

Surplus at the Border:
Mennonite Minor Literature in English in Canada

by

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BY

DOUGLAS REIMER

A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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**Surplus at the Border:
Mennonite Minor Writing in English in Canada**

Abstract

Major literature commonly considers certain writing inferior or unsophisticated and so less valuable than certain other works of literature which it calls literature of quality. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari imagine and theorize an alternative model for evaluating literature which established literature names "minor" literature. Their theory claims that minor literature actually plays a significant role in the continued vitality of major literature. Minor literature, they say, has a strength and quality which major literature denies. Without minor literature, they contend, major literature would weaken and become ineffective. Such a reliance on the power of minor literature, however, major literature would never wish to acknowledge. This thesis defines minor literature as other than "minority" literature. Minor literature consists of those literatures which stem from groups which consider themselves marginalized by the large group which feels at home with all the conventions of English and English literature. All minor literature, I argue in this paper, automatically exemplifies three defining features: minor literature is necessarily political; it speaks for community values (in that the major English group is not a community, though the smaller ones are); and it affects a high degree of "deterritorialization" of the foreign tongue, English, in which it writes. I study the works of Mennonite writers Rudy Wiebe, Armin Wiebe, Patrick Friesen, Di Brandt, Sandra Birdsell and others to demonstrate these three defining features.

Mennonite writing belongs to both the major and the minor. It cannot escape its intellectual, cultural heritage which is a major one grounded in western thought. Yet, it also writes English strangely and finds itself resisting the anti-community forces vehicular English imposes on it. There is, however, no successful, deliberate minor Mennonite writing in English in Canada. All the writers considered here attempt in one form or another to subvert English dominion and each succeeds and fails in distinctive ways.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Mennonite Minor Literature in the New Land

Minor literature, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari define it in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, is not literature written in a minor language, but literature constructed by a minority in a major language. They identify minor literature by three main characteristics: minor literatures are entirely political; everything in them takes on a community value; and language in them embodies an intense deterritorialization.¹ Because politics is not immediately necessary for the well-being of the group members who write major literature, its concerns focus more on the individuals' concerns themselves. In minor literature, however, each individual concern expresses itself within small spaces and so automatically becomes political. The absence of talent in minor literature communities, as well as the fact that minor literature communities are always in danger of disintegration, means that all minor literature automatically speaks for collective values. Finally, because the minority using the language of the major literature feels that its territory and its values are not properly represented by this language and that they speak in and write a foreign language when they use it, the major language is deterritorialized by minor literature's use of it.

¹Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari (16-17). Deterritorialization, as Deleuze and Guattari use it, may be defined as the taking away of a group's territory. That is, in linguistic terms, when a language like English loses the qualities of English that are familiar to all trained speakers of English, so that the language seems unfamiliar, much like Freud's notion of the uncanny, then that language has been deterritorialized. In another way of speaking, a language may be considered "deterritorialized" when the constructed nature of a territory's language (English, for example) becomes very apparent to its users, and no longer seems as natural or eternal as it once did.

Deleuze and Guattari's definition of minor literature is valuable for studying Mennonite literature in English in Canada. Because the Mennonite Canadian group exists under the constant threat of disintegration living as it does within the territory of major English-speaking Canada, writing by any one of its members always has a political and religious value. Politics and collective values of Mennonite Canadians are interwoven. The Mennonite Canadian community is constantly concerned both with how to keep its religious beliefs intact and how to keep its children from forgetting the faith of its forefathers. Mennonite Canadians must regularly ask, how do we keep our children from leaving our towns and communities? Each poem, story, novel, or play a member of that community writes addresses the problems of territory (culture), whether it does so purposely or not. Despite the political nature of its use of English, the English language of major literature does not speak for Mennonite Canadian territorial experience in either the Old World or in Canada. For this reason, English as it is used by Mennonite Canadians is a deterritorialized language, never quite saying what it means to say, always self-aware and self-conscious. It participates in the plethora of minor languages milling about at the major, English border, hoping for membership. It contributes to what may be thought of as a surplus at the border.

My analysis of minor literature employs ideas from philosophy. Philosophical language helps to give a theoretical language to minor literature. Philosophy, the science of ideas, which makes its life out of thought against conventions and easy, common assumptions about the material and the spiritual, provides a way of writing about minor literature which, in effect, makes its life also out of subverting or changing major literature. To be plain, major literature does not like to change its

assumptions about anything, especially about its superiority to minor literature. Major literature wishes, in other words, for a hierarchical relationship between itself and other literatures in order to maintain the unthinking presumption that it rules over and determines processes of evaluation of literary quality because it deserves to do so.

Minor literature, with its greater courage and daring because of its minor status, by its very presence, undermines major literature's assumptions about quality and desert. The assumption of this thesis is that without minor literature, major literature stagnates. Minor literature, then, enlivens and oxygenates major literature, providing whatever newness enters major literature's language. Major literature has minor literature to thank, in other words, for its energy and life. While it regulates its minor literature neighbors, and makes solemn decisions about who and what is almost ready to be considered qualified to belong to the canon, major literature does not realize at all how it, itself, is a dead thing without minor literature.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari clearly explain this idea from a philosophical position. They say that minor literature is revolutionary and that among its defining characteristics is its hatred for major literature: "There is nothing that is major or revolutionary except the minor. To hate all languages of masters" (*Kafka* 26). Other philosophers' constructions of such ideas as knowledge, the text, writing, thinking, death, and subjectivity, become useful tools in my analysis of Mennonite Canadian literature. In short, making use of the ideas of important nineteenth and twentieth century thinkers to help me analyze the works of Mennonite Canadian writers, I proceed to argue that it is a minor literature which often understands major literature very well, and frequently successfully resists

major literature because of this selfsame competence in major literary conventions. Minor literature struggles through its revolution to force major literature into a new self-awareness.

The most important philosophical ideas which inform my argument need some introduction. The first and foremost is that notion of Deleuze and Guattari's that the minor is not equivalent to a minority. Rather than conceiving of minor literature as the literature of minorities who are marginalized by dominant societies, they suggest that the tension relevant to the question of minor literature is linguistic as much as it is sociological. Minor literature always writes in the major language, the vehicular language, for our purposes, in English.

Using the research of Ferguson and Gumperez, Henri Gobard has proposed a tetralinguistic model: vernacular, maternal, or territorial language, used in rural communities or rural in its origins; a vehicular, urban, governmental, even worldwide language, a language of businesses, commercial exchange, bureaucratic transmission, and so on, a language of the first sort of deterritorialization; referential language, language of sense and of culture, entailing a cultural reterritorialization; mythic language, on the horizon of cultures, caught up in a spiritual or religious reterritorialization. (*Kafka* 23)

These four types of language, available to any group at any time, cover the range of possible languages by which a small group exists linguistically. The main feature of this four-language model, however, as it applies to the postcolonial problem of group relations, is the dominance of the vehicular language over cultural, referential and mythic ones.

The spatiotemporal categories of these languages differ sharply: vernacular language is *here*; vehicular language is *everywhere*; referential language is *over there*; mythic language is *beyond*. But above all else, the distribution of these languages varies from one group to the next and, in a single group, from one epoch to the next (for a long time in Europe, Latin was a vehicular language before becoming referential, then mythic; English has become the worldwide vehicular language for today's world). (23-4)

English, then, dominates culture and deterritorializes culture's various languages. That is to say, English, vehicular language penetrating to the core of every group's operations, and substituting its perfunctory, "worldwide" language for their vernacular ones, making them either obsolete, or petty, or *historical* (that is to say, conscious of a time when they will not be what they are today), takes away from groups' sense of being an independent, original, self-sufficient territory. It takes away from the linguistic group's sense of well-being and independence, from the "equipmentality" and "reliability" of their vernaculars, to use two Heideggerian phrases.²

This ploughing-down-everything quality of the vehicular language represents the first of the linguistic deterritorializations to which Deleuze refers above. A second sort of deterritorialization also exists abundantly, however, which poses a threat to the first sort, for it deterritorializes the deterritorializer: it refers to a fighting spirit within the minor, vernacular language(s) which resists the major, vehicular language. The act of pitting

²Martin Heidegger *Poetry, Language, Thought* 34-5. "We say 'only' and therewith fall into error; for the reliability of the equipment first gives to the simple world its security and assures to the earth the freedom of its steady thrust." And, "Thus equipmentality wastes away, sinks into mere stuff. In such wasting, reliability vanishes."

forces against the dominating force requires imagination and sacrifice, two qualities which, it may be noted, major, vehicular language entirely lacks.

How many people today live in a language that is not their own? Or no longer, or not yet, even know their own and know poorly the major language that they are forced to serve? This is the problem of immigrants, and especially of their children, the problem of minorities, the problem of a minor literature, but also a problem for all of us: how to tear a minor literature away from its own language, allowing it to challenge the [major] language and making it follow a sober revolutionary path? How to become a nomad and an immigrant and a gypsy in relation to one's own language? (19)

Yes, the preservation of linguistic dignity is a minority's problem, but much more it is a problem for each of us outside of the strict definition of "minority," a problem of shaping our desires by the dominant language in such a way that it deterritorializes that language which is without desire, without cultural purpose and duty, and which, if it could, would smooth over every group's sense of linguistic distinctiveness.³

More to the point of the specific character of this deterritorialization: there are two sorts of "territorial" deterritorialization of the vehicular language prevail, a *rich* use of English, and a poor, or "sober" use of it. The first revolts too symbolically, which is to say, too idealistically, to be much of a challenge to vehicular structures. The second revolts most effectively; it proceeds by a visible renunciation of the metaphors, symbols, connotations, ironies and other tropic structures familiar to English within itself. What the reader of this impoverished

³Lyrical poetry participates in major English permanence and dominance. It speaks for all the values underlying the hierarchical assumptions of English. Its basic values, that is, which resist the revolutions of the minor, strongly support the values which keep English exclusive and privileged.

version of the vehicular notices is that the vernacular English seems devoid of all self-securing, or should I say, self-reassuring familiarities and significances. Armed with a high coefficient of deterritorialization, minor, vernacular literature cuts across all the patterns of sense, all the lines of logic, of English major literature and so deterritorializes sense itself. Both rich and poor uses of English are deterritorializations of it, and both, in their respective degrees, represent a disruption of major sense, though impoverished minor English actually deterritorializes so effectively that it makes English, in Deleuze's words, "assignifying," devoid of all sense (a major quality). Minor literature at its most intensely deterritorializing, brings English sense (signification) to an end. Deleuze calls this effect "an assignifying, intensive utilization of language" (22). Illustrating what he means by referring to Franz Kafka's deliberate use of Prague German, Deleuze explains that *the new* ("invention") becomes possible in the major language because of--maybe only because of--minor literature's assignifying use of major language and literature.

Now something happens: the situation of the German language in Czechoslovakia, as a fluid language intermixed with Czech and Yiddish, will allow Kafka the possibility of invention. Since things are as they are ("it is as it is, it is as it is," a formula dear to Kafka, marker of a state of facts), he will abandon sense, render it no more than implicit; he will retain only the skeleton of sense, or a paper cutout. (20-21)

Minor literature revolts against major literature; the vernacular revolts against the vehicular, and so "invents" new sense which the vehicular would refuse to acknowledge as sense, at least for the time being, until popular usage and public humiliation force it to accommodate the new sense

entering English conventions. It is the minor forces within the major which change its sense of sense, which change its sensibilities and its beliefs, its significations.⁴ We will find in the course of this thesis that writers like Patrick Friesen and Di Brandt, and certainly Armin Wiebe and John Weier, consciously pit the vernacular and assignifying against the vehicular sense in order to invent what would be uninventible from within conventional English. We will discover, too, that the lyrical, which may be equated with the vehicular, finds itself in a great contest with the material, equatable with the vernacular, within most of the works of the Mennonite Canadians considered here. What I mean by "the lyrical" and "the material" will be defined shortly.

I chose to analyse Mennonite writers because I began with them, and they did well enough for my purposes. I chose them, however, also, because I am familiar with their works and found this familiarity to be an advantage to my analysis of their minor and major tendencies. Mennonite writing provocatively mingles and struggles at a border of sorts represented by its European heritage and the groups already here in the new land. Its interaction with the Indian Canadian, for instance, whose lands it farms, forces it continually to rethink its territorial identity, and what its relationship is to its past and its Christian values.

Though this theory of invention exclusively brought about by vernacular, minor literature limits itself in this thesis to that minor group called Mennonite Canadians, it applies with equal effect to minor use of English wherever it occurs: minor league baseball coaches, gay Indians, prairie lovers of seafood, female readers of Sade, players of harpsichords,

⁴Every major language has its "stutterers," as Deleuze calls them in *Kafka*. These are foreigners writing in their own language. In English, for instance, William Carlos Williams, William Wordsworth, William Blake, Tom Wayman, and Al Purdy, among many others, have to varying degrees and at times resisted the lyrical, the major, the dominating.

aficionados of couscous, feminists against conventional feminism, and a myriad other groups with their minor discourses, might as easily have been chosen to illustrate Deleuze's theory of the revolutionary nature of minor literature.

The central question raised by Deleuze's idea of minor literature concerns the nature of reality: how does the new come into being? Major literature assumes that it determines reality. It presumes on the reality of a permanence of reality. "What we write is what produces the new," major literature thinks, "and the new is a product of quality. Quality must be determined by standards for literature which our conventions have so carefully discovered." In other words, major literature presumes on revelation instead of construction in its notions of refinement in writing.⁵ Quality writing, it infers, is a product not a production, is a discovery, not an action, depends on the refined taste of the wise and the learned, and cannot result from the unsophisticated blunderings of those groups who are not initiated in the difficult discipline of English literature conventions as they are taught in English schools. You must be an accomplished student of English literature before you can write acceptably, major literature prescribes.

Deleuze's analysis of "reality" problematizes--makes much more complicated and challenging to ruling notions of what constitutes a problem at all--major literature's inherent definition of reality and therefore, effectively, of quality. I have said that major literature presumes on structures which are real and permanent: there is love, there is goodness, there is weakness, there is quality, there is authority, there is competence,

⁵Major, vehicular language often appropriates mythic language and other forms of the vernacular as a way of appearing to be writing more communally: its main purpose, however, is to continue a cycle of deterritorializing and reterritorializing in order to keep community from strongly resisting its hegemony.

and so on. Its sense of structure grounds itself in metaphysics: metaphysics presents what is; it presents presence; presence must not be doubted, though knowledge of presence may be flawed; the presenting of presence is its own best evidence of presence; the presenting of presence is as close as we *humans* (not we subjects) can come to the real. The real is a simple presence if we could only learn enough, and see well enough, and devote ourselves fully enough, and maybe be chosen by the presider over all presence, but we in our limited powers only present presence ineffectually, though if we have genius we may come closer to presence's true nature. This is metaphysics, and it is based on a belief in the precise and objective existence of everything in the mind of God somewhere. Metaphysics is Plato's universe. Metaphysics is epistemology and all its possibilities. Metaphysics is major literature. When Rudy Wiebe, Di Brandt, and Pat Friesen are major and lyrical, they support metaphysical structures. Metaphysics and major literature are all possibilities except their own being under erasure.⁶ Major literature does not place its understanding of reality under erasure. Therefore, to conclude this definition of major literature, reality is presumed by major literature to have a metaphysical status with forms and structures which are retrievable and available to consciousness. Consciousness assumes man, always, and "man" assumes a man/God relationship. Major literature's schema of the real therefore always combines the elements dear to humanism consisting of the real, man, consciousness, God, and permanence.

Deleuze unphilosophizes metaphysical reality in order to describe minor literature. Science, for him, is collaborative, not final, not

⁶Derrida, in *Of Grammatology*, argues that certain of Heidegger's terms which presume on metaphysical presence, terms such as Being, must be put "under erasure" or bracketed because of the problematic privileging of presence by philosophy in the West.

conclusive, not a subject with full knowledge. He equates the real with flux. Flux is a technical term which infers construction: flux writes⁷ that all forms, all structures, all realities, are fabricated, and they are fabricated as escapes from the metaphysical trap, the metaphysical trap of the permanence and presence of forms.

An axiomatics was the extraction of a structure which made the variable elements to which it was applied homogenous or homologous. This was a recoding operation, the reintroduction of order into the sciences, for science has never ceased to be delirious [*délirer*], to make completely decoded fluxes of knowledge and objects along lines of flight, continually going further afield. There is thus a whole politics which demands that the lines should be blocked, that an order should be established. (*Dialogues* 67)

Science as a decoding mechanism and a successful escape from axiomatics or blockages, leads to this related thought necessary to understand minor literature in similar terms of "decoding," or "deterritorialization" of the codes (conventions), prescribed by major literature.

...it is always on a line of flight that we create, not, indeed, because we imagine that we are dreaming but, on the contrary, because we trace out the real on it, we compose there a plane of consistence. To flee, but in fleeing to seek a weapon. (135-36)

So, realities are "processes of escape." They are the creative and the new. The creative and the new cannot be permanence, nor have permanence as

⁷Flux must be writing. Derrida problematizes presence by contrasting writing and speech. All of his *Speech and Phenomena*, as well as his other two works contemporary with that text, *Of Grammatology* and *Writing and Difference*, use the language/logic of metaphysics to discuss the unsaid/unspoken privilege which metaphysics (representational language and logic), even phenomenological metaphysics, gives to presence: "That the privilege of presence as consciousness can be established--that is, historically constituted and demonstrated--only by virtue of the excellence of the voice is a truism which has never occupied the forefront of the phenomenological stage" (*Speech and Phenomena* 16).

their ground or end. Permanence and forms based on the theory of the possibility of permanence, represent the non-creative and the impossibility of the new. For invention to occur, metaphysics must be broached by the real.

Heidegger distinguishes thought from metaphysics: thought starts with what is known and logical, and examines its structures of logic. In other words, thought refuses to be carried away by discourses it gets caught up in and instead examines those discourses for evidence of their constructedness. Heidegger defines thought by looking back to Nietzsche:

He [Nietzsche] is the first to pose the thoughtful question--thoughtful in that it starts from metaphysics and points back to metaphysics--which we formulate as follows: Is the man of today in his metaphysical nature prepared to assume dominion over the earth as a whole? (*What is Called Thinking* 65)

Minor literature fulfills the functions necessary for "real" constructions: it accidentally, for the most part, forces into the light the constructedness of, the fabricated nature of, the forms major literary discourses utilize in their unthought state. The real requires thought. Thought is what thinks against itself, not what does not know itself and presumes on its own newness and correctness without self-observation and self-destruction built into its mode of production. Flux is always, it is obvious, in the process of destroying what has just been. Flux moves on, escaping from itself, from stasis, from the prerogative. Thought, as Heidegger defines it, knows metaphysics and labors to understand it in order to free itself from metaphysics. Minor literature does not know metaphysics (though it may be part of it, complicit with it), but it aids and abets thought in that it disturbs major literature's

metaphysical assumptions so that they can be thought.⁸ Minor literature, thus, is asignifying, making absurd (showing the arbitrariness of the rules governing the major) what before was clear and structured. Thought itself is not minor literature. But thought can be made possible by minor literature's non-analytical revolutions aimed at the major. Both thought and minor literature, one analytical of metaphysics, the other accidentally destructive to it, create the new. It might even be argued, as I do in the chapter on Rudy Wiebe's work, that minor literature *thinks* the metaphysical, dead logic of the major thereby creates a new community: when this happens minor art reterritorializes the community it seemed to attack.

It is important to understand the relationship between minor literature, thought, reality and newness: all of these depend on the movement away from the security of refinement, comprehensiveness, definitive answers and explanations and, in general, the sparseness of the logic (metaphysics) which informs and sustains major literature. When analyzing the writing of Mennonite Canadians, and all minor groups for that matter, the postcolonial critic can only gain by remembering how invention comes about not by the standards already set by the dominant literatures and discourses, but by the not-ever-yet-established ones of those groups whose literatures write themselves as if they are alien and marginalized and kept at a distance from privilege by the major group to whom they appeal for understanding, acceptance, and often remuneration of a material and political sort. These clamoring minor literatures might be temporarily conceived of as gathering at a border they are not permitted to

⁸Minor literature disturbs major literature structures and sense by blunder, by accident, crossing over its lines of logic without realizing it is doing so, unaware of the value placed on these lines of logic by the major. Such a blundering exposes to public view the illogicality and constructedness of these same lines of logic.

cross: they constitute a surplus at that border, and they disturb by their very congregation there. They disturb and disrupt and generally cause the sort of unwanted confusion which forces the guardians of the border to open its ports of entry to the aliens. These guardians at the border, wary of the amassing newcomers writing in their major language, find themselves unable to decide anymore exactly where the border, once so clearly delineable, lies.⁹ The set of linguistic, social, moral formations that were thought to make up the major, under ceaseless attack as they are here by this conglomeration of minor, discursive groups, finds its sense of reality contaminated and undefinable at those sites where they all, major and minor, rub shoulders.

The material nature of thought, change and the minor is the next topic which needs to be addressed, now that metaphysics has been tied to discourse, writing, and particularly to minor literature's relationship to major literature. Material art shapes and changes history. Roland Barthes (*Sade Fourier Loyola* 182) has said that writing is dangerous to systems in that it breaks through the systems' constraints. When a novel such as Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many* appears, it forever wrenches the minor group's moral perspective and teaches it how blind it has been to the qualities of other groups around it, groups such as Indian Canadians. The Mennonite Canadian group interprets this change in its own attitude and political awareness as moral and, so, spiritual. It sees God's hand in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, and does not ever notice the material nature of the effect wrought in them.

⁹This border, before the Mennonite Canadians started writing, may be represented by someone like Duncan Campbell Scott who was the deputy minister of Indian Affairs at the time, and whose novels as well as his politics show us he was blind to Indian Canada.

In reality, the effect brought about by Wiebe's novel is fully material: a process of recording, on paper, with ink and type, enters social material history at a certain moment in time and from then on the system as Mennonite Canadians believed in it, no longer stands as it was but accommodates a brand new understanding of itself and other groups. The only belief of the Mennonite Canadian system which does not change (much) is the belief that God's will has been done. Metaphysics--spiritual logic concerning presence--remains as it was. We can conclude then that material art forever changes material history, but almost never very clearly does it change spiritual, metaphysical self-understanding.

Much Mennonite Canadian writing attempts to break through the constraints of the systems of thinking inherited from our intellectual past. Their material texts, those concoctions of paper and ink, actually change Mennonite thought. Certain texts more than others, are aware of their own material nature and also the materiality of social formations. Di Brandt's poetry, Patrick Friesen's poetry, Armin Wiebe's novels and John Weier's novel all recognize the tension between the spirituality that Mennonites brought with them from the old world and the material nature of their experience when they arrived in the new world. The lyrical style, for instance, appears to all of them to be unsatisfactory here, in a land which till they came, had never heard of, and so of course had not participated in, the formation of all the conventions which went into the making of lyrical writing. Lyrical writing is staunchly moral and metaphysical, staunchly western in its imagination. Much Mennonite Canadian writing resists the lyrical inheritance,¹⁰ an inheritance inevitable for anyone who belongs to any major, European group, and actually textually represents the struggle

¹⁰Though not all--Brandt and Friesen are often "lyrical."

between respect for Europe and respect for this land. The struggle, as I represent it in this thesis, exists between the lyrical and "the material."

The elements of the material may be summed up with the word social, and the lyrical with the word moral. Behind most lyrical writing lies a system of inspiration for action based on moral thinking. Behind most material writing lies a very opposite sort of thinking based on social formations. The material is aware of the constructed nature of formations. The important relationship for the lyrical is between the "self" and "moral law," which can be expressed in many ways, including between the self and God, self and "right and wrong," self and "the other." Always, in this relationship, the self pits itself against wrong and tries to do right based on moral absolutes of the sort Kant imagined must determine all value. These moral absolutes, then, to the degree that they are expressed in a refined way in specific works, of course, also determine the relative quality of literature. Social material literature, on the other hand, determines quality in an entirely different manner. Its evaluation bases itself on desiring-production, by which I mean, after Deleuze and Guattari, the ability to *affect* the body which encounters the text. The extent to which a given text induces laughter, hunger, sadness, delight, or disease on the body is the extent to which it is a powerful text, and, of course, the affects of a text on different individuals would vary greatly. The material does not wish to standardize the evaluation process, but thinks that multiplicity in most things is an advantage, and not a liability. Many different ideas concerning the relative quality of texts is preferable to one universal idea, according to the material. Minor literature, then, disrupts major literature precisely over the question of universal value: amassing at the border of major literature as it does, it dramatizes the multiple voices which more or less

have learned to speak and write English, and have only barely familiarized themselves with major English conventions.¹¹

The material text accomplishes another feat which the lyrical cannot. It *thinks* the lyrical. It thinks the lyrical and exposes its metaphysical presuppositions--its moral and so individualistic modes of "thought"--by juxtaposing the lyrical with the material, the moral with the social. Where the lyrical convention typically operates by modes of secrecy and silence, of a sparseness of logic and expression which at the same time thrives on denseness and depth of imagery, and singularity of sense, the material, when the minor writers achieve it, operates by exposing all the intentions of the author, by utilizing whatever discourses it can lay its hands on, and by modes of excess. Where lyrical language strikes the ear as dense and complex, material language often seems naive and plain, driven by a desire for clarity rather than a desire for obscure and cabalistic sense and meaning. That the lyrical has become dense over time instead of clear, that it has opted for the mysterious instead of the empirical and clear, may easily be explained by the need to complicate a metaphysical intelligence which all the best minds in the English community believe in and apply their cleverness to characterizing and analyzing. This process of becoming a dense semantic system instead of a clear one also helps explain the tyrannical individualism at the heart of lyrical writing, an individualism which contrasts with the basic socialism at the heart of material writing. As we will see, by way of illustration, when Patrick Friesen writes his material poems with their simplicity and clarity of language and images, images and language visibly empty of secret purpose and literary allusion,

¹¹They long to be major, but are accidentally implicated by their politics in the minor. Friesen's and Brandt's models are the greats, Tennyson and Keats, for instance.

he seems most intent on constructing Mennonite experience on Canadian soil. He seems then to be most concerned with the future of the Mennonite Canadian community. When he writes in a recognizably lyrical style, with its complex imagism and allusive qualities, he becomes individualistic in his interests, representing moral systems, and less concerned with social, communal construction.

The overall effect of writing both material and lyrical poems powerfully represents the problem Mennonite Canadians have had adapting to their new place and learning to nurture it and care for it instead of remaining indifferent to it by holding their moral systems before them like a pillar of fire so they don't have to see the confusion into which they themselves have thrown the new socius.¹² The socius they arrived within when they settled here would have seemed to Mennonites to be no socius at all, not able to record and map the patterns of relationships and actions which a people engage in, value and so codify in order to ensure their survival as codes over a long time. Indians were no socius, in other words, as far as Mennonite Canadians were concerned, and they would bring them one, whole and fully shaped, completely functional. All the Indian Canadians had to do was prepare their infertile ground for this moral Mennonite socius, learn to learn, and learn to live by its laws (not thought of by Mennonites as codes and conventions, of course). That was the long and short of Mennonite understanding of the new land that they immediately thought of as theirs. Works by Mennonite artists have gradually, over the last thirty years, decoded Mennonite European

¹²"Socius" and "habitus" are two terms which Pierre Bourdieu defines and uses frequently (see his *Language and Symbolic Power*). Socius I define shortly, "habitus" means the social environment in which a subject is raised and which is responsible for the dispositions which determine where he feels comfortable on the social field. The question of the recording socius and of habitus simultaneously presents the reader with the question of surface and depth. The values of the lyrical are encoded in the vehicular.

territory and begun to replace it with a new, though grudging, respect for the Indian Canadian socius that was here when various Europeans arrived, and is here today. Mennonite Canadian art is dangerous to Mennonite Canadian systems. It forces a deterritorialization which this minor group, so comfortable with major lyrical conventions and morality, would rather avoid. The material, we might say, subverts the lyrical in Mennonite Canadian art. The social subverts the moral. Small groups rub shoulders with big groups and change both sets of groups forever. The big groups hate these changes and don't realize they have the small groups to thank for them.

Beginning with Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, and moving through Armin Wiebe's works, Pat Friesen's poetry, Di Brandt's poetry, Sandra Birdsell's novels, and other Mennonite Canadian writing, I analyze the materiality of minor Mennonite Canadian literature and its subversion of lyrical modes of writing. Speculation about the effects and, as in Armin Wiebe's *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens*, the affects of a deliberate material writing on English-speaking Canada with its lyrical heritage is the goal of this study.

Chapter Two

Mennonite Canadians, the Second World War, and Indian Canadians:

The Reterritorializing Power of Minor Art

Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many* is one of the first Mennonite novels, in either German or English, with a style that is recognizable and interesting to an English audience. This is so because the English readership has particular tastes, appetites, and expectations for literature.¹³ Still, it is not a replica of the common English novel, or a novel of the English Canadian center, if there can be said to be such a center. It is too political for that. In this sense it is a minor work of literature. Two questions have to be asked of this text and other minor texts: how is it political and how does it carry community values, and in what specific ways does it subvert major literature?

The village of Wapiti is a young Mennonite village in the arable bush land of northern Saskatchewan. A dozen or so families live there and try to raise their families by traditional Mennonite ways and beliefs. The wise school teacher in the one-room country school gets into trouble for his reformist views and is replaced by a pretty, non-Mennonite woman. She causes a disturbance among the males of Wapiti whose duty is supposed to be to hard work and not pleasure and idleness. Apropos of such duty, certain ambitious and hard-working families in the community have trouble with another less industrious family which, true to the adage that cleanliness is Godliness, seems to have fallen from the strict adherence to Mennonite spiritual traditions connecting work and salvation. This renegade family, the Ungers, appears to live in the easy, natural lifestyle of their neighbors, the Moosamins, rather than in that of their churchgoing and pious, capitalist brethren. The work-

¹³There is difference among the writers, but all have inculcated lyrical values.

ethic tradition is challenged in other ways, however. The war comes to Wapiti as a stirring of shame and nationalistic fervor in the breasts of the young males of the village. Eventually, the struggle over the questions of the value of adherence to the faith of their fathers in the face of this dangerous patriotic call brings the novel to its climactic close with a physical confrontation of another sort right in the center of the community.

Minor literature announces itself by its inevitable political stance. It does not, as major literature does, keep its politics in the basement somewhere, in the narrative's "unconscious." Master literature, that is, major literature, does this because it assumes the obviousness of its politics, the universal knowledge of its values and social formations, and the needlessness of presenting for the reading public the conventions of its literature and the nature of its politics. Instead, major literature typically proceeds with a pure narrative unclouded by boring, "didactic"¹⁴ details. For major literature, the purpose of the novel or book of poems is not to teach but to delight.¹⁵ Its assumptions and received wisdoms are already imbedded in the language itself, in the very ways that stories and even sentences unfold and construct themselves. Given this self-sufficiency of major literature, minor literature consequently belongs much more with what major literature would call the silly and "Victorian" tendency of certain more religious works to attempt to teach their Christian gospel than to provide a convincing plot and character development. For the Modernist canon,¹⁶ this trait of being delightful is

¹⁴"Didactic" is J. M. Robinson's term for Rudy Wiebe's style in his forward to the paperback M&S edition of *Peace Shall Destroy Many*.

¹⁵Philip Sidney, we know, taught the English world (though they had always ideologically known) this delectable power of literature back in 1595 with his claim that it "holdeth children from play and old men from the chimney corner" ("The Defense of Poesy" 613).

¹⁶The High Modernist canon operates metapoetically by depth: its basic message is that silence about the surface meaning effectively presents *real* meaning which is deep, profound, difficult, ultra powerful, and so, of course, an effective tonic for alienation's toxicity. In this seriousness the modernist canon is opposed to the Victorian one which makes its message the very surface of the text, loud, vulgar, emphatic, anything but silent. Victorian literature assumes the possibility of communication and of universal truth; High

especially important: narrative must not serve message, but must be presented as itself. Narratives, like objects, should convince by their purity and precision, and not be contaminated by the subjective message they secretly/not-so-secretly desire to disseminate.¹⁷

Wiebe writes his novel for altogether non-major reasons. His purpose is didactic. He wishes to inform Canadians of the true nature of Mennonite separateness and conscientious objection during the two world wars, and he wishes to bring about an understanding within the community itself of the ambiguous complexity of their "simple" stand against violence. The community needs the artist more than the preacher, Wiebe's novel implicitly but forcefully informs us, when it comes to understanding such complexities, understanding the "reality"¹⁸ of human life in the world.¹⁹

Modernist literature ostensibly, with its silences, with its raw experience, declares the world of truth most complex, a matter for specialists such as themselves. George Eliot's work is a case in point. The particular messages about propriety, greed, laziness, love and diligence which *Middlemarch* attempts to convey are assumptions about the universality of these messages and of the possibility of their easy reception by reading subjects. *Middlemarch's* narrator, for example, moralizing about Casaubon's and Dorothea's imminent wedding, announces with confidence that if humans weren't so selfishly stupid, they would realize that human selfishness causes heartache.

The betrothed bride must see her future home, and dictate any changes that she would like to have made there. A woman dictates before marriage in order that she may have an appetite for submission afterwards. And certainly, the mistakes that we male and female mortals make when we have our own way might fairly raise some wonder that we are so fond of it. (53)

Similar sorts of facile generalizations about what it means to be "man" can be found in the fiction of Thomas Hardy, Charles Dickens, Emily Brontë, William Thackeray and most Victorian (and Romantic) writers. You don't find light-hearted judgments of this sort, of course, in the works of T.S. Eliot, Henry James, William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway for whom truth is a deeper, more essential matter.

¹⁷The following selection suggests the central argument of Sanford Schwartz's *The Matrix of Modernism*, that the modernists diluted Bergson's great conundrum concerning the possibility of art. Bergson theorized that no communication was possible because all experience was subjective and, so, individual. Eliot, Pound and Hulme, Schwartz claims, did not face up to the Gorgon reality of Bergson's logic. Facing up to Bergson's reality would have meant their acceptance of what they least wished to admit, that art has no remedial value.

Hulme, Pound, and Eliot were indeed reacting to what they regarded as the excessive subjectivity of the nineteenth century. This reaction appears in Hulme's deviation from Bergson--his emphasis on the accurate presentation of perceived objects rather than the flux of subjective life. It also appears in Pound's desire to render the objects of perception dispassionately, and in Eliot's demand that the artist transmute feeling into its "objective correlative." (54)

They would not have wanted to accept communication's impossibility because such an impossibility would have made them, the authors of *The Wasteland*, *The American*, *Go Down Moses*, insignificant, no more able than the next subject to think epistemological connections. Twentieth century aesthetic silence and anti-didacticism is more didactic and essentialist than any other. This may even be true of postmodernism with its silence about the moral. Such silence is a form of complicity.

Explicit in the novel is the message that political and religious leaders are vulnerable. They cloud our vision and simplify the issues for their own purposes and so are untrustworthy stewards of both knowledge and community values. In the end in fact, what Wiebe's novel attempts to do, as any good minor work does, is to reestablish the community as a viable entity. It strengthens what the other institutions have weakened. Art, Wiebe tells us with his high didacticism, is stronger than the sword, is more potent than the church or the state, in times of community crisis at least. Wiebe does not, in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, imagine the vulnerability of the artistic institution to degeneration, that is to the possibility that the artist might be a non-

¹⁸"Reality" in this paper is flux. The real for Deleuze and Guattari is the disorderly which is a series of escapes of knowledge along lines of flight. These disorderly lines of flight are "the real" where creation takes place. These quotations, already used in the introduction of this thesis, worth repeating, make the connection between the absence of method and structure in both science and reality.

An axiomatization was the extraction of a structure which made the variable elements to which it was applied homogeneous or homologous. This was a recoding operation, the reintroduction of order into the sciences, for science has never ceased to be delirious [*délirer*], to make completely decoded fluxes of knowledge and objects pass along lines of flight, continually going further afield. There is thus a whole politics which demands that the lines should be blocked, that an order should be established. (*Dialogues* 67).

And,

...it is always on a line of flight that we create, not, indeed, because we imagine that we are dreaming but, on the contrary, because we trace out the real on it, we compose there a place of consistence. To flee, but in fleeing to seek a weapon. (135-36)

"Reality" has nothing to do with the Modernist definition of good literature as that literature which presents objects to the reader in their pure, real form (the objective correlative), without subjective and so false "interpretive" contamination. Reality for the purposes of this paper is escape, movements along escaping lines of flight, never form, object, or permanence of any sort.

¹⁹By "understanding human reality in the world" I mean all that is incorporated by the idea "thinking," over against what is technology, or technological thinking, to be more precise: political, business, educational, familial, church and recreational facilities' relations proceed by non-thought, that is, by non-examination of their own governing assumptions and rules, and their agendas about power and logic. Literature at its best *thinks* what it means to be human. It can *cause* thinking among readers when it is minor, and thoughtless, and simply smashing up against major logic like fast water bangs rocks and boulders up against shores. There is real power in both sorts of literature. One might be called High Sophisticated, and it comes out of a stunning knowledge of major conventions and relations. The other might be called highly unsophisticated and it comes out of a state of non-knowledge and innocence of major conventions and relations. This second sort is powerful by blunder, by childlike, clumsy, indifferent, willful playing with the "priceless" china of master literary conventions and unsaids. These unsaids, really, are the entire and very busy world of (technological, power-relations) deceit that master literature keeps up to convince everyone to believe in its viability as representational of *divine* literature, and *divine* politics, and *divine* moral systems, in short, of divine relations which are contained within the major as if inherently and naturally and necessarily. We all know these "divine categories" are made up, constructions, creations of the imagination, self-protecting *fabuli*. There is nothing true about them. There is nothing correct about them. They are not in a position to *judge* others and others' texts.

thinking²⁰ leader in happy complicity with dominating technology. Deleuze would express this degeneration of any leader as the subjection of the subject to the group so that instead of being a group subject the subject loses his subject status and becomes instead a firmly controlled, non-nomadic member of the subjected group.

The novel's story concerns three homesteading families, the Wiens, the Block, and the Unger, as well as an indigenous Métis family named Moosamin. The year is 1944; the historical moment is the last part of the second world war. The story's theme is the confrontation of Mennonite belief in non-resistance, doctrinal conformity among its members, and politico-religious separateness from the other people in the land, and Canadian nationalism during a period of war. The struggle certain young men from these families undergo in their confrontation with the local community's doctrine of non-resistance, prompted by both their consciousnesses and the animosity of Canadians whose family members have fought and died in this and the previous war, results in the disruption of various of the community's social formations. It experiences the decline of the particular, fairly static,

²⁰An art that plays in order to celebrate is in danger of not thinking the "seriousness" it has intended to waylay and expose. It is in danger of forgetting the problem which moved it in the first place to play and celebrate game and play. It is in danger of not thinking against the spirit of technology, the metaphysics that is technology. All art forms which become caught in a structure which is not at base self-critical, face this danger of the non-thinking.

Important as the economic, social, political, moral, and even religious questions may be which are being discussed in connection with technological labor or handicraft, none of them reach to the core of the matter. That matter keeps itself hidden in the still unthought nature of the way in which anything that is under the dominion of technology has any being at all. And that such matters have remained unthought is indeed first of all due to the fact that the will to action, which here means the will to make and be effective, has overrun and crushed thought. (*What is Called Thinking* 24-25)

Nietzsche, who sees the "wasteland growing" (29) is aware of this problem with language play as non-thought. Yet, language play can also be the very heart of thought, of thinking. Nietzsche's formidable insight into the ethics of pity (*The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals* 154), comes about because of an etymological exploration of the word "good" (162) in various languages. Heidegger, too, who reveres cleanness and precision of expression, refinement to simple and uncluttered thoughts, does so by an endless interest in the connotative encrustations on particular words. Witness his clever analysis of the history of the Greek word for "unconcealing" (*alitheia* [*Parmenides* 10ff), and the Roman word for "dominion" (*imperium* [40]).

hierarchical power structure by which the community has, till then, existed and thriven economically.

In brief, the plot of the story involves the political protest of the sons of three adult members of the community, and one of its daughters. Thom Wiens is one of these. He is a diligent and obedient son who is led by an enlightened and thoughtful school teacher to consider the problems inherent in conscientious objection. The wise, subversive teacher is eventually forced to leave Wapiti because of his non-conformist views. Pete Block, son of Peter Block the local despotic patriarch, is faithfully obedient to his father's teachings until an event involving Miss Razia Tantamont, a beautiful, single female school teacher, brings him to a point of sudden, active resistance to community values. This act of resistance constitutes the book's climax. At this point in the narrative, young Pete, in what we assume is a fit of jealous passion (though there is a curious diegetic elision here concerning the specific motives for the struggle) fights and knocks down the fighter ace Hank Unger. Hank, home on furlough, has been too boldly eyeing Miss Tantamont and commenting on her former reputation in the army camps further east. At the same moment Thom, coming upon the fist fight, suddenly takes the courage of his convictions from those displayed by the actions of his friend. In a nice confrontation between city and country, between good and bad, between serious and sacrilegious, between lascivious and honorable, Thom knocks down Hank's brother Herb who has for years relentlessly teased him about his "cowardice" and his refusal to fight either at home or on the front. This eleventh hour display of resistance, or courage, whichever you wish to call it, breaks Deacon Block's till then indomitable will and leaves him alienated from the site of power in the community. Power relations have shifted in Wapiti at the end of the book, and the plot does not tie up this particular loose end.

What will become of the community now that its views on obedience and pacifism have been assailed from within by its future leaders, now that the hierarchy of power has been publicly problematized?

To all intents and purposes, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* opens like any novel of pioneer life in rural Canada. There is a little school, a teacher's bell clanging, students arriving for the day's classes from the four corners of the municipality, and even, of course, for pleasure's sake, for the sake of diversion from the seriousness of the novel (a seriousness not out of place in a canonical English novel), a couple of boys playing hookey.

The teacher stepped through the door and his bell clanged. When the distant measures of "O Canada" had faded over the tree-tips and the stirring flag on its pole was the only movement near the school, two overalled figures arose from behind a bush on the east hill and ran down its bare face. (9)

These represent to the reader, from the novel's opening pages, the convention of the satirico-comical imbedded in the tragic to make the overall message more palatable. These hookey-players are Edgar in *King Lear*, Mr. Pumblechook in *Great Expectations*, Tom Sawyer in *Huckleberry Finn*.

The novel announces itself thus with this opening lightheartedness to be a conventional non-political English one, but it is far from that. After the significantly brief comical two-page first chapter, Chapter two immediately symbolically announces both its serious and its political intent, already foreshadowed by the fact that the two vagrant boys are not only representative of fun and play but of resistance to the values and laws of the community: "The yellow planes passed overhead swiftly and in thunder" (11). The "yellow" invites, it speaks of the lure of the heroic and the warring. The sun-coloured planes promise in their power and brightness both swift death and

superiority of purpose, a 'God on our side' omnipotence and beauty. Thom is, as others in Wapiti are, torn by these new signs of the technical and spiritual existence of a Canadian nation which have, the novel informs the reader, been revealing themselves to this closed community for the last few years, ever since Canada joined the war effort. Thom is attracted to the planes, to their power, to their speed, to their charmed existence outside the monotonous farm life:

Thom Wiens had heard their growing roar above the scrape of the plow on stones, but the trees hedged them from his sight. Then suddenly, as he twisted on the halted plow to look back, they were over the poplars, flying low and fast. The sense of the horses' sweated trembling was in his rein-clenched hands as he stared the yellow planes out of sight to the north. (11)

Despite his attraction to this power, he does not admit to himself his own ambivalence, made up of part longing for and part abjection at the thought of war. He is fully committed in his beliefs to Mennonite community values:

Fly, you heathen, he was thinking. Fly low, practice your dips and turns to terrify playing children and grandmothers gaunt in their rocking chairs. Practice your hawk-swoops, so you can gun down some equally godless German or bury a cowering family under the rubble of their home. To get paid for killing. To be trained to kill more efficiently. If you shoot down five Germans you get a medal. If you kill twenty at once, you get a Victoria Cross and the King himself shakes your hand. What will you do when all the Germans have been killed and the only work you know is shooting men? Acclaimed murderers everywhere! (11)

Regardless of his beliefs, there is more than a little envy and identification with the airplane pilots. Like many young men in times of war, Thom longs for the excitement both of high technology in war and of standing solidly for a cause and being able to state unequivocally that your side is good and right and that you are saving the country. Such a language of good and right and saving, typically nationalist, implicit in Thom's struggle with his training, even sounds fully Christian. The fervor of Thom's beliefs in 'Mennonitism' is no less zealous than that required by a national subject during a time of war.

