicians, Mennonite conductors gave their students access to the great works of the European tradition of sacred music. Gospel songs continued to be sung with enthusiasm by many congregations—and Regehr observes that the introduction of more classical music provoked some controversy in Mennonite churches—but the anthems, chorales and hymns of the larger, mainline churches generally were adopted by Mennonite institutions. Regehr suggests that the relative ease, of what can be seen in retrospect to have been a dramatic transition, is a testimony to the leadership of such musicians as Ben Horch in bridging the gaps between two cultures. But young people making music in community also affirmed long-standing Mennonite values and traditions. Perhaps for some of the same reasons, dramatic productions in the schools and colleges seem to have caused few difficulties.

Regehr's account of literary production during these years seems less satisfactory, less able to be explained by the development of Mennonite institutions which he sets as the context for this section of his history. Institutions, whether of learning specifically or of the church more generally, are largely absent from this account. It might be that the literary artist simply cannot be accommodated easily within existing Mennonite understandings and structures. Regehr notes, in fact, that such early Canadian Mennonite writers as Fritz Senn and Arnold Dyck were always marginal figures within the communities about which they wrote. But the focus of his discussion of the place of the Mennonite creative writer is the publication and reception of Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many* in 1962. This event is, of course, notorious both within the Mennonite community and within the Canadian writing

community. While I will not rehearse the full story here, I want to consider the implications of Regehr's discussion in some detail to try to account for the ways in which this narrative does not quite fit into the context in which Regehr discusses it.

Regehr begins by mentioning Wiebe's community connections—"born in a small and remote Mennonite community in northern Saskatchewan" (289); boyhood spent in Coaldale, Alberta—and his institutional connections— student at the Alberta Mennonite High School; student at the University of Alberta; editor of the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*. This introduction of Wiebe by way of defining his cultural position implies that he writes, most signifi- cantly, *as* a Mennonite. And there is little doubt that the furor caused in Mennonite circles by the publication of the novel confirms that this was also the assumption of many of Wiebe's first readers. But Wiebe's retrospective account of the composition of *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (an account pub- lished in the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* in 1987) gives little indication that he saw himself as writing as a Mennonite.

In order to explain this as concretely as I can, let me refer briefly to the tripartite model of "speech events" proposed by the linguist Roman Jakobson.[1] Verbal communication, according to Jakobson, is constituted by three factors, the addresser or sender, the message, and the addressee or receiver; Jakobson analyzes the message itself in terms of three further factors, the context, the code, and the contact or medium of the message.

If Wiebe's autobiographical account is read in light of Jakobson's model, it seems clear that he saw himself writing, sending his message, as himself, as a complex individual, as a human being: "what little I knew about life and humanity had to be pushed to the utmost limits of my conception, and then another notch farther, and then another, towards whatever I was discovering of what was good and new and moving and beautiful."[2] The literal situation of writing, Wiebe recalls, emphasizes this solitariness: moving his typewriter inside the small bathroom of his apartment to shut out the incursions of his young daughter, he "live[s] inside his head" for three months.[3]

Two obvious differences from the situation of the Mennonite musicians Regehr discusses present themselves immediately. A writer might be moulded by a community and its institutions into the person he or she has become, but, unlike the musicians, he does not produce his art within the discipline of community. Moreover, unlike musicians who realize an already existing score, a writer reaches to know what he or she is producing as he is producing it.

To the extent that Wiebe understood his message as existing within a context, that context was his graduate class in writing at the University of Alberta, the channel of the writing was a graduate thesis, and the receiver for whom the codes of his message were chosen and shaped was Professor F.W. Salter. Wiebe, in fact, details at some length in this article the various stages of Salter's intervention in the process of his "grop[ing] about trying to discover the shape of Elizabeth's story."[4] As another instance of verbal communication,

the novel's eventual publication to a wider audience, at the recommendation of Salter, again does not set itself within specifically Mennonite codes, contexts, channels, or receivers: it was published by Jack McClelland as a first novel by a "young theologian" about "the people of a small Canadian community."[5] And Wiebe himself speaks of his sense of the state of *Canadian* fiction at the time: he describes it as a "soggy mosquito-burdened hayslough... where, it seemed to me, the dazzling gleam of bright water was then only very occasionally visible."[6]

My point is a simple one: reading Wiebe as a Mennonite writer is reading backward, moving from the reception of the novel or message by Mennonite readers to attributing the Mennonite motive to the sender. And, in an important sense, this backward reading is the same activity whether you see the book as a minister from B.C. did, as "washing ones [*sic*] dirty wash in the front yard of a neighbour," or as Al Reimer does, as "slaughter[ing] the sacred cows of institutionalized Mennonitism on all sides...."[7] The reading activity is the same, however different the judgement of the message. It is what Wiebe, alluding to his first novel, calls appropriation of the artefact: finding "the skull in the swamp", the hay-cutter hurls it somewhere else, into one field or another.

