

# Mother Tongue as Shibboleth in the Literature of Canadian Mennonites

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Few discernible branches of contemporary Canadian literature have, over the past decade or so, received as much critical attention as the collective work of the country's ethnic writers, among whom few are presently as productive as the Mennonites. Yet Mennonite writers like Rudy Wiebe, Armin Wiebe, Patrick Friesen, Sandra Birdsell, David Waltner-Toews, Di Brandt and others, while they persist in writing out of, about, and, at least in part, for their minority-culture community, function, in relation to the Mennonites, as outsiders: like the ubiquitous and threatening figure of the stranger in their own literary creations, they individually and collectively tend to objectify their people's peculiar social and spiritual modes of discourse and so in effect contribute significantly to the dismantling of the traditional barriers of ethos, language and belief that have, for some 400 years, kept the Mennonites a community palpably and self-consciously separate from worldly society.

However, even as these writers objectify (and so appear to threaten, and even subvert) the conventions and rituals that sustain the Mennonites' centuries-old identity as "a people apart," many of them employ linguistic devices that function to endorse and support the Mennonites' exclusivistic culture—characterized by the affirmation of the insider and suspicion of the outsider. Indeed, through the persistent (in fact, increasingly prominent) use of a linguistic discourse that often only "insiders" can understand—by their use, that is, of mother tongue (German, and more particularly, Low German)—these writers maintain and perhaps even extend the barriers that separate the Mennonites' minority culture from the contemporary social order.

It is worthwhile, I think, to begin a discussion of mother tongue as shibboleth—as a test word or catchword distinguishing one group of people from another—by referring briefly to the theological notions underlying the Mennonites' commitment to separateness or nonconformity, and by remarking on the role of Low German and German as conventional means of confirming and preserving the community's separation from the world.

The place to begin is the sixteenth century, a decade after the publication of Martin Luther's Ninety-five Theses, in the early years of Protestant reform. In 1527, at Schleithem, Switzerland, leaders of Anabaptism, the radical wing of the Reformation, reached a consensus on "seven points of faith" that "brought structure and focus" to their movement.<sup>1</sup> The fourth of these points concerned the separation of the fellowship of believers from the world:

everything which has not been united with our God in Christ is nothing but an abomination which we should shun. . . . From all this we shall be separated . . . .<sup>2</sup>

The Anabaptists' belief in separation from the world was reflected in their theology of two kingdoms: their belief in a radical dualism "between the community of the redeemed and the larger society."<sup>3</sup> The Mennonite historian Harold S. Bender aptly summarizes this aspect of what he has named the Anabaptist vision:

An inevitable corollary of the concept of the church as a body of committed and practicing Christians pledged to the highest standard of New Testament living was the insistence on the separation of the church from the world, that is nonconformity of the Christian to the worldly way of life. The world would not tolerate the practice of true Christian principles in society, and the church could not tolerate the practice of worldly ways among its membership. Hence, the only way out was separation (*Absonderung*), the gathering of true Christians into their own Christian society where Christ's way could and would be practiced. . . . In a sense, this principle of nonconformity to the world is merely a negative expression of the positive requirement of discipleship, but it goes further in the sense that it represents a judgement on the contemporary social order, which the Anabaptists called "the world," as non-Christian, and sets up a line of

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<sup>1</sup> Leonard Gross, introduction, *The Schleithem Confession*, ed. and trans. John H. Yoder (Kitchener, Ont.: Herald P, 1973) 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> *The Schleithem Confession* 12.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Toews, "Faith in Culture and Culture in Faith: Mennonite Brethren Entertaining Expansive Separative and Assimilative Views about the Relationship," presented to the Symposium "Dynamics of Faith and Culture in Mennonite Brethren History," Winnipeg, 14-15 Nov. 1986: unpublished ts 5.

demarcation between the Christian community and worldly society.<sup>4</sup>

The belief in separation from the world formulated in the first years of the Reformation continued to shape Anabaptist experience and self-definition as the movement grew over the next four centuries and its adherents spread out geographically, fleeing from persecution, attracted by prospective new homelands that would promise religious liberties. That faction of the Anabaptist reformers known as the Mennonites (after one of their leaders, the former Dutch priest Menno Simons) were themselves represented by two major streams of adherents—one South German-Swiss in origin and the other (the one that concerns us here) North German-Dutch. The descendants of the Dutch Mennonites, in their attempts to escape persecution in the Netherlands in the sixteenth century, fled to Prussia (where they began to settle in the Vistula Delta around the mid-1500s, and developed their use of a Lower-Prussian dialect, *Plautdietsch*, for day to day discourse). At the same time they continued to employ the Dutch of their former homeland "as the language of worship, of record-keeping and . . . written communication" until well into the eighteenth century, "when Dutch gave way to High German."<sup>5</sup>