Thom is not aware of these ambiguities, however, in his own passionate denunciation of the overflying pilots. The purpose of the planes here is symbolic. They tell us about the essential theme of *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, of its power as art. These symbols do here what symbols do everywhere in the novel, effect a *symbolic* reterritorialization of the Wapiti community, a commitment of the community to be a community when the power of the leader of the religious institution and the leaders of the political institutions are not effective any longer, of which more will be said shortly.

How does the novel present why it is that the community is so dependent on Block? It presents it as a problem between belief and tradition and new challenges which the Canadian soil and society make on these traditions. Two incidents, that of the yellow planes flying overhead and the happiness of Thom Wiens's brother Hal contrasted to his own discontent, and a lengthy mimetic section concerning the specific moral dependence the Wienses have on Peter Block, early on establish the nature of Thom's, and the community's, dilemma.

Thom both likes the flying planes and condemns them at once:

To grow something took a long time, and the machines for it were slow.

There were no machines to pick rocks. But the machines for death were

wind-swift. For a moment he felt he had discovered a great truth, veiled until now: the long growing of life and the quick irrevocableness of death. (11)

The need to love and distrust at the same time characterize Thom's and Mennonite living generally. There is, for the territorial Mennonite, always in everything an imperative to be true and honest, to find truth and honesty somehow, sometimes by honest searching, sometimes by deceit, but always to at least pay lip-service to truth and honesty. In Thom's case, the lip-service form of honesty is not applicable. He legitimately searches. Yet he is confused. The primary feature of Thom's character, in fact, is his confusion over truth. He wishes to accept what his father and the church teach about truth, but he is constantly perplexed by these teachings and feels torn two ways.

His inherited patriarchal (religious and political) values are clear to him. He knows them by heart and longs to fulfill what they require of him, what they require of the group subject.

The heaped rocks recalled him, and he turned to stride rapidly towards the plow. To just stand, thinking! He glanced about, happy for the rugged world that had hidden his dreaming. Pulling his feet up hard with each step, he sensed within himself the strength of his forefathers who had plowed and subdued the earth before him. He, like them, was working out God's promise that man would eat his bread in the sweat of his face, not pushing a button to watch a divine creation blaze to earth. (12)

Hard work allows him and others of his community to forge ahead without thinking. Thom's training tells him that resignation to previous thinking, an acceptance of received wisdom, is proper and good. You don't need to think about the meaning of "in the sweat of his face" since the thinking has been

already done by the Holy Bible and some unknown ancestors who did *that* hard work for you. Still, something in his experience of the moment bothers him and constantly forces him to doubt, if only momentarily, the rules that, after such doubts, he immediately recommits himself to.

Such unchallenged acceptance of rules equips Thom and his fellows poorly for relations in this new land. Preacher Goertzen has taught, for instance, that Mennonites both know more than others in the world, because of "God's Grace" (12), and what they know that others don't know is the true meaning of love. Goertzen preaches this concerning the war and love:

We are to follow Christ's steps, but we do not have pride. By God's Grace we understand what others do not. As we cannot imagine Him lifting a hand to defend himself physically, so we, His followers, conquer only by spiritual love and not by physical force. Always only love: for those who love us, for those indifferent to us, for those who hate us, for those who would kill us, which is the same thing; *all* are included when He says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another even as I have loved you." (12)

We know what love is, Goertzen says, and we must never do anything to compromise that knowledge of love's nature. An obedience to labor in suffering against a resistant earth is the first lesson a Mennonite learns, then, and the second is the prescription, for Christ's sake, to love others. Of course such love means to not kill others in war, as Thom has already told the readers.

Herein, in this double restriction, lies the problem for Thom, a problem which takes him the entire narrative to understand, to face and then attempt to resolve. He is constantly torn two ways. He wishes to believe, but he is driven simultaneously to doubt. This is so, for instance, in the question of love

Goertzen raises, and also in that of work. Labor is fine, Thom acknowledges, and the earth is the enemy he admits, but his construction of what is right differs from the sensations he feels when he is near the earth. What he believes, in other words, and what he feels, oppose each other. "Thom felt the ground warming with expectation, the ripeness of the earth's belly pushing itself up against the steel of the shares" (13).

Such biblically prescribed labor "properly" tears at the earth as if it were the enemy, with "steel" shares which rip at the "ripeness of the earth's belly." The earth is imagined here by the narrator cooperating in the human exertions against her. The shares are the enemy, the violent penetrators of an earth which is really only a gentle and giving, though somewhat masochistic,²¹ entity throughout the book.

Thom senses duplicity in everything though he doesn't define it as such. The text brims, for instance, with the contradiction between old world belief and new world place. In the passage above, as elsewhere, Thom cannot get past his forefathers' teachings in order to understand what it is that the earth really is, generative, productive, maternal, seductive and sexual, seductive against inordinate labor as Herb Unger discovers in his preference for pleasuring in the meadows over suffering behind the plow (76 ff), and as the Indian Two Poles and the Métis Moosamins have always known in their slow

²¹*Peace Shall Destroy Many* presents the earth as if it is her fault somehow that men toil on her. She is both things to young Thom, seductive, gentle and procreative, a woman, but also requiring of him control and violence to maintain her exuberance and to keep her seductive charm at bay. This is the Mennonite farming youth indoctrinated with visions of the corrupt earth which deserves what it gets from the aspiring human spirit, a classical conception equal to anything in Milton or even Plato which teaches that our "Edenic" existence is deceptive. It seduces and charms in order to lure us to spiritual death. We must not submit to its siren beauty and call. Thom betrays his eventual resistance to Mennonite dualistic doctrine here. Even when he later rebels against this classical and authoritative humanistic model of earth's relation to heaven, he still is not committed to a new view which reveres the earth, only to a model which is willing to fight to protect property. This in the classic Miltonic hierarchical universe is modeled for becoming-hierarchic man by the war in heaven in Book Six of *Paradise Lost*. War there, as everywhere in English literature--for instance, Virginia Woolfe's *The Mark on the Wall*--stands for the opposition to maternal, territorial plenty and multiplicity represented by a revered and exuberant earth. War stands for the embracing of monological values which turn always on a model of opposition to generation and of re-inscription of what is apparently, though naively, conceptualized to be a male-driven hierarchy.

and patient ways. To love the earth might not be to labor in and against it so relentlessly. Thom's body understands this better than his head.

When he lay with his face in the sandy loam, arms and legs yearning, he was beyond himself. It seemed to Thom that every man must feel the smallness and the greatness, his face in the dirt when the clouds were sheep with their heads down in the sunshine of the open sky and the larks chanting from their post-perch and the burdened horses nodding their heads to earth with sweat black in straggles down their thighs. Lying there, he felt doubts settle in his mind like mud in the hollows of the spring-soaked land. (13)

This is essentially a generative image. Good bottom land depends on the accumulation of alluvial soil. Here things can grow, in rich soil which forms the land in a slow, peaceful becoming. Growth needs this endless accretion, this slowness, this peace.

But the image also tells of destruction; so in the midst of this reverie about larks and horses and settling mud he is characteristically reminded of humankind's hatred, of the foreigners whom he will never really think of as similar in hatred to Canadians:

The earth holding him, he thought. If only there were enough trees and hills and rocks in all Saskatchewan or all Canada or even all the world to hide us from a Hitler who has tasted power like a boar's first gulp of warm blood. (13)

"We are good, they are bad," Thom's reflection implies, much like his knowledge tells him that the earth is bad, work is good. Precisely in these assumptions, however, Mennonite consciousness is not adequate to deal with the new place they have recently occupied.

This consciousness is not adequate, as Thom gradually learns in the course of the narrative, because it makes thoughtless assumptions about what is and what is not worthy. It makes assumptions about the false and the true in the first place, and in this already it makes a leap which proves treacherous for them and others. If the Mennonites could have left their beliefs at home when they came over to this land they would have been better equipped to deal with the realities they make contact with and violently misunderstand. Not knowing this, not willing, of course, to abandon their till then hard-earned faith and beliefs, they do untold damage to their new place and its earlier inhabitants, as Wiebe's novel takes pains to illustrate.

Mennonite consciousness, Mennonite belief imported from Europe and Russia, is somehow blind to the worth of the Indians who live here already when the foreigners arrive and who for the most part benignly share their land with these newcomers. These newcomers, however, are tyrants, terrorists, grabbers for themselves of whatever they see and walk on. Indians, to Wiebe's Mennonites, are loafers who just spend their time aimlessly in and not at work on the land's forests and grasslands. To Block and the citizens of Wapiti, all shiftless people must be "bought out" and moved off such valuable land. "If it's not productive, it's not being properly husbanded," is a Mennonite truism which the following description of Wapiti relations to local Indian and Métis people makes plain.

Unable to imagine Canadian natives as fellow subjects, as fellow humans, the inhabitants of Wapiti, including Thom, speak of them as a nuisance to be adroitly expressed from their holdings:

...but to the highway on the east, Poplar Lake on the west, and to the Indian reservation across the Wapiti River to the north, all around the Mennonite settlement lay virgin sections, heavily wooded, enough for

children's children. And there would be more, when the last breeds were bought out. (21)

Heavily coded biblically, this passage combines all the elements which make western literature symbolically complex: sex, family, the aesthetic imagination, place, and ethnic specificity: sex in "virginity" (with its ironic, duplicitous understanding of and alacritous artistic application to the density of the novel of "virgin" to reflect what Mennonites are most fearful of, what they work to escape from, what they work to control in the land, what they destroy by trying to master, what they teach and preach incessantly about and against, and so on), 'the heavy woods' of the rife German imagination, a particular group of Wapiti Mennonites in a particular location in central Canada, the Abramic family in "children's children" (with its overdetermining symbolic value, in the original Hebraic story, of colonialization and procurement thus by divine promise of land and wealth, and a reason for the sustaining of a war mentality to protect all these classical markers of a nation's wealth).

More important than and yet part of its symbolic value, however, the passage shows us how poorly Mennonites think (as all minor groups, all subjected groups have trouble thinking their blindneses and their privileges) about the connections between the Bible's truths and the translation of these truths into action in the new land. Thom is no exception. He is as confused and as unable to think these connections as anyone else. The novel helps us to think through the dilemma of preaching love and non-resistance, while coercing the Indians and Métis off their traditional lands. Without the novel, however, without the aid of art, the major does not see its own untruth. Without ever understanding this problem of hating the Indians whose land the Mennonites are stealing, the novel manages to at least challenge the poor thinking that Mennonites have been willing to put up with in their argument for peace in

their communities, for non-resistance in each country to which they wander. Thom resists Block's tyranny in the end, but even then does not properly understand the way that the entire lifestyle in which the Mennonites have been engaged in the new land is a violent and aggressive one, an appropriation from the people who were kind to them and whom they force from their homeland. Their violence against the territorial pre-Canadians is as indifferent to human suffering as that which forces people in Poland, Germany and Austria from their homelands in the particular war this novel constructs for its readers. In other words, the same people who through active non-resistance resist the ills of war, one of which is the unfair dispossession of people from their territory, are blind to their own equally callous uprooting of and alienation of Indians and Métis from their traditional territories.

Art's reterritorializing is material. That is, it brings about a new understanding in its audience not through a tidal, spiritual tugging which remolds what is there already of the spirit, but which comes about textually. Mennonite Canadians, reading this novel, or hearing about it, are reconstructed by it. They have something added on to themselves, have a new discourse inadvertently glued to the surfaces of themselves, to their subjectivity, that is. From the time of this novel on, they are no longer able to think of the Second World War, non-resistance, rural communal living, patriarchy, and utopian Diaspora ever again in the old territorial ways. Capitalism deterritorializes them, shifting and disjoining their social (moral, religious) formations. The novel reterritorializes what has been disturbed and wrecked. It brings about a new group understanding, and, in fact, a new series of groups. In this case, the taxonomy of groups of legitimate Mennonites will now include that one which claims to find some sort of or some level of fighting and violence permissible within its Christian coding system, within its

semiotic system. Mennonite politics, Mennonite religion, that is, from now on will always have to address what was before not within them to address--the question of the rights of Indians and Mennonite violence, and the question of the logic of the non-resistance position.

These are entirely material constructions. They are seen by the community as spiritual ones, ones which God has sent them to ponder and to resolve, but they are only and fully constructed and have nothing to do, of course, with the will of the cosmos, or that of a creator somewhere outside of the creator Rudy Wiebe who first writes these concerns and so reshapes, remakes, recreates, remolds, re-construes the Mennonite imagination and the Mennonite view of and perception of "soul" and "spirit"--*Peace Shall Destroy Many* is a genealogical hotspot in Mennonite "history": at the exact moment of its writing something material forever records and thus shapes and changes how a particular minor group has materially seen its coding systems and how it materially sees them afterward. A particularly intense moral moment--that short space of time in which the materiality of the moral structures of a group are made suddenly and irrevocably visible--leaps into subjectivity and into language with the becoming of this text. With this text's production. In short, what this Mennonite group will take as that great spiritual moment when God taught it its own blindness about Indians and the war, is in fact the sudden material moment of this semiotic production entitled *Peace Shall Destroy Many*.

Foucault would say that the body of the Mennonite has had a new layer of technology added to it, imprisoning it for the foreseeable future.²² Wiebe's

²²Michel Foucault conceives of the Cartesian body as hidden by the soul, by technologies. The modern body is neither spontaneous nor disposable any longer the way it had always been for all of human history under regency. Now, since the seventeenth century, the body has become the valuable site of the inscription of countless discourses on it, and these discourses constitute an imprisoning "soul," so to speak.

This is the historical reality of this soul, which, unlike the soul represented by Christian theology, is not born in sin and subject to punishment, but is born rather out of methods of punishment,

text, that is, rewrites Mennonite spirituality. The material gets subverted by the system into a new spiritual understanding, a new spirituality. Wiebe is God's little helper if the *future* state of the Mennonite territory, changed and shifted by his material efforts, is taken into account. Wiebe adds a new discourse to those already existing proving God's hand in Mennonite history. His new discourse dramatically again proves for the deterritorialized Mennonite, the reterritorializing power of God: "God will and does stretch His hand into our lives and reshapes our understanding and our wills when we have been wrong too long," the pulpit interprets, as do the religious colleges (Canadian Mennonite Bible College, for instance, as well as the Clearbrooke Bible College and the Prairie Bible Institute). 'God works in our lives,' in other words, is the *effect* of his book on Mennonite self-consciousness. So much for the hope for positive historic change from a material quarter; but so much also for the knowledge that the material is the root of change and reterritorializing. Wiebe doesn't know what affects he encodes. Material production is thought; and the material is theorized in the course of this thesis.

Wiebe, the discursive subject, at the time of writing is able to consider only the particular political and minor status of his Mennonite group caught up in the problem of non-resistance during the second world war. He imagines a specific problem concerning Mennonite relations with prairie Indians, but not the discourse which will make the Indian a "landowner," or a "city-

supervision and constraint. This real, non-corporal soul is not a substance; it is the element in which are articulated the effects of a certain type of power and the reference of a certain type of knowledge, the machinery by which the power relations give rise to a possible corpus of knowledge, and knowledge extends and reinforces the effects of this power. On this reality-reference, various concepts have been constructed and domains of analysis carved out: psyche, subjectivity, personality, consciousness, etc.; on it have been built techniques and discourses, and the moral claims of humanism. But let there be no misunderstanding: it is not that a real man, the object of knowledge, philosophical reflection or technical intervention, has been substituted for the soul, the illusion of the theologians. The man described for us, whom we are invited to free, is already in himself the effect of a subjection much more profound than himself. The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body. (*Discipline and Punish* 30)

dweller," or a "businessman," or "someone who has become a boss over his former usurping Mennonite neighbor," and so on. Over the years, Wiebe has continued to work with the question of the Indian and his original place in Canada, coming up with new discourses that we might add to those petty few which already exist here, most of them problematic ones of the sort Terry Goldie theorizes in *Fear and Trembling: The Image of the Aborigine in Canadian, Australian and New Zealand Literature*. What Wiebe manages to do, however, which is most significant, which is politically effective, is to break through the constraints which keep Mennonites from writing, constraints intended to keep a certain politico-religious system in place and unchallenged.

Barthes says about danger and writing and systems:

Any detention is a system: a bitter struggle exists within this system, not to get free of it (this was beyond Sade's power), but to break through its constraints. A prisoner for some twenty-five years of his life, Sade in prison had two fixations: outdoor exercise and writing, which governors and ministers were continually allowing and taking away from him like a rattle from a baby. (*Sade Fourier Loyola* 182)

To write is to be dangerous to the system. To do art, to write fiction or poetry as a Mennonite, is to be dangerous to at least Mennonite order. It is also, however, to be dangerous to all orders and groups because it forces a reconsideration of how these groups interrelate and what their politics' hidden agendas and violence and secrets are. It seems as if this dangerousness to systems is especially true of minor literature. Why? The evidence is there for us all to easily see every day. The writing for television, the art which sustains popular media and which appeals to the imaginations of the major group, is writing which is not dangerous to systems but sustaining of them. Such

popular writing, over against *minor* art, never challenges existing relations or existing moral structures (which are in reality the existing political and social structures). On this principle, Barthes quotes an eighteenth-century reader of Sade:

Justine is a work as dangerous as the royalist newspaper *Le Nécessaire*, because if republics are founded on courage, they are upheld by morality; destruction of the latter always leads to the destruction of empires. (*Sade* 178)

Deleuze argues something similar in the major/minor literature context in *Kafka* :

When Kafka indicates that one of the goals of a minor literature is the "purification of the conflict that opposes father and son and the possibility of discussing that conflict," it isn't a question of an Oedipal phantasm but of a political program. "Even though something is often thought through calmly, one still does not reach the boundary where it connects up with similar things, one reaches the boundary soonest in politics, indeed, one even strives to see it before it is there, and often sees this limiting boundary everywhere....What in great literature goes on down below, constituting a not indispensable cellar of the structure, here takes place in the full light of day, what is there a matter of passing interest for a few, here absorbs everyone no less than as a matter of life and death." (*Kafka* 17)

Anyone who has thought about the connection between moral systems and the existing orders of the state, of the major, knows how difficult it is to read popular fiction and to watch television. Art, writing--by which I mean that art and writing which thinks, which challenges systems and breaks through (moral) constraints--reterritorializes via the materiality of its text, the writing

utensils, the words, the paper, the social realities, and so on, all visibly employed to undercut the "spiritual" presumptions of the privileged, the major, group.

What had been developed in Russia as a way of dealing with place and people no longer holds here in Canada with equal effect. In fact, the Mennonite Russian ways are virtually useless here, especially as they are handed down by law and prescription and not a product of experience or the subject's individual construction.

Block is as we can see above a despot. He is the despotic ruler of the fictional Mennonite community of Wapiti set in the early to mid nineteen hundreds. He is a religious and political despot and the state over which he presides is a despotic state. He is the authority who reminds the Mennonites of their heritage. Joseph, Thom and Peter are productions of the new land and actively resist Block's authority, reluctantly at first, and finally with full conviction. They show the community by their questioning and ultimately by their actions how narrow, outmoded and inadequate its thinking has been and where new values are needed. Thom has felt early on in the novel that the wrong values were controlling the voices of the group. When Joseph is questioned about his reasons for teaching Sunday School in English at a local picnic, the first time such a travesty has occurred in the memory of the German-speaking communities, he is ruthlessly and coldly misjudged and excommunicated from the church. Here is Thom's reflection on the community's absent/vacant values:

There was a rustle as Joseph arose for the last time. Beyond his own numbed incapacity, there welled in Thom the overwhelming feeling that something of immense value was being abused here. As if Joseph's beliefs were being used to coerce him into the virtue of asking

forgiveness where there was nothing to forgive. Only two from the back benches had supported the teacher; there was no further sound now. (62)

The very stature of the judging "brotherhood"²³ and their waiting attitude in the church as Joseph is about to reply tells the story of their deceit and impassivity. If he asks for forgiveness he is a member in good standing. So vital is the lie to the solidarity of this group, and likely to that of all large groups. Only in the complicity of lies and secrecy accepted as truth can the group persist as a group without change:

Thom could see before him, erect and half-turned to Joseph, waiting: Rempel's face ham-like, Block's sharp and clean as a knife, Reimer's gleaming head, Pa hopeful, pen poised; the younger men, Ernst, young Franz, Pete, the Rempel twins beyond, had their eyes hard on their shoes. (62)

But where will such reformation as that begun by Thom, Pete and Joseph, once it has begun, come to an end? Does it mean the disintegration of the community? The answer lies in the description of the conflict itself, in its being made public, in the self-analysis which puts the problem up to the light for all to see, including the problem of the reformationist impulse itself. In other words, the novel as a work, introspective, somewhat objective and impartial, analyzing the conflict between the community's values and the deterritorializing forces in the world which assail these values, the novel which writes the story of this struggle against traditions and the overthrowing of them, acts as a way of creating new community spirit. It resists both the destructive territorial coding and the equally destructive overcoding of the

²³"Brotherhood" is a name by Mennonites for that body of church men who make decisions about the propriety of the behavior of various members and who have the power of excommunication. In Low German this group is called the *browdashoft*.

state, in a sort of recoding which temporarily allows a new group to gather around the memory of territorial values and the prospects for the continuing future of the group based not on an idea of permanence, but on an idea of and temporary acceptance of impermanence--that is, based on a shift in and acceptance of the shift in (and the shifting nature of) all codes/values. In effect, art allows it to accept as currency a set of values based not on values but the memory of values: values once, values once again some time in the future, values now only the temporary lack of values which *this group* has at present, which once was a value-added group.

Art as an institution brings together the people whom religion and political action had discouraged and left feeling bereft of purpose and cohesion, bereft, that is, of a sense of group unity. Basically, this summary of the story above, of Thom and Pete and their resistance to Peter Block, is the story of how minor art can reterritorialize a community when the religious and political institutions have failed to do so. The story by Rudy Wiebe, though it reterritorializes, is not thought of as being effective in those words by the author. His work shares, with other minor literature, a tendency to and a wish to explain what is a matter of passion and ardor for him, a confusion in the world that is vital and valuable to him, but which the rest of the world, the world of major literature as he imagines it, is likely both unaware of and indifferent to. He simply writes what he knows and has close to his heart. He writes the dispositions inculcated in him²⁴ by his habitus, a habitus unfamiliar

²⁴Pierre Bourdieu's socio-linguistic model of class relations and taste bases its understanding of power on notions of the "habitus": the habitus is that environment within which subjects are inculcated with dispositions pertinent to a certain social class. His important speculations on linguistic capital exemplify this model:

The distinctiveness of symbolic domination lies precisely in the fact that it assumes, of those who submit to it, an attitude which challenges the usual dichotomy of freedom and constraint. The 'choices' of the habitus (for example, using the 'received' uvular 'r' instead of the rolled 'r' in the presence of legitimate speakers) are accomplished without consciousness or constraint, by virtue of the dispositions which, although they are unquestionably the product of social determinisms, are also constituted outside the spheres of consciousness and constraint. The propensity to reduce the search for causes to a

to the world of major literature. Focusing on these dispositions then, with a detail and a clarity and an intensity that major literature would never dream of applying to its own dispositions,²⁵ Wiebe inadvertently writes a minor work which has the effect of both interesting the major world and of changing it as profoundly as it has changed (via new reform and new cohesion of the threatened group) that world which perceives itself as a minor one, one might say as a group which has, like all minor groups, perceived itself as a marginalized one.

The small group, one among many, rubbing shoulders with what everyone knows is *the* big group, effectively, because of its self-analysis, is honest. It is honest because it makes an *honest* analysis of its own dispositions. I say "honest" not in the sense of finality of truth but of a deliberate application of sight and thought to its true and fragile existence now, rather than of a deliberate avoidance of its true existence now that characterizes major works and the seeing that is not seeing. This honest analysis of its own dispositions powerfully rips off the blinders of the big group concerning its own dispositions and their *historical* status. Not able to presume on the permanence and universality of its dispositions and of its habitus, the big group interacts in new and active ways with a group which till now it judged simply as smaller, more naive, and so inferior. The new is brought to the major group by the spirited, honest description of the details of the politico-communal formations of the small.

search for responsibilities makes it impossible to see that *intimidation*, a symbolic violence which is not aware of what it is (to the extent that it implies no *act of intimidation*) can only be exerted on a person predisposed (in his habitus) to feel it, whereas others will ignore it. (*Language and Symbolic Power* 51)

²⁵Thomas Hardy, for instance, becomes major, though he also questioned the linguistic system which inculcated particular dispositions for certain subjects based on class. He initially operated outside the accepted/official literary language, but later entered the canon after affecting changes in English.

The generalization might be made that a surplus, a site of newness, characterized mainly by the mutual deterritorialization of social formations, exists at the voluptuous (that is the wide and inclusive) border where many smaller groups gather and interact and make much contact. It is as if the master, watching the slave's apparent courageous demise at his own hands, as a result of an honest self-examination of motives and dispositions, recognizes his own slave status--how he is a slave of his own blindness--and reluctantly, over time, the great and apparently permanent confidence that before was his greatest asset and power, now is made forever aware of itself and unable to treat those who were his slaves as slaves in the same indifferent way as before. The master is made *new* by the inward-looking peregrinations and autobiographical honesty of the slave. He is shown the blackness of his own heart that before was not perceived by him to be a blackness. Peter Block's actual sudden decline into a terrible self-awareness (and he is propelled to that knowledge by his contact with the "minor" world views of Pete and Thom) is in small within the novel the affect on a grand scale which minor art manages to accomplish through its vulnerable struggling and suffering within sight of the community at large.

The "major" disposition of Peter Block presents itself as an unwillingness to the point of anality to reveal his own motives, history, faults and agendas. The "minor" dispositions of Thom, on the other hand, express themselves in their pain at not any longer understanding or believing in the "major." The "major" dispositions with its hegemonic requirements and codes no longer fit this group subject comfortably and this discomfort expresses itself as the eventual full resistance to (as opposed to the revelation of) the secrecy that sustains all major codes. That is why the prominent aesthetics in any age is built on and sustaining of, as it is sustained and permanently made

consumable by, a profound secrecy. Any art, any aesthetic, which proceeds by anti-secrecy strategies cannot ever be representative of the major. It cannot be the divine poetics of the English group, the major group, the "moral" and moralizing group. Block, when the greediness of, the cowardice, the thoughtlessness of and the now inadequacy of his dispositions is exposed, bows his head and has to be led away by those he once led.

The Deacon bowed his scarred grey head to his hands, and the men of Wapiti community, Métis and Mennonite, standing in an old bar, heard the sobs of a great strong man, suddenly bereft, and broken. They heard, terrified....Block had been led away by Pastor Lepp, with Pete following silently. (236-37)

The major group's dispositions, much like Block's dispositions, are sustained by secrecy and broken²⁶ by the honest, self-analytical resistance to secrecy that the surplus of groups at the border inadvertently represents.²⁷

Thom, announcing to all what his uncertainties are, the fragility of his politics, assumes that his enemy's secrets are not so formidable and confronts him openly. He fights both major received wisdom and the major impudence and arrogance of Herb Unger's factionalism. Thom exposes himself to public scrutiny in a way he could never do before. He shows signs of wishing to in, for instance, the scene with Block where he takes the courage to ask him about Sunday School teaching and about the death of Elizabeth ("Elizabeth told me herself that day" 208). Thom practices such an "honest" self-analysis again when he admits that the brotherhood's position against Joseph deceives the community and indulges its fear of change and thought:

²⁶The major is broken, only to become new by this breaking, it might be remembered that I am arguing.

²⁷Secrecy needs some clarification as I use it. Secrecy is a willful blindness to, and complicity in, vehicular language's steady pattern of deterritorialization and reterritorialization which, for its own hegemonic purposes, affects a breakdown of communal formations.

As the deep voices about him echoed 'Amen,' his mind could only dully comprehend that in all the talking that evening, no one had disposed of any of Joseph's questions. They had not even been considered. (63)

Thom eventually stands up to the enemy, to secrecy hiding a fear of change and of exposure which necessarily would be the exposure of political and by now social weakness. Thom, in other words, chooses finally to act in what Deleuze would call the effective impulse of the minor within himself, within what has been the stagnation and secrecy and stasis of the rules of the major. These blockages, this Mennonite morality, is meant to contain and to protect for fear of change, but also because no one has yet found a way of abandoning these particular Mennonite morals and rules without the simultaneous abandonment of the possibility of the group. Thom, fighting his enemy, refuses to be determined by the overcoding of the Mennonite theocratic state and ushers in, with this refusal, the possibility of a new, revitalized Mennonite group which will now be made of those who still cling to the old ways and precepts, and those who like himself find the energy and inertia to move toward a new state in the future based on this act of courage and exposure.

To announce your politics as Thom does, as Wiebe does in this novel, and as the major work rarely does, is to announce your constructedness. It is to announce that you are fragile, changeable though desirous of not having to change any more than is necessary to achieve certain political ends, easily manipulated, full of the drive necessary for resisting utter change (utter deterritorialization), living in daily temporary shelter, surviving on energy and determination alone and not on the great strength of your politics: in other words, it is to announce the strength of the group to survive, not to rule, to go on with the revolution despite declining numbers of subjects, not to continue

to dominate by sheer mass superiority and divine right to rule as if your *politics* were somehow better and infinitely competent and not in need of exposure. Such an hegemonizing disposition stems from the secret, thus, because it says that the group's strength lies in its not putting up to public scrutiny the machinics (a technical term of Deleuze and Guattari's) of its rule (majority) so that to all appearances, to all the hungry minor groups, the major group, at ease with the vehicular language, seems solidly in control and not in an assailable fortress. The secret provides the protection from discovery of the weakness within--of the minor within the heartland.

Thom as subject constructed in part as Mennonite, announcing his politics in honest ways, more honest than the ways of Peter Block who represents the overcoded territorial state, decodes that state and prepares for the reorganization of the community of Wapiti into a changed and revitalized community. The morality to which it held for so long under Peter Block cannot any longer remain invincible for all its group subjects. The community will still remain Mennonite by name, and will, despite the profound changes brought about by Thom's act of self-surveillance, consider itself eventually again as a territorial group with legitimate ties to an older territoriality of rules and laws, that is, an older coded territory. It will have been reterritorialized and made new with the implicit--and dangerous if thought about too closely--knowledge of the impermanence of the moral laws which sustain its institutions.

Thinking would destroy community. Community survives because it forgets so soon and so fully the temporality of its codes. Not thinking this temporality, it stands as a unit when it has just been decapitated. Thought leads to the permanent abandonment by the individual of the group. Power--that is, thought--leads to the reassessment of groups and their ultimate ruin and full

heterogeneity. Thankfully for groups, for the socius (recording device which maps out changes in communities and ensures, in this mapping, this placing the community in the way of history, its cohesion), secrecy and non-thought--that is, power relations--always prevail and community continues.

Thinking would destroy community because secrecy gives community adherence to the large unit. Secrecy--which is a type of forgetting--means that the temporality, and therefore the constructedness, of the rules by which the group operates, which make for its cooperation as group subjects to create a sustained subjected group, privilege certain segments of the group and keep others underprivileged. That is, secrecy makes for a policy of restraint applicable to the spirit and activities of the average group subject. The ordinary group subject willingly lives with less (linguistic and so economic) capital because he is trained/determined by the dispositions of his habitus that his class of citizen, his particular subjective status, has made him incapable of either earning the capital that the more privileged ones have, or undeserving of such privilege, or even unable to make good use of more capital if it should become available to him. In this way, when the reader considers Bourdieu's claim against a system in which the underprivileged are complicit in the violence done them by the system, Thom, though bitten with the uneasiness of the special privilege Block enjoys,²⁸ thinks of him as do the others as a man of greater wisdom and so deserving of greater respect.

Block enjoys, thus, because of such deferential treatment, respect capital, linguistic capital (he advises and governs by a language familiar to himself which the others only partially have available to themselves) and economic capital (Block's farm always flourishes partly as a result of others

²⁸Thom's father reflects on what Block has meant to Wapiti: "For Wiens, as for his third son, there was one rock in the whirlpool of the Canadian world. They were both thinking of him at the same time. Deacon Peter Block" (20).

being willing to help him in hard times because they owe him allegiance from the early days of the community when he helped many who were penniless establish their homesteads). He has a special capital of privilege, even though, as the reader gradually discovers, he is a violent man in a community which deplores violence.

There are many examples of the violence Block has done to others both in Russia, where he is responsible for hoarding food and causing the starvation death of a poor family, and where in a fit of rage he beats a Cossack peasant to death, as well as in Canada where he intends to kill Louis, the lover of Elizabeth, and where he ruthlessly dispossesses the Indian people from their land.²⁹

There are other ways of speaking of the sociological implications of this novel, how the novel helps us to think about Mennonites, the minor status of Mennonite art, and the specific effect of Mennonite art on the major English art traditions within which it writes. In the case of a traditional Mennonite community, these two institutions are the same. Block, both religious and

²⁹A disturbing parallel can be drawn between the Mennonites making room for themselves as a people--as a subjected group--here on the prairies of central Canada by dispossessing the Indians and the Métis, and the classic German longing for *lebensraum*. The privileges which the major assumes for itself it does because it believes it is more deserving, not naturally but because of a willing adherence to certain morals and beliefs. It sees the Indian indifference to particular beliefs as a sign of godlessness and therefore as something to be wiped out as if "God" would not care for subjects of his who did not live by the virtues Mennonite codes had established. These codes, conveniently for them here on earth, are codes established in heaven and available to anyone who has the will, energy, stick-to-it-iveness, and industry to adopt as his own. Privilege, thus, is always a product of belief. Privilege is always unthought. It is not thought through. When it is thought through, then it is seen to be a matter of belief--that is a constructed subjective position--and so, if there is goodness in the ones doing violence to the underprivileged and the suffering, it would have to be for these bad/good ones a mandate to change, and changing, to share privilege. Privilege can only be sustained over time if it is hidden from the whole group as being privilege, including the ones benefiting the most by it and orchestrating its sustaining codes. Secrecy maintains privilege and is a willful and trained forgetting. Forgetting is part of the habitus of the subjected group. Forgetting without remembering is non thought. Thinking, as I have said, is dangerous to systems of privilege and memory. Non thought memorializes; thought destroys memorials. Thought is *not* wanted by the political and religious institutions because thought makes these institutions recall their constructed histories, that is their genealogies of constructions, and thus relinquish privilege and systems of secrecy. The major never thinks; the minor thinks in order to challenge the hegemony which keeps them from permanence and inordinate privilege. The purposes of the minor are essentially self-serving and it is thus, in principle, no more powerful or thoughtful than the major. Thought on the part of the minor is not altruistic, but temporarily self-revealing for purposes of obtainment of privilege.

political leader of Wapiti, has arrived at the place in his long hegemonic control of the thought and action of the group he has subjected, in both senses of the word (oppressed and constructed according to his understanding of the Bible and his own despotic agenda), where his tenure and leadership are about to be challenged and successfully opposed. That is in the novel's future, however, and constitutes its main hermeneutic thrust. For now it is enough to say that this novel, standing for a third institution, that of art, attempts through intense symbolism to bring about a reterritorialization of community which religion and politics are on the verge of destroying. If it is not exactly destruction they cause. They cause a deterritorialization of the cohesive group by the outmodedness, harshness, sterility and unreliability of their laws and regulations. Now the time has come to inspire the failing community with another and very powerful social structure, as I have said. The novel has the potential to hold up to the minor community new avenues for escape from the destruction they witness around them in the guise of broken religious laws and inept political practices. Thom, coming after Joseph in questioning the community's understanding of the biblical call to pacifism, contributes to the razing of the ineffectual politico-religious institutions as Wiebe contributes to a new vision for the community, based on questioning the old regulations and beliefs. The novel, with its narrative of struggle and final victory, is saying to all Mennonite readers, "Listen to my story. You all have a problem which needs addressing. The community is being destroyed by the deceitfulness of your religious leaders, by the Peter Blocks in your villages, and the question of our Mennonite responsibility to the outer and larger community must be not only addressed, but presented as a serious and important issue."

Chapter Three

"More wild oats and mustard than the neighbors":

Canadian Mennonite Desiring-production

and Honest Hypocrisy in Armin Wiebe's

The Salvation of Yasch Siemens

Armin Wiebe's *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* tells us of Mennonite Canadians' desiring-production.³⁰ Despite the apparent spirituality of Mennonites, it says, they are really as deeply committed to the material as anyone. The strong materiality of Mennonites is the novel's most important construction. Wiebe, aware of the materiality--the affective qualities--of the text, writes in a highly material, discursive style on the topic of the materiality of Mennonites. This combination of style and subject bring about a reterritorialization of English Mennonite Canadians around this forgotten historical fact, the forgotten fact that once Mennonites were much more accepting of corporeality than they now are. That corporeality is still there in them, constructed as we all are by our pasts, but it has been obscured by a recent and body-denying spirituality which successfully hides the history of the body from the community and teaches a hypocrisy which is labeled truth. This is the line of reasoning that the reader of *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* is left with, though it is never stated theoretically, as such. This line of reasoning reveals itself to the reader

³⁰All things in the world desire each other, desiring-production as a theory says. In a social material world, as opposed to a world dominated by metaphysics, desiring-production would determine relations between people, animals, plants and inanimate objects. In a desiring-production context, one object's desire for another and its subsequent behavior is determined not by moral but by material considerations. All objects, according to desiring-production, are machines which are plugged into other machines with desire flowing between and around them. This latter is Deleuze's definition of desiring-production (*Anti-Oedipus* 6). Strictly speaking, our western world, dominated by metaphysics as it has been for almost ever is, of course, also fully of and within desiring-production.

because of the two-tiered structure of the novel: one, the book's main body, and two, the book's ending, by which I mean its last few chapters.

An analyst of the novel might well conclude, as I will later argue, that Armin Wiebe's narrative strategies seem in the end to spiritualize what has till then been a material text about a material community of Mennonite Canadians. This self-resistance is an important quality of the novel, but Wiebe's real achievement is his presentation of the Mennonite community in its "reality," as Deleuze would call it, referring to its corporeality: its flows and motions and differences which are always myriad and unrecordable in their entirety. This "reality" which Wiebe thoughtfully records in part in the novel, would be the Mennonite subjected group's "true" values, its "thought," by which I mean (as Heidegger does) its multiplicity,³¹ which is always material, rather than its singularity, harmony, unity, or any other desire which designates an agreement of the sort that erases difference and binds subjects to a theory of non-resistance and to group-held values. Group-held values are commonly spiritual values and spiritual values usually have a hidden agenda. They subject its members to acceptance of ideas and modes of behavior which do not resist its power structures. The spiritual in a Mennonite Canadian society is hegemonic, a sort of forcefulness which is binding to the individual.

Mennonite Canadians don't know themselves very well. They've been trained to not know themselves very well, though they neurotically as a community think about themselves, see themselves (a sign, of course, of fear of discovery and of being discovered). They are not nearly as conscious of who they are as they proclaim. In the novel, Yasch's mother,

³¹Multiplicity is, as I said earlier, what Martin Heidegger, in *What is Called Thinking*, calls "strict thought."

for instance, changes drastically when Yasch finally leaves home. It is as if he never knew her. Suddenly she is eating small, healthy vegetarian meals and traveling around in a slightly cosmopolitan way. She has discovered how she has been constructed by others to be a church-loving, politically correct, Mennonite farmer's wife whose concern is entirely for raising her children and fostering in them a commitment to the church and the peculiar God she has been trained to believe in. She dispenses with belief and the need for it in the end and marks out the path toward the subject's understanding of himself as constructed and so outside of permanence, unity, harmony, order, endless acceptance of those means by which power structures and "blockages" keep its group subjects subjected.

Self-deluded, Canadian Mennonites often announce bravely this or that as their belief and their opinion, but careful thought on the part of a listener tells him that committed spirituality the belief is not and does not either reflect or foster. The bravado may well hide a desire for "true" and authentic spirituality, or an inculcated disposition to make the claimed and announced spiritual-motive the highest virtue. "I do this or that for this spiritual reason," or "I know God wants me to do this or that," or "God reached out and saved our car from this or that accident," or "We prayed to Jesus and he sent a miracle and made Tina well," or any one of a thousand versions of this claim to spiritual living and to special intercession from above, as if their world is truly one lived in resistance to the body and in special, personal self-denial for the sake of the abundance of the spirit. The constant direct and indirect acclaiming of the real spiritual nature of all of the affects of "real" desire by the Mennonite subject of his intentions and hopes tell about his territorial codings more than about his personal commitment to the ideals of the spiritual lifestyle.

The claim to spiritual living always has that in it of the theater, of knowing that it is making absurd claims and so has to speak louder and speak as a group to continue to believe its own words. It requires the group, requires, that is, others standing around nodding vigorously, and saying "yes," or "amen," or "I had a similar experience myself recently. My Johnny fell out of the car on the highway and I just closed my eyes and prayed and when I looked up out of the window he was walking toward me in the rearview mirror." And everyone listening has to add some sort of confirmation to the communication being made to let on he has been communicated to and that he fully supports the belief position of the vaunting subject. Always a simple (though violent, as we know from Bourdieu and Derrida and Foucault) belief, always a grave agreement about the spiritual group value.

A spiritual lifestyle would be manifest in the successful denial of the body. Of the material. The opposite seems true for Mennonite Canadians. Instead of a denial of the body and of things material, Mennonites of all people, of all groups, may well be the most material and the least spiritual. It seems likely, and I would hypothesize, that Mennonites are among the least spiritual and the most materialist (moved by and acting exclusively on the needs and desires of objects for each other--that more than a will to spirit they are characterized by a will to the material) people on the face of the earth. I have never seen a more profoundly, aggressively, exuberantly material people. What Steinbachers are to the successful production of the sales of automobiles, Mennonites are in general to the vigorous and incessant production and consumption of goods and services. Bakhtin, in his analysis of Rabelais in *Rabelais and His World*, describes a carnivalesque, earthy and carnal model of medieval festivity. Wiebe

likewise represents the high carnality of what seems like a typical Mennonite Canadian prairie community of the 1950's (though curiously slated as that of one in the 1980's). Though Wiebe's novel is theoretically influenced by Bakhtin's analysis of Rabelais and carnival, I intend to analyze its narrative of false spirituality (or spiritualist bravado) in terms of Deleuze and Guattari's idea of desiring-production. My description of the nexus between the spiritual and the material in modern Mennonite Canadians, and a provision by the text of solutions for many of the problems that a general lack of the spiritual and a prevalent hypocritical marriage to (not just accommodation of) the material generates, will provide again evidence of the "minor" status of Wiebe's writing. Desiring-production among Mennonite Canadians, and Wiebe's symbolic reterritorialization of "true" or spiritual community values will be the double focus of this examination.