Hurling the skull in Wiebe's article is a variation of a metaphor he has earlier used to describe his own process of writing and publishing the novel: "you grab everything conceivable and imaginable into your hands, spin it around into one compact ball and hurl it as hard and as far as you can."[8] The similarity between the two images is instructive. When readers take up the novel, act as receivers of the message and then reproduce the message, they become, in turn, senders of a message. It is rather like the circle game of "telephone" we played at birthday parties when I was a child. Sometimes what you sent on down the line was what you wanted to hear; sometimes it was the only thing you could imagine from what you were able to hear; sometimes you heard nothing you could decode and so you passed on a word you had overheard from the whispers in the line ahead of you. Reiterating the message you understand yourself to have received might be the only kind of reading any one of us can ever do. But the fact that the reiterability of verbal communications carries with it the structural possibility of error requires, as I see it, that we consider carefully why we have received the messages we have, that we choose carefully which messages we send on, and that we mark the provisionality of our messages.

To return to the specific case of Rudy Wiebe, we might, for example, ask ourselves why academic readers so quickly enshrined Wiebe as origin of modern Mennonite writing. Does naming Wiebe in this way make it possible for the conveyancers of his imputed message to figure themselves as embattled defenders of a truer, purer Mennonitism? Is it possible that the institutions that are marked by their absence in this section of Regehr's book are, in fact, present in the very structure of interpretation here? Regehr quotes, without attribution and as fact, Al Reimer's assessment that "Rudy Wiebe 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" (291). And, indeed, the burgeoning literature written by Mennonites after 1970, many of whom do not define themselves as members of a Mennonite faith community, would seem to corroborate this assessment. But it also seems to me that it is in large part the reviewers' and academics' choices to send on this message that created the capacious world Reimer writes about. In other words, the description of a Mennonite world "spacious enough" and respectable enough to accommodate writing Mennonite without the requirement of practising Mennonite might be read as a description of the academic study of the Mennonites within the secular university. Let me say very quickly that it's not my intention to suggest that we ought not to study Mennonitism as academics, that we ought not to hold symposia such as this one. I do, however, want to suggest that we must acknowledge and interrogate our own desires when we do so. For we do not, cannot, merely reflect messages we receive; we are also actively involved in shaping and reconfiguring the definition of the messages we discuss.

Recognizing that our reading of Wiebe as origin itself produces Wiebe as origin might also lead us to ask what writers or traditions of writing we ignore and devalue in creating this historical narrative. I notice, for example, that immediately before naming Wiebe as source of the central tradition, Regehr mentions and passes over a variety of other writers, including Barbara Smucker, a woman writing for children.

I suggested at the beginning of this observation that the literary artist seems to fit less easily into Regehr's model of artistic production embedded within a particular social and educational milieu than the musicians do. This leads me to my second observation. Regehr uses the metaphor of voice in naming the chapter in which he considers Mennonite artistic production. Voice implies embodied presence, an attachment of a producer to the message produced, and an event bound within temporal constraints. A performance, musical or dramatic, appears to be just such an event. Writing, however, is an event that can be radically split from the context of its production, split and circulated, its meanings taken up in new ways and recirculated. As Jacques Derrida has observed, "For a writing to be a writing it must continue to 'act' and to be readable even when what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what he has written, for what he seems to have signed."[9] I would propose that it might be the very nature of writing itself, its susceptibility to being split from its context, that makes writing at once a challenge to the notion of *a* Mennonite community and a logical extension of Mennonite theology.

The possibility of the fracture of sender from message can be terrifying. Wiebe himself writes, for example, of the moment of realization when his first book was suddenly in his hand:

> Anyone can pick it up, read any line here or there, the worst or the best sentence, anything... a thousand different people can take it home and sit down and read

every word of it at their leisure, study it, return to certain bits again and again, ponder; they'll lend it to their friends and you can do nothing about what it creates in their mind. The book is there, you can change nothing.[10]