The history of Mennonite migrations and the inevitable shifts of mother tongue that accompanied them is, as we shall see, central to the Mennonite experience. What, after all, could more effectively secure the separation of the Mennonites (and, incidentally, retard the possibilities of their developing a sophisticated book culture) than their persistent use of languages foreign to the cultures that surrounded them?

The Mennonite ancestors of the Rudy Wiebes and Patrick Friesens of the contemporary Canadian literary mainstream, typically, it seems, did not remain in the Vistula Delta (in the general region of what was then the Prussian city of Danzig), but began, near the end of the eighteenth century, to migrate once again. At the invitation of the Russian Empress Catherine II they established a prosperous agrarian commonwealth (composed of some 400 villages with a total population around 100,000) on the steppes of the Ukraine. Here their separate way of life (where the languages of discourse remained Low German and German) allowed them to live comfortably, indeed to prosper, until their isolated and vulnerable settlements were threatened,

<sup>4</sup> Harold S. Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision* (Kitchener, Ont.: Herald P, 1944) 27-28.

<sup>5</sup> Reuben Epp, "Plautdietsch: Origins, Development and State of the Mennonite Low German Language," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 5 (1987): 65.

first by the Russification of the 1870s and then by the violence of the Revolution and by the personal and community chaos effected by the collectivization of the new communist state in the 1920s. Once more fleeing their adopted homeland, many sought refuge in North America where a large contingent of Mennonite immigrants settled in two waves of immigration on the Canadian prairies, in the 1870s and the 1920s. Of the 600,000 practising Mennonites in the world today, some 60,000 live in Manitoba. "Of these at least 25,000 live in Winnipeg, making it the largest concentration of Mennonites in the world."<sup>6</sup>

The present high level of literary activity among Canadian Mennonites follows centuries during which these people had virtually no literature of their own. Their history of migration, as well as their Puritan disposition towards the arts (indeed, toward any form of embellishment or ornamentation), their suspicion of fiction (which consisted, after all, of the unacceptable activity of telling lies) and their state of isolation from the cultural activities of other Europeans precluded the emergence of any kind of sophisticated artistic tradition among these people—until the mid-1800s, when the Mennonites in Russia experienced a marked increase in the level of education and cultural sophistication in their own settlements. (This "cultural awakening" resulted to a large degree from the prosperity that allowed some of the intellectually gifted males among the German speaking Russian Mennonites to study abroad and so to escape their own culturally restrictive environment and, in effect, to appropriate for their people, upon their return to the colonies, some of the cultural practices and concerns of mainstream Europeans.)

What we would identify today as the literature of the Canadian Mennonites began in the Russian colonies at the turn of the century, during what has been called the "Golden Age" of the Russian Mennonite commonwealth. Courting a potential, but as yet largely untutored, Russian Mennonite audience, Jacob H. Janzen (who would settle in Canada in 1924 and continue to write), along with some of his similarly literarily-disposed colleagues, began to compose and publish indigenous poetry, prose, and drama (in either or both of his two mother tongues) in the years before the Revolution. Another Russian-born Canadian Mennonite immigrant, initially inspired by Janzen and later influential as a kind of Canadian Mennonite man of letters and cultural impresario, Arnold Dyck, worked indefatigably during the 1940s to nurture in Canada a Mennonite audience for literary and cultural endeavours. Both Janzen and Dyck composed in

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<sup>6</sup> Al Reimer, *A Sackful of Plautdietsch: A Collection of Mennonite Low German Stories and Poems* (Winnipeg: Hyperion P, 1983) 13.

their mother tongues: German (the Mennonites' formal language of religion and education) and Low German (the language of work and village life, the intimate language of family and friendship).