Yasch Siemens is a poor "orphan" boy who by relentless industry, elbow grease, ingenuity, and an indomitable drive to succeed pulls himself up by his bootstraps. The tale of Yasch Siemens is, in other words, a classic rags to riches story. Yasch grows up in the village of Gutenthal with his *mutachi*, as doughty and salt-of-the-earth backwoods farming mother as you'll find anywhere. Yasch's father has long since "went dead" on a trip to Mexico where he "clawed out" (*oot je clevft*--escaped) to. He dies of a knife in the back from a jealous husband/lover of the "Spanish" girl he has been driving around in his convertible over there. This is the story of his father Yasch has been told by his mother, but he has little else to go on in his attempt to piece together his father's life and character. *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* is in regards to these details a conventional archetypal "quest for the father" novel. Yasch has questioned his mother about having

to do women's work, hoping she will stand by his intent not to wash dishes at home, a chore he calls women's work which his wife Oata should do. He discovers that his father washed dishes himself in times of emergency:

I try to reckon out when I ever saw my Futtachi wash dishes or cook something and I'm thinking through when I was young and the things I can remember about my dad and all I can remember is about the time me and him cut pigs together. (156)

He "gribbles" for a long while about when it might have been that his father actually did this "women's work," and the sudden realization of its exact place and time comes to him connected with the tragic absence of other siblings in the family:

...and that was when Futtachi washed dishes. He didn't leave them for Muttachi to do when she got home. Even a few days later when Muttachi came home and there was no baby along and Futtachi said the hospital didn't have one fixed ready for us and Muttachi just went to bed and she stayed in bed for a long time, Futtachi was almost all the time cooking and washing dishes and I can't remember that he ever complained that he had to do women's work. (157)

Though at times thematic and conventional as in the quest for the father, *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* is more than that. Much more importantly, and what makes it other than a conventional treatment of common themes, is its close-up view of Mennonite "interior," I was about to say, but resist this blatant or thoughtless psychoanalytical metaphor for specific reasons that will become clear later in the discussion of Deleuze and Guattari's non psychoanalytic model of desire. Mennonite hypocritical subjectivity substitutes well for "interior."

Despite its overbearing quest for the father motif at a crucial stage in the narrative, *Salvation* concerns itself more with the antics and desires of an irrepressible Yasch Seimens. Yasch's narrative life divides itself into episodes around his three loves--two great loves for Fleeda Schreeda and for Sadie Nickel, and one love of convenience for fat Oata which turns into what readers of realism would be tempted to call "his true love," that more real love they would say which teaches Yasch something desire and beauty and the highly erotic could never do. The Puritanism in all modernist realism is, as one can see from this, obvious. To all intents and purposes, Armin Wiebe *teaches* us something. He is the preacher in the end, as the argument of this paper will show. His purpose seems to be to tell us that the conservative, the moderate, the plain and the hard working--in other words desire as lack, Oata instead of Sadie for lover and wife--have a great *and secret* reward hidden and a great ability to satisfy in the end if only the (essential) subject shows stick-to-itiveness, keeps a stiff upper lip, and learns responsibility. Anglican rhetoric; and Mennonite discourse. Learn to sacrifice here on earth, "and all these things shall be added unto thee."

But there is more to *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* than a call to seriousness and lack. The tensions in the novel between these two wills, the will to desire, and the will to self-sacrifice, is the most important material gift this "minor" writer gives both the Mennonites and non Mennonites (say, Anglicans) who read the book. The material side of *Salvation* draws even essentialists into a suspicion of their own transcendentalist, territorial views and values. It forces all readers to smile at their own need for unity and permanence. The "spiritual," essentialist side of the novel, however, does something sinister; inverting what has been accomplished or constructed by the material text, it reterritorializes symbolically a group

which has just been shown, through thought, the great wonder of the multiple within its own territory, within and at the center of its garrisoned, major, legalistic and finally fear-driven community. Why does Armin Wiebe do this? Is it a result of Mennonite guilt which, as guilt seemed to drive Chaucer to write that great retraction of *The Canterbury Tales*, has the author here recall himself and attempt his own "salvation" at the eleventh hour, fearful both of political reaction and of divine sanction? Is it an ineptitude with narrative structure that, so trained and bound by realist novel conventions, falls short of ideas for a material conclusion to a text that has till the last chapters been almost entirely material?³² Or is it a more intelligent and sophisticated implies, to *enact* the very deterritorializing/reterritorializing cycle which the Mennonite group subject and subjected group forever fall prey to, likely because of the "blinking" relationship between technology and religion (morality/law)?³³ To enact this tension and force the reader to personally experience how guilt and the dysfunctional communal work in a Mennonite community?

³²No text can help but be material. Wiebe's text has been particularly material in subject matter, however, till this point.

³³Wiebe seems to blink at the superiority of the material ideas he himself has depicted, and more than depicted: thought by. The way out of rational ideas which the "last man" simply accepts as if natural and eternal is through the material, the multiple, the thinking that is thinking because it sees the constructedness of spiritual systems. This is Nietzsche's view of that subject who passes over from weak, "blinking" man to superman, in charge of his own idea-making:

The superman is the man who passes over, away from man as he is so far, but away whereto? Man so far is the last man. But if this manner of living being, "man," in distinction from other living beings on earth, plants and animals, is endowed with "rationality"; and if *ratio*, the power to perceive and reckon with things, is at bottom a way of forming ideas; then the particular manner of the last man must consist in a particular manner of forming ideas. Nietzsche calls it blinking, without relating blinking explicitly to the nature of representing or idea-forming, without inquiring into the essential sphere, and above all the essential origin, of representational ideas....Meanwhile, the last man must move in a realm of ideas which blink at everything and can do nothing else but blink, in consequence of an unearthly fate that forbids modern man to look beyond himself and his type of ideas. (*What is Called Thinking* 82-83)

Wiebe's materiality turned spirituality dramatizes this precise problem in modern (subjective) man: man cannot think of himself in other terms than as "man," that is, *essentially* as a spiritual, which is to say humanist, entity that he names "man," who acts and forms ideas according to metaphysical (individualist) as opposed to material (social) constraints.

These questions stand for themselves because they have no final answer. They can, however, become significant and material questions by directing the examination of how in the text Wiebe develops the material, textual community, the book's "body," and then the spiritual, ur-textual family, the book's body's "death," its conclusion. If it is an enactment Wiebe constructs, the reader moves through a series of empathetic stages, from a wonder at the liveliness and physicality of the Mennonite subject, through a growing hypocrisy in what he admits to others and to himself about his real longings and motives--a hypocrisy which this subject cultivates in order to survive in the community--and to a final acceptance of this hypocrisy as non-hypocritical truth. What to the reader is clearly hypocritical in the "confession scene" is much less clearly hypocritical to him in the "family" scene of Chapter Ten. Which of these relatively sophisticated intentions is Wiebe's, will possibly be clarified by an examination of the two sections and thrusts of the novel.

As I have said, *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* tells the story of a poor Mennonite farm boy who makes good. Yasch Siemens grows up with one parent, his mother only, because his father has been murdered in "Mennonite" Mexico over a Spanish woman. The stigma of his father's scandalous death and of his *umsiedlar* ('owning no property'--the term derives from eighteenth-century Mennonite Russian land ownership practice) status, having no farm of his own nor farming machinery and scratching out a living with the (traditional, territorial, though often contemptuous) charity and long-suffering of wealthy neighbors and of the church, fill Yasch with an unusual industry and will to succeed. He is clever, opportunistic, scrappy, and hungrier for success at whatever cost than most of his fellows, and though he spouts a rhetoric of conventional

Mennonite morality, though he brims with aphorisms and oral wisdoms about decency and honesty and kindness, he is at heart interested mainly in his own promotion. That is so at least until the very end of the novel when children are born to himself and Oata, a propertied farmer's daughter he marries for the half section she has inherited. The children's presence (though not their actions or subjective characters) somehow mellow Yasch. Their presence teaches him love, which is to say, concern for others besides himself. Love seems to have come attached to the children like a covering letter, since we don't see any of the specific actions or events involving children that inspire him to *learn* love from the trials and tests which raising children put the individual ego to. We see only the finished product, the new Yasch.

Sure, Yasch Siemens isn't a bigshot farmer like the others, but it's not so bad really. With only a half-section I can really farm it, and I don't think I have any more wild oats and mustard than the neighbors who use all that Avadex BW and Hoe-grass stuff they show sliding on a curling rink on TV. In the winter time I read things about organic farming and I don't know but for a small outfit like mine it seems to work. A farmer always has worries but it sure doesn't seem so bad when you don't have to worry about feeding the bank manager's family, the lawyer's family and the implement dealer's family. But then Oata helps, too. She makes a big garden and we have our own chickens, pigs, cows and things so we hardly even have to worry about feeding the storeman's family yet, too. Doft sometimes wants to know how come he can't have one of those games that you play with the TV like the neighbors' boys have but I

just laugh and say that while those guys are playing with themselves on TV he can play with their girlfriends. (165)

Besides the question of new competence in love, there is so much here of *Salvation's* thematic method. First of all, this passage shows us Yasch's growth in practicality and wisdom. He has become wise with the advent of the family.³⁴ He now sees the real value of the small family farm instead of the "bigshot" one. He has become ecologically smart, resisting the use of unnecessary farming chemicals on his land, a self-righteousness that running a small operation makes possible. He has not only recognized the debt of the average worker to the big corporations, to banks, the justice system, and the business institution, but he has discovered how to avoid contributing to their upkeep by using organic methods, a heroic wisdom which almost no farmer ever grasps, certainly no one else in Gutenthal, regardless of wealth or status. Besides all this new wisdom, Yasch even commendably discovers and promotes the rights of women, a wisdom of special merit because, it would seem from what precedes and from other

³⁴"Family" represents for Deleuze the symbol of the West's refusal of desire, refusal of a material mode of being. "Family" represents for him a Freudianism which sees goodness/godliness as an inner, abstract state in "man."

But psychoanalysts are bent on producing man abstractly, that is to say ideologically, for culture. It is Oedipus who produces man in this fashion, and who gives a structure to the false movement of infinite progression and regression: your father, and your father's father, a snowball gathering speed as it moves from Oedipus all the way to the father of the primal horde, to God and the Paleolithic age. It is Oedipus who makes us man, for better or for worse, say those who would make fools of us all. (*Anti-Oedipus* 108)

And,

...the more the problem of Oedipus and incest comes to occupy center stage, the more psychic repression and its correlates, suppression and sublimation, will be founded on supposedly transcendent requirements of civilization, at the same time that the psychoanalyst plunges deeper into a familialist and ideological vision. (117)

And,

The family is indeed the delegated agent of this psychic repression, insofar as it ensures "a mass psychological reproduction of the economic system of a society." Of course it should not be concluded from this that desire is Oedipal. On the contrary, it is the social repression of desire or sexual repression--that is, the *stasis* of libidinal energy--that actualizes Oedipus and engages desire in this requisite impasse, organized by the repressive society. (118)

The family, it can be said another way, operates by sexual disappointment, a disappointment which keeps all group members forever "blinking," for economic reasons (via the technological flows of the capitalist machine) at the possibilities of material living, of desire, of libidinal satiation at a social material level.

Mennonite Canadian literature which *Salvation* necessarily reflects, it is an unusual insight in "redneck" and patriarchal rural Mennonite country where, feminist discourse tells us, wives and daughters did do and still do most of the actual farm labor while their grudging and pampered, self-satisfied husbands, fathers and sons lay down the law and drive around in pickup trucks and tractors, an unfair division of labor upheld by and preached from the pulpit.

Oata, male-feminist Yasch prudently realizes, contributes a great deal to the Needarp farm's independence from the grasping service institutions by keeping a garden and raising chickens and livestock. Furthermore, *the* most difficult feat of the late twentieth century in the Western world is handled simply and adroitly on the part of the fast-maturing hero: Yasch parents superbly. Because of Yasch's timely wisdom, instead of staying neurotic and masturbatory like the other young boys of Gutenthal, Doft will be truly generative, "play[ing] with their girlfriends" instead of with TV games (games and thematic narcissism foreshadowed in the first chapter by the TV tower episode in which young Yasch "plays" with the younger of the Schroeder sisters while on a treacherous "heroic" ascent and descent, not into hell, but into the sky via the TV tower on the American side of the border close to Gutenthal). This passage shows Yasch parenting with wisdom and with a winning panache. How appropriate for *Doft* (no mention is made of the daughter and her sexuality) to outwit and outdo the poorly-parented, overindulged neighborhood boys by playing well the real game of sex, while they compulsively glue their attentions to television games (technology, the corporations, the banks and lawyers and businesses).

In other words, Doft will win over the other boys at a host of things that their father alone could teach them to win at provided they were as diligent and worldly-wise as Yasch: how to be independent of the horde of other boys, how to enjoy sex despite the strict Mennonite mores against it and prove thereby his own enlightenment and possibilities for joy and freedom from endless Mennonite morality; how to rebel and get away with it; how to create community (play with others) instead of atrophying socially "playing with yourself;" and how to grow up healthy with your biological desires sated; finally, Yasch says here, in this bit of suave advice, that *his* boys will not have to grow up fatherless and so suffer the debilitating setbacks the orphan faces growing up alone in the treacherous economic world. Their father will be there to advise, to strategize, to provide cash and material needs, and most of all to contribute through his own serious experiences of impecunity to the balance of the thought and action of *Doft* and whatever children are to come.

Unlike on other occasions, Yasch doesn't "laugh" himself on the topic of his children, at this late "mature" stage in his life. He simply does the proper "major" thing one does when one wants to make a solemn point that transcends the minor play with language that the rest of the minor text is set in: he "laughs" (165) in perfect capital 'E' English at his boy's foolish, unwise desires and shows him a better way, pointing him cleverly, considering the capitalist theme of the text, away from technological possessions to ones that don't cost and which both gratify more and at the same time subvert Mennonite Canadian anti-sexual morality. At a few critical points in this otherwise minor English novel, which deterritorializes major English through steady mistranslation of English meaning by supplying a laughable and outrageous coinage (such as the

constant "what is loose" standing for 'what is wrong,' which derives from the low German "*vot es lows*" meaning precisely in Low German "what is loose" but of course not meaning that, or not meaning much of anything, in context in English; except, of course, that when something is wrong, in anyone in any language, there is a powerful sense of the looseness of what gives meaning in the world, the looseness of the individual subject's connections with the group, the looseness of the connections between things, ideas and meanings which before made perfect sense and seemed more tightly connected.)

Yes, Yasch Siemens parents well. He is here at the end of the novel the wise father. Where his father has failed, Yasch succeeds. But all this success, this preoccupation with the Yasch who has made it and who is an exemplum suddenly of spiritual values, values rooted in a permanent religious ground and showing the rewards of persistence and self-sacrifice, comes late in the novel. Before this, however, in the more authentically minor and deterritorialized (and so more communal and social) first nine chapters of the novel, a great picture is drawn of the material Mennonite subject who hides his materiality from himself and others. He hides this materiality, though he hides it poorly. This visible secrecy, this silly (nice) concern for the spiritual to cover up all the abundant and overabundant evidence of the "real" material constructedness of the individual subject, this very transparency of double intention and of hypocrisy and absence of any real spirituality is the great achievement of *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens*. The material (ultra material would be more correct) reality of the Mennonite Canadian subject as Wiebe sees him is most visible in the "Confession Scene" in Chapter Eight.

In his confession, Yasch tells of atrocities committed on himself and a few other innocent school fellows by a group of hardened bullies led by the n'er-do-well, Forscha Friesen ('Bullying and Pushy' Friesen). Forscha Friesen is the same man who years ago bullied children in school to such an extent that organized games were impossible. He rode his team of make-believe horses around the school yard breaking up attempts at baseball and other games. Always bullying, always mean and destructive, he is now an upstanding member of the church who has a say in what goes on there, especially in "Christian Endeavor Evening." It is for one of these evenings, in fact, that Forscha spitefully selects Yasch to give a testimony. A testimony is a public and highly ritualistic, conventional profession of faith in which you tell your "faith story," the moment of personal commitment to Christ, and how you have both succeeded and failed in your commitment to him, especially where you have "backslidden" and "strayed from the path." Forscha's wicked intent for revenge on Yasch for Yasch's refusal to join his gang of disrupters on the school ground lies at the heart of his selection of Yasch for testimony candidate, made in order to "nerk" ("spite" and "taunt") him into blackening his name further in the community, as Yasch easily sees:

This going to church business just makes me feel more cut off. And then to have to deal with Forscha Friesen yet. I see him standing there so shtollt and Christlich while the last prayer is prayed and when he thinks nobody is looking he turns his head and he looks me on with those light green eyes with dark centers and I can see that for sure he is the same Forscha that used to be boss of the school yard and that this testimony thing is his way to nerk me. (123)

But once selected, Yasch can decline giving the testimony only at great cost to himself. In the end, despite misgivings, Yasch testifies in what might be called "the Confession Scene" in Chapter Eight.

The "Confession Scene" begins with Yasch's recollection of the scene as it unfolded earlier. One cannot always be hypocritical, Yasch says, even if one wants to, and Yasch tries, he says, to be honest and be hypocritical about his sinful past so the church will accept him because of that hypocritical honesty, because of the effort taken to make oneself humble:

So simple it isn't. Sure, I have hauled a few twenty-fours out from the parlor and before I go dead there's lots of chance that I will haul out some more. But I can affirm on a stack of Bibles that I never even sniffed a bottle cap that day. If I had, for sure I would have stayed home from church and people would say, "That Yasch Siemens sure is a dow-nix!" like always they have and they could have felt *shtollt* and *fromm* about it and it would still hail the same on the good man's field as on the bad man's and the rooster would still crow in the morning. And nobody would think that in the Gutenthal church the Devil had been. (117)

Shtollt means proud, and *fromm* means distant and condescending. If he had not made his confession, Yasch says here, people could have gone along blindly as they did before, believing themselves superior by God's design and Yasch and others like him, one supposes, though we don't meet any who, like him, are outcasts and "dow-nix"es (good-for-nothings). Now, however, their eyes have been opened, they have been forced to see "reality" in a light they didn't want to see it in, and they make the ambiguous assessment, Yasch claims, of having a church now that has been contaminated by the presence of the Devil. Who exactly, this ambiguity

asks us to consider, is this Devil, Yasch or the men and women at whom Yasch pointed the finger and whose "sinfulness" has now been exposed that before was 'properly' hidden and comfortably secret in secrecy's transparency, meaning a knowledge about certain "evil" behavior, certain anti-Christian acts of selfishness or lust, which too fully reveal the "real" materiality of the Mennonite subject? Left unspoken these "evil" events, the ones Yasch now goes on to tell us about which he "confessed" before the entire congregation, fail to significantly disturb the "honest" hypocrisy of the group and its belief in its own spirituality. Spoken, openly and arrogantly and with vitriol as Yasch does momentarily, they are the very Devil in their midst. The hypocrisy of the denial of the material nature of the subject by the Mennonite Canadian church subjected group and its insistence on seeing itself blindly as spiritual is exactly pointed at by the rumors of the Devil's presence. Father of lies, he is the presence of lies in the midst of God's people. What have the people in the church seen? Who are the liars? Who is sign of the Devil's presence? Is it Yasch? Is it themselves, the entire hypocritical congregation feigning its spiritualism while in reality hiding bullies and power mongers? Is it the specific group subjects who have accosted poor Emmanuel and his friends and who now belong to the church as if they were members in fine standing? Who, in fact, *are* now members in fine standing and will remain so even after the confessor who has the courage to speak honestly and to unhide the secrets of the group has been excommunicated as a Devil in the midst? In this context, in other words, the true confession is the false confession.

Even more to the point, the confession is the non-confession, if the materiality of the subject and the text is to be credited as a picture of the

way in which the individual Mennonite Canadian subject is nomadic³⁵ and constructed. In the context of the confession, however, Yasch gives us a true confession which is not believed. And yet, despite its hypocritical nature, it is hypocritical at another level. Why confess at all? In a rural, territorial, Mennonite Canadian context, if you do not confess once you are perceived as living outside of the moral standards set by "God" and the church, you cannot properly belong in the community. You have limited access to financial institutions (as Yasch's thwarted efforts to buy Yut Yut Leven's land on credit shows), you have no friends to phone to ask for help or to borrow machinery from if yours breaks down, you have no cozy commercial contacts with businesses whose managers will give you a discount on machinery or sell you clothes at reasonable and wholesale prices. Subversive and independent, the non-hypocritical (outspoken) group subject is on his own and lonely in such a community. He must buy the community hypocritical standards *as if they were honesty* if he is to succeed and belong and get the breaks that other members receive.

His confession is a bad one. That is, Yasch does not do in his confession what a confession is meant to accomplish, a humbling of himself as the confessing subject before his judges, the members of the church (subjected group), to declare his sinfulness (that is, the ways you have not taken their rules and regulations seriously and have subverted them, intentionally or not), and to thus with a contrite heart and because of a contrite heart, be accepted back into the fold of the group from which your sin (rebellion) excluded you.

³⁵The subject traverses a field of intensities, Deleuze and Guattari say, and is, in every way, a nomad or aleatory point on a grid of desiring objects. At every contact he makes with another object or discourse, his subjectivity is altered and enhanced. "Local movements are alterations.... One travels by intensity; displacements and spatial figures depend on intensive thresholds of nomadic deterritorialization (and thus on differential relations) that simultaneously define complementary, sedentary reterritorializations " (*A Thousand Plateaus* 54).

Yasch admits to the reader that he was honest in his intentions in the confession he attends and makes at Oata's insistence: "Some things an honest man can't lie about. I mean, I tried. For Oata I really tried" (117). He tries to give an honest confession instead of a "bad" one, in the traditional distinction the Catholic church makes on the matter of sincerity in the sacraments. He feels a great discomfort as the moment approaches in church on the night of confession when he has to stand, walk to the front of the church and open up honestly for others to see:

Oata gives me one with her elbow and she fuschels in my ear that it is time for the testimony, so I grip my Bible on tight and stand up and start to walk to the front and then all of a sudden I am climbing the steps up to the platform and I am almost to the pulpit when I see the preacher that is supposed to talk after I give the testimony. (142)

The long description of the approach heightens the tension of this feared moment of self-exposure and self-surveillance.³⁶ Yasch slowly approaches the pulpit. The distance seems long, interminable. When, however, he steps up to the pulpit, another unexpected emotion begins to fill him:

I step up behind the pulpit and put my Bible down on the slanted thing there and I reach my hand out for the nickel-colored microphone that looks like the front from a Massey Harris 44 and I

³⁶Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish*. Individual self-surveillance supports group power, Foucault argues. He exemplifies what he means with Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, a model for surveillance in the prisons. The king may impose a "productive" power over the heterogeneous multiplicity of individuals in society by having it exercised everywhere willingly, "at the very foundations of society" (208). This "foundation," this basic site of cooperation, of course, must be the individual's own will. Power (what we euphemistically misname "society,") achieves a homogeneity of effort among heterogeneous masses by an inculcation of group values based on making every individual activity visible to all. Willing uniformity of behavior is achieved, in effect, by self-discipline:

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (202-03).

move it so that I can talk it in without bending over too much, just like the preachers do. Then I look at the church. (143)

The critical moment has come. The hardware up on stage already gives him a lift. The microphone reminds him comfortably of farming equipment, of a *powerful* farm tractor. He instinctively maneuvers the microphone to let him speak with dignity and style, not bent over the way a less clever and less self-possessed young person might. This little act shows us the showman in Yasch. This might not be so bad after all. It might be in fact just the sort of thing that suits him, to which he was born, so to speak. The symbolic power of the "Massey" microphone, however, determines the next and crucial moment in both this confession, and in Yasch's personal future in Gutenthal.

This coming moment is crucial because it both confirms Yasch's utter individualism even in the most official of Mennonite Canadian institutions, the church, and it provides a sudden window both on Yasch's particular constructed character--that is, about his relative honesty--and on the nature of the Mennonite church (and of course the church in general, official institutions of any sort in general). We must remember, approaching this passage, that Yasch has always drawn himself as an honest man who "gribbles" until he discovers the truth about a certain individual or about the church, or about a decision he must make. Now look at the way the confession is set up by Armin Wiebe:

It sure is different looking at the church from behind the pulpit. The whole church full is looking you on. And you are higher than everybody. And everybody you can see. And it's almost like you can see what everybody is thinking, because you can see their faces. Oata is there, her face shining like the sun. (143)

There is a great power in that place behind the pulpit. The man or woman who stands there is in a site of privilege, not at the burning bush as a suppliant, but the igniter of the bush who speaks to the suppliant about his duties. He sees everyone, he knows in an intimate way who they each are. Oata, for instance, in a rare passage that is lyrical and English in its Anglo-Saxon syntax and rhythms, is bright-eyed and true, "her face shining like the sun." But the others, many of them, do not get off so lightly in this new light shining on them from the eyes of this anti-preacher, this false preacher, this "dow-nix" temporarily holding the reins of power in his hands.

Forscha Friesen is there, and he looks nervous, but he looks like he wants to laugh himself, too. Dola Dyck is there, sitting in the second row, but I can't find the preacher that was him with. I look the rows down. Ha Ha Nickel is sitting Pug Peters and Sadie beside. Zoop Zack Friesen, who usually to the free church goes. Hauns Jaunes' Fraunz. Schlax Wiebe. Knibble Thiessen, the rightmaker. Fuchtig Froese. Store Jansen's Willy. Yelttausch Yeeatze. Penzel Panna and his girlfriend from Altwiese. Rape Rampel. Milyoon Moates. Hingst Heinrichs. Gopher Goosen.

And on the women's side the women--Muttachi, her wet eyes glancing the light off like sparks--and the girls like Shtramel Stoesz and her sister Shups, that me and Hova Jake took to a crusade in Dominion City once. And the children in the front bench, waiting. And I see Klaviera Klassen sitting sideways on her piano bench and she is looking me on with such eyes that I have to look away....
(143)

What Yasch's "bad" confession shows us more than anything else, what makes it "bad" at all, is that he tells us the truth about Mennonite Canadian subjects--they are hypocrites who seem, even to themselves, to be spiritual, church-goers, honest, true and good for the most part, as if these intentions to do good, this distinction between what is good and bad, were their main quality--as if the spiritual were what composed them and their desires. They wear their souls on their sleeves, however.³⁷ Their most obvious trait, clearly visible from up here in the rarefied atmosphere of the pulpit is their materiality, their *non-spirituality*--they are bodies all, none of them "souls" and "inner essences" who only sometimes err and make mistakes. They are not to be defined by their occasional mistakes, but by their constructed, whole, multiple, discursive selves. They are the discourses others have created around them, discourses they themselves have taken on as "traits."³⁸ They are the languages they have encountered, and in this community, largely the languages concerning the farm, the prairie, the livestock they raise, the sex they make evenings and mornings in the middle of their busy working daily worlds, the trips to "Winnipeg in the basement," Eaton's *em tchjalla* as I recall Mennonites calling it. Their names especially give this materiality away, the names by which they are best known in the community, as they are to Yasch here in the pulpit,

³⁷Foucault claims that individuals no longer are "man," no longer know who they are, or what their bodies do without constraint. We are our constraints in this age after regency he theorizes: "The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body" (*Discipline and Punish* 30).

³⁸V. N. Volosinov claims against Freud that the conscious and the unconscious are simply two states of language, one permitted, the other not permitted.

This inner experience is, then, in point of fact, what psychology studies. Thus, in experimental psychology introspection has the final word. Everything else, all those instruments for exact measurement, in which representatives of this trend take such pride, constituted only a mounting for introspection, an objective-scientific frame for a subjective-internal picture--and no more. (*Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*. 19)

Neal H. Bruss, editor of Volosinov's *Freudianism*, sums up Volosinov's perception of the linguistic nature of subjectivity this way: Freud presents man falsely because asocially. The unconscious in fact is a linguistic entity, an "unofficial conscious" which the "official conscious" (vii) keeps under wraps for obvious, social reasons.

confirm this discursive, material existence. This materiality they are trained not to recognize in themselves, they are coerced to and beholden to hide under a banner of righteousness and spirituality, of a sort of endless church attendance that obfuscates their "real" discursive, material being.

Consider the particular names and faces Yasch sees from the pulpit; recall what the reader knows about them. Oata is the fat girl, who brings Yasch lunch on the field, her blouse unbuttoned and flying wide open in the wind. She drives a combine, loves ice-cream at the Dairy Dell with Yasch, goes on her "honeymoon" in Winnipeg in a pickup truck pulling a honeywagon (manure spreader). She is the one who is laughed at and rejected by kids in school. It is about her the students, including Yasch who pens the English version, write this terrible verse:

Pissed in the water
Hit a catter
Pulled herself the panties down
Found a lump there nice and brown
Thought it was a Easter egg
Rolled it up and down her leg
Tasted first a tiny bit
Holy cow it is just shit³⁹ (58)

Ha Ha Nickel is the rich farmer who entices Yasch to notice his daughter driving the tractor on the field with her blouse off and wearing only a black brassiere ("Look out for the crows, Yasch,' Ha Ha laughs and he slams down the fertilizer lid. 'Twa Corbies,' I say, louder than I mean" 49). Later, secretly worried that his daughter is hanging around with a

³⁹This whole passage, and much of Wiebe's novel, reminds us of Bakhtin's theory of the unofficial role of the grotesque in literature.

"dow-nix," a non-propertyed hired hand, instead of with the son of a somebody, Nickel gives the excuse that he is afraid Yasch "will try something yet" (95) to fire Yasch and deny him access to Sadie whom Yasch loves to distraction. Then Nickel shows his true (material) intentions and concerns by letting Sadie go where she wishes and do what she likes with Pug Peters who fairly quickly "gets into her pants" on the "double dike" one evening after the Christian Endeavor Evening at which Yasch is informed of his having to give a testimony. The upshot of the "seduction" is that Sadie becomes pregnant and the two are forced to marry, something Ha Ha Nickel seems not to mind at all, exactly because it is Pug and not Yasch who is the father. Mennonite Canadians, seemingly so spiritual, are no different from anyone else when it comes to democratic (loving) treatment of potential son-in-laws and husbands for their daughters.

Zoop Zack ("Alcohol Sack") Friesen, appropriately named, is the man who gets angry at the mummers on New Year's Day and who is spooked by the surprise carnival *Brumtuping* into attending church from then on. Hauns Jaunes's Fraunz is alliterative punning, an excessive playfulness with language which places Mennonites willy nilly into the realm of the material, regardless of their and their officials' remonstrance about strictness, solemnity and moral uprightness expressed through a constant focusing of the attention on God and Godly matters. This preoccupation of the officials is not only attributed to them apocryphally; it seems, I believe, and Wiebe's brimming, excessive, playful text magnanimously claims through its excess, through its plenitude of play with the words and ideas⁴⁰ of these officials' (ministers', councilors',

⁴⁰Wiebe's Mennonite materiality is clearly Bakhtinian, a Mennipean satirical trait taking the solemn "official" to account. Wiebe's material Mennonite world is a festive one which, like the festive world of Bakhtin's "carnival," affirms the "unofficial" celebrative body.

bishops', elders', choir leaders', deacons', women's sewing circle leaders, and so on) knowledge--likely unacknowledged--that the Mennonite world/soul is a stoutly, gaily, rambunctiously material one.

There is a great energy for life and fun and celebration among Mennonites. The multiplicity of ways and means devoted to the restraining of the Mennonite spirit in each community itself speaks to this very fact of the irrepressibility of Mennonite pleasure, bodiness, carnality and all other terms that denote the material within subjectivity. Much energy must be expended by the officials in Mennonite Canadian communities to make it seem as if they are all God's eternal subjects now already, right here, in this day and in this place. Much rhetoric is invented and created and broadcast to hook these subjects in order to construct them as hypocrites. The hypocrite is, thus, not someone who nefariously plots a dark and devious lifestyle for himself, a lifestyle of lies and deceit. He is that subject who, through the strenuous effort of a fearful officialdom, is taught to not educate himself and so not endanger the tentative hold the institution has on his spirit, has on that in us which recognizes the material nature of our lives. He is taught not to recognize signs in himself of life and love of that life. He is trained to disbelieve these stirrings of the multiple, material, and minor in his perceptions of the commonalty between himself and all life. He is trained not to see the complicity between all spirit and body, how all that is "wrong" at the level of the body is also "wrong" at the level of the spirit, and all that is "right" at the level of the body is "right" at that of the spirit. This body, he is just as assiduously taught, is a sacred temple meant

Unlike the earlier and purer feast, the official feast asserted all that was stable, unchanging, perennial: the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions. It was the triumph of a truth already established, and predominant truth that was put forward as eternal and indisputable. This is why the tone of the official feast was monolithically serious and why the element of laughter was alien to it. The true nature of human festivity was betrayed and distorted. But this true festive character was indestructible...." (*Rabelais and His World* 9)

to be married as a bride to the church of Christ and so not to be thought of as a body, but as a spirit imprisoned by its body. In short, the hypocrite is a construction of the church institution in the Mennonite Canadian community.

What Yasch exposes now, following the catalogue of members seated expectantly before him, is not the hypocrisy of the church, not his own hypocritical claim--a discourse based in large part on his performance in this confession--to be the honest one, the rest the dishonest ones. He exposes for all to see, not the sins of Forscha Friesen but his "real" and desiring subjectivity.

Forscha and his "horses" stampede the group who are Emmanuel's friends when they are having a weiner roast in the bush. They tie Emmanuel to a tree and, while he accepts all they do to him with an eternal long-suffering, the others are forced by Forscha's gang to spit on Emmanuel's face and revile him. Even Yasch, deeply respectful of Emmanuel who has shown no fear of the bullish Forscha, cannot in the end keep from participating in the torture, with his arm twisted behind his back by Melvin, who at the same time is squeezing his testicles till Yasch's tears come. Forscha makes all of them, girls and boys both, touch and stroke Emmanuel's penis which stiffens against his will (148). Wiebe creates in this scene a parody of the crucifixion of Christ, with a terrible picture of a sexually molested Jesus whose penis represents the phallus that symbolizes patriarchal, heirarchal Mennonitism.

He confesses someone else's sins. Having confessed his sin as the product of the wrong Forscha did to Emmanuel, Yasch has not confessed. Hypocritically, he has exposed another's "sins." By doing that, however, Christ like, he takes the sins of that man on himself, in a sense. He does not

know this. He is not aware of the effect of his honesty about the others. About the "evil" (Devil) in the church. His hypocrisy lies most clearly in that quarter in which he deludes himself with the power to reveal and tell. These are his own inventions. The confession is a mock confession because inevitably the perception--often too self-critical, often too self-indulgent, never just right, no right existing by which to gauge a good confession--of the one confessing. The confession, a discourse, a monologue, a bit of speaking which cannot communicate since it is not the same in meaning to any one other subject there, still constructs all the subjects there. From this moment on no one in the church will be able to relate as easily to Forsha without remembering his sins, no one will ever trust Yasch again to speak in an official capacity without exposing the skeletons in Gutenthal's closets, and no one will ever be able to enter the church with the same complacency and the same sense of its sacred power over the "Devil" as before. Yasch's confession regroups them, reforms them all. His confession, untrue, monological, material, reterritorializes the community by first deterritorializing it. Bringing the community to an understanding of its "sinfulness," meaning in truth, its materiality, it nevertheless eventually rallies everyone around the common purpose of ostracizing Yasch. Chapters Nine and Ten of the novel clearly indicate how such a community, reterritorialized (recommitted) in their insistence on the evil of the poor and outspoken and disruptive, and on the good of the secretive, quiet, and obedient, always has to be hypocritical to protect God's status in their midst. Had they listened to Yasch, they would have had to abandon community as Mennonites know it. Turning on him (while still respecting him at a material level, a level not easily allowed to speak in its reality), the church body (odd term) gives itself the gift of longevity and permanence.

As in Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, reterritorialization comes at the cost of honesty and vulnerability. The community is saved. The salvation that Yasch Siemens offers and delivers to Gutenthal, is the salvation of a continued ontological perspective which refuses to recognize the reality of its onticality, its constructedness. In other words, Yasch sacrifices himself in his "honesty" as the lamb which binds the large community ever more strongly in its group-held claims of divine purpose and sacred mission, and its refusal to see what is most transparent to a reader of Wiebe's artistic rendering of that group, its highly mischievous, selfish, cantankerous, joyful, celebratory and in every way material, discursive subjectivity.

Chapter Four

"a prisoner of his tongue": Pat Friesen and Uneasy Relations Between the Lyrical and the Material

Pat Friesen is Mennonite Canada's first poet. As the first poet--as any of the first twenty or so might be expected to do--Friesen presents the reader not with themes of love, death, youth and war in themselves, or for themselves. He tells us of life in the group as if the reader had never before seen evidence of the inner workings and complexities of Mennonite Canadian life. And he is right. As history text, the Mennonite world is known to non-Mennonites, as radio sermon it is known, as articles and editorials in religious journals, as cookbook, as map, oral story (as jokes, for instance, in the *Mennonite Mirror*, *The Red River Valley Echo* or *The Pembina Times*), letters, martyrology (*The Martyr's Mirror*), newspaper (*The Steinbach Post* or *The Altona Echo*), government document, sociology text and photographic study it is known to still others. As poetry, however, Mennonite Canada remains still undiscovered. Here, their politics and community values (the general social material mode of production of the Mennonite group subject) have not been made public. In other words, when a Mennonite Canadian poet writes of Mennonites, you would expect him to write of them as an unknown political entity, as a group about which very little is understood. His business would be to inform the major group, whose politics is known to everyone in every possible form which the material text takes, of the intricacies of the socio-politico-religious institutions by which the Mennonite Canadian community is governed. As poet, too, he would be expected to resist at times and support at times the innumerable rules (that is, the constantly reterritorialized codes) by which the group orders and constitutes itself.

The opening poems of *Bluebottle* operate largely at a lyrico-symbolic, imagistic level. Thematically, they have to do with the sudden, traumatic beginning of the process of becoming a poet. The persona, a young Mennonite male, experiences a traumatic "conversion" of sorts following the death of his father.

Bluebottle

he died on a stone pillow
his hand on a banister
there was nothing between us

for the moment

I was the staircase and the last touch
he the debut
between touch and ghost

i heard a Bluebottle in the blind

the droning was summer days
chewing the stems of lilac leaves

the fall of yellow afternoons

suns glinting
on the blue hood of our '53 dodge
and father hoisting me

to the hot fender for a photograph

sitting still

and father brushing sandflies off my back

between touch and ghost

while I heard time

everything happened at once (9)

He converts not from paganism to Christianity (darkness to light in traditional neoplatonism⁴¹), but from non poet to poet.⁴² As an examination of the first six poems in this book shows, none of this "becoming-poet" is constructed materially, openly, on a literal level. Instead, it is presented lyrically, imagistically, which is to say, symbolically and indirectly. To put it another way, the poet makes intense use of the objective correlative--as I will shortly show--to present symbolically (which is to say, transcendently) that critical moment in his life when he comes to the decision to take over his father's authority for paternal "law." He will become "ghost" to take responsibility for "touch."

At a material level of the poem we learn very little. We do know that the feature of the poem is a Bluebottle fly, at least if we go by the title. We learn that someone has died. We notice that the narrator makes some cryptic comment about his oblique involvement in the death. He hears a fly in the blinds, some sort of droning (the Bluebottle's buzzing). The narrator says that he hears time ("time's wing'd chariot," of course, if the reader has read Marvell, but at a

⁴¹For an analysis of the symbolic value of light and conversion in Neoplatonism see "Reflections of a Soul," in *Zone* Part Two.

⁴²Another Canadian poem which deals with this problem of becoming-poet is Robert Kroetsch's *Seed Catalogue* which asks the persistent, "buzzing" question, "How do you grow a poet?" (*Completed Field Notes* 41).

material level this allusion does not occur to anyone), and then the poem ends. It is not much of a poem, really, if read at its plainest, most material level.

A much more sophisticated level exists within it, however. We can interpret it to greater effect if we read metaphorically. The place to start is with *The Lands I Am*. Many of its poems have been, as I have said, about the death of fathers. Now, here, in "Bluebottle" and the other first half dozen of the second book's poems, the theme of the dying father becomes even more relentlessly significant. "Bluebottle" concerns the poet coming to some sort of important personal decision *because* of the death of his father. The opening line of "Bluebottle," and so the line which determines the development of the ideas of the poem, tells us that the father ("he") has "died on a stone pillow." Immense symbolic weight rests on "stone pillow." This poem and the ones which follow describe the process of the son taking over authority from his father. If we follow the story in Genesis which the "stone pillow" metaphor points us to, we know that the particular authority which he takes is the right to determine the future of his people--in Friesen's case this right takes the shape of "author," maker of the word, writing and rewriting the word in order to show his Mennonite people what it means to be a poet for his people. If the metaphor uses its biblical connection non-ironically, it implies that the poet's people live in a foreign land, in a Canaan, and are in danger of losing their identity as a community. Someone must turn the people's inclinations away from Canaan worship and back towards its own traditions. Someone must again, as the story of Isaac and Jacob in Genesis tells us, "take a wife"⁴³ from among the distant

⁴³Not unlike Tiddy Lang's despairing gloss of the state of gender relationships in Robert Kroetsch's *What the Crow Said*. To Gus Liebhaber's surprise, Tiddy inexplicably whispers "someone must take a wife" (18), when she enters the pub in Indian Head and sees sitting there the passive John Skandle, local icemaker, her later lover, Gus Liebhaber, the printer and editor of the local paper who has just remembered a death that will take place that afternoon, and Tiddy's husband whom she has come, in vain it turns out, to retrieve from the pub in the afternoon where the men have already so early in the day almost drunk themselves into a stupor.

members of their clan in order to return the people to social roots and traditions, and so to multiply their seed in the world as God has promised Abraham via the sacred covenant.

The literary convention of receiving the mantle of poetry from a predecessor [mentor?] is implied by the reference to the stone pillow. With this allusion Friesen invokes the history of the transmission of the biblical, patriarchal word and the blessing of special sons by (dying) fathers. In the biblical narrative of the stone pillow, the great patriarch Isaac in his old age calls his favorite son Jacob to him and commands him to travel to the distant land of Padanaram to find a wife among his own people, from "the house of Bethuel thy mother's father" (Genesis 28:2). Essau, the disgraced, sedentary, older son, discovers indirectly that his father does not like Canaanite women and attempts after the fact and in vain to wring a blessing from Isaac too. It is not to be, however. Isaac declares Jacob the blessed son, and prophesies to him that God will "make thee fruitful, and multiply thee, that thou mayest be a multitude of people" (Genesis 28:3). The biblical passage about the chosen son's experience with the stone pillow strongly relates to Friesen's "Bluebottle" poem, particularly in the depiction of a staircase reaching to heaven with angels climbing up and down it.

And he lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took of the stones of that place, and put *them* for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. (Genesis 28:11-12)

Jacob sleeps on a stone pillow and lives; the poet's father dies on the stone pillow. The father then has been a sort of failed prophet. He has been one prophet of the word among all the ones over the last four thousand years who have brought the

message of God's covenant to his chosen people. Whereas Jacob sleeps on the stone pillow and lives to produce the seed of a multitude of his people, in contrast the poet is his father's seeding. Jacob's story tells of the survival of fathers, the poet's story concerns the dying of fathers. This theme has clearly troubled Friesen since at least "fathers die: for J.K." in *The Lands I Am*. If the living father is responsible for the seed, for the future of his people, then it is the living son of the dead father who carries a similar responsibility. These are two starkly different scenarios. The first keeps the weight of duty on the father, the second takes it off the father who absconds, and makes the young, tender, timid, weak one take up the load his father has relinquished.

A short diversion is necessary here. A brief analysis of the first half dozen poems in *The Lands I Am* helps to clarify some of the poet's intentions in the second book. It is common knowledge that the dead father is a Freudian theme involving the ambitions and the process of individuation of a son challenging father and separating from mother. Laius is killed by his son Oedipus who must find a way of marrying the mother (the community). This overthrowing the father and sympathizing with the nurturing mother theme holds for the next many of Friesen's books. When the father is overthrown, someone must take over his authority. The now dead, once visible "God" (father) of this universe, must be replaced by a new God since no corner of the world can go unordered in the Oedipal myth. In Friesen's prairie world, where no models for such new ordering exist except European ones, the poet puts himself temporarily in charge of the dispensation of fatherly wisdom.

sun king again

I'll be staunch

subdue the rabble

and be aristocrat again

be king

for a moment

....

for a moment

i am king

and king governs

the lands i am (5)

Cockiness and self-satisfaction characterize this fledgling king. He is "aristocrat," able to rule with a stern hand, to "subdue the rabble." Regency is not a term from the present age. It may apply, however, to any other time period, even one current with the life of Jonah, the reluctant prophet who resists being God's poet, his voice of truth. God overcomes Jonah's reluctance with various trials, not the least of which is his being swallowed by a whale and finally spit out on dry land after four days. Friesen's second poem here, "Jonah," describes precisely this dilemma of not wishing to be responsible for the word.

why do I go into this secret room

with my bowels churning?