Reading Wiebe's statement—"The book is there, you can change nothing"— I hear echoes of something I've heard many times before while growing up in a Mennonite church, about the irreducible fact of the biblical word. Somewhere near the centre of Mennonite theology stands the word. Regehr himself explains this understanding of the authority of the word in Mennonite theology by quoting the history of the Ontario Mennonite Bible School: "Never forsake the Word to follow men. Learn to understand what the Word of God says. Let its own light illuminate your hearts and minds" (236). For the magic of the presence of God invoked in the sacraments of bread and wine and baptism, Mennonites have substituted metaphor and absence; the informed, individual understanding of the word; the voluntary, conscious confession of faith. Writer and academic Magdalene Redekop sees this "radical anti-idolatry stance" of her tradition not as limitation but as possibility: "To insist, for example, that the wine does not literally turn into blood is not to say that the ritual has no power but rather to define the nature of its power as imaginative".[11]

Perhaps it is, then, not because writers undermine the foundations of Mennonite faith, but because they expose some of what Al Reimer has called "the radical roots" of that faith (qtd. by Regehr 298) that Mennonite writers pose a challenge to institutional Mennonitism in all its forms. And, if we assume the model of verbal communication I cited earlier, this is true of academic writers as well as creative writers. If we as academics take our stand on the ground that words themselves can illuminate hearts and minds, we commit ourselves to the possibility of decontextualization, to the play of interpretation and re-contextualization, not only by other Mennonite readers but by any readers.

The matter of institutional forms returns me to the place I began this response and to the question with which I want to conclude it. Regehr ends his chapter on "Literary and Artistic Voices" by remarking that "the Mennonites' discovery of the fine arts moved them much closer to the mainstream of Canadian literary and artistic life" (298). I was initially perplexed by the use of the phrase "fine arts," since the term commonly refers only to the plastic and visual arts, and these are the arts least discussed by Regehr and apparently the arts least practised by Mennonites. Sometimes the rubric includes music; rarely would writing, however creative, qualify. My perplexity, of course, was not insuperable. There is a more general sense in which "fine arts" are simply practices requiring highly developed techniques and skills. Think, for example, of the idiomatic expression, "the fine art of argumentation." Because each art form has its own traditions and conventions, its own languages, and its own systems of meaning, practitioners and observers, listeners, and readers of the "fine arts" often have to be educated by institutions and schools to be able—or to be seen as able—to participate in the enterprise of making art. The choice of

embedding the discussion of artistic production in the larger discussion of training and education perhaps makes the emphasis on "fine arts" natural and even obvious.

But I wonder whether it is the most obvious way to approach the question of art in the Mennonite community. The most general definition of "fine art" is art that is produced or intended primarily for beauty rather than utility. The conventional definition locates the quality of beauty or utility in an object. More recent theories of art, however, suggest that beauty or utility does not inhere in an object, but rather in interpretative practices. In the case of reading practices, Louise Rosenblatt has suggested that we might distinguish between efferent reading, in which the reader is primarily concerned to find the messages that can be taken away and applied, and aesthetic reading, in which the reader experiences "what is being created"[12].

We might, then, begin rather by asking what objects and activities among Mennonites resist reduction to utility and encourage the experience of beauty. It might well be the case that much of Mennonite expression focuses on the functional and utilitarian, but even some highly functional objects seem to have qualities in excess of their utility. The quilts for which Mennonite women are renowned are, of course, wonderful blankets to use in Canadian winters, but it is difficult to see that their utility requires the intricate stitching and abstract designs with which they're created. I think, too, of my grandparents' market garden, with its fields of raspberries and strawberries and beans and peas which grandchildren were pressed into helping to harvest each summer—and its field of carefully tended but unsaleable peonies and dahlias and geraniums and daisies. Can we develop a theory of Mennonite artistic production that accounts for my grandmother's extravagantly beautiful, and extravagantly useless, flowers?

Notes

[1] Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," *Style in Language,* ed,. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge, MA: MITP, 1960).

[2] Rudy Wiebe, "The Skull in the Swamp," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 5 (1987), 8-9.

[3] *Ibid.*, 14.

[4] *Ibid.*, 11.

[5] *Ibid.*, 15.

[6] *Ibid.*, 11.

[7] *Ibid.*, 16; Al Reimer, "'One foot in, one foot out': Themes and Issues in Contemporary Mennonite Writing," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 10 (1992), 155.

[8] Wiebe, "Skull in the Swamp," 9.

[9] Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," *Limited Inc.,* trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1972), 8.

[10] Wiebe, "Skull in the Swamp," 8.

[11] Magdalene Redekop, "Through the Mennonite Looking Glass," *Why I Am a Mennonite: Essays on Mennonite Identity,* ed., Harry Loewen (Kitchener, ON: Herald P, 1988),246.

[12] Louise M. Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration,* 1938 (New York: Modern Languages Association, 1995), 33.