Privately printed chapbooks such as those Janzen and Dyck produced found virtually no Canadian audience outside the Mennonite community where their works of gentle good humour were regarded as interesting by some, frivolous by others, and as threatening by few. These intimate expressions of Mennonite community life, written in either mother tongue, tended to assert the cohesiveness and unique identity of the Canadian Mennonite community which, settled then mostly in villages on large tracts of prairie farmland in the pattern of the Russian colonies, still valued its separation from the dominant "English" culture. So mother tongue continued to mark and sustain the separation of the Canadian Mennonites from the dominant culture of their adopted homeland. In fact, Mennonite leaders here in Canada (as Rudy Wiebe so forcefully observed in his first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*) continued to exploit language "to perpetuate apartness"<sup>7</sup> as they had for at least 400 years:

First they [had] used Dutch as the barrier in Low German Prussia, then they used Prussian Low German as the barrier in High German-speaking Danzig and finally they used Low German and High German as the barrier against the national languages in Russia and in [North] America.<sup>8</sup>

German and Low German remained the languages of Mennonite literature in Canada well into the 1940s. It was not until 1962, with the momentous publication by McClelland and Stewart of *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, that a Canadian Mennonite work of fiction appeared in English. The furore that followed its publication (resulting in Wiebe's informal, but nevertheless brutal disenfranchisement from the community and his subsequent move to a temporary sanctuary in the U.S.A.) demonstrated the degree to which the Mennonites wished to remain—even in Canada in the 1960s, where many of them already held prominent positions in business, education and the professions—a people set apart from the dominant Canadian culture. That Wiebe would be critical of his own people in fiction was bad enough; that he would write in English and publish with the country's most prominent publisher—and so expose this private people's

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<sup>7</sup> James R. Jaquith, in Jacob A. Loewen, "The German Language, Culture and the Faith," presented to the Symposium "Dynamics of Faith and Culture in Mennonite Brethren History," Winnipeg, 14-15 Nov. 1986: unpublished ts 13.

<sup>8</sup> Loewen 24.

private affairs to public scrutiny—was nothing less than a scandalous breach of trust.

One of the themes of this watershed publication, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, is, significantly, the "language problem" (a subject, which has, deservedly, an entry of its own in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*):

Problems caused by language have repeatedly arisen among the Mennonites because of their migrations from one language-and-culture area to another. . . . The maintenance of the language of the motherland has aided in maintaining separation from the surrounding culture in the new homeland and thus strengthened the sense of nonconformity to the world.<sup>9</sup>

Through his protagonist Thom ("the doubter"), Wiebe questions the notion of separation as it was practised in Wapiti, a fictional Mennonite settlement on the Canadian prairie. Finding untenable the dominant ethos of the community which obliged the Mennonites to retain German as the exclusive language of religious fellowship and in effect to ostracize their Metis neighbours, Thom provocatively asks his mother, "And why must we in Wapiti love only Mennonites?"<sup>10</sup>

Echoes of Thom's question, and the challenge it represents to what had, over centuries, become the standard convention of using language as a means by which to preserve the coherence and identity of the Mennonite world, reverberate throughout Canadian Mennonite literature. Arnold Dyck explicitly anticipated the question in *Lost in the Steppe* and David Waltner-Toews, Patrick Friesen, Rudy Wiebe in his later works, and others have uttered it explicitly or implicitly, over and over again.

Insofar as these writers compose in English, they have ostensibly already displaced or rejected the language barrier that had for so long been absolutely integral to the dominant ethos of their people. Yet in their progressively less reticent embrace of mother tongue as linguistic technique or embellishment over the last decade in particular, they have revealed their ambivalence towards "the language problem." The dynamic conflicts in the mind of the artist who throws the patterns of his culture up onto the screen and finds them wanting, yet who feels the desire

<sup>9</sup> "Language problem," *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, 1955.

<sup>10</sup> Rudy Wiebe, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (Toronto: McClelland, 1962) 215.

to evoke (not always nostalgically) a fading ethos is focussed in the powerful image of ambivalence in Patrick Friesen's "end poem" in *Unearthly Horses*:

ich stehe  
zwischen nein  
ein fusz im feuer  
ja.<sup>11</sup>

It has already been suggested here that few Canadian ethnic groups have established themselves as prominently in the mainstream of Canadian literature as have the Mennonites. Both Andreas Schroeder and Rudy Wiebe have chaired the very influential Writers Union of Canada; Sandra Birdsell, Patrick Friesen, Armin Wiebe and Victor Jarrett Enns were founding executive members of the Manitoba Writers Guild (Enns went on to become Executive Director of the Saskatchewan Writers Guild); Patrick Friesen and Di Brandt have been executive members of the League of Canadian Poets; Rudy Wiebe has won the Governor General's Award (Lois Braun was short-listed for the award in 1987, Di Brandt in 1988); Sandra Birdsell has been selected by a national panel as one of the ten best Canadian writers of the post-Atwood generation, etc. As they have moved relentlessly into the mainstream, many of these Mennonite writers have incorporated mother tongue into their work in such a way that it functions as shibboleth, re-delineating the very barriers between insider and outsider many of them have railed against in their work.