...

to seize three or four words

which I lack. (6)

The third poem takes us out of biblical times to 1685 and the martyrdom of Margaret Wilson, burned at the stake, singing praises as the flames devour her. Both the poet and the martyr "sing" in the face of persecution. Though she died in Europe, still she inspires us here and in a powerfully Canadian way, since her dust, her ashes, have blown over all lands. She has become "the scattered silt / of

three centuries living" (7). If the poet, scratching for words to describe the lands he is, fears that he has no models for his writing, he need only turn to this woman's image, to the knowledge that the soil of the earth holds a secret knowledge of suffering and strength, even soil of the Canadian prairies. "Nestor Makhno: anarchist," the fourth poem of this book, takes us forward in time and closer to the poet's home to the Russian persecution of Mennonites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Mennonites are persecuted in a manner almost as devilish as that which Margaret Wilson suffered. The next image is that of the Mennonites aboard the *Teutonia* and a two week long crossing. The Atlantic is finally spanned, the poet's ancestors arrive in the new land, and here in a country foreign to them they have to begin to build a new culture.

The fifth poem, "culture building," describes the multiplicity of cultures which construct the poet himself, from the Indian/French Métis's culture, the British explorer Samuel Hearne's culture, to that of the Roman soldiers and the Russian military whose terrible scythes "hacked twitching embryos from swollen bodies" (10). After this the poems derive not from foreign subject matter any longer but from the poet's territory, the Canadian prairie around Steinbach, Manitoba, a stony land his forefathers have worked. Finally home, in the multicultural place he recognizes, the poet begins to write what concerns him most passionately, his people here in Canada, his immediate family's interrelationships, a concern which possibly finds its strongest expression in "fathers die: for J.K." The poems in *The Lands I Am* thus quickly move from the distant biblical past through time and history up to the present moment and the death of the poet's father. This backward look at the politics and history of his people, a history always concerned with place and filiation, authenticates in a

classical way the poet's present resolve to write, and to write specifically about place ("prairies" 10) and Oedipal suffering.

This analysis of Friesen's careful development of the theme of the writing Oedipus in *The Lands I Am* brings us back now to *Bluebottle*. Here the dying father has become central. The father dying in Genesis and on the prairie have much in common, but much that differs too.

The phrase "his hand on a banister" begins to explain how the Mennonite poet is his father's seeding. A banister, of course, forms part of a staircase. A staircase appears to Jacob in his dream, a dream portending his future importance in the history of man. Man will be connected to heaven and heaven's beings through Jacob's marriage to a kinswoman, and thus a marriage to the future of the covenant that the people will continue to worship Jahweh and Jahweh will continue to consider them his people. The stairway ("I was the staircase and the last touch") symbolizes the connection between God and man, a connection tradition tells us a few chosen men ensure. Abraham is convenanted to be the human connection first; Isaac next, with his marriage to the lovely Rachel; Isaac chooses Jacob to continue the great "poetic" sacred planting, growing, generating; Jacob passes the blessing on to one of his sons; eventually the seed of Abraham proliferates and the covenant grows and strengthens in proportion to the increase of God's people, products of that original promise made to Abraham.

Unexpectedly, instead of seeing the God-sent vision and interpreting it for those who follow, the poet's father "die[s] on a stone pillow" (9). He fails to make life out of the stone pillow experience, as Jacob has done, as those few who are chosen to carry the covenant on must do to be visionaries. "His hand on a banister" further suggests the meaning that the father has his eyes on the staircase to heaven, and a possible attempt at climbing it, or interpreting it, but somehow he can't do more than simply grasp its banister before he dies. At this point, "us"

comes into play. The poet involves himself in the image of the staircase and the stone pillow: "there was nothing between us," he says, suggesting an absence of relationship, a "nothing" (9), between father and son. If the father died at the gate to "truth," or vision, the son's task is to do more than that, to do what will be nothing like his father did. "Nothing" might also mean simply "that which is still not something." In that sense, nothing is a temporary non-substantiality which some forthcoming event will suddenly alchemize.⁴⁴ The introduction of the dichotomy between touch and ghost⁴⁵ and the specifics of the discussion which the dichotomy inspire neatly directs "us" to think of nothing in this sense of immanent transformation, as an absence which is about to become a touch and that this becoming will happen as a result of a shift in the poet's perspective.

The shift from nothing between us to something between us does not happen in this poem. Here the territory is the non territory of the event being awaited. There was nothing between us "for the moment," the poet says, separating the lines before "for the moment" and after it with large spaces as if to say these words are special; "they stand out like this from the rest," he is saying, "because they indicate the main point of the poem, that I am no longer in a non-relationship with my father (as I was in "father's die: for J.K."), nor am I in a defined and new relationship with him, but I am here in the front parlor of our house where he lies before the funeral ceremonies in a critical balance and temporary stasis which will determine my future. To decide to be the leader of a people, to be the spokesman for a people and its visionary tie to the sacred covenant, is a momentous decision."

⁴⁴See here in the problematization of touch and ghost the shadow of the old poetical convention of the alchemist and alchemy, the turning of dross into gold through mystical means, through incantation mixed with science.

⁴⁵All of these complexities concerning the Mennonite poet's sense of relative touch and ghostliness the poem only suggests through symbol, conveys in a "ghostly" way through modes of intense elision. We see here, then, the exact *modus operandi* of the lyric with its methods based on secrecy and restraint--elision is applied secrecy and restraint.

Clearly, the decision has not yet been made by the young man, most likely standing there in the room with the coffin, in the immediacy of experiencing his father's death. That decision comes at some later time. The poem's effective use of the past voice ("I was the staircase"; "I heard a bluebottle"; "he died") highlights the importance of reflection in the poet's eventual discovery of how the death and the funeral marked him somehow as a poet before he knew it had done so. He analyses the event further. Not only was he in stasis, immobilized by the death, but he was responding to the events around him in a way peculiar to the poetic imagination. He responds to the death not directly, through touching the dead face and hands, or through a detailed, exploration of memories of his father and himself at some intimate game or work, or through abstract utterances of love and loss such as, "Oh, father, you never should have left me," but through a series of intense and symbolic objective correlatives of the sort which Eliot, Pound, Hulme, H.D. and the other immanent instructors of the twentieth century poetic consciousness have successfully taught as *the* aesthetic to Friesen's age. According to the modernist canon, quality poetry is that poetry which produces a sharp moment of understanding in the reader by means of a powerful image, by means of the substitution of rare and more difficult objective images for common subjective statements of feeling and intent.

The poet, thinking about the boy standing there by the coffin, recalls how he responded to events. He sensed the following things and did not think. He heard a trapped Bluebottle fly, buzzing, approaching its own death between the drawn blind darkening the death room and the bright, hot, sunlit window. The Bluebottle is stationary, stuck between the past and the future just as the bereaved son is. He is trapped where light will kill him, though Bluebottles sometimes buzz in vain in apparent agony in the blinds for days. The window blind (blind poet, blind uncertainty, blindness to codes and traditions, blindness to the future)

impedes things, separates and forces confrontations. The sun confronts the blind⁴⁶ and is turned back from its natural affect of lighting the room. The darkness of the death room remains there unmediated by the sun because of the blind. Only that which finds itself between the dark room and the bright outside spaces is trapped in a place where it sees and senses both what the dark room holds and what the sun's world shows. He is not free, the Bluebottle poet, but he senses and sees from the spot where his particular relationship with his father has trapped him. He is "the staircase" (9) which his father, dying on the stone pillow, not able to go on, has vainly grasped in his hand. He is "the last touch," the last thing his father touched, "the debut / between touch and ghost" (9), and having been touched in this sacred way by ancestral, patriarchal, religious history, he becomes a ghost to reality. He becomes a ghost to immediate experience and that sense of the real we often define in terms of touch, for in this room, so soon after this father's death, he already begins to turn subjective "reality" and touch (the truths, codes and abstractions we territorialized ones are in touch with) into the "ghostliness" of objective correlatives, of images, of lyric, symbolic, metaphoric pictures. I say the ghostliness of objects because the pictures not familiar to others (of the prairie instead of imagined heaven) will be familiar to him; the reality of objects he is in touch with will be ghostly, peripheral things to his people, hypocritically accustomed as they are (as I have already claimed about Rudy Wiebe's and Armin Wiebe's works) to spiritual realities which, inversely, he the poet will find ghostly.

What I am suggesting with this close reading of "Bluebottle" is the extent to which Friesen understands the lyrical and uses it with remarkable success and facility. I have only scratched the lyrical surface of "Bluebottle." The poet's

⁴⁶The sun confronting the blind makes for a very provocative, layered image here, considering Friesen's common equation of the sun with paternal authority, and "heavenly" light with viciousness, two patterns given only to an earth-blinded poet, accustomed to the dark, to see

facility with the lyrical is not, however, a sign of satisfaction with the lyrical style. Precisely the opposite is true, I think. Friesen demonstrates the lyrical in order to indicate frustration with it. His purpose is not to do away with all evidence of the lyrical in his work. His purpose is to show us the struggle he as a poet in Canada, on the prairie, has faced in his desire to "represent" himself and his people and their experiences. How does the chosen poet write after Europe? How do you write or unwrite the lyric with its density of symbol and its restraint in a land which counsels its subjects to wait and listen ("heard a Bluebottle") and not always already have something standing between the subject and the moment. How do you write against the received wisdom of the lyrical and the symbolic with their long, Euro-English semantic histories, with their predictable systems of meaning and long-baked, cleverly transmitted, potentially binding moral structures? That conundrum buzzes in the blind, caught between touch and ghost; that is what is blindly trapped by the light through the death-room window; that is what the poet feels compelled to covenant with his father to write about:

I smelled heat
off the pavement
saw it shimmer
above the field

I was there
his accomplice
among idle worshippers
who would not let go

I heard the buzzing of a bottled fly ("accomplice" 15)

He is his father's accomplice. He is not his father's enemy. Not *only* his enemy, at least. If he is his enemy, it is a greater task which unites him with his enemy more than it separates. This uniting with the enemy in a common goal is the crux of the Christian message, after all. The Christian subject is to love his enemy as himself. So the poet in his complicity with his father, between whom and himself 'there is nothing for this present moment,' announces his Christian duty, a burden of sorts, to "feed" the buzzing fly in him, to not eat the traditional sacerdotal bread of the Eucharist with its two thousand year old "unchristian" traditions, but to rewrite this world and these traditions represented by his father with whom he feels, and in a moment swears, a complicity:

bread was flesh of the dead

I could not eat

later

in the basement

of the house he built

i whispered my rites (15)

The poet cannot eat the flesh of the dead, cannot take the father in as dead, fears the earth and its warm decadence. In effect, though he attends the funeral ("I was at the funeral"), though he sings communally with the singing Mennonites ("their amazing grace / made me weep for old days"), and though he has "consented" to all the last wishes of the dying man ("father died / wanting to die / I consented / and felt his blessing"), he can't face the earthy facts of death. The poet can consent to the death, can deal with the words of the blessing, but when it comes to the actual signs of the flesh and its moldering he can go no further and must find ways of substituting word for flesh, spirit for body. In this fear of the dead body and commitment to the living word in the site of or place of death ("in the

basement / of the house he had build") he is not far off from the biblical incarnation.

He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, *even* to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth. (St. John 1:14)

I quote the passage in full because it echoes *Bluebottle*. The theme of difference from other Mennonites, who are his people but unlike him in beliefs and understanding, is one thing the two have in common. That is the message of "He came unto his own [people], and his own received him not." In "accomplice" we see, in this light, the young man at the funeral with his Mennonite brethren, conscious of his difference from them.

I was at the funeral

all the brethren
my stiff-necked mennonites
carried the coffin
and sang

their amazing grace
made me weep of old days (11)

Their amazing grace (graciousness, dignity) reminds him of something of the old days when he was younger that he has lost, an ability to sing the old songs and recite the old religious ideas with belief. Their *singing* of the song "Amazing Grace," however, also reminds him of olden days and traditions which the

Mennonites have lost. What they have lost can only be recovered or discovered by the poet gradually, over time, if he commits himself to that arduous task for a lifetime, as he is about to do at the end of this poem with "whispered...rites." The difference between them and him concerns something lost on both their parts, and by implication, something each has it in its power to give the other. Here is the reason for his turning to words and not to flesh ("blood"). It concerns the chosenness of the special son to bring truth to a people reluctant to hear, the complicity between father and son, the preference for words instead of earth and blood. In "whispering these rites" to write about and write out of the father's world, a Mennonite traditional religious world, the poet commits himself to a life of interpolating the buzzing Bluebottle between the blinding light of the sun and the warming material world of the dark, warm grave:

a pastor's prayer is a momentary span
that dissolves in open air

a loam mound warms in the sun ("graveside" 11)

This dark earth/bright sun binary--lyrical binary--persists after this. They found, complicate, and direct the flow of ideas in much of Friesen's poetry for the next dozen years. The insistent presence of earth/sun imagery is particularly true of *The Shunning*.

Friesen is dealing throughout with a view of the inverted realities of Mennonite spirituality and so with a hypocritical (though consciously non hypocritical, what they themselves would call "realistic," or "the most realistic reality of all which is and is all about heaven") community which is more individualistic than social. This individualism is strongly implied in the image which opens "accomplice." The specific subjected group is Mennonite, its personal as well as religious attitudes toward individuals of other cultures and

each other is proud and stubborn ("stiff-necked"), and when they sing at the funeral they sing very well, with a peculiar grace which their singing has long been noted for. Local *sangerfests*, local church choirs, the Canadian Mennonite Bible College's perennial and very gifted mixed choir, the general involvement of Mennonites in all music programs at all levels of accomplishment, provincial, national, and international, are proof of the grace Friesen notices and inscribes. He himself feels "stiff-necked" proud of this gift in his people. Much more to his point, however, is the fact that religiously speaking the Mennonite is less gracious when he is relating to others than when he's musical: they sing *their* "Amazing Grace," not anyone else's version of it. An aspect of Mennonite spirituality which has long been cause of suffering among its people, old and young, is its acceptance and insistence upon that most puritan of sentiments about the religious subject which "Amazing Grace" enshrines that the individual is a guilt-bound, sin-ridden, worthless creature whom God somehow sees fit to love regardless. "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound / that saved a wretch like me," the song goes, showing its sentiments with another puritan bastion, the seventeenth century novel, *Robinson Crusoe*, which has the luckless Robinson finally discover the true goodness of Providence in isolating him on his uninhabited island which he has taken till the moment of revelation to be its indifference to him:

*Why has god done this to me? What have I done to be
thus used?*

My conscience presently checked me in that inquiry, as if I had blasphemed, and methought it spoke to me like a voice: "WRETCH! dost thou ask what thou hast done? Look back upon a dreadful misspent life and ask thyself what thou hast not done; ask, why is it that thou wert not long ago destroyed. (82)

The individual Christian subject for Crusoe and for the Puritans for whom he speaks is a wretch whose conscience, if the subject listens to it, will invert a blithe sense of personal blamelessness and turn it into an authentic and proper self-denial and self-disgust which eventually then returns to the said individual the gift of a new heavenly bliss. This bliss, however, is bodiless, not of this world, stiff-necked in its insistence on the reality of the spirit and the false, lying, deceitful unreality of the material world.

This digression concerning the wretched subject of "Amazing Grace" illustrates Mennonite hypocritical reality. In "accomplice" it works in this way: at the very home of the material, the grave, the stiff-necked Mennonites in their blessed voices cannot sense, cannot let themselves feel, the dark *welcome* of earth, the "loam mound" which "warms in the sun" (11). Friesen's Mennonite poet cannot either. He, too, he realizes with discomfort, is an inverter. Poetry represents for him an inversion of the material into something other, something symbolic. He is after all an "accomplice" who wishes he were not that, who for dramatic effect, to jolt his senses into being sense, climbs closer to, and symbolically deeper into, the sensual grave by descending into the basement⁴⁷ to 'whisper his rites' (15). The word itself--the poetic word and the non poetic word, these whispered rites hopeful of reuniting the poet to the earth, and later hopeful of uniting his people to the earth of their past, to their material past--denies the material and constitutes a forced and vain singing of "Amazing Grace." The whispered rites in the basement are the gentle, quiet (quiet, because the poet is embarking on a career which stiff-necked Mennonites don't encourage and which, regardless, takes much courage and an odd mixture of arrogance and humility), tentative words of commitment to his calling, in his father's house, in

⁴⁷The basement is man made and so a compartmentalized, ordered, bunker more than a loam mound: the poet's is a wishful, ineffectual journey into the grave, into the underworld; a false harrowing of hell.

the site of patriarchal authority proper to the commitment to God's work of a Jacob or a Moses. The calling for which he is chosen is to sing a new version of "Amazing Grace" which will not carry a coffin, which will not carry its own death around with it. He is "chosen" to return his people's gaze from self-loathing and stubborn sun-inspired spirituality to a new materiality.

He is chosen against his will. "Jonah" has hinted this, the very progress of the poems of *The Lands I Am* have strongly suggested this, "Bluebottle" more than suggested it with its complex "stone pillow" image, and now another poem speaks of it even more explicitly. "Whispered basement rites" implies a particular meaning of "chosen." It symbolically means that his calling will be to bring his "stiff-necked mennonites" a new acquaintance with the earth, an acquaintance with the social material instead of with the hypocritical puritan. That he is chosen to bring a new vision of the material vividly presents itself to the reader in the stunning poem "mother" which appears early in Friesen's fourth book, *Unearthly Horses*:

mother

1.

her bare feet in dust
holding her print dress above the knees
she sprints toward home laughing

2.

a girl in her summer dress
sun shifting through foliage on her yellow hair
father his arm around her waist crooning wilf carter

3.

in the garden

leaning on her hoe
pushing back strands of hair
her eyes lock on mine
where i lie on my stomach
between rows of raspberry bushes

this is how I was chosen

4.

ma singing me to sleep
with 'the golden vanity'
and sailing dreams of 'sir patrick spens'
telling me gypsies she remembered
greasy skirts and pans their fire and paint
at the edge of altona their dance (5)

That is how he was chosen. He will sing the earth which he persistently tries to get closer to in his memories of the past ("where i lie on my stomach / between rows of raspberry bushes," for instance). His whispered rites in the basement to sing the earth echo the earth and sea song he remembers his mother singing to him at bedtime.

The songs his mother sings pertain now closely to the themes which preoccupy Friesen later. "Golden vanity," for example, warns him early of the pride of the sun. The sun is a quintessential symbol in Friesen's poetry. It is always what blinds Mennonites or freezes them with its cold, fierce light. The sun for Friesen represents the non-material, hypocritical spiritual which divides his people from pleasure and love. Gold, the color and affect in the heavens of the sun, opposes dark and stands in the classical sense for an old cosmology which

calls the earth corrupt. For religion and the Ptolemaics, heaven is the place of true gold, of refined and refining light.

For Friesen, the sun and light stand for the dehumanizing, desocializing spiritual. Nowhere is this more evident than in *The Shunning*. At the point when Peter is sitting on his swing in his yard after the announcement by his church brethren of his excommunication, while he is beginning to contemplate suicide, he hears the rooster on his brother's adjacent farm, crowing in the separating light:

rooster crows the sun
and i know what must be done
before it crows again (36)

Early in the morning, on his way to get his rifle, he kills all his chickens in a grizzly simultaneous affirmation and negation of the material. He smells the rancidness of rotting eggs, both as a reminder of the sensuality which death deprives the subject of and of the decay of life and life's pleasure in the material.

i dress quickly
walk out boots in hand

running for the henhouse
I smell the heap of smashed eggs
grab the startled rooster and twist his neck
throw him on the stinking eggs

hens flutter as I flounder reaching
tearing with my hands my teeth
spitting blood and feathers
fat headless hens dancing on broken shells (36)

In the midst of this carnage, with the stink of the carrion's return to dust, in the haste of his killing spree, the sun rises to call him to his own death. The sun, religion with its truth and light, with its sweetness and light as Matthew Arnold would have it,⁴⁸ the same sun with which the poet earlier claims a complicity he cannot free himself from, and which persistently makes him fearful of the earth whose "bread was flesh of the dead / I could not eat" (*Bluebottle* 15), now ruthlessly, mindless of the havoc generally, beckons him to wake up to another day of human isolation and social extirpation.

sun slants in at the windows
on the spattered floor on my untied boots

from Johann's farm a cock crows
the sun will not be denied (36)

Of course, the crowing cock recalls the biblical Peter's denial of Christ. In this text, Peter's social alienation is exponentially greater still than his wife Helena's who, dispirited with watching her husband's declining sociability, sums up the nature of the indifference of the sun in this way:

this distance will not be forgiven

i must come back
sit on benches
if I am to be loved again

but how do I come back (37)

⁴⁸"Greek art, again, Greek beauty, have their root in the same impulse to see things as they really are, inasmuch as Greek art and beauty rest on fidelity to nature--the *best* nature--and on a delicate discrimination of what this best nature is. To say we work for sweetness and light, then, is only another way of saying that we work for Hellenism" ("Culture and Anarchy" 1430).

The great distance of their removal from love is both that from their fellow church members and the vastness of the distance from the source of love their Mennonite brethren worship and in whose name Peter has been singled out for shunning. Reverend Loewen recalls Peter's whispered words at the moment the committee of brethren confront Peter:

all this light he said

all this cold cold light (39)

Moments before Peter's death, while he prays for God to forgive "them" and "me" (41) the poet (not Peter) tells us that "his [Peter's] brother shivers at noon" in uncanny telepathic knowing, and with the sun at its most potent height. Many years later, when Johann remembers one day all that Peter taught him about life and death, the sun's cold power declines and the earth suddenly replaces it in a powerful way. A new warmth enters the world of *The Shunning*, a fertile and familial earth.

johann remembered his brother
who tore the curtain and went blind
who taught johann fear and not fear
that the child dies no matter what
and a man carries his funeral with him
you never know how many people you bury with a man
nor how many are born again

come said johann let's go back to the house
ruth bakes bread today
it's good when it's still warm and the butter melts

listen he whispered

that rasping sound that's a yellowhead
see it over there near the creek

and I saw
a blackbird with a sun for its head (98)

This last poem in *The Shunning* points the reader and the poet back to a former book and ahead toward his next two books, closing a circle, so to speak, of poems which have attempted to indicate the distance between sun and earth, Mennonite spirituality and Mennonite materiality. The delightful and welcoming image of a wife (Johann's second wife Ruth) baking bread with butter melting on a slice of it, beckons us back to an old territorial world of Mennonite love of food, hearth, earth, drink, socializing and sex.⁴⁹ Really, seeing as this is Johann's revitalized world long after Peter's death, we may read it as a reterritorialized more than a territorial world. *This*, this material, satisfying, social, non stiffnecked-necked side of the Mennonite culture and personality, constitute the world the poet has been chosen to bring. It is the word he has "whispered" (*Bluebottle* 15) to himself and his readers in his father's basement that he will devote himself to write and so to memorialize instead of that of the hypocritical sun. Peter tearing the curtain and going "blind," returns us to the Bluebottle fly caught between light and dark in the blind of the death room. "Rasping," in the undertow of this baking bread image, reminds us suddenly of how the poet has been chosen to be poet, lying on the ground between raspberry rows with his mother's eyes locked on his (*Unearthly Horses* 5). "Yellowhead" and "a blackbird with a sun for its head" send us to the title of his fifth book, *flicker and hawk*. Flickers rasp at wood, sport yellow and black feathers, and yet here do not inordinately represent the

⁴⁹Mennonite materiality is contradictory. It both affirms and negates life and celebration.

deceptive, cold world of the sun which the poet has so long religiously opposed with images of earth and darkness.

The image of the yellow-headed blackbird which ends *The Shunning* mitigates the story of social distance and the church's exclusion. It combines, in a fine gesture of community, the golden ("vain") world of the sun which his mother has warned him about and the black, warm world of death to which Sir Patrick Spens goes, as we all know, part way through his voyage of service for his king. *The Shunning* ends by bringing the reader back to the material. The sun is not destined to rule; the poet turns the tide of official territorial codes by effectively telling a story of reterritorialization, of recoding.

Official spirituality, the spirituality of the sun, is not the only spirituality the chosen poet knows. The first spirituality is deceptive. It calls to the poet and seduces him with a sense of its longevity and social possibility: the people after all have believed for four hundred years; their faith has profoundly kept them a people:

as they sing 'amazing grace'
 a dirge that moves me through time
 to whatever passed for eden
 i want to stand and say we are together
 blessing four hundred years with our names
 but i catch the lie
 and remember it was a young boy's eden
 mine alone and i know who seared whom
 i know eden vanished before the cross

("easter morning 1966" *Unearthly Horses* 10)

Eden, the place of early love, of first sex, of knowing, is an ideal the young man once had but which he knows, despite the seduction of that old "Amazing Grace,"

has nothing for him or for his people besides a "searing" hell and a legacy of ignorance and separation into gross, sad individuality. Eden, lovely and sensual, remains a dream of only one boy, not a commonly held vision of a free and material Adam and Eve, naked and young, naked and amazingly graceful in a gorgeous world.

This other grace, this other spirituality, is to be found in places where Mennonite preachers typically do not suggest to search.

letter to the brimstone church

i follow black caverns of jungle
 everywhere i look grotesque shapes hang
 distant barking nears and the dull pound of drums
 i don't see the clearing until i am in it

at the centre a shallow ditch flames
 a path of flat stones meanders across
 fronds quiver and part
 a procession enters the circle

(*Bluebottle* 19)

The poet descends into hell. The descent is easy; not difficult at all ("broad is the way that leads to hell"). Hell the material. The jungle is dark, fecund, cavernous,⁵⁰ filled with terrible shapes hanging from the high trees. The dogs of Cerebus bark ("distant barking nears"), drums pound as they do in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* with its inky, impenetrable shores and its endless ignorance of

⁵⁰The cavern is emblematically here a womb, given the subject matter and the rest of the poem's images of earth and sexuality. Margery Fee has examined the nature of the connection between cave and womb, in the context of Eli Mandel's poetry, in *Essays on Canadian Writing* 156-171.

the native other⁵¹ (always cast in the absence of color and the fulminating presence of eternal pounding drum rhythms). The poet fearlessly--instinctively knowing from past experience that he has only illumination to find in exciting sorties of this sort, and not damnation--crosses a ditch (with its onomatopoetic duplicity, calling up by sound strong sensations both of an ooze-filled slimy place you wouldn't want to step in and an earthy site on the other hand so much more tangible than anything in the presented history of the sky could possibly be) on a path of "flat" stones which "meander" across it. So far "hell" holds nothing all that dreadful for him. Entry in at its gates and progress further in both beckon him on with their ease, with their passivity. Fire doesn't burst and flare, but simply, mildly "flames"; and the crossing is not made with harrowing haste and danger but in a mood of slowness and, could we say, grace?

What will come next, here in this place far from the sun and official goodness? Surely something fearful to the poet, something to justify all our straining to disembodied our understandings and aspire upwards towards landless,⁵² sunny Platonic, Judeo-Christian immutability.

fronds quiver and part

a procession enters the circle (*Bluebottle* 18)

He is about to see for himself the terrible secret of hell. The image at the moment of seeing is plainly sexual. His body in its forward movement parts the fronds obscuring his view. He peers into the eternal womb, into the world of the maternal. This is a world which angels, if we read Milton on heaven and earth,

⁵¹Said treats Conrad's version of the other as an empirical set piece: *Heart of Darkness*, as all nineteenth century novels, treat all lands beyond their borders as meant to be colonized: "...the nineteenth century English novels stress the continuing existence (as opposed to revolutionary overturning) of England. Moreover, they *never* advocate giving up colonies, but take the long-range view that since they fall within the orbit of British dominance, *that* dominance is a sort of norm, and thus conserved along with the colonies" (*Culture and Imperialism* 74).

⁵²Landless, sunny heaven contrasts Friesen's general meaning in the title of his first book. "The Lands I Am" is a play on the sense of the landless (aspiring) world the Mennonite Canadian church--the "brimstone church"--would have him be.

secretly and jealously wish to deny. This is a world which heaven, the angels (spirits) and the "brimstone church" all spend their lives, their energies and their imaginations denying, refusing and preaching against, jealous of the power of earth and especially females to create while males (all angels in heaven are male⁵³) are able only to fight great, deadly battles.⁵⁴ The world which the poet "unfronds" is the world of the material generative. It is a world of great grace as the upcoming images delicately show, a world of the mother whose love and yearning so many of Friesen's poems attempt to recreate.

young girls

slim and feathered like night-flowers

sleepwalk by me (18)

The girls, attractive, with all the blissful qualities of flowers (Friesen is not attempting to be original in the metaphor; it simply "does" in the best sense of material poetry, is good for the required affect), "sleepwalk by," both because this is the place of lethargy and forgetting in the mythic wisdom about hell,⁵⁵ and because the image projects his sense of being in a dream-world, in a world he has not ever believed real. The brimstone church has never taught him this about hell, of course, never prepared him for hell's loveliness.

i smell their moist spices

⁵³In Milton's *Paradise Lost*'s evidence accumulates that the only woman in heaven is Sin, and she is imagined and bodiless, springing from Satan's mind in a gross, airy parody of God's material woman, created good and lovely and fully creative like himself.

⁵⁴In *Paradise Lost* Raphael, stunned at Eve's ability to create, trained on hierarchy and rule, misunderstanding God's generosity and generative nature, counsels Adam to rule over Eve and subdue her passionate nature. Angels in heaven are homosexual: to Adam's question about how angels love, whether "Express they, by looks only, or do they mix / Irradiance, virtual or immediate touch," Raphael answers him evasively, but blushing to high heaven. "To whom the Angel with a smile that glow'd / Celestial rosy red, Love's proper hue, / Answer'd. Let it suffice thee that thou know'st / Us happy, and without Love no happiness" (Book VIII, 618-21). Angels are, by implication, incapable of procreation.

⁵⁵Hamlet, in a scene whose context is curiously relevant to Friesen's poetry, listens to the words of his dead father whose ghost has come up from hell to caution him about the horrors and dangers of hell:

I find thee apt;
And duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed
That roots itself in ease on Lethe wharf
Wouldst thou not stir in this
(*Hamlet* I.v.32-35)

i watch the first girl
her breasts not yet budding
hypnotic hips swaying

i hear no incantation
no signals given
as she walks toward the stones
her lithe arms rise
undulate like charmed snakes

each step she takes is easy and precise
she is kelp dancing in a fiery sea (18)

Such seas, on fire, are yet not on fire. They burn without burning. They burn maybe in the way St. Paul cautioned against, but their fires "charm" and "hypnotize" more than they destroy. The maternal, the woman, the girl "who walks toward the stones,"⁵⁶ is *herself* snakes (plural, multiple) and not, by way of contrast, seduced by a singular, intelligent and deadly advisor reptile whose purpose is the destruction of woman; whose motive hatred and jealousy of that mankind whom God has created superior to all earth's creatures and whose injunction official religion has determined must be to "bruise thy head...[as] thou shalt bruise his heel" (Genesis 3:15). The girl undulates like kelp, she sways with a natural, hypnotic seductiveness. No words "signal" danger at her movements and grace, in contrast to the Old Testament version which proclaims with a sort of frenetic hurry against Eve's sojourn on earth. Hell provides no background

⁵⁶See how stones here, now that the context is hell and not a "stone-pillow" at the base of the staircase to heaven, are low and easy to cross. Stones represent another sort of passage over than in Jacob's Genesis.

dirge or chanted rites ("whispered rites" [*Bluebottle* 15]) to "signal" that one who encounters woman there must be on his greatest guard. If anything, she is innocuous and lovely only, a harmless and wonderful, kelpy, "precise" part in the machine which is this earth.

she has done it
and if only I can learn
every move each supple turn
I will do it too (19)

Friesen does not at this point, as he does so often in his later works, launch into a lyrical reminiscence of love lost and love made possible by the presence of a supple girl. Other than being such a singular love poem and such a lyrical, individualist, courtly prayer for maternity's acceptance of the lonely poet, this poem simply announces that beauty as woman "easily" crosses the fires of hell. She "does it," and he too wishes for the gift to cross hell with charm and ease and without the guilt or fear the official "brimstone church" has raised him on and which by implication ironically sustains him. He wants to be born new--though he does not directly use this biblicism--able to turn with suppleness enough to walk hell's fire charmed and unharmed. Paradoxically, he has already done it in coming, in parting the fronds, and in watching woman there. He forgets his ability, apparently, as soon as he succeeds. What he asks for then more than for an original ability is for the gift of memory, of remembering the past and letting it authenticate and stabilize his present.

brethren just for you
I will walk through hell unsinged

I will be muscle and flame
and stand where I belong

my bare feet on fire
I will be a whirling dervish
throw glowing cinders on my shoulders (19)

Here the poem ends; but it ends oddly. He suddenly determines to be courageous and able to traverse hell "unsinged" for his, as he has called them in "accomplice," "stiff-necked mennonites," for his brothers. He will cross hell for the church's sake to defy it, yet he also will cross it for his people's sake in order to show the way across and to point out its harmlessness, to be the fearless poet who sets the example they need to free them from their bondage to the exacting and joyless, "searing" sun.⁵⁷ The complication of this ending, though, lies not in the duplicity of "brethren"; rather, it has to do with his sudden vivacity and nervous restlessness. Instead of moving peacefully and easily as he does at the beginning of the poem when entering hell, or as the girl he admires does with her hypnotic sway and precise step, he promises to become male and "muscular," himself "flaming" as if he were fire, a "whirling dervish" on the fire. This is a picture of the poet in a classical visionary frenzy, precisely opposite to the sedate picture of the girl who inspires him. He whirls and flexes muscles suspiciously like a young man vainly attempting to impress a young woman of recent acquaintance. She is competent in crossing hell; he will be incompetent.

Regardless of his relative competence as the poet against the sun,⁵⁸ whirling and flexing useless biceps in a work which requires maternal patience and calm, "letter to the brimstone church" sets up the distinction between official spirituality and the spirituality which the material makes possible. This material

⁵⁷A fakir crosses burning coals unharmed. The poet, too, is sometimes spoken of as a "faker," Plato being not the least of those who thought of poets as imitators who attempted to represent in words what was already more truly there as object. Plato's hierarchy of authenticity declined in this way: Idea, form, object, spoken word, written word.

⁵⁸Which is to say, in this case, for hell.

spirituality is too frightening for the regular masculine group subject to approach, peep at, and be inspired by.⁵⁹

There is another spirituality which the poet more authentically presents, then, besides official spirituality. This spirituality is the opposite of the spirituality which the church and other Mennonite institutions endorse and exhort. It is to be recovered in the material, in the earth, not in the sun and that symbol's rejection of the body. This material spirit is in fact an embodied one. It is most closely represented by non-images, by non-symbolic language.⁶⁰ I have been arguing in effect that the official spiritual and the lyrical poem share common interests, while the material and the non-lyrical poem share a different set of strategies altogether. What Friesen, in "letter to the brimstone church," constructs lyrically with consummate skill in figures and symbols so that there is a great sense of irony in the combination of method and content, he has already

⁵⁹This poem's narrative reenacts the story of Achteon spying on a naked Diana. Diana in the myth is, of course, a product of official, classical spirituality (Apollonian light, sun light) and unlike the harmless, lithe girl of Friesen's hell, she has Juno turn Achteon into a deer and has her hounds tear him to pieces. The maternal, the feminine, sexuality in general, suffers terrible onslaughts in classical mythology. Whatever is not familial and chaste is pursued and killed. Only the gods are allowed to ravish women with impunity; then, however, the women they seduce are commonly lower on the scale of being and so not of sufficient status to have to be treated non-violently. Sex and violence, in other words, go hand in hand in the hierarchically determined relationships of official religion and spirituality. The sun is a "cold, cold light" in Friesen's own words (*The Shunning* 39).

⁶⁰This idea has a close corollary in Nietzsche's Apollonianism which is criticized by Nietzsche for its heedless and persistent symbolizing. Apollo, god of the sun, symbolizes instead of acts. That is, action is always a silent process which lives as great energy in nature. The symbolic, non-energetic, derives its energy from the actions about which it thinks and speaks and creates words. Words pacify. Language, in other words, pacifies the spirit of action and sexuality. Dionysius, god of wine, sex, earth and passion, wordless, is also the god of no language. Given language, action turns less active and more Apollonian. This is the connection between Nietzsche's first book (*The Birth of Tragedy*) and his last (*The Genealogy of Morals*) in which he argues that those minds preoccupied with language and language's apparent activity, are not thinkers at all but pretenders: "But whoever thinks *words* is an orator, not a thinker; he betrays that he does not think *things* but only in respect of things; he really thinks only of himself and his listeners" (*The Genealogy of Morals* 245). Oddly, this position seems quite close to Plato's position denying the value of poetry since poetry is the putting into word what before was something else. The difference is, however, that for Plato the thing represented is objects (Ideas themselves), while for Nietzsche, slyly, I think, the thing that language represents is not objects but action. Friesen's poem ends with a promise to act, to be very active, to be on fire with the impulse a visit to hell has given him. This can be taken either as a profoundly direct statement of the Nietzschean desire to give action speech, or an ironic comment on the Platonic futility of and deception of the word.

constructed materially in this book shortly before without symbolism or lyrical strategy. This is the materiality of the two poems "closet" and "seeing."

"closet" tells us unforgettably about his father's *active* material life in material terms.

i finger the khaki shirt
he wore on his last working day
before he unbuttoned

along the collar stain of sweat
faint salt smell of him alive
even as he lies
past mattering in his grave (7)

The poem is not entirely material. It has its symbolic moments, though they are few and very specific to the tension between spirit and matter and so highly relevant to the issue Friesen's aesthetic confronts in the entire book. We have here the shirt's color, the time when he wore it, the hint of the crumpledness of having been used for a whole working day, the smell of and sight of sweat on the collar, and even the less present but still highly physical, material and active decay his body is undergoing at the very moment the poet is rummaging in his closet, "past mattering in the grave" (7). Mostly the images do not refer the reader to anything abstract and so are not symbolic. They describe matter. They tell us of life more than death, of what matters materially to those who live.

work pants sharply creased
have fallen from the wooden hanger
I see wrinkles behind the knees
where he stooped or bent

lenses of the eye-glasses
reveal striations
of his eye-lashes on dust

I can't imagine what he saw
as he lay thin and bare
in that dark place (7)

To the extent that Friesen at this point in his writing career has figured out the function of the material for himself, he creates a material poem with all the senses of the reader engaged in seeing what it means to die as well as what it means to have a father die and be left alive to remember the event. The poem, though constructed without excessive symbolism, yet makes use of the objective correlative without problematizing it and so the claim must be made that it has to discover a way of representing the material world and the materiality of writing which incorporates excess and plenty with their obvious inability to be or willingness to attempt to be exact. The objective correlative in the passage above of the lens with their striations is a precisely worded image, as precise in words as the girl in hell in "letter to the brimstone church" is precise in her graceful step. Friesen's fiery dancing and "whirling dervish" activity will, with great contrariness of meaning, be less excessive (as whirling dervish implies) than greatly restrained and moderate and in fact secretive in affect and effect.

The poem "seeing" shows the same attempt at material writing but with a similar quickness of image, deftness of line and thought, possibly characteristic of a little girl talking of her fear of disappearance, but most likely fitting the poet's sense of what a good imagistic poem would do to present a specific material content and context:

when I die

I'll keep my eyes open
so I can come back
she said
if you see someone
as high as the chimney
flying
it's only Marijke

I'll fly in the rain
my eyes wide
seeing all the trees
herbie my cat
and the small houses

There is little question that a child would be likely to dream of flying, and would think of herself as flying high if the flight were at the height of the house chimney. This is good verisimilitude. The rain, however, seems rather arbitrary, as if Friesen wished to have tears represented by the image, especially since they enter the little girl's eyes which are wide open as she is blown through the falling rain. The apposite myth is that of Icarus, but missing here the ambition to get to heaven, the Apollonian sun-idolatry. I am sure this is due to Friesen's own serious intention to show us a maternal figure in the same boat as a patriarchal one: the female and generation are materially here and alive even after the father and authority dies. He shows us simultaneously with competent modernist imagery, the simplicity of this maiden, her longing to be on earth and not to fly too near the sun, and her sad little attempt to stay here on earth in its warm "hell," so to speak, by grasping the chimney (with all that image's energy gleaned from Blake and "The Chimney Sweep" substituting Blake's boy with a girl)

fearing the unknown represented by flying itself. Death has paradoxically made the little girl wish to fly the earth, and to be near it. The poem is imagistically complex, yet apparently material, with few figurative or allusive complexities requiring an erudite audience. It makes use of questionable strategies of presentation, that is to say, for a poem which wishes to counterpose a material prairie Mennonite Canadian world to the typical lyrical symbolic one which till now has always been major literature's canonized, and we could say "poetic," method of presenting everything.

As "seeing" indicates, Friesen's poetry in these first four books struggles to present a prairie Mennonite Canadian world materially, but it does so without entirely ridding itself of the complex lyrical image and its aesthetics based on restraint. Much later in his career, Friesen makes the discovery that long, apparently excessive lines with run-on thoughts (of the sort found more in Di Brandt's poetry) *can* represent the unofficial material world more materially than short, pithy ones, although as I have shown earlier, he inclines toward intense mysticism once he actually begins to use the long line. He seems unable to shake free of the constraints of modernist imagism despite his consciousness of the power of the material. To do what he does here in "closet," and again with "seeing" a few pages later, is commendably to attempt to construct a voice which speaks for the material prairie but which unfortunately still uses lyrical tools which, in some respects, are already outmoded (the short line, the objective image, and others). The material, as quick reflection tells us, is not best presented by strategies of restraint and secrecy, but by those of excess, blunder, non blunder, lengthy and precise exposition of a complex idea, total exhaustion of possibilities of meanings confidently recorded on the page, non-semantic strategies, pedantic overstatement of the simple, and a general oversupplying of the requirements of the semantic demand, among others. This is an awareness of

the nature of the material which Friesen never comes to understand. His poems are all constructed either *barely*, without signs of excess when they are very material (by which I mean when they are not clearly clever and symbolic) or in his later books in apparent *excess* with long lines and many words when they are most lyrical.

What this discussion of the lyrical and the poetic strategies of the early poems of Pat Friesen indicates is that more than any other element of his work its purpose is to problematize the conflict between the major and the minor, the lyric and the material poem. This purpose is announced in "Bluebottle," it is illustrated in the particular mixture of some solidly lyrical and some solidly material poems, in *The Lands I Am* and *Bluebottle*, and it is most clearly expressed as well as most plainly imagined and constructed in *The Shunning* and in *Unearthly Horses*.

This knowledge of the conflict between the lyric and the material poem does not surface in *The Shunning* as a main concern. There that conflict is already naturalized. The aesthetic has incorporated the struggle and made its metapoetic appearance less necessary. The opposition between the lyric and the material aesthetics are, in other words, a fully operative mode or style in that book. Sometimes the poem is lyrical, sometimes material, according to the thematic and tonal purposes of the poet. Nowhere more than in *The Shunning* does Friesen's sense of the strength of the material, minor, politically explicit poem appear so solid. This same quiet force of an incorporated aesthetic determines the production of *Unearthly Horses*, and much could be said about this book in light of the question of Friesen's poetic (prophetic) Canadian material purpose. For my purposes, however, a closer look at certain parts of *The Shunning*

adequately explains the dynamics of the meeting of the lyric and the material in Friesen's poetry.

The Shunning tells the story of the religious shunning and subsequent suicide of Peter Neufeld, a Manitoba farm boy of Old Colony *Kleine Gemeinde* ("little church") stock. The story is told to us through the diary entries of Mrs. Hiebert, a midwife, and of Dr. Blanchard, as well as poems about and by Peter and Johann Neufeld, Peter's wife Helena, Johann's wives Carolina and Ruth, and Johann's daughter Anna. All of their contributions help the reader gradually to piece together what happened to precipitate the shunning and what various people thought of Peter and of the shunning, how Johann relates to his wives and child, the opinions of neighbors and church members on various topics related to the shunning, and so on.

it was july and the sun
 there was a *tsocha boum* and a rope swing
 Peter sat upright motionless
 all afternoon he gazed unseeing across his land
 everyone else was inside Helena the children

 only

 two horses muzzle to muzzle
 stand against the fence tails flicking flies
 Brummer hot on the trail yelping in the trees
 and Peter on the swing
 that sunday was the first day of his shunning (29)

This is what the reader discovers a third of the way through the book. The language is simple, unadorned for the most part, the setting is decidedly Manitoba

Mennonite, considering the use of the Low German name for the Manitoba Alder. It is a pastoral place, here where Peter learns of his shunning, where we are asked to be to receive news of it. It is a pioneer Canadian place with animals waving tails and running in the bush. All of us readers, including of course Pat Friesen, are outside in July under a hot sun. There is a tree with a rope swing on it on which Peter sits with Mosaic patience looking out over the farmland without seeing it. In a reverie. A dog barks and hunts somewhere far away, horses nuzzle each other and stand there swatting at flies with tails.

But there is tension in Eden. Of the members of his family, only Peter is outside. Everyone else is inside, looking out at him, as if he were a danger to them, as if he might hurt them, or as if he must not be approached, touched, or loved. And of course, this is precisely what Friesen's theme and the succession of poems tells us. Peter's shunning means that no one of his family or friends may speak to him or have anything to do with him until he is convicted of whatever sin he has committed and repents. When he repents, then all will be forgiven and he may again be loved and befriended. "For love they will come back," says the old woman Rebecca of the unruly children in Miller's *The Crucible*. Here, in the high religion of Steinbach-area Mennonites, love is a lure, a seduction, a tantalizing impossibility for someone with the convictions and moral certainty of a Peter Neufeld.

Pat Friesen's hero is someone with strong convictions, strong beliefs. That is the sort of person, presumably, Friesen constructs as the "ideal man." Such a man is an individualist *par excellence*. He stands up for truth regardless of the cost to himself. In that sense, this individualist (in the American tradition of Walt Whitman, Daniel Webster, Abe Lincoln, Billy Graham, and so on), imperturbable to death, devout and loyal, Peter is the ideal churchman, even more of a religious figure than the milksops who come to read him his rights:

There are mosquitoes on Loewen's hands one on his cheek but he pages on and reads.

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Bible closes. They bow their heads and Loewen prays for my salvation and that they will do the right thing. I move toward Loewen as he prays. He backs down. Funk and Penner stumble off

the porch. Loewen shuffles aside as I go down and walk to the barn. (28)

Friesen is for truth, for the artistic presentation of the truth about the hypocrisy of the church, and about its violence. This truth-concern expresses itself thematically above in the "mosquito-slapping" scene with its "tiny scarlet splash there and a wreckage of black legs and wings" (28--symbolically the death these churchmen cause with their shunning, and the violence to others related to Peter inflicted by their rectitude and paranoid exertion of the ban of silence and separation goes almost unnoticed by these men). See how delicate the image? How gentle and lovely the creature violated? How lyrical and outside real experience. Wings suggest heaven and grace, legs, black and broken, present the fragile body tangled in sudden death, the human body, that short-lived entity whose legs carry it around in a too quickly finished and busy life. Legs always has something of sex in it in all English literature. But more than theme and its imagistic development, Friesen's desire to *think* the church and the Mennonite community (rather than to receive its teachings already full blown) shows up in numerous qualities which may be called minor qualities.

Friesen's simple, unadorned language tells non-lyrically about something very much of this land, a shunning is different here than there, distinct in Canada from a shunning in the Old World. Here it is not to be captured by the prescriptive responses sought for and achieved by thick lyrical layers. Here a shunning (or poetry, the two are interchangeable) is letting yourself think, the

way Thom, in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, thinks against his parents and his "community's" non-thinking acceptance of old beliefs that others had thought for him before and so should be adequate as knowledge. But, in exactly the way that such received Biblical wisdom is not thinking very well, and is motivated by a fear of change, so the lyrical presentation of Peter Neufeld's shunning would be a not-thinking-very-well the facts of shunning here on the prairies of Canada. The lyrical presentation would derive from fear of hard (facile, bland, material) thought about it that itself derives from surplus and from having no established moral structures easily and effectively standing between the event and the subject. "Nothing works" is not a cry of despair, but a statement about reality and its flows. "No structures work" is what Peter experiences in his long insistence against the church, against Old World prescriptions. The poems establish that the church has many times asked Peter to recant his belief that there can't be a hell. The shunning comes after it is apparent that Peter won't give in. That very real "nothing works" is his pacing in the fields and in the woods in the wilderness behind his farmyard, as witnessed by Anne, Johann's daughter:

Uncle Peter left people alone and he wanted to be left alone. He would go into the bush when he felt too strong about one thing or another. Like when he was angry. And you never saw a temper like his....I sometimes sneaked up on him near Buffalo Field....Anyway, usually he was quiet. One time, though, he was swearing and punching a poplar tree with his fist. When I went to look at the tree after he had gone, there was blood smeared on the bark. I wouldn't have wanted to see his knuckles. (23)

The real "nothing works" is also Peter's sitting and watching from the swing, a watching, an ending, which ends in his "real" death too at the end of his real (multiple) gun:

the crouped child choking

and mother holding him over a steaming kettle

the child sprawled on gravel licking his blood

the child rolling his pantlegs to the knees

wading down twin creek cattails bowing

this boy his feet and calves mud-smeared

is man here the caught corpse

one hand in water

one boot off the other untied

his white foot nudging the rifle stock

his temple a blue hole the bullet made (48)

I find in this a combination of empirical "addition" of details and symbolic reterritorialization. Here the language is at once ascetic (poor, sober) and signifying (logical). There is a form of "addition" of details going on, but the "ands" and "buts" are missing for one thing. It is not the empirical addition of "poverty," but one in which the addition-tags, the transitions, are silences. Silences, secretive, authorial and dominating as they are, are suspect of high purpose, of the transcendental signifier. The alliteration and consonance of "calves... caught corpse" suggest an uneasiness about poverty of language (intensities). It suggests an uneasiness about resistance to morality at such a raw moment, at the moment of death. The stylistic dying--not unlike the reclining of Bernini's ecstatic St. Teresa--with one hand in the water, and one boot off, suggesting the unity within disunity and pointing still even here in this undoing of Peter Neufeld of Steinbach up to a divine order which we do not understand but

that nevertheless somehow is there, and which traditional poesy helps to recall and signify. Friesen has the cattails "bow" to this boy, to this "savior," this divine man who has thought against evil and conformity and in death, died for his community. This sense of worship due Peter Neufeld for his Messianic dying continues in the classic contrast between white and black ("his white foot") and even more precisely and evocatively in the making of his body a "temple" ("his temple a blue hole the bullet made"), a biblical allusion to 1 Corinthians 3:16 and 2 Corinthians 6:16. The rifle and bullet indicate that this poem, which in so many respects seems to be a simple, clear and local "Canadian" poem, is really ordered by classical dichotomies. The power of the symbolic through contrast and dichotomization is everywhere appealed to by Friesen: rifle or violence/Christ and peace, mother/father, child/adult, blood/earth, feet/head (with its particularly high Messianic connections: Psalm 22:16, John 12:3, John 13:5, Romans 16:20), and others. What appears at first to potentially be a poem about a Canadian boy grown up and dead now by the creek where he once played, turns out instead to be thickly coded symbolically. At critical moral moments and dramatic moments (often the same thing) Friesen turns to convention, to the familiarity of the lyric to either give his piece punch or because he himself is uncomfortable with the material when the thinking gets rough.

Contrast the bland and "Canadian" (non-conventional) way he describes Dr. Blanchard's activities on the morning of his discovery of Peter Neufeld's suicide. First an offhand reference to the death:

I'm puzzled by this suicide. I imagine it had something to do with
his trouble with the church. Though what that trouble was I don't
rightly understand. Strange people.

The line lengths are not especially significant, the descriptive adjectives are not carefully selected for any effect but the most common, and the speculations about

the central theme/plot of the poem (Peter's death) do not charge the reader emotionally. The fact that this entry is a journal entry, additionally strengthens the "empirical" quality of the poetry with its necessary easygoing confessional discourse, and its willingness to name the emotions felt by Blanchard. He is "puzzled," he "found" strawberries, he "had to go" because of the mosquitoes. We have here the material. None of the symbolically charged language readers of the lyric and the epic involuntarily associate with the climactic lyrical death scene. Blanchard's account acts as the non-lyrical version of the highly lyricized death poem. Coming side by side as they do, they seem almost intentionally on Friesen's part to illustrate the two ways of writing poetry this thesis theorizes.

Other poems illustrate Friesen's tendency to go lyrical (non-thinking) at important, emotional moments. Johann's (or what appears to be Johann's) lament/elegy for his dead brother is an example.

now his narrow home
a mound a stone

wild rose bushes
barbed wire
and headstones on the other side (52)

Here are many of the markers of the transcendental we associate with traditional poetry, poetry such as, medieval romantic ballads: the grave equals a "narrow home," there are "wild rose bushes" (as in the ballad of "The Three Maries," and "I Have a Young Sister"), barbed wire symbolizing the indignity of war, an image popular in the poetry of the World Wars.

Other examples of the lyrical shortcut in *The Shunning* include the poem describing a darkly brazen and flayed-feeling Sunday after Peter's death, a woman walking home after church

Or this.

a woman walking home from church
her shawl loosens and slips to her shoulders
she pauses removes combs and pins
lifts her face to the sky and shakes out her fiery hair

behind her the sun and golden withers
of a horse reaching for grass
beneath the bottom strand of barbed wire

a horse the sun
and almost everyone shielding their eyes

on a sunday

The "barbed wire" image connects Johann's lament with this random erotic piece, joining the brothers in ways other than blood. "A woman"--the mystery of no particular woman but one important enough to have a full poem devoted to her. "Fiery hair" and the whole description of the loosening of the body and the clothes which mean a relinquishment of or abandonment of the restrictions on the erotic which church enforces. "The sun and golden withers"--Sunday's holy horses of the apocalypse, the pagan Helios or God's great seeing eye; "golden fleece" we are about to say and all that epic apparati and quaint emotion and convention from which the lyric derives its themes, methods, and power.

We get from Friesen here the sparse lyrical detail of a modernist poem, like something by Carlos Williams or H.D., the entire image in true imagist concentration of power on the singular experience, the immediate experience,

focused on the poem's last word. It is an admirable imagist poem. You can just imagine the poet putting all his body's weight, almost, behind the pen till it grinds down finally as the poem closes on "sunday." Always in Friesen's lyrics a message, a great theme and humanist truth to be hammered home and gotten across. Always a tragic death, an evil Sunday, a brooding brother like, or only slightly different from, a Cain. Always the hated church but still the church. The lyric has these moments all ready for us. We are its and their receptacle. We have little to say about it and them, being readers who are well-trained, well-drilled, made to feel uncomfortable with the comfortable (which is to say by the uncanny: the "uncomfortable comfortable" is a precise definition of Freud's *unheimlich*)--easy scares, horror chambers which frighten but only within endurance because we know we are safe. In other words, the lyric is the official. The official always thinks (via non thinking) it is delivering the difficult when it is delivering the predetermined and the inane. The lyric and the official are the undangerous.

And in the very next poem, which is largely material and non-conventional, you still get the highly elliptical description of the sexual female body, an ellipsis explainable by the long willingness lyrical literature (Old World serious poetry) has had to stop in modesty at the threshold or inference of pleasure and love-making (for lack of a better word) or love, unlike, say, Sade's or Rabelais's works.

No Old World lyrical restraint conspires here: no teachings of guilt; no established thinking to keep the subject subjected to the group and to thwart his desires. As Thom reterritorializes his community by thinking against the received wisdom of "by the sweat of your brows," so Pat Friesen's "watching from the swing" poem and its structural, non-lyrical complacency to the coming death, allow us to *think* the shunning here on the prairies. Not only the shunning we are

let to think, but everything. Nothing.⁶¹ We are allowed by the non moral, non repressive, non complexly already structured and imaged and filled and heavily layered poem to think our own minor poem. This thinking the minor poem of death is not an emptiness in the sense of the "nothing there" but an emptiness (if it is an emptiness) of the everything there, the surplus, the multiple, *waiting* for us to write "the emptiness" of death as we wish. That is, of course, it is waiting for us to write it out of power. We are "empowered" by this waiting, it might be said if that wasn't a favorite (and fascist) expression of the cause-fighting groups. The poem is a waiting, before the splendid emptiness of the non-structured, the not already-determined. This waiting is a minor waiting that refuses the major, both thematically and stylistically. The waiting Peter refuses the precepts of the church as profoundly as the waiting ordinary thought of this poem revolts against the endless expectations and cautions and predeterminations that are the lyrical style. The moment the lyrical style is used (old conventions of expression, imagery, rhythm, and much more) the writer/reader jumps to attention and returns to the harness of pulling, pulling his weight. That is, he returns to guilt and fear instead of into thinking for himself.

⁶¹See Derridas's "Letter to a Japanese Friend" in which he describes deconstruction (which is identical with Heidegger's "thinking"): "Deconstruction is everything. Deconstruction is nothing."

Chapter Five

Di Brandt: The Poetry of Complaint, the Voice of the Politician

Next to Pat Friesen, Di Brandt stands as the second most well known and influential poet of Mennonite Canadians. She has published four books of poetry and a critical text in the last nine years. Her concern is most clearly about the fate of women in the world, and specifically women in Mennonite Canadian society. As a way of analyzing the state of the female under patriarchy she examines her own past and present in an autobiographical style.

The new awareness of the special importance of birth mothers in the world is cause, Brandt says, for celebration:

I wish to celebrate in my study the presence of the maternal reproductive body in history, in narrative, and in language, and honor women's reproductive labor in childbirth and childrearing, without which, after all, none of us would be alive. (*Wild Mother Dancing* 10)

In her poetry, which she began to write after the problem of the missing birth mother became important to her (7), Brandt does what she preaches. She undertakes to do what few have done till then, or at least not with such persistence. She writes the birth mother's subjectivity. She writes this birth mother, directly often, and sometimes indirectly, into all of her poems in each of her four books, and into the prose of her dissertation. Feminism and feminist writing, that is to say, provide the theory and the subject and forum for this passionate concern with raising up to a long-awaited proper place the image of the birth mother in Western texts:

how long i've listened
to your cry

in my flesh, singing
me home.

& now i am fully
born. i dance

as the trees dance,
deep-rooted

& rustling in wind.
my arms caress

air, my mouth fills
with pleasure,

knowing the earth
deeply, recognizing

myself in you,
perfumed, & trembling

without fear

(Mother, Not Mother 75)

This rebirth, a new birth for mother and baby, fills the mother with a new joy and pleasure. As if for the first time she recognizes her place, her identity in the baby she has made. She now, for once, feels fearless. Males and their violence

(see all of *Jerusalem, Beloved*), textual and physical both, no longer contain nor decenter her now, "fully born" as she finally is.

Brandt claims, in other words, that essential meaning belongs to females because of their ability to mother, that is to birth and care for a child which a mother "gardens" and grows within her biological body. Males in the entire universe have not been privileged this way and so, attempting to either appropriate female meaning, or to avenge themselves for not having it, or possibly simply slaughtering and hurting as an expression of their anguish at being alienated from meaning, they cannot feel the great female love, longing, desire, and joy which is the earth, and which is even, oddly, the ancient cities such as Jerusalem, female products of the earth. She writes of Jerusalem, the female:

i want to be wild &
unworded, like the wind, blowing through the bare
branches, toward open sky, i want to learn to fly,
not with Air Canada, with my own wings, arms
branching, feathering out, the sea down below,
roads & houses disappearing, the air sharp & clear,

Jerusalem rising from her desert bed to meet me (*Jerusalem, Beloved* 58)

The desire to fly, but not to fly too high in Icarus fashion occurs already in Pat Friesen's poem "chimney" with the little girl holding onto the house chimney to keep from blowing away after her grandfather dies. The desire for low flight, controlled flight which makes the earth the focus of its exhilarated discoveries rather than heaven and divine spirits, expresses itself in the imagined whirling through shops and streets of a *female* city.

Jerusalem rising up from her desert bed to meet me,
glistening, luminous, her thousand musicians

playing love songs, the war over, all over, my
feathered hands caressing her stone hips & thighs,
her doorways opening to the fragrance of wine,
olives, feasting, the sky holding us lightly,
swooning, among clouds (58)

Flying poet, and rising city--erect and growing more erect--meet in the sky among the clouds like lovers, the "doorways opening" with their wine fragrance a coy symbol of female sexuality. The war over, the female city lifts from its "desert bed," where it presumably has been sleeping, into the sky (domain of male spiritual inscription) and joins this other female in busy, freed, now unafraid female desire for the female. The male other, the "fighting men" of Jerusalem (71), is nowhere to be seen, his duty done in having fought and ended fighting. The sky, no longer heavy home of the gods, holds Jerusalem and the poet "lightly." The two lovers, poet and female city, occupy with rejoicing what was once not theirs to gambol in. They frolic in the presence of, almost in flirtatious indifference to, an emasculated sky which holds them "lightly" up (tenderly, or facilely, or simply indifferent to women now that heroism and war are ended, only taking them lightly, taking their jubilant lesbian sexuality lightly).

Males in Brandt's work, in contrast to females, do not wish to succor, but to slaughter and vent their anger in violences of various sorts. The opening section of *Jerusalem Beloved* provides a long series of dramatic approximations of this generality. These experiences on first seeing Israel and Jerusalem are not unlike some of those she feels against those who, having birthed children, still do not let themselves love. *Mother, Not Mother* poignantly recounts the autobiographical past of the poet's relationship with a mother who, either for personal, religious reasons, or because of the dominance of "the name of the father" over the female spirit, never expressed her love for her daughter. She did

not, in other words, train the daughter to love her own beauty and "womb power" (as the poet successfully does for her daughters) and so she alienated one who by nature should not be alienated.

The logics in *Mother, Not Mother* present the reader with the story of the deterritorialized mother. The poet attempts to come to terms with her feelings for her mother and the causes for her sense of alienation both from her birth mother and from meaning generally. Foremost, the protagonist of these poems feels ambiguity about motherhood. Motherhood is not simply a wonderful state to be cherished; it is often burdensome and thankless. Why should mothers always be in charge of providing tenderness and sympathy for the world?

why she can't write the mother
though she has birthed two children,

spends half her day feeding clothing
sheltering them,

picking up dirty rolled up socks
cooking macaroni,

though she has stretched herself thin,
scarred skin over bloated belly,

watched leftover blood shoot clotted
like fists from her emptied womb,

though she's exhausted herself, black
& blue, many times

mothering the goddamn fucking world

why she can't write herself around
that,

why she can't put down simply,
i am the mother,

& leave it like that

(Mother, Not Mother 9)

The problem of extraordinary importance for the poet concerns the state of the entire world and its beings. In the poem "blackbirds" she provides the reader with a stunning portrait in little of the universe as she understands it. The universe, first of all, brims with colorful, beautiful life:

blackbirds, green ash, purple
fireweed (10)

In the midst of this abundance, however, sorrow sits.

by the river she sat down & wept

Eden has been betrayed and lost, and pain suppresses the joy which abundance and beauty once offered. The unnamed river suggests primacy, a great mythic river, possibly the Euphrates, in keeping with the Eden metaphor. Someone, "she," sat down once upon a time (later the poem turns to present tense), and wept. The poet, in Jerusalem, with a lover (probably nature herself) who consoles her, recalls for instance how she herself has wept more than her memory can bear:

the rivers of tears i have cried, an ocean, not

enough salt water to wash out this cave, this
temple, this holy place, where you have come,
visitor, bearing gifts

(Jerusalem, Beloved 42)

"She," the unnamed narratee of "blackbird," symbolically takes on herself the entire burden of our mythic forebears who, cast out time and again from their homeland, endlessly wander in pain and insecurity through wildernesses, and time and again wind up as slaves serving the unknown gods of their foreign masters. "She" takes on this weight of suffering, this history, in the particular wording of her action which echoes the biblical account of Israelite oppression:

By the rivers of Babylon,
there we sat down, yea, we
wept, when we remembered
Zion (Psalm 137, 1)

That the one who weeps is a female, provokingly connects her with the story of Eve which has been essentially elided and overshadowed by that of Adam since what has been recorded of mankind's doings over the last four thousand years has been recorded by and mostly about male experience. "She," then, represents Eve's experience (as this book of poems and others of Brandt's testify to); the subject of this story will be female. Females here will be given their due subjectivity. Brandt has argued in her thesis that females in Western literature have not been subjects and that this fact has been especially evident in the absence of mothers from narrative:

While I do not wish to valorize maternal experience or maternal narrative at the expense of other subject positions, therefore, I do wish to argue for a politicized reading of maternal narrative that takes into account the

mother's traditional absence and the reasons for it, a politicized reading act that is on the side of maternal subjectivity (*Wild Mother Dancing* 9-10).

Female subjectivity will be honored here in "blackbirds," but in what way? Will this only be the story of endless suffering? On the contrary, despite her sorrowful alienation, friendship exists for her.

the weeds keeping her company
when he would not (10)

Earth and nature gather around her when she, the poem's subject, feels bereft. Weeds, usually vilified in literature, here come to her as friends. What most of us would sniff at as worthless, fit only to be "weeded out,"⁶² and gotten rid of, represents to this bereft woman the possibility of friendship. Those who have suffered greatly appreciate small goodnesses. Moreover, everywhere in Brandt's work, the earth stands for that loving mother of life⁶³ whom human children forget to love in return, much as these children forget to love their birth mothers, cocky and self-centered as they are (see *Jerusalem, Beloved* 64). Regularly, in moments of greatest pain or exuberance, the female subjects of Brandt's texts rediscover meaning and friendship and love in the earth which nurtures (has something in common with) especially its female offspring (See *Wild Mother Dancing* 16-17). The earth loves her "when he would not."

because the trees outside your window are
splendid, the wind in the branches waves the sky

⁶²For Hamlet, by way of example of the status of these plants as metaphor in Western literature, the declining state of the world, of what is "rank and gross in nature" (I, ii, 136) and rotten in Denmark, is best represented by a garden overgrown with weeds.

⁶³*questions i asked my mother* already illustrates this insistently:

hear them whispering mother my unborn
children crying their sorrow without a
name why don't you love me why am i bad
how will i ever hold them all i need a
dozen arms a hundred breasts i need a
thousand love songs mother a lap as big
as earth (58)

along, grandly. because the earth under your feet is
there, every morning, solid, profound, hanging in
air, filled with gravity & lightness, keeping you there

...

this earth is my home, my body, my mother,
unafraid & so, unutterably, beautiful

(*Jerusalem, Beloved* 32)

Males, in the universe as Brandt imagines it, contend with females and do not support them in their difficult task of mothering. They, alienated from and jealous at female (and earth's) procreative power, often wage war against the partner with whom they should be laboring to provide love and nurture. The abandonment of females by the "he" of this poem is highly symbolic of the actions of particular men and men in general in all of Brandt's poetry.

The sky, classically male and indifferent to human needs, only seems benign and friendly to the weeping woman.

the sky sometimes a delicate pink

like the petals of the roses (10)

Where human men abandon their women, the masculine sky in Brandt's poetry typically, "lightly," acts in harmony and union with mother earth (*Jerusalem, Beloved* 58). That is to say, sky loves earth in Brandt's version of a prelapsarian nature and fallen humankind.

a great circle, coming round, like the sky, its
long arm reaching across, east to west, your
life coming back to meet you, greet you, in
flashes, green, yellow, pink, against the night

(*Jerusalem, Beloved* 66)

It seems to me that what Brandt wishes to show herself and readers is the wonder that in a world which humans endlessly violate there exists, if we would only have the wisdom and will to see it, a still lovely, loving, and nurturing natural world.

the river's green today,
like the leaves over my head,

so vivid this time of year,
just before they turn color.

everything's singing,
do you hear it in the wind?

the whole world's in orgasm
this late summer day

every tree spreading its
legs to the sky,

a hundred dark crotches
on every trunk

(Mother, Not Mother 63)

We destroy a nature which would love us and teach us how to love it, if we would only let it. "She," the female poet in tune with her female-loving universe (*Jerusalem, Beloved* 47), shows us how it is done:

a billion leaves shudder

their ancient, secret
vegetable delight.

i'm lying here, my sore
back pressed against grass,

against the earth, all eyes,
all ears, all nose,

listening, watching, smelling
the gorgeous world,

every pore a vagina,
every sound, every green

shade of leaf & tree
a lover (*Mother, Not Mother* 64)

These passionate, "lover" trees are trees of her own creation. The narrator is forever (in all her books) standing or lying down among trees (see the opening poem of *Agnes in the Sky*, for instance). She stands and lies in these trees which she makes and nurtures and protects in order herself to get protection and to get love from them. Her love for herself, her love for people, and her love for nature are the very means by which she both creates and "tends" these "word" trees.

you come bearing gifts green apples
glistening in a red bowl you have
waited all your life for this moment

tended your small tree carefully

(*Agnes in the Sky* 19)

The little tree is a symbolic tree of life within her, a tree threatened by father-violence, mother-fear and a mass of related "exquisite hurt."⁶⁴ Possibly most precisely, this little "tended" tree is the little child within her whom the poet imagines has never properly been given birth--it is herself, within herself. In other words, she makes love to herself here in "the river's green today" (*Mother, Not Mother* 63). Only if we take as truth the classical sentiment on which poets, Milton included, have always hinged their moral worlds, namely that self-creation corrupts,⁶⁵ does this self-love of the poet disturb us. Her self-love must be accommodated by the reader because what she attempts to describe is a world which has not learned to love either women or the strength they represent, the strength and wonder of generation--of making babies, to put it plainly. Loving herself here dramatically in "the taste of earth," the female poet loves women and dramatizes a love of the maternal subjectivity she has vowed to devote her words to encouraging.

The archetypal universe as the poet has created it in little so far (in "blackbird") includes an abundant world, a river by which a woman weeps, and a sky coloured in gentle pink like rose petals. Now is brought into play the next seminal type in this archetypology, children. How are children treated in this "fallen" world as Brandt's "she" imagines it? Badly.

the children banging their bicycle

64

weathered high winds listened to
the world's pain each delicate
exquisite hurt you have wept (19)

⁶⁵Satan, in *Paradise Lost*, recreates himself in the image not of God but of Sin whom he finds very beautiful and with whom he instantly copulates (II, 765). Sin, here, is a foul version of God-created Eve who is born into corporal nature and given free will by her Creator. Selfishness of Satan's magnitude--parodying God's creation, living incestuously--mark for Western civilization among the worst of possible evils.

locks against the bridge railing,

their extraordinary carnival of
grief, in the night

That which symbolizes the future, our children, raised in a world in which we too once were children, is traumatized and lives under a burden of lovelessness and abandonment. The noise of bikes "banging" against metal railings simply stands in place of all the "carnival" of weeping, wailing, pleading sounds that this entire world together makes. This grief pours out of the children

against the dying universe, against
absent mothers

against the failure of fathers.

The dying of the universe finds frequent expression in Brandt's work (see "munitions factory" in *Agnes in the Sky* 31). The other ur-themes, the absence of mothers and the failure of fathers, however, I will analyze briefly as *Mother, Not Mother* and *Jerusalem, Beloved* illustrate them.

Virtually all instances of violence in these texts occur in association with a male figure. Female figures represent peace and love, or at worst, the terrible absence of a love which they would naturally give were it not for the way patriarchy has conquered, humbled, mistreated, and silenced women.

needing to be
touched.

my back is full
of terror still,

remembering

the hand,

the belt across

my spine,

the hole between

my shoulder blades,

where i quiver

& taste dirt (28)

The perpetrator of abuse against this child must be a father, given the associations the rest of Brandt's poems have left us with. Since this belt-wielder is not particular, we are led to understand a universal hitting father, or if not a father than at least an angry, authoritative male. The child hit, since it too has no name, becomes the generalized female child within, who cannot be freed or born until the victim confronts the violator. Memory stays infantile, fixed not on a flux of things, not focused on the movement of events of the moment, but on a single and highly symbolic image of the hitting hand. Not only the memory and consciousness remember, but the very body of this woman carries the ever present and determining "terror" about with her. There is no forgetting then, when the mind and the body independently hold and bind and keep contained⁶⁶ the violence and keep it static and hegemonic in a relentless remembering.

⁶⁶David Carroll, in his introduction to Jean François Lyotard's *Heidegger and "the jews,"* describes the silence of holocaust survivors in similar terms of refusing to speak of a great violence because to speak it would be to lessen it and to let the perpetrator off with too small a remuneration, with too much of the story of the crime "forgotten" by the telling (vii-xii).

Regardless of the passive hold on her of the memory of the hand seared into flesh, another active force enters her life which frees her body from its catatonia.

you touch my
forehead,

my left shoulder,
where i am

broken-winged,
you say, & healing.

you touch my body
& i am held

like a sea, fronds
waving in slow

motion, waves
lapping shore.

the sun in our
faces,

dazzling. (29)

This kindly figure frees the victim from her stupor. A woman, for whom "Joan Turner," to whom the poem is dedicated, may for my purposes here stand in,

touches her "body" and she feels new love: "& i am held." The victim is an angel, "broken-winged;" she is an angel for no other reason than that she belongs to the pretty, loving, precocious, vibrant group of humans who are female. The implication here is, How can someone hurt and control another human who represents innocence, goodness, love, joy, pleasure, friendship and intelligence, someone who represents all the traits of ascendance and refinement? How can someone punish and break the wings of that which is good and wholesome (Remember the brother who swings cats by their tails in *Questions I Asked My Mother*)? Why would an innocent woman be so terrorized? No answer is given, but instead love from another woman touches and begins to heal the persona. Movement begins: "held / like a sea, fronds / waving in slow motion," and "waves / lapping shore." The sun radiates in not her face alone, but in theirs: a social bond forges itself from what was once only individual pain and incommunicability.

In brief, violence has been done by males; females bear the brunt of that violence and, made passive by it, find release only when they eventually speak out against and join forces against this active past imprisoning them in its painful memory. Women are victims, males are perpetrators. The very language of Mennonites perpetuates female silence and male authority:

the body remembers being
beaten & tortured & killed

i stole the language
of their kings & queens

but i didn't bow down to it,
i didn't become a citizen.

how hard it is to tell a story
so it can be heard

how easily the reader climbs
on top of it,

pronouncing judgment

(*Mother, Not Mother* 30)

The violence which "the body carries...well hidden" fears speaking, speaks slowly and methodically as if it were a child learning to articulate basic sounds, and as if the first sound this child-adult learned to make was a loud (expressionistic) cry for mother:

MMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

MMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM

EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE (31)

How much the narrator needed her mother "through the centuries," the poet tells us. She finds just such love later in her travels, as I have already said, in her meeting with the female revolutionaries and Bacchantes in *Jerusalem, Beloved* on her tour of the holy lands, as if she has traveled the world specifically in search of maternal care and compassion. The very city Jerusalem, in fact, becomes her maternal lover in one of these later poems which I cited earlier (*Jerusalem, Beloved* 58). Having gone in search of maternal love, in other words, she finds it eventually after *this* kindly female sets her free by her touch. For now, though, in the dramatic context of this book, the mother is still an absent mother, and the

child within the poet (and so making her one of these absent mothers in an ironic way) still unborn, still enwombed, still not in the lovely, living, nurturing earth.

Feminism tells males (and humans generally) a truth about the violated female, if males could only listen well enough and begin to express regret and contrition:

poem for a guy who's
thought about feminism

& is troubled by it,
but not enough:

what you don't want
to know can hurt you,

& will, perhaps even
kill you, as it has killed

so many others, women,
whales, birds, Indians

Jews, even the golden-
haired sons of men,

the privileged ones,
the chosen

(Mother, Not Mother 48)

Though feminism teaches all mankind that a terrible litany of killings must be redeemed some day by the death of the male, the dying of the male in atonement, the narrator does not always feel strong enough to tell this message with equanimity:

i long again

for the old pain,

the fist in the face,

the twisted twirly

fate, the bitter taste

of absence

on the tongue, you.

i admit i have cried

at night for my father

& his Word,

the old terrible God. (52)

An implied loneliness drives the feminism of this narrator at times to weaken into a state of longing for the very paternal pain and oppression against which she has for so long pitted her intelligence. This "Word," this "terrible God," this "garbage," gives way to the steady growth of the "earth pushing" and "flesh singing" (52) within her, however, and for these teleological reasons she succumbs only temporarily to the temptation to find familiar belonging within the old hierarchy, and easy understanding within "the Old Story" (53).

The strength of the female to endure despite the tyranny of the "Old Story" finds quaint though poignant expression in a strange shamanistic account of a second birth.⁶⁷ The poet describes the birth of her inner child; this poem does double duty, ostensibly describing the birth of the child which she so proudly carries in one of the first poems in the book (16) but more dramatically presenting the birth of the inner child which male violence has "over the centuries" imprisoned within her.

how you pushed your way

fiercely, between her thighs (59)

The mother here sees herself from a distance; the child pushes its way between "her" thighs. There is a disconnection between mother and child of a classic sort, a sort the poet has lamented all along existed between herself and her own mother. This disconnection, however, is only a waiting, a fearfulness lest she will not be able either to love her girl child as she feels she has been unloved by her mother. Since this is her inner child as much as her "real," biological child, the waiting represents decades of waiting for something to be born which has lived in a sort of eternal gestation within. The touch of the woman in the poem dedicated to Joan Turner, of course, has brought about this new movement in the mental womb. It, the waiting here, symbolizes the long silence women, and this woman in particular, have endured. Now at last the baby emerges and instantly this new child becomes the strong mother: it carries her on her back:

& now you carry her

so strangely, on your back,

⁶⁷As always, Brandt makes use of the types of the "Old Story," in this case imagining her release from the static power of the name of the father through a Christ-like rebirth: the story of the birth of Christ as a child, much like this one of the narrator's birth, begins first with the historico-social account of the birth of a child into the world. Only later does this birth begin to find symbolic, extra-historical significance in the metaphoric application of the idea of birth as innocence, goodness, health, vitality, renaissance, freedom, and love to the process by which adults re-spiritualize dead and bound lives through a "re-birth."

into the evening
her old bones glinting,

eyes glowing into the dark.
the reversals in everything.

the distance between cells
dividing & dividing (59)

Rebirth, reversals, enmity between mothers and daughters, sight in the dark--and so light and dark--are great, ambiguous relationships which surprise with their unpredictable reversals. Where the narrator had thought all lost, now all has become possibility with the birth of the inner/outer child. Where maternity appears impossibly bound and caught, it here becomes freed in the simple division of cells. Feminism receives, with this birth, its savior.

That child-savior speaks in the poetry it writes to force an accounting from violence. In a poem which tells of the contrariness of the outer child who "wouldn't come along / i couldn't make you" (70), the newborn inner child calms the screaming with its political wisdom:

just stop once in a while
in your screaming

& listen, your armour
anger against bombs

& pollution & plastic,
against me:

there is holiness
in everything

even our fear
haunting us at night

wants to be loved (70)

In "in this version" the violence the speaker resents and sings against shows itself to be a tempter too. She "falls in love / with the dragon" (71) hoping that if she "loves him enough" he will "stop breathing fire on her skin" and "be a man" (71). Males are not men, in other words, in our age, but dragons who burn and involve their women in the complicity of--the co-dependency of--the love of violence. Gradually, however, the speaker has become inured to dragon breath, got to know "him" by loving him and "swallow[ing] his come" (71). Now in need of new strength, new ability to resist the dragon, she turns to nature, to its light, its wind sounds, and, learning from her, she slowly "grows / a new tongue, / to sing / screaming (73).

The words and speaking which the poet learns from nature, together with her long apprenticeship in the bedroom of the dragon, allow her finally to "sing screaming" the great and terrible song which acts as a semantic climax to *Mother*, *Not Mother*. Till now she has been complicit in the violence through her silence. Now she breaks from the prison of complicity finally and freed, begins her minor song, her song of resistance to the dragon's killing fire. She tells in this poem of the terrible stranger who haunts her dreams:

sometimes,
in the middle of the night,

there he is again,
my dark haired

dark eyed bogey man,
my monster,

my stranger (76)

This Freudian, uncanny figure⁶⁸ stalks her memory, against which she is powerless, a memory she earlier has described as the mesmerizing and terrorizing image of the "hand." We know that children who are spanked feel in part that they deserve it. Whether the reason lies in the discourse of spanking, always initiated by the spanker, which usually exonerates the one doing the spanking, or whether a more sinister masochistic psychic disturbance underlies this need to implicate the one punished in the punishment, the subject here feels deep acquaintance, and more than acquaintance with "my dark haired / bogey man, / my monster, / my stranger." She knows and wants to keep this man, not expose him and lose him forever. The scenario seems archetypal, again. After a moment's hesitation, however, her new strength from nature drives her on to further revelations.

no use shutting the door,

he's made of air.
though he was real

flesh & blood once,

⁶⁸Freud speaks of the "strangers...felling your woods" as the emblem of the uncanny (*Art and Literature* 342-43).

my monster man,

that first time,

in my grandma's house

in Rosengart,

in grandma's bed (76)

As in all of Brandt's poems, the perpetrator is a male, of course. An adult male, here, attacks and almost kills the little child in her own grandmother's house, with all the poignant (not tired, at all, despite the years of its use) sexual-existential associations with the story of Little Red Riding Hood.

wolf in sheep's clothing

(though still her child)

making the room spin,

dissolving walls & floor,

my life flickering

at the ceiling,

off, on, off, on.

Peter's hands on my throat,

death hands, full of hate,

his penis a hammer

in my mouth (76-77)

Now for the first time in this book, possibly in all of Brandt's books, she makes use of a dotted line to separate this last entry from the succeeding one, as if to say "Now it is done. I am finished. The story is told, finally." The act exposed, the man's name given and recorded forever, even the complicity of a whole ancestry publicized (with the ambiguous accusation that the grandmother is the wolf in sheep's clothing--grandmother, after all, was the genetic womb and socio-religious environment responsible for the becoming of this violent offspring, Peter obviously there as a member of the family in a family gathering of some sort), the poet now has little left to do in this account of her loveless upbringing and bare survival but to draw a deep breath of relief, and sum things up.

his penis a hammer
in my mouth

.....

i've lived my life
with courage, & great terror.

i've walked through fire.
i've learned to spell death
backwards,
heat, hate, hat, head.

i've been sung to by angels
mit Rosen bedacht.

finding the lost child

in me, after such dying,

knowing everything,

miracle baby,

mit heisser Liebe,

unharmmed.

The ellipsis therefore stands for the boundary between the lost child and the past, and the reborn child and the present. The reborn child is reborn because it began to speak the truth and fought off the desire to serve the very force (dragon) which violated her. Standing outside of the history of violence herself, her own involvement has been only a helpless, victim's desire to associate with power, since power can protect as well as harm. The poet is never this explicit about her extra-historical, non-subjective position, but this sentiment and self-conception everywhere informs the poetic narrative.

This "once real" event of the rape of the infant⁶⁹ represents for the narrator the quintessence of male violence, that particular manifestation of it which forced her to learn to love her enemy. That is to say, it has forced her to live so long with the fear of "Peter's" dreadfulness, the shame of his imposition on her, and the hollowness of personal weakness and impotence as a result of his great physical chastisement of her in her weak, vulnerable infancy. The "Old Story" told, however, she now may find herself finally free to discover who she is, who this repressed, cowering child within "really" was all these years.

All this knowledge of a repressed, particular, sexual, violence, in summary, has been released within her by the love of the woman who touches her

⁶⁹The following poem confirms the identity of the "bad" girl as a baby girl, the "wild, spirit child," the "naughty one," the "wildflower, weed" (*Mother, Not Mother* 80).

(*Mother, Not Mother* 27-29). It is further freed by the eventual resulting birth of the inner child prompted or at least made possible also by the biological birth of her first daughter. Then the process of emancipation continues in the writing of the "screaming" words within which have been "hammered" (77) into silence by the "penis" (77) of some man ("Peter's" 76) in her grandma's bed in "Rosengart" (76). Though they come after, these emancipating moments lie behind, wait to inform and help enrich a reading of the poems of *Questions I Asked My Mother*.

Very interestingly, the poem in which she sums up her life as the finding of the lost child, just discussed above, makes another declaration about conclusions which the beginning of the first book has prepared us for. In "sometimes" in *Mother, Not Mother*, as I have said, she claims to have experienced much in her life, now having come to a sort of full and complete state of knowing:

i've been sung to by angels.

mit Rosen bedacht.

finding the lost child

in me, after such dying

knowing everything

miracle baby (77)

In *Questions I Asked My Mother* the poet sets out on a heroic quest--appropriately, the writer having studied archetypal theory from Northrop Frye⁷⁰--to discover everything there is to know in the world (not unlike Cassaubon in George Elliot's *Middlemarch* writing the impossible *History of the World*):

⁷⁰"Frye's grand archetypal vision had given me a framework in which to make sense of the bewildering array of stories that make up the body we call literature, but it was useless for coming to terms with maternal experience" (*Wild Woman Dancing* 3).

one

time i asked her about bread i loved smelling the brown yeast
 in the huge blue speckled bowl its sweetish ferment watching it
 bubble & churn how does it turn into bread i asked her well
 the yeast is what makes it rise she said when you add warm water
 it grows as you can see yes but how does it turn into bread i
 mean it comes out a completely different thing what exactly
 happens to it in there in the oven why does heat turn it into
 something full of holes we can eat she sighed my mother
 sighed a lot when i was around you're asking me something
 i can't tell you she said now help me punch down the dough
 i sat in front of the oven all afternoon bathed in warm kitchen
 smells trying to figure it out someday i said to myself someday
 i will find out i will find out everything (7)

The "everything" she does eventually find out takes her out of this warm and cozy kitchen through a world of terror to a point of exhaustion which she in turn takes the reader through in both *Agnes in the Sky* and *Mother, Not Mother*. The word "punch," in this otherwise innocuous account of a youngster querying a busy mother in a pretty kitchen, hints at the dangers of the journey to come.

This will be a heroic quest, with all the danger and conquest heroes⁷¹ face and manage. The dough rising, of course, clearly symbolizes the baby rising and growing in the womb, in the warm, close, pleasant womb much like the kitchen. The questions the child wishes to ask represent the world of dangers and senses which each cocooned individual eventually must experience to correct his biased view of what life is like in the world outside the family's shelter, outside the

⁷¹The quest is heroic despite her disclaimer in *mother, not mother*: "she does not hate / her charred / womanskin. / she does not long / for a hero" (72).

loving home of father and mother. A complication arises for the poet, however, in the later account of this journey from the home, and this complication becomes the very foundation stone on which her whole poetic edifice constructed over about twenty years⁷² is built. The father and mother, who here in the early reaches of her family narrative, represent only minor deterritorializing forces (forces which inexorably push the subject away from the "real" and safe linguistic environment of the territory) in that, as we have seen, the mother in her ignorance of science (farm wife that she is) cannot tell her much about the factors of leavening, while the father criticizes her for being contrary and willful when she asks questions about the illogicality of the Bible's account of the last judgment:

i don't think that's a very
 nice thing to say about grampa she begins she wouldn't say
 this if we were alone it's an introduction she lets him finish
 with the big stuff it's your attitude he says i've noticed lately
 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 you've always been like that you're
 always trying to figure everything out your own way instead of
 submitting quietly to the teachings of the church when are you
 going to learn not everything has to make sense your brain is not
 the most important thing in the world what counts is your attitude

⁷²Brandt tells us that her problems with archetypal (i.e. academic, current scholarly) explanations for maternal narrative began in 1976 with the birth of her first child, and continued through to the last book she wrote: "Meanwhile [after 1976--see page 3], I began to write poetry, circling around the question of the absent mother, exploring the mother's problematic absence/presence in language intuitively, rhythmically, through sound and image. Through the writing of three consecutive volumes, *Questions I Asked My Mother* (1987), *Agnes in the Sky* (1990), and *Mother, Not Mother* (1992), I began to formulate the argument of this book, supported by current feminist theory, notably that of Adrienne Rich, Mary Daly, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Marianne Hirsch, that the mother has been so largely absent in Western narrative, not because she is unnarratable, but because her subjectivity has been violently, and repeatedly, suppressed" (*Wild Mother Dancing* 7).