The use of German and Low German in contemporary Canadian Mennonite literature is extensive. Rudy Wiebe uses German phrases to evoke the repressive piety of Jacob Friesen V in *The Blue Mountains of China*, for example, or to evoke the irrepressible romanticism of David Epp. Armin Wiebe uses Low German words, phrases, epithets and syntax throughout his humorous novel, *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens*, to evoke the primal, sometimes coarse personal life of Yasch, a village bumpkin. Patrick Friesen and David Waltner-Toews use German liberally in their poetry, as does Audrey Poetker, who borrows from both the Mennonites' mother tongues to enrich the texture of her work.

Patrick Friesen quotes, at the end of *The Shunning*, "O dass ich tausend Zungen hätte"—the opening words of one of the Mennonites' most widely-used invocational hymns. With this

<sup>11</sup> Patrick Friesen, *Unearthly Horses* (Winnipeg: Turnstone, 1984) 75.

resonant phrase, Friesen embraces his (implied) Mennonite audience by stimulating it to recall a seemingly lost world where the coherence of community was assured by the resonating, integrating power of familiar verbal ritual.

Audrey Poetker, in her collection of poems aptly named *i sing for my dead in german* both evokes and laments the loss of the mother tongue that once confirmed the common identity of individuals otherwise generations—even worlds—apart:

i tell *gros mama* the line in armin wiebe's book  
 about *himmelfahrt* being the day  
 when jesus goes to heaven & mennonites  
 go to winnipeg  
 & she laughs until she almost *fuschlucks* herself  
*en vieb dann noch*  
 yes but no relation  
*gros mama* i say *gros mama*  
 but can't remember the low german word  
 for love.<sup>12</sup>

It is not, of course, unusual for writers of ethnic background to employ some of the words of their mother tongue in their literary compositions. But this practice has particular significance among the Mennonites where language has been used conventionally to effect separation from and nonconformity to the world. Because of the rapid disintegration of the ethos of the traditional Canadian Mennonite community and the accompanying loss of the use of German and Low German, mother tongue in English Mennonite literature functions inevitably as shibboleth, as a by-word defining the limits of Canadian Mennonite experience. What the "insider," the Mennonite raised in the rapidly disappearing, traditional Mennonite world, recognizes in a work like David Waltner-Toews' poem "Tante Tina's Lament" is a kind of exclusive intertextuality that probes poignantly beyond the gently ironic humour of the poem into the last records of a people's fading means of common (and exclusive) discourse:

Oh my son  
 my heart is heavy,  
 thick as *glums*.  
 If you come home  
 it will rise, light and sweet.  
 I will make you *porzelky* for breakfast

<sup>12</sup> Audrey Poetker, *i sing for my dead in german* (Winnipeg: Turnstone P, 1986) 21.



and we will celebrate the New Year  
every morning.<sup>13</sup>

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. For over 400 years mother tongue functioned as shelter for the Mennonites committed to existing as a people apart. Now, as the Mennonite world becomes ever more dispersed, its literary artists are evoking a past world in the words and syntax of German and Low German. Whatever these authors hope to accomplish through their use of mother tongue, the result of their technique is to divide their audience into insider and outsider and so, in effect, to re-establish barriers separating the traditional Mennonites' experience from the world's.

The use of German and Low German in Mennonite writing intended for the mainstream Canadian audience (and not at all for an exclusively Mennonite audience) evokes an ethos that was defined by no thing as much as it was by language. To allow mother tongue to find its place within a predominantly English discourse is for Mennonite authors to affirm the very exclusivistic culture so many of them rail against. It's almost as if, having gained unlimited access to the coveted Canadian literary mainstream, the Mennonite writers who use their mother tongue want to assert that they are different, after all.

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<sup>13</sup> David Waltner-Toews, *Good Housekeeping* (Winnipeg: Turnstone P, 1983) 81.