& your faith your willingness to accept the mystery of God's
ways (*questions i asked my mother* 6)

The accusation of disobedience both to parents and to God has a long history between the poet and her parents. Her father is depicted earlier as deeply committed to his ignorance and irrationality, resenting at the same time her desire to test the truths he accepts:

but what do you think my father says this verse means if it's not
about the end of the world look that's obviously a misreading i say
the verb grammatically speaking doesn't have an object in this
instance so it can't possibly be made to that's exactly what i mean
he says waving the book in mid air if my father ever shouted he
would be shouting now you don't really care about the meaning all
you ever think about is grammar & fancy words i never even heard of
where i come from 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 don't you
think it's time you got a job & did some honest work for a change. (4)

The father's whole emphasis is spiritual, about transcendence, and his anger at his daughter focuses on those aspects of her character which think against the simple understanding of truth that Mennonites have had, do have, and will continue to have in order to keep them ostensibly heaven-inspired, heaven-contracted, and heaven-bound. Her antagonism to simple truth in reality communicates to her father her resistance to what drives him, her resistance, that is, to hard work, much long labor, and little pleasure. Such a world view as her father's does not take time to enjoy the pleasure of the world of the senses. Pleasure taken in the earth is for religious simpletons a waste of time, or at best a dangerous diversion.

The poet, as poets are wont and known to do, longs for pleasure. She

hungers for a heaven centered right here in this lovely world, a world which includes the warm kitchen rich in smells and sensations, and the earth outside the kitchen even more luscious in its gifts to that individual who is not subjected to an ascetic religiosity.

when i was five i thought heaven was located
in the hayloft of our barn the ladder to get
up there was straight & narrow like the Bible
said if you fell off you might land on the
horns of a cow or be smashed on cement the men
in the family could leap up in seconds wielding
pitchforks my mother never even tried for us
children it was hard labor (2)

A lovely materiality characterizes the little narrator girl's vision of heaven. If heaven cannot be felt and seen like this, it cannot be heaven, the poem written by the adult poet implies. Heaven must have all of the charming mythic qualities of the stories we have inherited, as well as all the prettiness of the earth we have spend our years close to if it has any hope of appealing to a thinking person as a reasonable heaven:

i was the scaredy
i couldn't reach the first rung so i stood at
the bottom & imagined what heaven was like there
was my grandfather with his Santa Claus beard
sitting on a wooden throne among straw bales
never saying a word but smiling & patting us
on the head & handing out bubble gum to those
who were good even though his eyes were half
closed he could see right inside your head (2)

Santa is God, the ladder takes the place of the classic narrow path up to heaven which sinners find so difficult to climb, the throne is a pile of straw bales, believably regal because baled straw has the yellowest sheen which to a child's eye could easily appear to be a golden throne, the mythic God is kind and loving, especially to children, and he proves it in her imagination by his gifts of bubble gum and patting them on the head, he does not speak to his subjects in the Bible, nor here in the hayloft, and significantly for the poet's later life, he is omniscient and can see all the little thoughts going on in her head even with his eyes half-closed.

Her feelings concerning God and heaven, even material as they are, cannot escape the simple truth her father has already at this tender age drummed into her of her unworthiness:

i squirmed my way to the back of the line &
 unwished the little white lie i had told which
 i could feel growing grimy up there & tried
 not to look at the dark gaping hole where they
 shoved out black sinners like me (2)

Immediately, however, in the moment of self-loathing, another beatific vision symbolically replaces this dark one of hell and damnation. The power and beauty of Brandt's poetry cannot be felt anywhere more than in the passage which follows. The centre of that special quality has to do with one thing, and one thing alone: the vulnerability of the poet here who allows herself to be memory.⁷³ To be memory is to be any one of your past constructions with openness and feelings unbridled. The little girl here, tentative in the presence of her very strong

⁷³Heidegger connects thanks and memory in *What is Called Thinking*: "Both memory and thanks move and have their being in the *thanc*. 'Memory' initially did not at all mean the power to recall. The word designates the whole disposition in the sense of a steadfast intimate concentration upon the things that essentially speak to us in every thoughtful meditation" (140). To be vulnerable memory is to think hard about the past without excluding the painful parts, and those painful parts always include the complicity of the subject in the "problem."

brothers who can leap up the hayloft ladder in a second, fearful of the things that can fall down out of that black hole, unexplainably finds "wonders" falling from there and not only people of the "black sinner" sort, as the poem above tells us. She is fearful, she is, dare I say it, sweet, she is intrigued with and blessed by the tiny. Not large heavens (of the sort she needs later, say in "each cell" in *Jerusalem, Beloved* 47) alone are necessary, not a grand phenomenological sign of heavenness, but "tiny blue flowerets / pressed on dry stems." The girl's fragility and tenderness, the girl's need for small, particular tenderness, not glorious systems of general goodness in God, the little girl-poet's innocence and sad (though pretty) love are presented here in as effective a poetry as anyone could hope for:

but the best
part was the smell of new pitched hay wafting
about some of it fell to where i stood under
the ladder there were tiny blue flowerets pressed
on dry stems i held them to my nose & breathed
deep sky & sun it was enough heaven for me for
one day (2)

She is aware at her tender age, to the instant outrage in the sensitive reader against propaganda, of her sinfulness. Yet, she hungers for the lovely and kind. She is aware in some dim part of her green subjectivity of the cruelty the pretty endures, "pressed" as it is and "dried" in its short duration. The replacement in these lines of the dark for the light, the rich and desiring earth for the wicked repressiveness of heaven, symbolizes early in her first book the precise longing the poet feels throughout her depiction of her childhood and growing years. This materiality she has loved as a young girl, which she has obviously incorporated in a spiritual sense with Santa, flowers, hay, and other produce of our earth and

earth's culture, has eluded her as a growing woman. She has felt focused on the name of the father instead of on the earth; she has felt confined and imprisoned by the memory of the wicked "hand" (*Mother, Not Mother* 28) which she only finds release from decades later because of the love and wisdom of the woman who touches her into new life, into a rebirth in the poem dedicated to Joan Turner; she has felt cheated of life's innocence by the violence of men, a violence represented in the early phase of *Questions I Asked My Mother* by the niggling and ignorance-loving father in the passage I have already glossed and others of similar autobiographical intent and effect. In sum, this poet very effectively paints a picture of the loveliness of the earth, and of the young girl who loves her earth so much, robbed of that love by the "monster" (*Mother, Not Mother* 76) who insists that God cannot be and must not be Santa Claus, and that his heaven must be "understood" (*Questions I Asked My Mother* 4) more than felt.

Much later, after having understood everything, understanding standing for a weak and miserable form of knowing the earth, the poet reflects on that part played in her long quest by the infant girl who refused to be pinched and wrung into a mechanical version of her father's subjectivity:

little one, black angel,
disobedient, willful,

wild, spirit child
you wouldn't die

you wouldn't take
the family lie

into your mouth,

your belly,

the nasty secret,

wouldn't keep it

(*Mother, Not Mother* 80)

All the literary markers point to Wordsworth's "Lucy Gray" whose parents too have treated her with great efficiency and heaven-bound coldness, and who appears to have died at the end of that poem trying to please them. In Brandt's case, the child, "wild" and "spirited," just like Lucy Gray who takes the lantern into town on an errand commissioned by her father on a bitter winter's night and who gets lost in a blizzard--possibly as a way of answering a question often asked about Wordsworth's imaginary child--refuses to die and lives by learning to speak the truth about the lie the family has perpetrated. This lie concerns, as I have argued earlier, the violent rape of the child on her grandmother's bed which the family refuses to believe or allow an existence, but also the lie which the father insists upon, that God, and all spirituality as a result, are immaterial and beyond the world of touch. The materiality of the means by which the poet eventually finds freedom from the father's (the family's) lie now appears to our sight more clearly: the woman who strokes the "broken-winged" girl in *Mother, Not Mother* (27ff) brings about her rebirth through touch (the material is nothing if it is not touch); rebirth itself speaks plainly about coming into life through passages of flesh and bone, coming from silence to crying, coming from warmth to coldness and other equally sensual, tactile qualities.

I have said this little girl's vulnerability makes this poem as well as the others in this book great. Vulnerability, however, is not just or simply innocence. In "Marian makes lists" the poet's vulnerability takes an entirely opposite set of characteristics than innocence and purity. Marion is a girl (sister of the poet,

older cousin or playmate, married aunt, we don't know) who keeps careful tally of things to be remembered: groceries to buy, chores to be done by such and such a day, acquaintances' birthdays, the cost of household necessities. All these innocuous items Marion arranges in her mind in obeisance to proper domesticity. All these items to be remembered would be things a good housewife in nineteen forties and nineteen fifties southern Manitoba Mennoniteville would have been expected to learn to organize with care and efficiency. The poet, however, admits her proclivity for lists of another sort:

me i

carry around this list of things i can't forgive
the time my mother made me stand in the corner by
the basement steps & my cousin Joyce came over &
i had to pretend i was so engrossed in *Reader's*
Digest i wasn't the slightest bit interested in
going bike riding with her & the sun shining first
time in a week or the time my sister got sucked
into raising her hand at evangelical meeting & she
had to get counselling from the deacon behind the
coat rack after church or my brother pulling the
wings off sparrows & swinging the cat by its tail
just to make us scream & my mother always thinking
he was a saint & my dad grotesquely cheerful after
milking barging into the room with his grin & good
morning & we with our awkward limbs only half dressed
oh yes like Marian i remember my family i tally up
prices i keep track

(*Questions I Asked My Mother* 3)

All of the best qualities of Brandt's poetry go into the construction of this poem. There is here a materiality of the sort "when i was five" brought to our attention. The spiritual is brought down from its loft and contacted only at the level of the movements and speeds the *constructed* version of the spiritual spins into being here on earth, such as her sister's unfortunate consequence in the coat room for "raising up her hand" at the alter call. Notice the image here is not of a raising of the spirit, or a raising of the mind or consciousness, nor any other sorts of quasi-spiritual yearnings heavenward, but a raising of hands. Hands play such an important role in Brandt's account of her becoming-poet, for one thing, so the introduction here of hands in this strongly material way at an evangelical revival meeting, which is to say in the very site of classical Mennonite spirituality, threads materiality all the way through her text, even those parts of them which seem to lapse into a feminist spirituality or essentiality as insistent (and non-economical, non-productive) as an "evangelical meeting." How does it do this? The material use of hands in place of hearts and minds and spirits here shows us how subversive hands may be and generally forces us to expect the tearing down of rather than the raising up of the spiritual edifice by hands whenever we will meet with them in Brandt's poetry.

But the despiritualizing, materializing, deterritorializing use of "hand" constitutes only one minor way in which this poem reveals its high material standards, in which this poem makes itself vulnerable. The materiality of Brandt's writing without compromise lives here in these lines, then, purely impure and constructed and social--so much of the material culture of Mennonite life swims on the surface of this poem without depths. But--and partly and--her willingness to tell all as she thinks it, with such telling's incompleteness or even minor existence outside the text also breathes here. She is angry, she dislikes her father's grinning (duplicitous) insinuation of himself into the girls' bedroom where they

are changing, she "tally's up and keeps track" with exaggerated annoyance and obsessional willfulness, she imagines in poetic ways not the good and beautiful (and so really very lyrical and useless to poetry in effect), sentimental, imposed, metaphysical, prettified worlds for the consumption of those who cannot face life's dying with authenticity, but rather she imagines her home-world with authentic and material accuracy impervious to the glossing tendency of most imaginers to paint themselves well, or paint the world well, or paint themselves and their world well (teleologically) and offering hope/love/joy/beatificity/pleasure/praise/assurance/final well-being and all those other forms of pretending that basically all is well with the world as the lyric poet makes it for his readers to help take their minds off their own good and constant dying which is determined by them to be bad when it is nothing more than dying, when there is no doubleness in it whatsoever.

Brandt professes complicity in evil, to make a short point of it. That is, she does not label evil evil here, but instead refrains from binary judgment with this complicit and real text. Therein lies the most effective form of her vulnerability. Such ethical "self"-implication constitutes an ethics of the most engaging sort. Brandt's material poem here takes the double naming out of dying and leaves it in its singleness, as Nietzsche has taught us to do:

For, just as popular superstition divorces the lightning from its brilliance, viewing the latter as an activity whose subject is the lightning, so does popular morality divorce strength from its manifestations, as though there were behind the strong a neutral agent, free to manifest its strength or contain it. But no such agent exists; there is no "being" behind the doing, acting, becoming; the "does" has simply been added to the deed by the imagination--the doing is everything. The common man actually doubles the doing by making the lightning flash; he states the same event once as

cause and then again as effect. The natural scientists are no better when they say "energy *moves*," "energy *causes*." For all its detachment and freedom from emotion, our science is still the dupe of linguistic habits; it has never yet got rid of those changelings called "subjects." The atom is one such changeling, another is the Kantian "thing-in-itself." Small wonder, then that the repressed and smoldering emotions of vengeance and hatred have taken advantage of this superstition and in fact espouse no belief more ardently than that it is within the discretion of the strong to be weak, of the bird of prey to be a lamb.⁷⁴ (*Genealogy of Morals* 178-79)

Brandt's poetic child is angry and she hates the ones who have annoyed her in her youthful years. She is herself more violent and abusive in her compulsive keeping of lists than her siblings, relatives or parents have been. This violence replacing love here (and the father's grinning intrusion suggests love more than it suggests deviousness), this poet's nit-picking replacing larger, loving, forgiving, relating sensibilities possessed by the others in her family tell us that *the poet* is the one about whom lists should rightfully be kept. In effect, she doubles their actions and makes them passive and so she falsifies the documents, falsifies history. She accumulates a secret history of evils⁷⁵ here and in doing so *makes* these innocent actions passive, memorialized evils.

Not only does she *act* as a list-keeper, but she *knows* at some level that she does this, that she is duplicitous, that *she* is the perpetrator of the making of

⁷⁴This piece of Nietzsche's precisely states, in an originary way, Deleuze's later claim that history happens "behind the thinker's back" (*Dialogues* 1) despite the questions we ask. We say our plans, our revolutionary aims, our great revolts, are caused by our idealism, our grand questions, our causes. They are not. These questions insist that the strong can be made weak, that the belief in something affects the outcome of things. The minor influences the major in its own incalculable ways; history happens behind our backs in its own way; the flows that are history spread out in patterns which can be recognized as patterns, not as plans. Brandt's revolutionary intent will never bring about predictable results, or any kind of useful results. Unpredictable changes will simply come about because of this exposure of flows usually kept secret as permanent structure.

⁷⁵See Nietzsche's powerful account of the secrecy in Christianity, subjectivity, and the origins of the ethics of pity (*The Genealogy of Morals*. See especially "Preface" Chapter v, and "First Essay" Chapters viii and xiii).

minor annoyances into major ills. She is, the poet makes public, the poet broadcasts in a way only *minor* literature usually has the courage to do, the originator of evils in the family, in history. This self-problematization, this neurotic sense of her own culpability, this combining of love and violence, this consideration of vulnerability as hatred, this airing of the minor group's politics, makes this poem, and many others in *Questions I Asked My Mother* among the best poems Brandt writes. This vulnerability which is self-problematization makes "Marian makes lists" among the best poems written, not only among Mennonites, of course--not that many of this sort from this group have been written--but the best on the Canadian prairies and in Canada. They are of the best if vulnerability--a non-linguistic, subjective quality--is conceded to be evidence of fine writing.

Di Brandt's writing is minor writing. It has in it a high coefficient of deterritorialization (albeit a "rich" and so ineffectively minor deterritorialization which actually is a reterritorialization), it automatically speaks for the community values (even when she speaks against them) and it is visibly political. She is minor over against the major. She is a revolutionary user of English even when she attempts to use it in non revolutionary ways. In other words, Brandt's poetry does not, in the style of Kafka the deterritorializer of German, deliberately impoverish English at every turn. But, besides this "automatic" minor quality, her poetry is actually major. She wishes to be major and her models, as I have said earlier, are the great poets for the most part.

Brandt's is the poetry of anger, which is to say that it is poetry of the cause, of the political purpose, of the revolutionary agenda. Typically, where there is revolution, there is belief. We have this or that to prove. It is not the revolution's belief which will be legitimized in the end, but another new state which will be the visible recipient of these efforts at change. The revolution

wishes for this or that to occur because it believes strongly in this or that human virtue or value. Neither the specific wish nor the specific value or virtue which that revolution or that particular revolutionary subject believes in will be fulfilled or finally honored. Yet fulfillment and honor of a sort in the form of the new will result. The minor text, rebelling and calling for this or that change, exposes itself in public, and this self-exposure, this humble act of letting all see everything without great secrecy, forces the major text to come temporarily to terms with its arrogance and its desire for secrecy (always a desire to interpret its own text as a divine one, a transcendental signifier) and in the process a new relationship is formed between groups. Big groups yield to small groups and the balance of power, the balance of prohibitions, the balance of have and have not, the balance of the apparent permanence of institutions, the balance of all large and complacent groups' relations to small and politically active groups, shifts, changes, evolves, moves materially through a series of physical states which would always seek to remain non-moving if it were up to the big, non-revolutionary group(s).

Brandt's anger will not bring about any political change or value system which she may think is very important and worthy of reverence, but it will bring about change. All minor writing does. Without her anger and that of other minor voices, English literature, with its cultural hegemony and its unified field of big groups and large social organizations would not see (embarrassed) its own selfish/secret/powerful politics hidden and kept underground in a sort of basement, or unconscious,⁷⁶ as if a destined force and a destined state. Brandt's

⁷⁶There is no unconscious, only secret agendas. The unconscious, site of the unexpressed self, is an essentialist image of the subject which cannot be valid unless we believe (in the fashion of all causes) that a transcendent being has made each one of us different and unique, and that we each potentially have a great service to perform in that "being's" will. Without such a transcendent view of the "being" of the subject, and with another view of the subject which sees it (gender, too, is made of course) wholly constructed and different only insofar as it has encountered a unique combination of discourses and desiring objects over time and within conditions of speed, this subject has no more a personal, undiscovered, unique personhood than does each unique snowflake.

minor anger changes major power, though never in any way as she wishes it to or towards a goal she may have in mind. Brandt's minor English literature changes major English literature whether it wishes such change or not. Without Brandt's minor English inscriptions, as I have said before, major English literature would stand still and spin its wheels, unable as it is on its own to vitally criticize the false assumptions, lies and transcendental signification which it constructs into its systems and institutions as if they were unconstructed and from on high.⁷⁷ Yet, Brandt's challenges to English signification must be understood to be accidental. They do not come out of a determined impoverishment of English. Her writing, her allusiveness, about which much more might be said, is highly lyrical and so not especially material at all.

The lesson in the above thinking is clear. The personal and political ends which drive our writing are dispensable. The state which comes is not recognizable from a profile or prediction or chart drawn based on the specifics of our convictions. Texts have minds (desiring directions) of their own. Groups have minds (desiring directions) of their own. Writers are not in charge of the ethics or changes in ethics which groups undergo. Writers are not in charge of a dynamic which is essentially material and not spiritual. Writers are exposers of the materiality of and the non-spirituality of the dynamics of groups--in that they are exposers of the essential and utter materiality of writing itself. Writing, whether it wishes to be or not, is deconstructive. It is the trace which leaves for others to see, the presence which leaves for others to see, the other logic in all logic,⁷⁸ the "false" logic in all values, the "false" logic in all representations, the

⁷⁷I use "high" here to suggest "hierarchy" which hegemonicity always invokes as a model of proper relations. In an ideal age in which hegemony has been defeated and created out of existence, hierarchical imagery will no longer have potency and currency and a new age of horizontal relations will predominate. This is, I think, thought of in sociological terms, going to be an age of community (global, possibly), in theological terms, an age of brotherhood and love, and in political terms, an age in little need of a government or of complex leadership. Such a non-hegemonic age sounds positively utopian.

⁷⁸I use other where I am tempted to use false. False the logic is not; it is simply other than and constructed via its peculiar combinations of historico-linguistic elements and impulses. In the history of language that

"false" logic in all agreements and truths. Di Brandt's anger may as well be as not be an anger. It is just one of the ways the "false" in logic makes itself known. Her anger is a "falsehood." Her anger is a writing. Her anger is a minor anger and in that it is very powerful. It is, despite the scepticism I can hear from critics who say "we know that," worth repeating, since the "false" is always easily forgotten, especially by the reader who wishes to see the "false" as "true." He wishes the secure and the permanent to be the way the universe works. The reader may as well as not be reminded that the security he smacks his lips over is neither security nor particularly more pleasurable than insecurity. Insecurity holds all the cards, in fact. To remember the "falseness" of all claims to "truth" is to have pleasure.

the Western world is caught in, logic and anything else can be said to be "false," as opposite to "true," but all today already know, though they are not yet and will not be till the end of the age of subjectivity in a desiring position to construct new and non-ontological categories which tell of the constructed, material nature of the concepts (cause/effects) by which an epoch simplifies its thinking. In this age, the true/false binary has allowed us to grow up and raise up others without a memory, that is to say without an inclination toward thankfulness, recalling Heidegger's link between thanks and memory.

Chapter Six

"Once you've had one, you've had them all"⁷⁹: Alienation and Materiality in Sandra Birdsell's Fiction

Where Birdsell most strongly retains her minor status is in her address of political problems. The particular minor group for which she speaks is a very small group, the Indian Canadian/Mennonite Canadian group of southern Manitoba. No other fiction writer has emerged from this precise language grouping. That happens to be, most likely, because so few subjects belong to it. Possibly only a few dozen families in Canada have a Mennonite Canadian/Indian Canadian territorial subjectivity. The mixture of the European and the North American territories makes for fascinating writing. Her impact as a writer comes from her awareness of the troublesome mixture of the two systems of codes, the two territories, within one family. The Lafrenier family in *Night Travellers* represents this union. Her power also derives from the interaction within her work of the minor and the major in literature. The Mennonite literary subject is both major and minor, of European, classical, intellectual, western history by association, but out of it by its history of dissociation from most of the West's major codes.

The Indian Canadian literary subject, for the most part, must be labeled minor because of its non European territorial memories and its history of resistance to as well as hopes for acceptance by major Canadian literature. The Indian Canadian subject sees himself as always outside the mainstream Canadian text, while the Mennonite Canadian subject sees himself as inside it and outside it at the same time for a complex set of

⁷⁹*The Chrome Suite* 133.

reasons. Whatever the case, Sandra Birdsell's writing presents the combination of these two political, material territories within one voice. Her overall contribution may be characterized as a deterritorializing of both Indian Canadian and Mennonite Canadian minor territories in her earlier work, represented by the collection of stories entitled *Night Travellers*, and then an attempt at a deterritorialization of major territoriality in her two novels, *The Missing Child* and *The Chrome Suite*.

Maurice Lafrenier is an ordinary working man in Agassiz whom the bankers, town administrators, and other middle class townspeople treat shabbily partly because he is only a barber and is coarse and profligate, but mainly because he is Métis. His mother has been found literally dead drunk, and the town holds that against him as much as it considers such an event typical of his kind: "It would have turned out well if it hadn't been that it took too long for a town to forget a person who would die suffocating on their own vomit" (*Night Travellers* 14). The implications are clear enough in this comment, but the racism which crushes basically good people like Maurice comes to him much more directly, sometimes hypocritically as a "kindness" done by the redneck. A local friend of his confidentially tells him that Métis culture is not better than white: "Don't let anyone tell you different, Henry Roy had said, mongrels don't make better dogs" (15).

Maurice's wife who is Mennonite has no such difficulties finding acceptance: "The town would rush in for a woman like Mika. The town thought Mika had taken him in hand and with her clean habits and Mennonite ways had made him what he was today" (2).⁸⁰ She treats him

⁸⁰All of the stories in Birdsell's short stories and novels come down hard on the convention of the protected and pampered mother. Mothers find credibility far too easily when often, almost universally if Birdsell's drama is to be believed, they whine, hit, yell, reject and generally do little to earn the approbation and automatic respect they get. This alienating mother contrasts with Di Brandt's mothers who are usually wonderful, or at least wonders.

much like Roy believes Métis should be treated, as some lower form of being, when clearly in some respects he is the better of the two parents: he loves his children, he respects his wife and is long suffering despite her vicious anger at him and her weariness of being mother to her children (*Night Travellers* 74). Maurice tries hard with commendable persistence, the stories explain, to fit in where he is not wanted.

Partly due to his marginal social status in the town, Maurice has long wanted to give some proof of his importance and value as a member of the community. He gets his wish. When the worst flood in recorded history hits Agassiz, it turns out that Maurice has predicted it:

Old Man River. That was the name they'd given to him since his prediction of the flood had come true. Maurice Lafreniere reads the river like it was a newspaper. When the going gets tough, the tough get going, he told himself. And he'd proven himself. (7)

Maurice's humdrum life on the margin of things in Agassiz seems about to turn interesting and important. His life has had few highlights, and he has felt alienated, but the possibility of some sort of progress and new purpose seems to be held out to him with his fortuitous prediction and he intends to take advantage of it: "Why do you have to stay, now of all times, Mika had asked. And he couldn't explain to her that for once he didn't want to be on the outside, left out, but dead centre" (7). Maurice now suddenly has a widespread local credibility, to the chagrin of businessmen like Mayor Livingston who takes every opportunity to discredit Maurice. When Medley, a reporter from Winnipeg, comes to investigate the damage done by the flood, he makes it clear that he prefers to record Maurice's opinions about what should be done about the catastrophe rather than those of local officials. Livingstone interrupts Maurice's claim that stopping the flood

might be a possibility in the future. "We could take steps to make certain that this flood will never happen again" (12), Maurice says, and Livingstone laughs at him in front of the reporter and with magisterial pomp points out some particular flood damage to Medlake. Medlake senses, however, what officials in Agassiz have never wished to sense, Maurice's perspicacity and good sense. Medlake tells Livingstone to "wait and let him finish" (13). His credibility established in Agassiz in this way, our credibility in him as readers also rises.

Maurice wants recognition and acceptance from the leaders of the community, however, not just from reporters. The desire for official acceptance constitutes the particular flaw in his character I would probably think if I was reading a work such as *The Ancient Mariner*, *Frankenstein*, *The Lady of Shalott*, or *Hamlet*. That judgment might not be so far from the mark despite the late twentieth-century status of this story. Maurice does die at the end of *Night Travellers* without completing the great symbolic boat-building project he has fiddled with for half his life, one which fortified him against the continual disappointments of social and domestic rejection. Temporarily, however, Maurice's desire finds satisfaction. He tells Livingstone and Medley that the courthouse basement walls aren't safe and likely will cave in with the pressure of the ground water. Livingstone, at least, disbelieves him, saying that the walls are two feet thick and impervious. The walls do cave in almost immediately afterwards, just after they've entered the building, significantly immediately after Maurice refuses to "say something to them in Indian" as Livingstone boorishly tells him to do in front of everyone.

"In a pig's ass," Maurice said, his anger breaking loose in upraised fists. The floor beneath him tilted. And then there was a sound, like

thunder, beneath them. Relief flooded every part of his body and his knees suddenly felt weak. He felt like laughing hysterically. (15)

The walls come tumbling down, not unlike the walls of Jericho falling in the classical vindication of Israel in the Old Testament. The miraculous exists in Birdsell's world. The timely collapse of the courthouse walls are a sign that nature sympathizes with the wishes of special people. The miraculous shows itself to be more miraculous even than that, coming as it does at exactly the right time to vindicate a favored subject. The message the miraculous sends is that it exists, that it honors its beloved, and that it has a special place in its heart for the downtrodden, particularly the Indian downtrodden. This combination of affects and effects, though textual, does not have the feel about it of careful planning. It sounds suspiciously like it sympathizes exactly with Birdsell's own desire for a "unicorn" power in a world which, as she continues increasingly to show, seldom *reveals* that facet of cosmic flows and movements. Babies about to be abandoned are not picked up and delivered to the Salvation Army's doorsteps, good-hearted drunks on Henry street are not covered in blankets from the frost when it dips to thirty below at night, and no matter how worthy of protection, young women about to be done some violence are not mysteriously protected by some angel hand or some "thunder"-voiced heavenly being in the way that Maurice here is backed in his political ambitions by Nature.

Despite the existence of a mysterious force which provides for its subjects (not unlike Di Brandt's in *Jerusalem, Beloved* 47), Maurice does not really pay attention to his own consequent potential as a favorite of the spiritual. The cosmos loves him and comes to his aid; he rejects that special spirit and finally as narrative time evolves, makes a flop of his life. We

don't know that his life would not have been ordinary with kind Nature's assistance had he believed and remembered her goodness, but we know that, not believing or remembering her advocacy of him here during the flood, he more or less peters out. He loses energy and friends; he continues to try to fit into white society but fails. He does all the things that are not good for him if he wishes to be happier than he is.

It is this ultra-ordinary impulse in subjects which Birdsell's stories impress upon her readers. Betty, Truda, Lurene, Maurice, Mika and others all are shown at moments of crisis and choice but in every case each of them chooses badly, or we could say, chooses for that course of action which will lead her down an increasingly sad, lonely and misunderstood path. This refusal of the miraculous by each subject at every narrated moment in every one of her stories and novels, in other words, even if that miraculous element in the world represents simply the potential for the individual to feel important and worthwhile, is the norm for the ordinary in her work. The ordinary does not recognize the extraordinary right there before it to be seen. The ordinary subject therefore must experience the opposite of the miraculous and that is a slide, a steady, precipitous slide down into great discouragement. Only two possibilities exist in Birdsell, both of them hierarchical: the climbing happy, or the declining unhappy. The ordinary which sees itself as ordinary and celebrates the ordinary, looking forward to the next office party, political convention, Winnipeg Folk Festival, family gathering, winter vacation in Arizona, shift in the weather, and so on, never occurs. Events must be highly dramatic in Birdsell's work. They must always represent extreme affirmation or denial. The author knows another possibility, of course. She shows us potential for celebration in the ordinary world. Her subjects, however, do

not see what she sees. They fail to see and, blind, head quickly toward disaster and annihilation.

These traits, these slippages into alienation, are conventions of high modernism: the eironic author, the extraordinary real universe, the shortsighted and unknowing, willful, wrong-choosing subject, and the wasteland at the end of the story. This combination of high alienation due to subjective ignorance and an inability to visualize possibilities or miracles determine the plots, settings, characters and themes, namely the narratology, of all the stories Birdsell writes. Miracle and ignorance of miracle are both present even when one of the two appears not to be explicitly there. This simultaneous presence is the case in most of the short stories of *Night Travellers*. When you have a downward movement in the story, when the character chooses badly or makes choices which will alienate her further from loved ones, or when relationships have reached an impasse, and no particular extraordinary cause is suggested in the story, the element of the miraculous is there in the silence, in what is left unsaid, possibly determined by something supranatural which has entered the narrative earlier.

The family members with whom the short stories concern themselves include Maurice, an Indian Canadian married to Mika, a Russian Mennonite immigrant who intensely dislikes her husband's lower class values and especially his general sloppiness and his tendency to drink and stay out late. When it comes to orderly living, he is not German, that is certain. They have children, Betty, Lurene, and Truda, each of whom is featured in one or more of the book's stories. The children are (predictably for realist fiction conventions which always see only one possibility for the nuclear family) twisted and hurt by the tensions between their parents. They reflect

the apparent dysfunctionality of their parent's marriage in the sorts of decisions they make in their own relationships, in their thinking, and in their hopes for meaning. Two other important members of the extended family are Grandmother and Grandfather Thiessen whose own relationship, though it appears normal and calm to the children, contains terrible conflicts which can never be resolved and so which secretly contribute to the dissolution of the Lafrenier family.

In "The Wednesday Circle," fourteen-year-old Betty Lafrenier reluctantly goes to a farm neighbor's place for eggs, knowing she will be fondled by the old and (again typical of realist fiction which idealizes youth) repulsive Mr. Joy, an unhappiness which has been happening since she was ten and which she has almost become inured to: "it has happened over a course of four years, gradually, like growing" (52). The "growing" metaphor infers the nuclear family, and in the bigger picture, the social family as site of growth. Its sterility brings on such stunting experiences which grow like weeds in what should be good garden soil if it was tended right. On this occasion, while the old man holds her so she cannot leave the barn they are in, and whispers "show me your tits....I'll give you a dollar if you do" (52), Betty finds consolation in the decision she has made that morning to tell on Mr. Joy at the Wednesday ladies' circle. When she enters the circle that evening her resolve fades. The ladies, with Betty listening and respectfully waiting her turn to "tell," discuss the sin of suicide in the context of a story of a thirteen-year-old Russian girl who has been repeatedly raped over a period of two weeks and who finally shoots herself. Betty's mother Mika suddenly and impulsively announces that suicide must be the unpardonable sin or else she herself would have done it long ago. One woman remonstrates over Mika's candidness, another, the

white-haired one whom Betty has taken a liking to, says meaningfully that "occasionally ... in this room, someone dares to speak the truth" (57). Betty slips out of the room unnoticed then. Her own bitterness at Joy's intrusion and her eagerness to expose him slip, along with her, into the background. Whatever she felt was significant in her life, enough to make her one of the ladies, to warrant such a group confession which would rally them in support around her and end her lonely confrontations with Mr. Joy, is silenced by their larger and more terrible secrets, secrets which they keep to themselves, and which if they could reveal would cause them all to choose death over continued living. Consequently, because of some terrible duty, they go on hypocritically miming the life of joy themselves:

The stone is back in her [Betty's] stomach. She feels betrayed. For a moment the women are lost inside their own thoughts and they don't notice as she rises from her chair and sidles over to the door. Then, as if on some signal, their conversation resumes its usual level, each one waiting impatiently for the other to be finished so they can speak their words. Their laughter and goodwill have a feeling of urgency, of desperation. Betty stands at the door; a backward glance and she sees the white-haired woman bending over her work once again, eyes blinking rapidly, her fingers moving swiftly and the doily, its flecked pattern spreading like a web across her lap. (57)

"Like a web across her lap" the doily stretches. Domestic work, forgetting work, busy work, various sorts of "nets" to catch the thoughts and feelings and hold them back, keep emotions from spilling out because life is so terrible for women, the implication goes, that if they weren't careful they would die. Specifically, sex and touch, among the greatest pleasures the material world offers, are sealed off by the doily virginity belt. In a world

where women wish to die but duty keeps them busy, blinking back tears while they work, who would wish to impose her own paltry worries on anyone with such a high quotient of suffering? Betty Lafrenier is the oldest of the Lafrenier girls. Each of the girls in her turn, as well as their mother, tells stories as deadening to desire as this.

In "The Rock Garden" a series of narrated events end in Mika's sudden great annoyance with mothering. Lurene, watchful and precocious Lurene, has watched Mika make a mysterious midnight trip away from the house and then hours later back to it carrying a rock which she adds to a growing pile of rocks under the children's swing. That starts the sense of mystery around the mother figure for both the reader and Lurene.⁸¹ Where could she be going in the night when she should be asleep we, as much as does Lurene, ask ourselves. The complication of the mother's life (Mika's in "The Flood," except now "the mother's" because seen from a daughter's perspective⁸²) here includes Lurene tattling on her sister Betty out of jealousy since she has been hanging around with Lawrence, a vagabond family's son, who has eyes for none of the Lafrenier girls but Betty. Mika, angered over the information--the false information--from Lurene that Betty and Lawrence have been necking in the coulee, dramatically declares Lawrence off limits to Betty. Then, in exasperation at

⁸¹It is important to note that the reader is drawn closer to Mika as a result of the discovery that she does have feelings and desire for love, whereas for Lurene, this discovery of her mother's secret night time world distances her from Mika. The members of the nuclear family wish for the end of mother's desire, the reader wishes for more of it. The family model as we know it, Birdsell seems to dramatize, stifles desire and love. Lurene has been trained to expect loyalty and consistency and devotion from mothers, not pleasure and active, new, unpredictable living in the world.

⁸²Here we have the first of many reasons to think of Birdsell's work as polyphonic in the sense in which Bakhtin theorizes in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. "A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness," says Bakhtin, "a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels" (6). Frequently, reading Birdsell, the reader is struck, if he is open to such impressions, of an author creating characters with voices independent of each other's values and of hers too, characters who in effect create the author instead of the other way around, characters whose consciousness's are too large for the author to comprehend and present on the page.

her husband and the children, she begins the endless task of building the mysterious stones into a rock garden. Questioned by Maurice about the reason for her sudden impulse to build the garden, she flares up at him and says she's tired of her life. Maurice reminds her that she should quit this impulsive work outside and go inside where she's needed, where the babies are lying in sopping diapers.

Mother grunted as the wheelbarrow tilted suddenly from her grasp and fell onto its side. "Well, change them then," she said. "They're your babies too."

"What's the matter?" he asked, lowering his voice. "Is it--are you in the family way?"

Mother stopped shoveling and looked him straight in the eye. "Yes. I'm always in the family way. And I'm tired. I'm tired of being a mother." (74)

Lurene overhears and feels unable to reconcile this with what she understands of the dependability of mothers. She recognizes that "mother" is a relative term, though, and at the end of the story, after a series of special efforts by Betty and herself to lure Mika back inside the house, she begins to consciously separate herself from her mother in ways which are desperate more than they are normal:

I knew my mother had some of the answers to the mysteries. But the pull of an alliance between sisters was stronger. It was better than being on your own with a person who could suddenly grow tired of being your mother.

"Piss, shit and God," I said. "A mean witch." I stepped out and away from my mother. Suddenly, I was afraid. (78)

The connection of mother with witchery suggests the ordinary metaphor we use when we declare someone we have learned to dislike mean and unwelcome. It also suggests more. It hints at the supernatural which hovers everywhere in the background of these stories, sometimes far in the background, at other times closer and specifically functioning in the actual dramatic lives of the characters.

In "The Flood" we saw it in the fortuitous answers to Maurice's prayers that the courthouse walls cave in to prove he is truly the town's "Old Man River" (14) and their fall vindicates Maurice, Indians, goodness, supernatural powers, all in one fell swoop. In "Truda," the girl by that name has been discouraged by an insensitive Mika from doing what she loves most, which is drawing. Underestimated and unappreciated by her family, Truda is shown by the narrator to have a wonderful kinship with the spirit of the land, a spirit which none of the other Lafrenier's even begin to imagine or respect. In a mysterious scene which symbolically hearkens back to the story of the flood and Maurice's Indian intuition which helps him predict the flood, Truda (the artist) sees a lake forming close by her, in this land which the reader is reminded is the not-so-dry remnants of the greatest freshwater lake ever, Lake Agassiz:

Truda waited. She leaned into the fence and looked at the lake. It jumped forward and channels of water tipped down the highway towards her. It was all in her head but she could smell fish and see shells and sand. The gulls flew low, crossing and crisscrossing each other's flight paths. She could see their black feet tucked up against white-grey bottoms. She looked down and saw milky water receding before her feet, leaving wet crescent marks on the ends of her navy sneakers. (43)

Till here the picture of the water seems all only imaginary. Then, however, the description begins to double back on itself, fold back the veil of image and introduce the drama of the real:

Beige sand, dappled with curious flat grey pebbles, rounded perfectly smooth, was left in the water's wake. She stooped, picked several pebbles and dropped them into her pocket before the white frothy water rushed back up, cold, overtop her shoes and then up around her ankles. She lifted her eyes to the lake. The gulls cried with joy and bounced their solid bodies against the lake. It was like nothing she had ever drawn. (43)

The lake ebbing and flowing, the girl's clear seeing, and the cry of the gulls come to the reader as sensually immediate, as if Truda has been transported into another realm where the impossible can happen, where what is past--the actual wave-lapping and shore action of Lake Agassiz--becomes present and living. The mind's unconjured images conjure up a world of the real which both makes time irrelevant and threatens to disrupt the deep-rooted and impervious movements of history itself, so sure do we suddenly become that the flood which came to Agassiz is somehow Truda's doing, somehow the doing of a child, somehow the doing of the artist. The flood, which historically came to the "Agassiz" region in the nineteen fifties is the flood of *Night Travellers*; the flood of "The Flood" is the flood of a historic past but it is the flood of the general artist remembering the flood and giving it special, human-cosmic significance, the flood of "The Flood" is the unsettling return of that greatest of the Great Lakes which laps with mystic power at the backs of the prairie imagination, and the flood in "Truda" is the mysterious real overpowering the sad and ordinary unreal of the nauseating politics of the prairies and specifically

the desiccated family relations which misoperate in all--especially Truda's and her sisters--lives in a world which (like that of T.S. Eliot's *Wasteland*) has lost all power to live by the spirit.

To bring this picture back to the story's drama, the impression given there is that Truda's experience with the rising lake is shamanistic, mystic. Truda, the artist, conventionally myopic and always underfoot in Mika's kitchen, has a gift none of the others dream of, the gift of prophetic sight. Immediately on establishing the link between artist and vision, and so between her stories and the supernatural, the narrator brings the focus back to the political one which drives the book thematically:

She didn't need crayons when she had all this in her head. Mika could never take away her head. Her own gull rose. She felt the cold water around her calves, at her knees and then it swirled about her thighs. She took a deep breath and dove under. She didn't need to draw the farm. The farm was gone and her imagination was a tree growing inside and green leaves unfolding one by one.(43)⁸³

Mika has kept the crayons from Truda. Truda has no need of them anymore. Her mind, her ability to create the reality she wants in full color and with all the sensations in place, make her much more powerful than her prohibiting mother. Again, mothers are coldly drawn, and again a great distance grows between mothers and daughters. Mothers in Birdsell's world obviously do not know how to give the daughters what they need.⁸⁴

⁸³I can't help but notice the curious connection between Di Brandt's operant metaphor for the victim's imagination and this one of Birdsell's. Brandt describes her imagination thus, as a tended treeling:

you come bearing gifts green apples
glistening in a red bowl you have
waited all your life for this moment
tended your small tree carefully " (*Agnes in the Sky* 19).

⁸⁴This, again, is reminiscent of Brandt's poetry. Mother's once were, before Brandt's poetry, terribly hard on daughters. How, then, can daughters learn how to love, both Brandt's and Birdsell's writing might be asking.

What they need, the effect of her writing leads us to understand, is to be led into a spiritual world in which the ordinary and the tedious do not dominate.

The extraordinary and the ordinary are inextricably linked in Birdsell's narratives as I have shown from the start of my argument. The other stories of *Night Travellers* and those of the novels bear up this unbending relationship. The powerful, intriguing opening of "Night Travellers," the title story of the collection, perfectly demonstrates the conventional fiction of the extraordinary-ordinary in production.

"When a woman has intercourse," Mika told herself, "she thinks of what might happen." She climbed in the night the hill that led away from the river and James. She traveled in a black and white landscape because it was void of details that would have demanded her attention. And the night was also a cover. Above, the starlit summer sky served only to make God seem more remote, withdrawn. (79)

Mika, as we know from the earlier stories, represents one version of the ordinary woman to the reader so far. She has cursed her husband's slothfulness and late nights' drinking, she has resented the work of raising children while her apparently kindly husband inquires what might be wrong, she has vilified the whole enterprise of watching the river and so vilified her husband with whom we as readers have grown to sympathize. She, in our eyes, is hard and mean, a "witch," as Lurene has declared. Her actions here of climbing a hill in the night, thinking of the intercourse which we assume she barely tolerates with Maurice, given her shrewish conduct towards him, imagining the landscape to be black and white and "void of details," and the passing reference to a distant god summon up the

quotidian much as a story by Raymond Carver would. Simultaneously, however, these same details here all, every one, and a host of others I haven't mentioned for brevity's sake, carry a weight of the marvelous with them. Why would a woman alone at night outdoors be thinking of intercourse? That is so unusual in the short story genre. This unusual topic sets the "miraculous" tone, or at least the note of the unexpected, for succeeding details and for the entire story. Climbing the hill is symbolic, whispering both glory and tedium, God on his hill and Sisyphus on his (as well as MacFleckno, Satan at the opening of Book Two of *Paradise Lost*, the writer hacks in their Fleet Street ditch in Pope's *Dunciad*, David Canaan on his mountain in *The Mountain and the Valley*, and, of course, many others).

The hill she climbs is the allegorical hill of difficulty and "mothering" to which she is heading back after a few fleeting hours with her secret lover, James. She heads away from the river which here in *Night Travellers* represents the miraculous if only Agassiz subjects would take note of it the way Truda has indirectly done and as Maurice himself describes, even though, when all is said and done, he does not follow his own fine instincts in this matter or really comprehend the extent to which his understanding of the river is both practical and quotidian, technical and miraculous:

Maurice cleared his throat to speak. Build a sewage treatment plant so we no longer shit and piss on the river. We didn't have floods like this one until we got the running water. My God, the river, she doesn't pretend to be beautiful, but some honor is due, eh? Lure the goldeye and pickerel back with clean water. Forget the Indian legend that says we have no say in the matter. We should remember the

river with different eyes. To them it was heavy. Sluggish and ugly, a breeding ground for mosquitoes and eels. (12).

The river in the stories is potentially miraculous and ordinary depending on how it is seen. Mika, walking away from the river, walks away from the shamanic and lovable Maurice and toward only the one whom she despises. Walking away from James from whose bed of "intercourse" she has just risen, she walks away from what she believes to be a wonderful and charming contrast to her husband, but whom we see as ordinary and even dull in his giving back to her the hairpins she ("charmingly," and shrewishly both) leaves on his bed hoping to force him to remember her after she is gone.

This same extraordinary/ordinary vein climaxes in the story with her reunion with her father who finds out about her adultery and then her impulsive and unlikely (though tearful) promise to her father that she will not go back to James's bed again, and it ends with Mika thinking she is at peace now that the reconciliation with her Mennonite tradition represented by her father has taken place. She thinks she is at peace, but the imagery in the last lines of the story tell us otherwise.

She turned her face against his [her father's] chest and stared into the night beyond him. She felt empty, barren, but at peace. In the garden, a bright glow flared suddenly and she thought, it's a cigarette. But the glow rose and fell among the vegetation and then became bead-shaped, blue, brighter, her desire riding the night up and up in a wide arc, soaring across the garden into the branches of thick trees. A firefly, Mika thought. And she watched it until it vanished. (89)

Significantly, and supporting my idea that in Birdsell's work the ordinary never recognizes the miraculous, Mika feels barren. All along she has not wanted more children, if she has wanted children at all. This is a highly deterritorializing desire on her part: it is the nadir of desire, desire's absence, really. Mennonites, and Indians too, are known for their huge families traditionally. Mika forecloses on this tradition and replaces it with nothing except a desire for barrenness, which is to say, a desire for the alienation which the characters she generates, and which Birdsell generates in future works, all construct themselves out of to excess. The firefly/cigarette, magic and mundane mixed in one metaphor, ride up and down in the night, as she has done with James. The garden it rides in, though, despite all the apparatus of allusion to that other religious garden we in the West all know so well, will never produce much of anything. Mika has wished just that. Mika has, in the years of her growing up, been so stultified by the particular discourse of transcendence and barren desire of her father's tradition that she can not think of a thing she would like as much as a peaceful barrenness.

Individualistic impulse blinded by circumstances and stupid willfulness at the most critical moments represents how everyone except Minnie operates in Birdsell's first published novel, *The Missing Child*. Stupid willfulness is not an oddity, or a frequent occurrence there, but an inevitable one. Minnie comes from heaven. God, her tyrannical though beloved parent/lover, goes by the name of Jeremy. Mozart plays his wonderful new musical creations in heaven's garden while Minnie, bored with being chained in this garden all the time, peeks down from heaven where from the other side of the trees bordering the garden she sees the valley and the people milling about down there. She longs to descend and

participate in the excitement of human concourse. Finally one day, when her chain--she's been kept on a chain in heaven because of her unpredictability and impetuosity--is accidentally loosened, she slides down into the valley and joins the human race to live there and to eventually warn it of approaching disaster.

Her coming to earth in an earthly body parodies Christ's incarnation, of course, and her purpose like his culminates in her predictions of doom and endtimes. This apocalyptic moment is in fact where the book begins and ends. Minnie, floating naked down the river through the valley, under a bridge on which sits a Bible-quoting boy looking salaciously down at her--she has a lovely figure, we discover in the course of our readings--announces that the end has come for the valley. The valley, of course, doesn't listen to her, the novel tells us at length, and eventually Minnie leaves presumably for her old heavenly home shortly before the flooding of the valley becomes a reality.

Important to the book is the realm of the mysterious and transcendent. Heaven, magic, mystery, spiritual possibility not sensed by the valley's individual subjects found the narrative. Yet, no one notices mystery's presence nor has the ears to hear. Everyone is too busy and too wrapped up in his own severity, selfishness, plots to deceive and get ahead, and process of personal dissolution, to take notice. Minnie gives all in Agassiz plenty of opportunity to hear her words of the extra-normal, but she is ignored and in fact, as Christ was, reviled and judged incompetent as she tells us right from the start of her story:

As Minnie Pullman floats on the river and sings, it's clear to her that the neat lines of the valley, the charted ancestries of families, ethnic

backgrounds, languages, quaint customs are going to be wiped out.

The glacier is melting and the river is rising. (6)

Even her own believed her not. Her daughter Rosella despises her. Her other daughter, Ginny, loves her and protects her even though she thinks her mother flighty and terribly eccentric.⁸⁵ She is loved and hated both, but never understood or even properly listened to. Her message, one which she only indirectly gives and which she often realizes herself in a haphazard sort of way, never with much conviction, is that the Valley as it has been will soon and catastrophically end. Everywhere there are indications of apocalypse, nowhere any agitation over it because there is nowhere anyone, not even extraterrestrial Minnie most of the time, who has the power of spirit to hear, see, feel or understand its immanence.

It comes to Minnie then that she could try and warn them. She could ride a horse through the streets, down the wide centre of Main, past the Red and White store where in the window, blind, sun-faded mannequins shamelessly model Gothic cotton brassieres and where upstairs in a large unpainted room lined with caskets, Mr. Harrigan, the store proprietor, stands behind a purple curtain. He leans over a coffin and places sprigs of lily-of-the-valley between Sandra Adam's young fingers. (6)

Sandra's death symbolizes the great extent of Agassiz's social depravity, one which would seem to invite or deserve an apocalyptic end to life in the valley. Sandra Adam has been murdered by Sonny, a disreputable young man about town who gets away with the deed. Lily-of-the-Valley is, of course, the death flower and constitutes an eschatological symbol for the

⁸⁵In an interesting glance at classical myths, Birdsell has made these two girls the daughters of a god. Minnie, goddess, generates Rosella and Ginnie who never know they are half man, half god. Usually in stories the offspring are males who eventually get to know their divine origins. Rosella and Ginnie presumably will experience the catastrophe Minnie predicts and possibly die in it.

Valley at the moment its dissolution begins. The "purple curtain" behind which the simple local death-drama unfolds will soon be rent in twain. The town lives on and will do so oblivious till the end, concerned with its death, sex, and security in and sales of clothes, caskets, sex and death. The Lolita-syndrome here in this sleepy town is fully alive, dead to the presence everywhere of death and signs of death, dead to its own mortality.

Minnie might clutch a horse between her thighs and cry out as she rides, "Gather up your photo albums, your diaries, your histories of the valley and run for the hills." But they wouldn't listen. Her desire is lulled to death by the rocking motion of the river, by the inevitability of the rising water. She frog-kicks and glides forward swiftly and smoothly. She passes through the shadow of the steel bridge and feels the chill of its spanners cross her glistening belly.

(6)

In her imagination Minnie is Lady Godiva riding naked through the streets of Coventry. The significant difference is that Coventry people didn't *see* Godiva who was doing them an enormous favor, interceding with her husband concerning taxes as she did. Agassiz won't *listen* to the warning. It is the people here who have lost all reason for a visionary's or a benefactor's sympathy, and not a cruel authority over the people who doesn't listen to the cries of his people as in the Godiva story. Hendrick speaks to us symbolically too from these opening pages. He is the closest thing Agassiz has to a home-grown prophet, but he is totally inept and stupid.

As she drifts through its shadow and out the other side, she sees the soles of Hendrick Schultz's boots as he sits on the top span swinging

his legs back and forth. It's a lazy, hypnotic motion and if he should lean too far forward he would be carried away. (7)

Despite his lack of coordination which speaks of poorly developed large motor skills, and so of his symbolic baby qualities, he amazes the townspeople who for the most part revere and fear him. Here he is seen spouting bible verses from memory (significantly from the prophetic books of Zechariah and Daniel), peeping--not unlike the "peeping Tom" tailor in the Godiva story who is struck blind, though not prophetically blind--down through the bridge grating at a naked woman, about to fall in the river and drown, in parodic foreshadowing of the way lovely Sandra Adam dies later. Prophecy in Agassiz, in other words, has no future. Only selfishness inheres. Where and in what novels have we not heard this before? Birdsell, however, writes this theme with great complexity and new humor and so contributes something valuable to the genre of modern alienation novels.

In the shadow of immanent presence, the entire story is told. Even when the writing goes on for a long while in a mundane way, without direct representation of a clear miraculous content in its world, underneath its unfolding of events, in the turn of a phrase, in its many quirks of decisions and oddities of natural phenomena (the new and growing artesian well in Agassiz; Jacob Friesen falling off Elizabeth's roof), the story is determined by the transcendental signifier. Albert's world, Sandra's world, June's, Jacob's, Elizabeth's, Robbin and Sonny's, Lena's, Ollie's, Steven Adam's and Marie's worlds are not conscious of immanence. These characters lack an understanding of presence. The most likely reason for their incomprehension is intellectual. They are not able to understand. Their stupidity is not only their fault, but somehow a natural flaw. Nature

has not provided for its citizens.⁸⁶ Inability to comprehend, and inability to communicate, are the factors which dominate the relationship of Minnie and Annie Schmoon. Minnie comes from a heavenly world. She constantly goes on about this world to Annie who assumes she is hallucinating. Annie's goodness and Dostoevskian moral superiority hits home to the reader in the way she continues to befriend Minnie despite Minnie's incoherent chatter about Jeremy and Mozart. Annie's own life is a miserable existence. She is very poor, she has poor health and is dying of cancer. She attempts to cure this cancer through home-remedies such as the consumption of live frogs which she continually spends her time catching and swallowing live whenever the reader meets her.

The reader, knowing the special status of Minnie as an angelic being, can accept these eccentricities with a smile. Also for this reason, he finds it easy to accept the material world described by Birdsell at every stage of the story. The pain in the eyes, the newspapers lining the windows, the ratty toque, the steel wool hair, the weirdly patterned clothes on the line, and even the cancer growing in Annie all are acceptable to the reader who knows that according to the lyrical, romantic novel, a figure from another world represents the possibility of salvation of some sort.

Her voice cracked and she turned, hawked, and spat. Minnie saw the string of blood in the mucus as it dropped to the grass. Annie wiped

⁸⁶The story doesn't give us reasons, but tells us everything via the objective correlative. For that reason we have to make assumptions such as this, that Annie's inability to understand the immanence which Minnie and her fragmented tale represent results from her blue-collar mentality, or her lack of education, or even her small-town, rural Manitoba, dim-witted environment. Most people in Birdsell's stories are essentially stupid. Almost none of them make decisions which impress the educated or worldly-wise reader. All of them inevitably decide things on weak, silly, selfish, non-courageous grounds. Instead of working something out, a problem which has say threatened a marriage, the conflictors opt always for separation or for a morbid continuation of the relationship for stupid reasons such as Mika's in "Night Travellers." Relationships, it seems to me, might be kept for reasons of "desire to love," say, or "hope for discussion if I work at it for a while longer," or even "the possibility that I'll grow to like his people," and other such easily-imagined, conflict-challenging conceptualizations.

her mouth on the sleeve of her jacket. "Here," she said and stepped towards Minnie waving the clipping. A musty odor emanated from her clothing. Apples, Minnie thought. That Annie was an apple going soft inside. (16)

Lyrical convention assures the reader that some sort of vindication of the material lies in store for the reader. Annie may die in the end, he thinks, but she won't die for nothing. And in a way he is right. Minnie's very extraterrestrial existence means that desperation in the world of alienation must be a problem with perception. The cancerous blood, the mucus dropping to the grass, the wiping of the sleeve across the mouth, and even the apple smell of the old woman have a not entirely unpleasant ordinariness about them here which as the novel develops gradually turns sour and hopeless.

Materials, things available to the body's senses, gradually lose all color and warmth as we discover a variety of occurrences which, in their "this-worldly" ordinariness take all joy out of the circumstances of the body in the novel. Sandra Adam is raped and murdered and her murderer, whose identity we know, will never be found or tried. Sonny, who murders her, is picked up by the R.C.M.P. for a damaged headlight and, though the reader knows he should be held for a more dreadful crime, he knows too that justice will not be served. Justice never is served anywhere in Birdsell's work, unless the serving of justice highlights some aspect of fallen hope, some travesty such a justice commits. Ollie loves Albert and has waited for fifteen years for him to love her as he used to, but despite a momentary return of a relationship between them, we also know that Albert hasn't the strength of character to commit himself to her. Alienation convention determines that Ollie will live disappointed. Annie's home-cure,

mentioned to Minnie in the laundry-hanging scene, will not succeed, we know, and our expectations turn out predictably accurate. On and on the litany of predictable death and growing disappointment lumbers. All desire which material bodies exercise on each other turns out unfulfilled. The absence of a visibly permanent relation of object and subject in the world of Agassiz, leaves only one alternative to the disappointed narrator and author, the imagination of a world bereft of imagination, which is to say, a world empty of satisfaction of desire. The material in Birdsell's work stands there in its mockery. It beckons us to try it, and then laughs at our efforts by wickedly taking away what we have grown attached to. The quintessential example of this attitude toward the material is the opening scene with Minnie's bidding a confused good-bye to the world she once wished to inhabit, giving up on it so to speak. God gives up on Agassiz when Minnie leaves it. Desire gives up on Agassiz when Minnie leaves it.

That is how it works in Birdsell. Her writing constructs out of this ideological world of morality, alienation, sentimentality, essentialism, and distrust of the material. The loss she represents in *The Missing Child's* distress is epistemological loss. Stymied at the absence of knowable transcendence, she shows us transcendence emasculated and disappearing. Minnie leaving Agassiz is Robert Kroetsch's female in "Fear of Women" leaving the house and riding off on someone's horse, Godiva's horse, ironically, to be exact.⁸⁷ If only the disappearance of Minnie Pullman represented the end of the old era of love of the absence of desire and the beginning of a new age when the material itself could sustain the interest of its bodies and subjects. The reader might almost find himself inclined to

⁸⁷Robert Kroetsch. "The basic grammatical pair in the story-line (the energy-line) of prairie fiction is house: horse. To be on a horse is to move: motion into distance. To be *in* a house is to be fixed: a centering unto stasis. Horse is masculine. House is feminine. Horse: house. Masculine: feminine. On: in. Motion: stasis. A woman ain't supposed to move. Pleasure: duty" (*The Lovely Treachery of Words* 76).

think this, given the title of the first chapter. This is not the case, however. Birdsell chooses to write the extreme alienation of desire from its object, as I have already said.

Extreme alienation as moral regime based on a Platonic-Christian cosmology is clearly to be seen in Birdsell's stories already, but with each successive book the intensity of the disappointment produced by the unsatisfying material is turned up a notch, until in *The Missing Child* and especially *The Chrome Suite*, it reaches its nadir. Where social material writing would find some disappointment and also some fulfillment of desires (which is what we call pleasure), anti-material writing (that is to say, lyrical, traditional, metaphysical, moralist, nihilist writing)--which seems to be, but only seems to be and isn't, a pro-material writing because of its competence at verisimilitude--finds none. It shows characters never entirely failing to renew their hope for joy and union in this world and its social formations, but always failing to find even minimal satisfaction, unless that satisfaction is the hollow one of high spirituality of the sort Margaret in *The Chrome Suite* gets when she listens to the old woman who preaches to her to be saved and so to atone for the sin which has caused her daughter Jill's death:

"But my dear," Mrs. Hardy said, "won't you see that the Lord is calling out to you? He has taken Jilly to be with Him for a reason. Can't you see?" She stepped back and raised her face and hands and began to chant a prayer. At least I believe it was a prayer but I couldn't be certain because the words, though they sounded like words, didn't make any sense at all. When I left the house, Margaret's voice joined with hers and I heard my mother say, "Thank you, Jesus, for taking Jill away from me" (146)

The desperation in Margaret's and Mrs. Hardy's voice indicates a high degree of doubt about the efficacy of the meaning they have put in their faith. These religionists are telling their Jesus what is real, like a silly young boy baby-sitting for the first time might talk to his charge saying, "Do you like these toys, hmm? Do you like these toys, hmm? You like these toys don't you, yes, you do like these toys," all the while waving different pieces he has picked up from the huge plastic toy box--trucks, duckies, plastic ninjas--an inch from the toddler's nose who has begun to cry in the meantime, and whose crying only succeeds in making the silly baby-sitter wave the toys harder, closer to the crying baby and to speak his nonsense louder. They speak of Jesus the way Joe in Lawrence's "The Horse Dealer's Daughter" speaks to his dog when the loss of the family farm has become fully clear to him:

Joe watched with glazed hopeless eyes. The horses were almost like his own body to him. He felt he was done for now. Luckily he was engaged to a woman as old as himself, and therefore her father, who was steward of a neighboring estate, would provide him with a job. He would marry and go into harness. His life was over, he would be a subject animal now.

He turned uneasily aside, the retreating steps of the horses echoing in his ears. Then, with foolish restlessness, he reached for the scraps of bacon rind from the plates, and making a faint whistling sound, flung them to the terrier that lay against the fender. He watched the dog swallow them, waited till the creature looked into his eyes. Then a faint grin came on his face, and in a high, foolish voice he said:

"You won't get much more bacon, shall you, you little b----?"

(Abrams 2127)

Joe does to the terrier what he imagines that a whining, resourceless God has done to him, a God who grins with both a slight embarrassment at this discovery of his failure to provide and a non-sharing, adolescent pleasure that He at least doesn't lose his job. Joe's God has the precise intelligence of Joe himself, or just a little less.

This absence of anything delightful in the material accosts the reader from the first pages of *The Chrome Suite* with Amy's separation from Pyotr. It continues through her story of her life. Her sister Jill dies an awkward and unnecessary death, her mother refuses to give her comfort despite a series of attempts on Amy's part to warm their relationship, Amy is raped by a psychotic who eventually kills Shirley Cutting, one of her only true friends, Amy's husband Hank spies on her and eventually begins to hate her, Amy's brother Mel comes for a few hours into the small town of Spectrail where she has been happily living for a few weeks and so distracts her from her new sense of peace that she decides to leave Elaine and Laura, and late in the novel she loses her son Richard to Hank's custody. Finally, a series of apocalyptic events top off the novel: Pyotr is shot and killed by rebel natives blockading a major highway; Amy takes time to let herself psychically experience her great sense of loss. Her loss is that lifelong procession of events which have bitterly disappointed her. She does not recover from these losses as the reader might expect her to after a period of convalescence now that Pyotr is dead. Instead she adds to them. As a symbol of all the accumulated loss, and as a form of revenge taken by an injured lover, Amy ends the novel with a final nihilistic act; she slowly burns all the journals and personal writings which she had grown to count on to give her meaning if normal things such as families, friends and fine

living could not. Page by page she burns her writings as Birdsell's account of her life comes to an end. The final words of *The Chrome Suite* combine alienation and transcendence in a parting blow at the material. The book ends with a wicked joke on Amy.

The swollen thing moves behind her rib bone, a slight sliding sideways, a pressure. A reminder. (364)

Amy, like her sister Jill, will die of cancer. Jill died tragically from a kick in the groin by a vagrant bicyclist early in the novel. That event generated almost all of the events which caused Amy's own alienation from home and friends. Like Jill, Amy too will die young, unfulfilled, and bitter. Nothing in this book simply happens without a vicious side effect, without an abundance of conventional modernist meaning attached to it.

Not only do these novels entrench the alienation/mysticism dichotomy evident in Birdsell's earlier fiction, they intensify it as if the author had come to a gradually more intense realization that her initial impulse was correct, her beginning instincts about the empty universe and the *need* for something to fill it were exactly right, but as if, convinced by her own early writing of this universal understanding, she increasingly lost faith in possibilities and found herself forced, for professional and personal reasons, to eliminate ever more fiercely any narrative possibility for earthly joy, earthly friendship, earthly and homey pleasure that spanned time. Her narrative violates all possibilities of progress, positivism, hope, growth or other indications of the teleological. It does not accept the absence of transcendent meaning but bitterly represents by the objective correlative of various characterizations and plots, an intense picture of the moment of loss, so to speak. That is, Birdsell does not show us transcendence lost and then forgotten about. That would mean a fiction of

creative construction around what is there when transcendence no longer has any place in time and space. Birdsell dwells on the static moment of the discovery of loss as if that moment were truly significant and worth hanging onto and not forgetting. In effect, Birdsell memorializes⁸⁸ transcendence by showing the extreme emptiness of the human and natural landscapes which result from that absence. They leave the print of violence toward teleology at every moment of the plot, at every stage in the development of character, at each contribution to the thematic intentions of the narrative, and at each establishment of setting and atmosphere.

⁸⁸To memorialize is to erect a memorial to an event which then can be conveniently forgotten about because so familiar. To memorialize is to allow all to not think. Lyotard theorizes this human tendency to dis-remember (recalling Heidegger's view of the connection between memory, thanks and thinking). "But as far as forgetting is concerned, this memory of the memorial is intensely selective; it requires the forgetting of that which may question the community and its legitimacy" (*Heidegger and "the jews"* 7).

Chapter Seven

John Weier, Lois Braun and Sarah Klassen

Among the many Mennonite writers, a few will receive attention here because they have done much by way of poetry and fiction to make the politics of Mennonite Canadians known in ways which show persistence and expertise at addressing the problem of what it means to be a Mennonite subject in the Canadian social landscape. Some Canadian Mennonite writers keep territory pristine, others deterritorialize the Mennonite subject's world and still others reterritorialize it, creating some new combination of rules and offices by which the subject can live without feeling that his intelligence and his sense of moral foundations are too artificially, too visibly constructed.

Lois Braun's books of short stories play with the problem of not being Mennonite. They present essential selves who long to be, but are not, full members of the Mennonite community in which they move and operate. These characters don't fit anywhere, really, and are very much products of eccentric homes, unusually gifted imaginations and perceptive minds. They are typically attracted by the bizarre, the obtuse, the mysterious, or the dark. Much like the writers of the early nineteenth century, Braun's plots and characters are determined by a destiny which is typically most evident for us ordinary readers in the lives, thoughts and experiences of children, outcasts, and rural, impoverished, and otherwise very solitary figures. Such a sense of characters with destinies inhabits Braun's writing. It might be said of her work that it is Romantic to the core, full of a sublime moments in which metaphysical presence announces

itself through the author's imagination: by the weird or chaotic, by the unusual and the solitary lives and experiences of her characters

Prominent among Braun's effects is the desire of the subject to get away from something, to escape from what in each story seems to be some sort of great restriction. The subject, in other words, in each story, longs for, imagines itself to be, a nomadic subject free to cross over various social boundaries which effectively bind the non-nomadic subject.⁸⁹ It is men her characters long to escape.

In many of Braun's stories, women are described lovingly and lustily, while men are seldom treated to even a modicum of positive sexual attention. Clearly, women physically and psychically interest the narrator, men do not, or only minimally. Take the description of Darcy as she discusses her birth-mother with Claire: "Darcy stretches her legs in front of her, legs in dark green leotards, and winds a white undershirt around her feet" (246). The emphasis on legs and what colourfully covers them is obvious, especially the way Darcy plays with her legs as if enticing Claire to be interested in them. A similar though slightly more muted description of the kind female officer suggests a connection for Claire between daughter and constable, who sits down beside her in the dark and whom the narrator cautiously describes as "stretch[ing] her legs out in front of her" (256). This may seem minor, but men are not described in sexual, or quasi-sexual, ways. Loving, colorful, sometimes seductive descriptions of females are found in her latest collection *The Montreal Cats* in stories such as

⁸⁹The nomadic subject in Deleuze's sociological model, is akin to his group subject who remains free of the inhibitions which the subjected group would impose on him. The nomadic subject travels over the grid of desiring bodies and discovers, over and over again, that he is a traveler: "The nomadic subject traces a process of becoming other, becoming plant, animal, mineral, becoming 'races, cultures, and their gods'...becoming all the names of history as it moves across the natural, social and historical body without organs of the world. At every point of intensity, the nomadic subject effects a conjunctive synthesis, exclaiming 'so *that's* what it was!' and 'so *that's me*'..." (*Deleuze and Guattari* 95).

"Toxic Wastes." Here, two rather witless beauties find themselves at the garbage dump on a Sunday illegally disposing of "toxic waste" hair conditioner which they've been sold in bulk at rock bottom prices. The descriptions of them lure and seduce: "One of the women--the blonde one with the wide mouth and full lips--slid off the hood of the station wagon and came towards them" (20); "...Suzy and Loretta made faces at Dale and Otto and waved both hands, which sparkled with rings and bracelets" (22); "...but Loretta went to the driver's door of the station wagon and reached in with her long pink fingernails. She stuck her arm in up to her shoulder, and when she withdrew it, rock-and-roll followed" (25); "Breezes peppered with ash and smoke lifted her heavy blonde hair and the sun reflected off her glossy mouth" (25); and other examples of libido-quickenning pictures of these two turn-ons at the local dump. Braun's stories are obviously serious in purpose, not to be lightly taken. All the signs point to that in her work. So, the female gazed at so lustily by the author/narrator suggest a great interest in the female sexual body, and a disinterestedness in the body of the males. There are more examples, many more, which suggest this even more adeptly. This would surprise no one, commonly, except that these stories are told within the context of Mennonite Canadian territory.

In another story, "Tattoo," despite the female narrator's announced disapproval of Natalie, who it turns out has abandoned her husband and one of her children because of a problem with alcohol, she is sexually drawn to her at the same time, and this interest is a repressed, inferred one.

Ingrid had only been able to stare at the lusty, handsome woman who was her sister, but was so unlike her, Ingrid. She stared at the copper loops and rings and bands Natalie wore in her ears, on her arms, her

fingers, and at her copper-colored hair, and at the white sweatshirt with the ragged armholes where the sleeves had been cut away, and at the copper-colored tendrils peeking out from Natalie's underarms.

(39)

In the first place, the narrator empathizes in this well-hidden way with the leaving of husbands. Even though Natalie left because of *her* drinking problem, the leap from thinking of her as a sorry excuse for a mother, to thinking of her as a victim of a lifestyle which just didn't suit her flamboyant and mysterious character is a short one. The narrator may not be able to stomach leaving or escaping from a domestic contract except via extraordinary means, but means which underline the frustration which staying in the contract obviously signifies. Secondly, this description above captures as well as can be the great allure of the beautiful, free, sexy, irresistible aura of Natalie for the narrator. She takes on a sublimity of character, a weirdness, an eccentricity which places her above the mundane world the narrator inhabits.⁹⁰ She has a quality of "raggedness" (roughness, disorderliness, anti-conformity) about her much like the sweatshirt she wears. She is covered in rings ("rings on her fingers, rings on her toes, she shall have music wherever she goes"), the rings are not gold, gold being too common an uncommon metal, but copper: bright, gleaming, startling

⁹⁰This was precisely J.S. Mill's definition of worthwhile human existence. A character made life to be life, a conformist made life miserable and tedious.

A person whose desires and impulses are his own--are the expression of his own nature, as it has been developed and modified by his own culture--is said to have a character. One whose desires and impulses are not his own, has no character, no more than a steam engine has a character. If, in addition to being his own, his impulses are strong, and are under the government of a strong will, he has an energetic character. Whoever thinks that individuality of desires and impulses should not be encouraged to unfold itself must maintain that society has no need of strong natures..." (*Norton Anthology* "On Liberty" 1265).

Mill's view of individuality and character assumes the possibility of a genius, born and made for the prospect of performing great tasks, fine creative works, for society. Braun's reverence for the eccentric, the character, speaks of a such Romantic character, such "dark," remote, virtually uncharacterizable individualism.

copper with which her copper-tanned body almost teems--copper ornament seems one with copper flesh, the flesh an ornament in and of itself this way, not needing adornment of a more crass sort, a penurious sort, to be utterly alluring.

There are many other incidents in which women not only get along better with women than men, but where they are seen as inevitably more attractive both in body and mind than their male partners. Such is the case in "The Laughter of Women," for instance, in which one sister, Rea Jean discovers that another sister has slept with her husband-to-be and the upshot of the story, after much fear within and disruption to family relations, is that the sisters touch and comfort and laugh with each other in a world which shuts men out ("And above, in the kitchen, amidst the banging of cupboards and the filling of pots, could be heard the rising and falling of voices, the laughter of women" [*The Montreal Cats* 104]). It is not that shutting men out is not allowed, but shutting them out, *and* implying women's sexual preference for other women, is a new and very important form of textuality in Mennonite Canadian social politics.

The desire among Braun's characters for nomadcity hides a subtle longing which, in Freudian terms, the narrator has repressed but which, in its decoding, would decode at once also those codes which hold together the territory to which she has belonged, which has imprisoned her, and which she hungers to be free from and to free of its restricting codes. She hungers to be free, though she doesn't herself know, unlike the author, what she wishes to be free of and for. The subject, in other words, in this case the narrator, longs, without being clear about her longing, to deterritorialize Mennonite territory by changing its subjective codes and in this to affect a reterritorialization in time which would make it possible for

the nomadic subject to become non-nomadic once again, to die to herself so to speak, as the Cat in "Hunting Clouds" dies to Natalie. This is leaping ahead of myself, actually, so the place to begin is with the drama which this story unfolds for the reader concerning nomadcity.

In "Hunting Clouds" we meet with a narrator who has recently met a young and handsome German youth. "Luther had sort of a breathless way of talking and permanently messy dark hair and a smile that knocked your socks off" (*Watermelon* 175). To any heterosexual female this man, you'd think, would be an Adonis, someone considered a "catch," a "hunk." The moment the narrator has described him, however, she introduces into the plot the death of "the Cat." At first this incident seems innocuous enough, but gradually it takes on special significance. All that happens in "Hunting Clouds" is told, and needs to be understood, against the background of the dramatic and symbolic tension between handsome man and Cat ("Cat" is this cat's name, and so stands for everycat--this cat's significance as this story plays it out will have significance for the narrator's entire world). First of all, it is Luther himself who finds Cat. If Cat were *his* best friend, it would seem plain that symbolically he was dying to the narrator, since the narrator has an odd fixation in this story with this particular animal, and elsewhere with cats generally. As many of Braun's stories show, Braun's female narrators and characters favor cats, her male ones favor dogs. Here, now, with the death of Cat, found by Luther, another significant factor emerges. Cat was *Natalie's* favorite. The significance of this fact strikes us only gradually with the development of the story.

Interestingly, a woman who is on a midnight boat ride with a young man, according to the code of heterosexual dating, must be starting to entice and fall in love with him, as well as tempting him to fall in love with

her. That would *seem* to be what the whole story is about when we've done reading it quickly. That major heterosexual literary convention is never explicitly denied or subverted. It is, however, subverted in other ways. First, at the site of young love, the narrator gets annoyed at the prospective lover. Her annoyance with him is virtually the very first thing we discover about their relationship:

And then this morning, while standing in front of the cottage, listening for the loon, Luther found the Cat. Dead and under the verandah. I was annoyed that an exchange student from Germany should have to find a dead cat under his host's verandah, but even more, I felt bad about the Cat. It had been difficult enough to come back here. (176)

Why had it been so difficult for the cat to "come back here"? It had been difficult because it was Natalie's favorite cat, and after Natalie died, Cat's spirit died too. The significance of this is subtly built by Braun. What follows is an examination of some of these subtleties.

When it comes to writing generally, Braun can string together ordinary, colorless, lethargic verbs with the best of them: "went," "is," "was," "sat," and so on. Suddenly, however, the moment cats are introduced in a story, her verbs become rambunctious. That is true of "Hunting Clouds," too.

She'd been lurking around Bruno's for years. She didn't belong to him, though, but roamed the lakefront from cottage to cottage, birthing kittens, resisting affection, hunting mice, eating barbecued steak bones and corn-on-the-cob and ends of wieners. She always turned up at wiener roasts. First, you'd see her whole body slinking nearer as the wiener ends began to plop in the grass. I'd known the

Cat for as long as I'd been coming to Bruno's cottage at the lake, but Natalie had been the only one who could get near her. (176)

This cat lurks, slinks, births, resists, eats steak bones, hunts mice, and so forth. Significantly, since if the narrator is herself hunting "mice," a possible pseudonym for hunting females, and certainly a euphemism for female genitals, then hers is a form of hunting clouds, or of hunting for what can't be had or touched or experienced here on earth for anyone as *practical*, and territorial, as the narrators of Braun's stories, including this one, always are. Eating scenes in literature, of course, are almost inevitably "Freudian" and sexual. There is a freedom of desire in this eating/hunting scene which is rare in Braun. Furthermore, cats have a romantic value for Braun not to be found in humans. Cat here is the nomad cat, the alter-ego cat, the *real* object of the narrator's affections more than is her German guest.

The cat belonged to Natalie, as the narrator takes pains to reemphasize. It didn't like Bruno or Natalie's husband but only Natalie, the wife, who, it appears, is the favorite of the two for the narrator as well:

I could not eat, hadn't all day. Everything had been fine yesterday, comfortable and familiar. But this morning, Natalie's not being here and finding the Cat dead had twisted my stomach into a knot. (176)

When we finally come across a dead cat in Braun's fiction--her stories teem with cats who have human female friends, and sometimes human male enemies--it is the dead cat of a woman whom the narrator obviously loved deeply. Her nausea long after her friend's death, points to her deep affection. So does her specific awareness of Natalie's presence and moods when she was alive, a period in time to which the narrator now returns.

Natalie's husband has gone fishing in bad weather one day and doesn't return. It becomes plain that he has had an accident. Natalie is crushed:

Finally Natalie just stayed on the dock. She sent me away. It was cold that night, and I brought her a blanket. I remember how she just sat there, huddled under that white blanket in the moonlight. I'd go out to her, to try to get her in the cottage, but she was frozen to that dock. She didn't say anything, just wouldn't let me touch her. (177)

She thinks only of the woman, not the poor man who has just drowned. She concerns herself with this woman's bodily needs, her coldness, significantly. Natalie might be conceived of as "cold" or "frozen" also because she is only interested in a man and the loss of him, while her awkward friend finds herself preoccupied nothing with men but with a woman alone. The frozen serves double purpose here. Much as in Milton's *Comus*, where the sister, in the masque she watches, is suddenly "frozen" to the spot, obviously from sexual juices which embarrass her, and which she in her innocence doesn't know how to react to.⁹¹ Natalie is frozen, too, in the narrator's imagination, possibly because the death of a man who controls the affections of the woman *she* would like to have under her control, fills her with an unnamable delight or pleasure. The pleasure might be as simple as the freeing up of her "lover," with her husband's death, from a contract to which the "lover" has been socially bound. Her pleasure might be more complex, a more murderous "hunting" instinct which experiences arousal (and imputation of arousal) in the news of the death of a male adversary.

Whatever the case with the concern over warmth and cold, Natalie won't allow the narrator to touch her. This seems to be an odd incident for

⁹¹Milton, John. *Comus*. 818-19.

her to recall here on her boat ride with a young, handsome man, unless some secret significance attaches itself to that fact. At the moment when the narrator tells of the great loss she feels when Natalie goes insane, Luther and she bump into a watermelon floating on the lake. In a great scene pumped full of symbolic sexuality, they eat the watermelon in the dark while discussing Natalie further. The eating becomes simultaneously a description of and a killing of the narrator's desire for Natalie. The watermelon symbolizes both Natalie's and Claire's consummation, and the unconsummated, forbidden relationship between the two. Interestingly, it is the male Luther who does the slashing.

"Do you think it is safe to eat?" he asked. I could hear his knife slash into the melon and the juicy splitting of the flesh.

"Yes, I'm sure it is. I'm hungry.

"Turn around."

He'd cut the fruit in half. The melon was small, probably homegrown. With his Swiss Army knife, Luther carved out crisp wedges and handed them to me on the blade. "How did she die"?

(*A Stone Watermelon* 180)

Notice the peculiar concern with safety, the salacious and violent slashing of the fruit/Natalie with the knife, the specifying of the fruit as flesh, and the sexual implications of both the narrator's declaration of hunger, and the bedroom language of the command that she "turn around." The cutting of the "crisp" flesh and Natalie come together hard in the carving and then immediately there is the interest in the mode of her death. "Crisp," moreover, usually connotes something young and delectable, something in clothing or in materials of various sorts which make them desirable.

Natalie's own death is not twisted into a complicity with the narrator's lesbian sexual inclinations. Why *did* she go insane the narrator has wondered:

"It is not usual to lose your mind when your husband dies."

"No. It was just something about Natalie. But--it's made me afraid. Afraid that a loss of someone I love will make me insane, like her. We were sisters. How much like her am I?" (180)

Both the pointing at the death of husbands and the reference to the narrator's and Natalie's dissimilarities reinforce the impression which the death of the cat as well as the finding and eating of the watermelon have more symbolically established. She *is* different than the woman she loved, that is precisely the point the narrator wishes to secretly write into her narrative of her friend's death, one which she cannot and would not for the world divulge directly. Luther must only know her distinctness indirectly, not that he will ever understand, but that way the narrator can keep from going insane. By hinting everywhere at her real, sexual and forbidden love for Natalie (and other women, in consequence), the narrator preserves her equilibrium.

"But you already have the answer. You are not like her. The Cat never went to you, did it? And you have lost someone you loved--Natalie. And here you are, still sane, yes?"

"I don't know. I suppose I am. Insane things happen around me. Like finding this watermelon in the lake. Maybe this is what becomes of cats when they're buried at sea. Perhaps this is where I should have buried Natalie." (180)

This story--and writing, living--is for Braun and her narrators, all about burying Natalie. Here the homoerotics are covered over with an almost

convincing coding of sibling love. She is sane, yes, but not as the major, territorial Mennonite Canadian world is sane.

Braun's challenge to Mennonite territory (which is a form of the major) works in this way. If it was not for the eating of the watermelon, the high sexuality of this story wouldn't be as plain and defensible as it is. But this story and others Braun writes, establish the impossibility, given Mennonite Canadian politics, of loving as you desire. Subterfuge among them is always necessary in all forms of loving and desire. Officially sanctioned pleasure is out of the question. Pleasure must be couched and expressed textually secretly if at all. Territory jails. The narrator herself feels ambiguous about the object of her desire. The tension which she feels is that between the longing to love and her desire to suppress her longing to love, between the hope for the juice of free love and her contract to Mennonite Canadian regulations, which is to say to the territory of Christian, psychoanalytical, familial codes.⁹² She projects onto Luther the sexual desire she feels for Natalie. This sexual act--territorially appropriate on the surface of the text because well hidden and secretive,⁹³ because heterosexual--lays to rest more than it arouses. It symbolizes the consummation of her love with Natalie, while pretending to be a 'proper' longing for a liaison with Luther. Luther, however, importantly for this story of misnamed love, is German. He is aggressive and not submissive (not a cat), he slashes and carves the "sex" or flesh which she then eats. He is not the intended lover but a ruse. The cat, nomadic, wandering like a

⁹²I am referring to Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of desire as production and of modern Christianity and psychoanalysis as official paranoid machines which persistently utilize that other very effective paranoid machine, the family, as a means of repressing desiring production. See *Anti-Oedipus*, 84-105.

⁹³A promising study could be made of the territorializing force behind the secretive nature of lyrical poetry. Possibly lyrical tradition has developed out of an unwillingness to resist moral, ethical, political and social codes of major territory, as much as it has for such other reasons as the possibility of the primacy of the author and book, or the protection of metaphysical presence as a way of assuring colonial domination and linguistic domination of the major English group.

waif, a lorn lover, loves Natalie. In loving Natalie it safely (and dangerously, too) dramatizes the narrator's love for Natalie, a narrator who, in many of Braun's stories we might remember, persistently loves and derives excitement from cats.

The story of longing for escape from marriage, endemic to all Braun's stories, is a story of loving soft cats, of longing for freedom to love Natalie who, mindless of the love of the narrator for her, loves her husband instead. Territory is heterosexual. Nomadism⁹⁴ in this site would automatically be homosexual, bisexual, or some other exotic and non territorial form of sexuality which might include heterosexuality de-identified. Braun's generic narrator's anguish stems from her choice to stick with proper heterosexual Mennonite codes despite the availability of forces of deterritoriality to set the desiring nomadic subject free of these restricting codes.

Braun' deterritory, then, is the subtle, careful and intricate recoding of the Mennonite Canadian story of an almost-affair with a member of the opposite sex. Braun's recoding appears harmless, infinitesimal, and territorial to the reader, much as does the recoding in which Sarah Klassen engages in her poem "Black and White," as we shall shortly see. In effect, it is a great deterritorialization *in code*: it waits for the analyst of the text, the critic, the writer about texts, to carry out the final stages of her almost full-realized sexual and so political deterritorializing act. In the process, in the showing of the non-nomadic subject to be in fact a nomadic subject, freely moving interterritorially, across territorial boundaries, freely longing for that which a territorial Mennonite subject must never long for,

⁹⁴I use "nomad" in the sense that Deleuze and Guattari define it in *A Thousand Plateaus*: "'Nomad thought' does not immure itself in the edifice of an ordered interiority; it moves freely in an element of exteriority. It does not repose on identity; it rides difference" (xii).

she at once dismembers the assuredness of the codes governing this minor territory's sexuality, and reterritorializes it as a future community which will have to be able to live with its knowledge of the nomadcity of its subjects, or one in which new sexual codes will become acceptable as the group's codes.⁹⁵ Kristeva speaks of a general trend towards such a new state of abjection, which is an acceptance of the end of the Name of the Father as Lacan has called it.

Leaving aside adherents of a feminism that is jealous of conserving its power--the last of the power-seeking ideologies--none will accuse of being a usurper the artist who, even if he does not know it, is an undoer of narcissism and of all imaginary identity as well, sexual included. (*Powers of Horror* 208)

The first point she makes is that systems, codes, laws, orders of all sorts regulating subjects create the narcissistic which is, if anything, a spectral relationship with nothing, with a self-image. The artist, who like Braun "undoes" the sexual identity clearly inherent in all vestiges of the Name of the Father, provides for her group and does not usurp, which is to say, engage in the hierarchical power struggle at the heart of Western politics. This self-same sexo-hierarchical power struggle lives, as we know, of course, at the heart of the tension between minor literature and major literature.

Kristeva makes another point concerning the end of object-identification and the beginning of another world after abjection. She has asked if the psychoanalyst could be capable of taking close pictures ("x-

⁹⁵Deleuze and Guattari make such a theoretical connection between nomadcity and the deterritorialization/reterritorialization cycle: "Deterritorialization must be thought of as a perfectly positive power that has degrees and thresholds (espistrata), is always relative, and has reterritorialization as its flipside or complement....One travels by intensity; displacements and spatial figures depend on intensive thresholds of nomadic deterritorialization (and thus on differential relations) that simultaneously define complementary, sedentary reterritorializations" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 54).

rays") of horror (abjection) without usurpation, without "making capital out of its power" (210). She replies that the psychoanalyst probably cannot, but is at least paving the way for a future state of the subject beyond object identification:

Probably not [be free of usurpation, that is]. Because of knowing it, however, with a knowledge undermined by forgetfulness and laughter, an abject knowledge, he is, she is preparing to go through the first great demystification of Power (religious, moral, political, and verbal) that mankind has ever witnessed; and it is necessarily taking place within that fulfillment of religion as sacred horror, which is Judeo-Christian monotheism. In the meantime, let others [non-artists, psychoanalysts, and so on] continue their long march toward idols and truths of all kinds, buttressed with the necessarily righteous faith for wars to come, wars that will necessarily be holy. (*Powers* 210)

The point she makes is a good one. We identify. The world of subjects identifies by the universe of words which make up the Name of the Father, which is to say, all rule and law and order. The way is being imagined, however, by artists to new forms of understanding which abject the Name of the Father. Abjection is no more and no less than an intense resistance to the great, fierce, relentless codification systems of various groups like the Mennonite Canadian one. This age of severe codification is almost over, however, Kristeva says, and I say that Braun, the artist, representing an unusual form of sexuality in her minor Mennonite works, participates in the bringing about of the artistic revolution which Kristeva theorizes. Braun's is a contribution to the sexual revolution against the Name of the Father. Braun tells us, in other words, that there are other satisfying ways

of relating sexually than the ones that are acceptable to the existing Mennonite Canadian community. After Braun--and this complicit analysis of her work--sexual formation must be and will be other than the last Mennonite Canadian territory (four hundred years old) has allowed or encoded. Mennonite Canadian sexual territory will now have built into it a degree of acceptance of the nomadic nature of Mennonite Canadian sexual subjectivity.

John Weier is the second Mennonite Canadian writer I have chosen for this chapter. His work seems, on first perusal, to be a non-abjecting text, if we are going to use Kristeva's terms for text devoted to deterritorializing the major literary codes. He *seems* to be doing anything but decoding. This is a crucial question for understanding how it is that his writing may successfully be called anti-metaphysical as becomes plain from an analysis of his method and style.

The place to begin is with the statement that he seems to be doing anything *but* decoding. The opposite of decoding does appear to be true of Weier's writing. His narrative voice comes across as naive and non-resistant to Mennonite Canadian codes. It does not seem to know the conventions of major literature and so writes always from a position of weakness with these lyrical conventions while *thinking* it is strong with them. The opposite is true. Weier is so strong in these major conventions, he understands them so well, that he uses them entirely to his advantage. His understanding of the lyrical allows him to subvert major English literature with great effectiveness. Obviously, then, his major assault on territory is an assault on the lyrical and the major rather than one limited (as Pat Friesen's is, and as Di Brandt's is) largely to an assault on *Mennonite Canadian* territory. Weier actually accepts Mennonite Canadian

codes for the most part. His anger is not directed against the very heart and soul of the Name of the Mennonite Father, and yet it indirectly is, too, because it very effectively deterritorializes the Mennonite Canadian group's traditions. By various means, Weier tells us of material Mennonite life without wasting any time rehearsing their traditional semantic object-identifications. In short, Weier gives the reader Mennonite Canadians transcendentally decoded and so he both subverts tradition, and contributes to bringing about that "demystification of Power" which Kristeva imagines as the beginning of the next stage in the history of the western world's imagination. Weier decodes Mennonite Canadian territory, and then recodes it, making it not at all unrecognizable, not the product of an especially violent annihilation of codes, only a gentle, humorous and kindly one which loves its people.

Weier's novel, *Steppe*, exemplifies his method very well for my purposes. Its aim is historical: Weier wishes to reconstruct--that is, to construct--the Mennonite Russian past of the Mennonite Canadian group to which he belongs with ambivalent commitment.

A shoestring of stories about Russia, Ukraine. Where do they come from? Whose stories are they? Stories about peasants and sailors and poets. What do they mean? How do they all fit together? Years. Kilometers. Dimensions. So far away. Beginnings? Where does it all start? Where are the books, the storytellers? I need to find out more about Russia. (1.5)⁹⁶

In classic postmodern style, with its subversion of orderly progression, Weier's text supplies a whole series of loosely connected fragments without

⁹⁶Weier has opted to use a section/page notation to indicate place in the text instead of regular pagination. The page with the fifth entry in chapter two on it is marked 2.5, for instance.

pattern. Only later do the fragments take on a quasi-structure which has in it some hermeneutic thrust. He begins by giving us such diverse headings (and each page has a new heading above the entry for that page) as "Journal: September 3, 1992," "Father Remembers," "The Legend of the Foolish Peasant," "Mennonites, and Other Freethinkers," "Father: Longing," "The Apple Tree," "Mother: Bad Things," and "Katherine the Great." All these seem to be visibly memories of the past by those in the world today. That is how they are set up. Eventually, he adds some important characters who also keep diaries and write stories and who are clearly people from a previous age, contemporaries of eighteenth and nineteenth century Russian Mennonites. The narrative method is to eventually discover more clearly a picture of the past based on a confusion of initial movement in the present. The author makes his method visible. He does not distance himself from his work. There are no pretensions to mastery or control here. The story teller is obviously in control of his text, but the message he presents is that he is not interested in hiding his control behind a self-effacing lyricism which makes the perceived object out to be the only thing of interest to the reader and author both. This author cares enough about his subject to let everyone know how foolish and vulnerable he himself has felt a lot of the time while attempting to write the text before him now.

This same unpretentiousness characterizes Weier's choice of details to present as well as his method of presentation throughout *Steppe*, and in other books such as *Ride the Blue Roan*, and *After the Revolution*. In *Steppe*, now, he tells us with disarming simplicity and strong effect, what he thought people back then in Russia and later during and after their emigration from Russia must have felt, thought and done. He remembers

his father telling him about his grandfather. The details are sparse, it barely does, in a way, to let us know about the relationship between these two men. And we get very little else later to flesh the relationship out. We have to be content with what we get in this little and not particularly self-indulgent book.

(These are the things his father taught him. All these sound things...)

Father pulls a blade of grass from the ground, stretches it between his thumbs and shows me how to blow through to make a whistle. It's a sharp sound, almost like a goat, always turns down at the end. Who knows where he learned this, perhaps from his older brother.
(1.9)

From this sparse detail of whistle-making much else falls into place for Weier. First, however, it must be noted that the most significant quality of this metaphor for family relations is its naiveté. Everyone knows that old black and white movies show fathers teaching their children grass whistle making, most farm kids had their fathers or someone close to them love them by teaching them grass whistling, and so on. The young one can't make a whistle. The old one has to show him many times before the youth somehow, mysteriously, begins to master it. The young one works and watches, works and watches, until after the twentieth time he gets a little squeak out of his blade of grass and the older one pats him on the back. The metaphor lacks something, doesn't it? It is too common. No writer worth his salt would chose to use it. Weier does. And his use of it is sophisticated.

Whistles. Father cuts a little piece of willow branch, maybe eight inches, not too thick. He makes a few cuts in the bark and dips it into a pail of water. Twists. The bark slides off easily. A few notches, the bark goes back on. Here, father says, he puts the willow to his mouth and he gives a loud whistle. This one he learned from old Ivan the Russian, Ivan who lived and worked with the horses in the barn when father was little. (1.9)

Weier's use of the whistle-making story is sophisticated for two reasons at least: one, that it brings up the other elements of this history for the author as if it were the sheer simplicity of the memory of natural whistles which allowed him to get in touch with what he knows was a simpler age, a material age, an age when people had simple tensions and conflicts, simple difficulties with love. Yet the very simplicity of these tensions, as Mennonites always wish to assert concerning their Russian territory, at the same time presents itself as terribly violent and destructive. The simplicity here then works to establish dramatic effect by contrast and by the juxtaposition of the romantic with the violent quotidian.

Weier's treatment of the quotidian is sophisticated, too, in that it allows us to return to the material territory easily, neatly, leaving behind a late twentieth century sense of irony which, present, would cancel the effect Weier has in mind of showing us people who believed they were simple, agrarian folk. We readers feel almost superior to the author himself. *We* would chose more complex lyrical strategies, we say. By treating the reader so casually and nostalgically, however, Weier has him enter disarmed and receptive, and also romantically hopeful, into Mennonite territory. Despite our initial narrative expectations, *Steppe's* Mennonite territory is in reality in the throes of a terrible

detritorialization as a result, among other things, of the Makhno Peasant Revolution of the early twentieth century. We discover that Makhno and his peasant army of forty thousand strong attacked Mennonite villages and burned them, tried and summarily executed Mennonite men and women who resisted the peasant leaders' demands, and claimed all property which before belonged to Mennonites. This involved, violent story of peasant retaliation and Mennonite anti-pacifist resistance, which we have not expected considering the naiveté of the metaphors, eventually emerges from *Steppe's* fragments, but only gradually.

Weier is a more material writer than any of the others I have analyzed. He speaks for the people and its community, he cannot help but be political the moment he picks up his pen, and his language is packed with detritorializing English language strategies, detritorializing because English does not suit his Low German subject. Listen to the anorexic English in this passage:⁹⁷

You, poor man, you can't do anything else but you can teach. Here, this is a book. Can you spell it? B-o-o-k. That's good. See that shack? That's the school, the children are waiting inside.

Father was a good teacher. I'd like to teach. I like the children. I like books. I like paper, the sound of pen on paper. I'd teach them to read, to read and read and read.

⁹⁷Deleuze considers an anorexia of language as symptomatic of writing which effectively detritorializes major language. "Fasting is also a constant theme in Kafka's writing. His writings are a long history of fasts. The Hunger Artist, surveyed by butchers, ends his career next to beasts who eat their meat raw, placing the visitors before an irritating alternative" (*Kafka* 20). Anorexic and sober use of language have much in common for minor literature: both refer to the ordinary use of language to strip it of its familiarity. They make language vibrant and intense: "Go always farther in the direction of detritorialization, to the point of sobriety. Since the language is arid, make it vibrate with a new intensity" (19).

I am only a woman. We are as poor as the Little Russians. Listen, do you hear the wind? (2.2)

This woman might as well be Weier himself whom Weier evokes here. The love of children, the preoccupation with father, the longing for and hope in books, and pen, and paper, the narrative of "the Little Russians" which *Steppe* is engaged with are all precisely Weier's interests as well as any character's in his stories. The language, too, barely knows English. The fact is that Weier is perfectly capable in lyrical English, in major English. He chooses, however, to write in the clear and unpretentious style of the literary group he is representing. His reasons for reducing his language, his lyrical input, are comprised of a combination of desire to write out of his setting and not out of an imagined literary one established by the British over the last thousand years, as well as out of a desire to love what is here. For into all lyrical literature is written a hatred of the material as Plato and Judeo-Christianity have taught. Weier loves food, drink, sex, salaciousness, all affects of the body. He has simple tastes, and certainly enough exuberance to embrace the too-wide world of spiritual disappointment as well as the great, huge world of material pleasure both. He chooses to write within the old culture and its minor codings, using the material tools of that culture, only mildly resisting that culture, and then subverting the lyrical by a process of simple statement and supra-clear--that is to say, anorexic, non-symbolic--English prose.

Sarah Klassen, too, writes simply, with a clearly territorial, minor use of English, an English accustomed also to speaking Low German. She has published three books of poetry and all of them give a similar impression of what it means to be a Mennonite Canadian subject. They all tell us that there is a Mennonite territory, this Mennonite territory must be

poetized and written with love and belief in order to preserve it, and she, Ms. Klassen, will see to it that the reading world which encounters her works will not forget the real, true Mennonite experience.

This is fine and good, as it should be. Believers in territory are the bread and butter of good local writing. They do not think that there is anything wrong except the too rapid deterritorialization of the world they love. To prevent that, they find new ways to present the territory as they see it (as if territoriality is not genealogical) as a form of asserting its permanence and power.

Unlike John Weier's poetry, Sarah Klassen's poetry is about impossibilities. It is about lost territory and hopeless deterritorialization. In short, Klassen's work, lyrically patterned and colorful as it is, tells the reader about loss of hope. She is, in other words a once young and hopeful one who is now, sadly, exhausted and wiser. She is one who sees clearly what youth only suspects but has not, unlike herself, graciously grown old enough nor disillusioned enough yet (though with grace and goodness) to understand. Youth does not yet understand the Neoplatonic truth of transcendence and beauty here⁹⁸ on this earth, that youth's Beauty is a sign of goodness elsewhere in the universe, a goodness which in Eliotian fashion we humans have forgotten how to see. We have become too blinded by depravity and selfishness and sexuo-sensual materiality to be able to see. In brief, Klassen's narrator is modernist, lyrical, and believing thus in an alienated material universe, a depraved materialist universe, which has forgotten how to see God and turns always nostalgically toward the past (to "Leonardo" 96) to find examples of a naive hope and faith which twentieth-

⁹⁸The Neoplatonic understanding of the connection between transcendence and Beauty is the reason for the lyrical in "man's" history.

century consciousness, alas, no longer believes. It knows too much to believe. Klassen creates narrators who want to believe, who give every sign of being willing to believe if only the proof for belief existed somewhere, but who in the meantime, in lieu of belief, write poems warning the less wise younger ones (students related to by a teacher) that one day they too will see how much this teacher has really experienced, and will then see past her quiet, plain demeanor and gasp with recognition at her wisdom and gutsiness about alienation. That is to say, Klassen believes in alienation and so, fiercely, in the transcendent. No hope for joy here. No love of sex, mouth, legs, food and travel for their own sake, regardless of what she might long for which she doesn't have and which isn't to be had (according to the lyrical) even in the smallest portions here on earth. Klassen's is the classic, modernist world of alienation. Only "heaven" for modernist (that is major literature) narrators--as Freud and Lacan and Kristeva and other pre-posthumanist⁹⁹ thinkers tell us with theories of desire as lack--can ever really suffice. The writing of poetry itself, and so the whole poetic enterprise, has for the lyrical tradition, been the apex of the expression in the human world of the futile, though lovely, attempt to obtain what is unobtainable. Lyrical poetry such as Klassen's is thus, in its basic

⁹⁹William Spanos, in *Heidegger and Criticism*, calls the age we live in the "posthumanist" age, as opposed to a postmodernist or poststructuralist age. Postmodernist and poststructuralist still imply humanist values. By "posthumanist" Spanos means that the old adherence, traceable all through Christianity as the Greek and Roman churches transmitted it with (papal) hierarchy at its centre, to desire as lack no longer has viability. Desire as lack and its related theories no longer move our age or imaginations. They no longer suffice as operant messages and explanations for behavior or purpose. Social materialism, on the other hand, does suffice today. It situates desire at the site of the body's and all objects' surfaces. Each surface is for social material thought in reality a machine which desires other and connects with other machines, instead of a defunct or broken machine, awaiting "salvation" and "new spiritual sight" in order to be reclaimed and mended. Things are not broken, posthumanism tells us. Things are desiring machines which interact with other desiring machines. "In a word, every machine functions as a break in the flow in relations to the machine to which it is connected, but at the same time is also a flow itself, or the production of a flow, in relation to the machine connected to it. This is the law of the production of production. That is why, at the limit point of all the transverse or transfinite connections, the partial object and the continuous flux, the interruption and the connection, fuse into one: everywhere there are break-flows out of which desire wells up, thereby constituting its productivity and continually grafting the process of production onto the product" (*Anti-Oedipus* 36-7).

functioning, desire as lack: it is both the medium and the message of desire as lack.

"Black and White," a lovely little poem about a new pupil who writes poems which the teacher/poet reads with delight, tells in little of this large "alienation-belief" disposition. First, it can be said that the narrator herself (as we have already seen in Braun's work) obviously hungers for, desires, the young, pretty, eccentric, lively girl who is the subject of the poem:¹⁰⁰

My newest pupil arrives in white
porcelain skin. Most of it's covered with black
leather and cloth, a sort of buffer
against the possible onslaught of color

Her skin shines like silver dollars
through deliberate hole in black stockings.
One of them's gotten out of hand.
She's trying to hold it together
with metal safety pins. (*Violence and Mercy* 9)

The narrator desires what (in a homophobic, youth-revering, politically correct, only partially-urbanized age) a middle-aged woman feels she cannot have. She *can* have these things, of course, if she wants them, but the position of *wanting without being able to have them* is a conventional position lyrical territory--major literature--always takes, having been so successfully trained in, and itself the trainer for, the world view of desire as lack.

¹⁰⁰Curiously, lyrical poetry always shows the pretty girl to advantage, always loves the beautiful girl/woman. And this is as true of female as of male writers. Why is this? Possibly the modernist age is as deficient in sexual balance (unable to imagine various sexual models and means) as it is in an understanding of the delights of the body generally. Everyone in lyricism is hogtied by and wedged tightly into an inner seeing which can only imagine either God or pretty females.

Nothing is *really* lacking for any "machine" in the world. Nothing is out of reach or impossible for desiring-production, only for the paranoid machine, as Deleuze would put it.¹⁰¹

An apparent conflict arises between desiring-machines and the body without organs. Every coupling of machines, every production of a machine, every sound of a machine running, becomes unbearable to the body without organs....We are of the opinion that what is ordinarily referred to as "primary repression" means precisely that: it is not a "countercathexis," but rather this *repulsion* of desiring-machines by the body without organs. This is the real meaning of the paranoiac machine: the desiring-machines attempt to break into the body without organs, and the body without organs repels them, since it experiences them as an over-all persecution apparatus. (*Anti-Oedipus* 9)

Deleuze needs to be explained here. The body without organs is another world outside nature and objects. It too, like living bodies, is a body, only one without organs. It is not a machine, or a series of connected machines with productive flows. It is, instead, that body which hates and repulses all machinery, all flows of desire. This is Deleuze's social material position. Now, instead of the *traditional, metaphysical* explanation of the repulsion noticeable everywhere in the universe as a lack built into existence, a "primary repression," that is, Deleuze and social materialism find evidence for a non-repressive relationship between objects, between the world of machines (life) and non-machines (traditionally, "the Other"). What happens when desiring machines attempt to interact with that mass that is

¹⁰¹"There is only desire and the social, and nothing else. Even the most repressive and the most deadly forms of social reproduction are produced by desire without the organization that is the consequence of such production under various conditions..." (*Anti-Oedipus* 29).

the body without organs is that other machines are generated which resist these attempted entries. A production occurs, not a repression. Instead of lack at the heart of everything, there is a "primary productivity," an always-constructing: all flows take place on a giant construction site where new machines are continuously being whacked into being. The paranoid machines, however, resist all desiring-machines.

But in and of itself the paranoiac machine is merely an avatar of the desiring-machines: it is a result of the relationship between the desiring-machines and the body without organs, and occurs when the latter can no longer tolerate these machines. (9)

Paranoid machines, in other words, break up the flows of desire which desiring machines generate. Without desiring-production, paranoid machines don't exist. There is, that is to say, no "primary repression" according to the material explanation of desire.

Desire as production is out of reach for the conventional, lyrical narrator in Klassen's work, though. She is more comfortable thinking of the production of paranoid machines as signs of "primary repression." She whispers to us in this poem about whispers, about secrets barely told, hardly audible, that she can hardly stand something about this meeting with the "black" girl. What exactly can she hardly stand? Is it the violence behind the black on white motif of this girl's clothing? Is it the violence against women and the repression of women generally of which this girl's dress and attitude strongly speak? Is it the great sensitivity, poetic and "elegant," of this Madonna-like beauty who writes violence without understanding it yet? Such a violence, an acquaintance with loss, the poet herself ironically understands and knows that this girl will too understand some day. What the material tells us is that Klassen's narrator can hardly

stand is her own desire. But, for territorial reasons, she cannot admit that. She calls her desire something else--she calls it lack.

What the narrator whispers secretively, at a minor, material level is that she is hungry for this girl. She wishes sexual, material, social, and psychic relations with her, but too strongly feels a filiation with the paranoid machines to say so.

She prefers to sit near the back
away from the window. She tells me this
with lowered eyes, in thin whispers
that almost get lost in the chalk dust.

In order to tear my eyes
from her black lips, black hair
her matte black fingernails
I study her poems. I'm not surprised
she's mingled images of bleeding children
with rats and black rain. (9)

"Black lips" and "black hair" and "matte black fingernails" draw our attention away from material desire to poetic convention. Hers is a fashion problem and a problem with violence, the convention tells the reader to think. This is what all these black things give the reader the chance to think and so he does. That would be to think the "proper." That is the relation between lyrical poet and territorial reader. The territorial reader will accept no strongly deterritorializing texts. Instead, though, he will accept a minor disturbance of the sexual territory, of the desiring territory willfully always seen by all major subjects as permanent, holding onto values and proper (non-historic) behavior.

The narrator, desiring the pretty, hurt, in-need-of-comfort-and-love young thing, desires her in a deterritorializing way which at the same time seems to leave Mennonite and lyrical territory undisturbed. She reterritorializes at the same time she deterritorializes and so keeps her Mennonite Canadian readers (the main consumers of her texts) content that the problem is this weirdly-dressed, sad, little "Black" Riding Hood who will some day realize that she is wrong, or willful, or hyperbolic, in her "black" understanding and needs to find true love (marriage, God, a really good career which will earn her good wages, and so on). The narrator also maintains the territory-reassuring facade of *"bad" young girl who will be helped* by presenting a wise poet-teacher who stands for similar misdirection in her youth and a violent past made right, or at least transcended. All these things Mennonite Canadian territory likes to hear. It does not like to hear the real "message" behind this poem, the social material desire of the female poet for the lovely female student given a politically useful narrative of requiring comfort because of too much violence done to her, and too little understanding of what to do with such violence, where to learn mercy as an antidote to fear of violence.

So, the lyrical narrative of the violence done to the girl covers up neatly for the true new and more interesting minor narrative of the longing of one woman (who happens to be older and trained in the techniques of disguising desiring-production) for another girl: actually, more accurately probably, the minor narrative is the narrative of the possibility of such love (which Mennonite Canadian territory and lyrical tradition call lust, or even pedophilia, and have strict codes against).

But I'm shocked at the sheer elegance
of her calligraphy.

Fear inked in delicate black
whispers across the white page.

This poem is all about black and white. Good and bad; proper and improper; love and lust. What fear haunts the girl? The older woman poet? The shocking thing is the girl's "sheer" elegance; the girl's sheer "elegance;" the "delicate black;" the "delicate black" which "whispers" across the white page."¹⁰² All these tactile-auditory images are taken from lingerie discourse. Delicate nylon things, underclothes, panties and slips and such other fineries worn next to the skin, whisper and float and cause fear in those who long for an experience with them. This sense of the erotic here in this poem generally between teacher and student, older woman and younger girl, do a lovely violence to the reader's expectations of information reaffirming the time-honored master narrative of the helpful matron and the hurt little girl; of grandmother and Little Red Riding Hood.

"Speeding" re-establishes a familiar, lyrical, spiritual territory. The poem describes a poet/writer whose car spins out of control on a frosty road and brings her close to death and so close to a classic moment of epiphany.

Words tumble
with the fearful speed of truth
to the empty page. Pen
clenched fingers, brain
racing to get it right.
Your nerves revved
as if a revelation burns inside you

¹⁰²The girl's crazy attire in the poem, black and white, speaks of "lack" as the root word of black (b/lack).

or a still voice.

(*Violence* 14)

The holy "still, small voice" of the biblical Pentateuch (I Kings 19:12) make this poem of dying transcendent, other worldly, suggestive of realms we earthlings know nothing about but are sometimes inspired by despite our usual dullness and unreceptivity. She continues with a now more earthly, more twentieth-century image of God, less classical and outmoded than "still voice":

I watch the sun
reach for you with coy fingers. Instantly
the innocent strands of your hair
catch fire. (14)

The sun, as it does in much lyrical poetry, and as I have shown for instance it does in Pat Friesen's *The Shunning*, here takes us "alienated" modern ones--afflicted by a sensual blockage seriously limiting our receptivity of and to a spirit there to be had in greater fullness in another, more glorious age--into the realm of the other worldly, into bright, intensely lit non-material space. "Coy" and "innocent" bring in sex; "catch fire" removes all of the verse with its "intimations" of material love from the site of the material into the glorious realm where things will have great meaning and possibility for satisfaction.

As in all of her poetry, Klassen is fully territorial. She *hints* at pleasure on earth, but always takes that pleasure, for propriety's sake, into a non-territory, into the sky where the sun debacterializes it, where "a still voice" decontaminates it of its earthly dross. Social materialist Klassen is not; territorial speaker for Canadian Mennonite values she is. Take, for

instance, "Wingspan," which appears toward the end of *Violence and Mercy*.

Remember the bird mother
coming to you in your cradle
was a vulture, not a swan.

When she fanned out her tail feathers
beat them against your small mouth
remember how you cringed

and cried out? Those grave wings
covered you like a judgment
carved out a nesting place

in your mind. How you examined
and reexamined them,
Leonardo. All your life

this obsession with birdwings.
The way they catch the updrift
of air, the mystery

of their conjunction with the body.
Each small muscle tendon bone
etched in your brain

and in your notebook. Larks

you set free in the marketplace
twittering to the sky.

You never wavered
from the stubborn airborne dream
that pinioned you:

one day your flesh would grow light
grow feathered wings
and from the summit of Swan Mountain

you'd fling yourself
and like an air-drawn eagle
fly.

(96-97)

Leonardo knows something we today, hundreds of years later have forgotten how to know. He had a faith in his world of wings. Wings, of course, stands symbolically for heaven, sky, the place of judgment and the source of love as the Bible and other classic texts teach. The artist, Leonardo, once sought with lifelong commitment to fly to the heaven he believed in with such admirable certainty. We, of course, the narrator tells us, can only admire the artists who once themselves believed thus fervently. We cannot believe that *we* will some day "fly," but we can remember and long for what we don't have; we can long for a faith none of us are strong enough to actually possess.

Now, central to this poem, however, is a faith as strong or stronger than the one Klassen attributes to DeVinci, the belief in the depravity of

materials and the purity and "wing-like" refinement of that world from which we are alienated in knowledge, but still tied to in longing. We don't know enough, but we know too much, she tells us here, to believe with the innocence and naive faith of Leonardo. The poet, however, stands for retrenchment, for rediscovery, for reaffirmation of a whole set of values which her minor/major literary tradition, Mennonite literature and language, supports fully in its understanding of its own territorial past and ideals.

Many examples in all three of Klassen's books of poetry support her role as standard bearer for a territory which Mennonite community thinks it believes in and honestly reveres. We know that such a community doesn't exist. All territory is deterritory; all territory is reterritory. Klassen's role within the Mennonite Canadian community is to act less like a deterritorializer than like a bringer back into focus of the traditional values of Mennonite spirituality, and in this, since she is a poet, the traditional values of the lyrical poetic tradition which is equally as moralistic and anti-material in its values, though not in its habits, as Mennonite Canadian territory is. Klassen teaches that each one of us would, if we only had the strength--a strength we must long for in the same way we are taught to long for the bird mother, for everything lyrical and beautiful without being able to have it--"fling yourself / and like an air-drawn eagle / fly" into the sky, closer to the sun, closer to what is good and more refined and less olfactory and tactile. Yes, once again, the world of touch is trodden on in the attempt to fling ourselves ever into the sky, lead-footed as we are, away from our outrageous desires, away from our unpredictable love of pretty pupils who arrive "in white / porcelain skin. Most of [it] covered in black / leather and cloth" (9), away from what "whispers," that which

"inked in delicate black / whispers" to us across great territories, that
which whispers to us to come and touch, to come and taste.

Chapter Eight

Conclusions

I have analyzed the work of various Mennonite Canadian fiction and poetry writers who have been important contributors to the body of Canadian literature. The critical perspective which directed my study has been mainly Deleuze and Guattari's idea of the revolutionary value of minor writing--how minor writing deterritorializes major writing by calling for a return of a territory it assumes exists somewhere in some form or other, whether as in Sarah Klassen's case, a Mennonite territory of ethical and political attitudes largely identical to those of high modernism, or in Di Brandt's case, a non-Mennonite territory in which women find out from reading her work that they were once powerful beings whom men had to deal with seriously and now, though made powerless by patriarchal violence, are beginning to show evidence of a sort of female progress back to a state they once enjoyed before and outside of science and rationalism. All of these writers have, in dealing with the problem of Mennonite Canadian territory, written against major literary conventions--by effect or affect--which is to say the age-old English lyrical tradition common to most of even Canadian writing. Some have written in greater complicity with major conventions; others have almost done away with the marks of, and so most effectively subverted, major literature.

The individual and collective accomplishments of the writers have suggested themselves in the course of my analysis. Each of the Mennonite Canadian writers has distinctively lent a voice to the deterritorialization of major English territory within the Canadian context, as well as to the deterritorialization and reterritorialization of his or her own group in new

literary space, reinforcing what he or she deemed valuable of an old territory, a territory which is by necessity textual. All the writers have had some things in common. Each has contributed to a collective or reterritorializing voice which has shaped and will continue to shape a future Mennonite Canadian group with identifiable social material formations. First a summary of the distinctiveness of each of the writers on the topic of Mennonite territory; then one of what they hold in common.

Rudy Wiebe's novel represents the beginning of Mennonite fiction writing interesting to a broad English-speaking audience. Considering the problem of how his work fits the definition of minor literature, we need to ask two questions of it: 1) how is it political and how does it carry community values; 2) in what specific ways does it subvert major literature? It acts politically by announcing narratively that three institutions determine Mennonite Canadian community, the church, the state and the artist. The first two operate hummily to direct the community and lead it as long as it is not in crisis, but eventually a crisis develops around the very lies which church and state tell in order to convince the social group that it is a permanent and unchanging entity. When this evasion becomes impossible any longer to be held up as truth or reality, and individuals in the community begin to rebel against the established leadership and its discourse of permanence, then the third institution begins to affect the group's body by writing a story of its political and ethical formations, and this story contains within it a strong indication of "honest" self-surveillance which shows the group both what is wrong with its social formations and how to change these formations in order to not become subordinate to entire disintegration but to learn from the lesson of its own blindness and reconstitute itself again as a believing

community. This believing reconstitution is a *believing* entity in that it finds new fictions to tell itself about permanence which will allow it to inhere as a group once again for the foreseeable future, inhere and remain assured of the goodness and badness of sets of things, of the importance of the effort to unify what is disparate, of the predictable dualities which make up all that is.

Wiebe's novels infiltrate and subvert the cherished beliefs of major English literature. They subvert by showing their own insides, turning themselves inside out, that is, so what is usually not seen by major literature of the social corpus, now is made visible and plain to see by minor literature. In concrete terms, Wiebe's novels show Mennonite politics and community values interacting with the less plain politics of the Canadian nation. This narrative self-exposure of politics and values challenges the exclusivist values and politics of the large, major literary group. Minor self-exposure does this by showing the major group that they too are politically determined, and that politics is constructed, not originary, not permanent or eternal. *Peace Shall Destroy Many's* struggle with the questions of conscientious objection and relations to Indian people, with the exposure of the hypocrisy and violence at the heart of these formations, forces major readers of this text to change in their self-understanding, as minor readers of it are forced to do as well.

Thus, in the case of *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, the hero Thom comes to symbolic blows with Deacon Block, local theocrat, when he fights Herb Unger, himself a renegade Mennonite who represents Mennonitism turned nihilistic of the group (utter individualism, that is), and in doing so, and doing so for all intents and purposes as an artist, he first thinks through Block's failing community logic, and then, by resistance to this hypocritical

discourse, by telling its story in the novel, begins the reconstruction of Mennonites according to codes which will have better understood the Mennonite Canadian community's relationship with their Indian neighbors as well as their inadequate view of peace and non-resistance, the cornerstone of Mennonite doctrine.

Armin Wiebe's contribution to the body of Mennonite Canadian minor writing seems more difficult to pinpoint than Rudy Wiebe's or Patrick Friesen's. Among his three novels, his first, *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens*, stands as the most accessible and important for the questions concerned with Mennonite Canadian territoriality. In a fascinating inversion which reveals the hypocrisy at the heart of Mennonite Canadian rural life, Armin Wiebe presents first a convincing account of Mennonite social material existence, and then a version of their existence which *affirms* the facile spirituality by which many Mennonite Canadians live and think. Wiebe's rambunctious materialism delights the reader and endears him to the Mennonite lifestyle. The spiritual solution to a specific conflict the book presents, disaffects the reader and makes him see how spirituality is a constructed corpus of qualities which the individual Mennonite subject must believe if he is to survive politically and communally. The upshot of this dramatic reversal of perspectives effectively demonstrates the hypocrisy by which Mennonite Canadians live. This hypocrisy consists of an inculcated acceptance of lies as truth, of a serious simplification of the complexity of desiring-production into desire for a heaven which substitutes for desire and pleasure on earth. Lying to themselves about the bounty of heaven and the joy of the postponement of material pleasures, Mennonites live according to an official, institutional agenda which requires such lies of them. They are among the most material of all peoples

or groups imaginable in their eating, drinking, pleasuring habits, but they are also among the most self-deceiving about their indulgences.

Pat Friesen's poetry tells thematically of the difficulty of becoming a poet in a Mennonite Canadian social milieu, and it tells stylistically and thematically of the struggle, relevant to the becoming-poet conflict, of writing a poetry which thinks the Canadian prairie when all indicators point him toward writing lyrical and non-thinking poetry. The first difficulty finds expression throughout Friesen's works in this way: it brings the religious pressure to accept the language of spiritual asceticism and biblical Christianity as Mennonite Canadians have transmitted it into constant contact with another more material and "embodied" side of Mennonite social existence. In this space of intimate contact, Peter teaches his brother Johann, in the course of the narration of the events in *The Shunning*, that the Mennonite world of food and drink and lovemaking are more reliable and valuable, that is they are more honest, than its world of high conformity represented by the church brotherhood's requirements of obedience to accept various doctrines it has inherited from a territorial past which no longer has any, and possibly never had any, life-sustaining power in the New World. As for the second function of the poet, Friesen constantly juxtaposes a material aesthetic with a lyrical one, being efficient in the latter, and gradually becoming more efficient at the former. The most effective quality of Friesen's body of poetry might well be said to be precisely this aspect of his growth as a poet. Writing with great competence as a lyric poet, he yet always presents much of his work without lyrical apparati and techniques, thrusts to the foreground the very problem of the hegemonizing dominion of lyrical poetics. He foregrounds, in other words, the *problem* of lyricism. He foregrounds the lyric's easy and facile

domination over local poetics, and by writing a "waiting" aesthetics alongside the "already always complete" lyrical poetics, he offers a forceful critique of both social and aesthetic indifference to and fear within the new land, the Canadian prairies. The poet serves the purposes of being a spokesman for a new poetics in a new land: he speaks against coming to the prairies armed with all the spiritual bricabrac of an outmoded Eurocentric and classical spirituality and he speaks for a new spiritual social materialism which waits for the land to which the newcomers have come to speak to those it has welcomed and to teach it in this waiting to abandon old formations and learn to enjoy the gifts of new ones there in abundance for those not too afraid or too proud to accept its gifts. The poet's duty, as Friesen's work teaches, is to be the voice of the conflict between European arrogance and tyranny (that is, fear), and the new land's patient, material goodness.

Of Di Brandt's many distinctive contributions, the one I have chosen to notice and discuss is her problematizing the question of gender among Mennonite Canadians. She has chosen to step outside of official circles such as the church, the traditional Mennonite family, and other constants governing various social formations and their moral foundations and critique Mennonites and others from, essentially, the site of general deterritorialization and non-community, the city. From here she argues that women are victims of male violence and need to find the strength to rediscover their past power now unfortunately in long and terrible decline. In this present state, women fear spiders who once were not afraid of anything, empowered as they were by "mother blood" (*Jerusalem, Beloved* 60). Despite her present debilitating fears, woman continues to love, both the earth and the children she bears. It is through love, and especially

through the writing of love by poets such as herself and Carol Rose that women can begin the eradication of centuries-old male fear, hatred and danger to the earth. The main thrust of Brandt's writing this new power is for the daughters of the world's birthing mothers. Hearing her story, seeing her courage in her personal struggle, they will too become strong enough to join the resistance movement against disempowerment.

Part of the great struggle for Brandt and for mothers is the loss of identity. The mother in Western literature is an absence. She has not been inscribed and so has yet to be constructed as a subject. Her individuation process requires of her that she becomes nothing, that she gives up power so that the daughters who follow her can take over without having to remain under her shadow. This seems very Frygian to me, the daughters overthrowing their mothers in order to take power themselves. This represents a reversal of Freudian Oedipal family politics, matriarchal as it is, but disquietingly still in Freudian and archetypal terms. For Brandt, birthing children is the great female experience. Birthing a child effectively separates her from males. They never can know the "self-birth" which giving birth to a child and giving it suck (*Jerusalem, Beloved*) is like and in this it takes a woman beyond all male experience. Effectively, giving birth to a child represents giving birth to herself--individuation from the male.

Right at this juncture Brandt's work and thought connects with the Mennonite Canadian community. Female victimization by male victimizers is perpetrated by the language of Mennonite Canadians:

i stole the language
of their kings and queens
but i didn't bow down to it

i didn't become a citizen

(*Mother, Not Mother* 30)

The greatest problem the female poet faces in her Mennonite group is the force to silence them. Females, separated from their co-dependency on their violent male Mennonite perpetrators, feel a longing for acceptance and company. The key as Brandt sees it is for the female poet to continue to resist, despite her longing and loneliness, and eventually her resistance to forces of silence will result in new and delightful singing, and the end of Mennonite Canadian's "terrible God" whose very language perpetrates violence against the innocent. That old despair and the struggle to overcome it. That old writing from despair. More than ever before, this is the mindset of the young Canadian writer. David Bergen, in *Sitting Opposite My Brother*, along with Sandra Birdsell, Pat Friesen and others, write as if despair were a new phenomena, as if the exhausted voice was an original and exciting one. It is not. It is the voice of least resistance and shows a lack of imagination and an immersion in suffering which the mind has not stepped out from or back far enough from to not be in its grip.

The novels and short stories of Sandra Birdsell accomplish something extraordinary in minor writing. They present a subjectivity constructed out of an intimate acquaintance with two clashing territories, the Indian Canadian and the Mennonite Canadian. The group dynamics of these two have a long mutual history and kinship. Ever since "settling" this land, Mennonites have acted as if the Indian owner of the land was not the owner of the land. In other words, the Mennonite Canadian has had to live hypocritically in relation to the Indian from whom he effectively took land that wasn't his. As he grew more aware of his theft as a theft, he had to become more wily in his denial of the theft as a theft in order to both live

with himself, and to keep up appearances of believing in a territory which had its taproot still nestled in the not very nourishing spirito-intellectual reservoirs of Germany, Russia and all of the West's classical traditions. Birdsell does not discuss this tension in its particularities, but she assumes it. Where Rudy Wiebe tells all, opens up to the reader the precise politics of hypocritical pioneering Mennonite Canada, Birdsell draws us portraits of individual Mennonites and Indians, co-existing in Agassiz, Manitoba, who are fully deterritorialized from their spirituo-political territories and who await a savior who will never come because they are too blind to see him, or her, as *The Missing Child* sees it. Blindness is a form of deterritorialization. Mennonites and Indians in Canada are blind to the power around them to hope and love. What happens to the individual subjects, then, is that in their blindness, they see only themselves, in classical High Modernist tradition, and so they cannot belong to any group except the major group of all the alienated. The alienated are those literary figures who are drawn by authors of the school of Eliot and Pound as having no ability to see the meaning and goodness around them. They are necessarily in despair. These fictional figures always approach a reterritorializing situation and then fail to make good of it. They opt, psychically and spiritually, at each moment of choice, for a despairing material world. They fail at each step of the way. Their failure is the failure to see the possibilities of pleasure and joy in the material. This is the dilemma of Maurice and Mika in *Night Travellers*, of Albert, Rosella and Minnie in *The Missing Child*, and of Amy, Jill, Pyotr and others in *The Chrome Suite*. In each case the deterritorialized subjects, Mennonite and Indian often, are left entirely alone, belonging to no group, convinced of nothing but the hopelessness of their efforts to belong. The value of

Birdsell's fiction to the question of Mennonite Canadian and Indian Canadian territory is that in her extreme deterritorialization of these groups from the possibility of finding meaning in old notions of territory, she paves the way for a future reterritorialization based on non territorial, and so material, possibilities.

John Weier, Sarah Klassen and Lois Braun also significantly contribute to the overall picture of Mennonite Canadian minor literature. Weier's work resists the territorial Mennonite metaphysical text which makes of each moment of speech and writing an opportunity to insert a superior divine being into material being. Weier writes about the subject and his material world as if it were fully constructed. His reterritorializing contribution comes from his willingness to write the story of the Mennonite Diaspora without affirming, as Armin Wiebe does in his fiction, the particular anti materialism Mennonites have traditionally assiduously fostered, nay evangelized.

Sarah Klassen is a political voice for Mennonite Canadian territory. She does not deterritorialize or unsettle fixed beliefs and dispositions. Her efforts typically are to show how able a lyricist she is and to reaffirm all the values and political positions of her Mennonite community. Klassen seems to see nothing amiss, nothing unsettling, about the relation of Mennonites to the material world around them.

Lois Braun, on the other hand, sees much amiss. Her revolutionary efforts take place in the sexual field. Her female protagonists need to escape from some sort of condition they find themselves in. The reasons are never very plain--the escape never clearly pointed out to be an escape from *what*. Various indicators in the texts, however, show through close reading, a restlessness with heterosexual relations. Braun effectively deterritorializes

Mennonite heterosexual metaphysics by showing us, through the assiduous literary critic who pursues textual clues with enough care, that women are much more interesting to women than men are. This is the case, at least, in the fictional worlds Braun creates, and does not necessarily mean that Braun would have no other worlds before her. Any attack on Mennonite Canadian sexuality is an attack on Mennonite Canadian territory. The specific nature or character of a reterritorialization resulting from such a sexual attack as Braun's, if it was a successful one, is hard to imagine. What would a non-heterosexual Mennonite Canadian reterritory look like? It is impossible to imagine. What would a material Mennonite Canadian reterritory be like?

Each writer discussed in this thesis has contributed a great deal to the re-writing of what it means to be a Mennonite Canadian group subject. Each writer tackles the problem of being a voice for her community's values and politics in a unique way. Presumably, each writer to come from this dynamic and changing non-territory will have her own revolutionary turf, his own bone to pick with the inflexibility of Mennonite Canadian territoriality. The minor quality of a writer is that quality which sees the major textuality in its own ranks, and attacking there, reduces it by enlarging it. The major is made minor by the minor's attack itself. Revolution always happens from within the ranks. Mennonite Canadian territory looses its hegemonic hold more with each minor text written. All (re)territories do that steadily, wax and wane, grow and decline, sometimes with imperceptible slowness, sometimes too quickly for the recording eye to see.

Much as Di Brandt's expectations won't be met by the feminist revolution, or by a revolution she instigates with her poems, Birdsell's

alienated Mennonite Indian Canadian subject is that only in her text, and Pat Friesen's lyrical/material poetic subject is only one small flutter of change in the whole picture of Mennonite life. Yet, this small flutter is such a potent wind that all of Mennonite Canadian territory shifts and adjusts its vision in order to arrive at a set of temporary values which it can claim are permanent. The reminders of various individual writers that the territory is a reterritory stampedes Mennonite subjectivity toward some sort of abyss, some sort of terrible ocean in which they seem about to drown: the books of Birdsell, Friesen, the two Wiebes, and Brandt each bring the Mennonite group subject face to face with the ocean of his, of her, lies. Each time, however, thanks to the very Being of revolution--and being particular now, thanks to the complicity of the revolutionary, minor texts--the major walks dry shod over to a new land through what should have drowned it. It walks calmly over to a new land, carrying with it all the names of the old land, plus the titles of the new and dangerous, minor texts. To recapitulate and generalize, change (de and re territory) is the prerequisite of Being. Permanence (territory) is the built-in hypocrisy of Being. The minor hates all major languages, as Deleuze has said in *Kafka*: the minor loves speed, loves change, knows change intimately; the minor loves change but hates permanence. Being is the major undergoing change. The writing of Mennonites is a milling at the border of English, a surplus which changes itself and what it touches by its very being there.

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