The Theme of Isolation in the Novels of Rudy Wiebe

H.E. Schreiber

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada

June, 1981

An Abstract of

The Theme of Isolation in the

Novels of Rudy Wiebe

It is the purpose of this thesis to investigate and discuss the theme of isolation as it appears throughout the literary works of the author Rudy Wiebe. I intend to demonstrate how the author expresses his own concerns about and opposition to isolation of the individual and the isolation of communities from the totality of mankind. Furthermore I will attempt to show how the artist's vision constantly moves, both in religious and secular terms, from a limited inward and, as such, isolated view (be it parochialism or narrow-minded nationalism) to an all-embracing positive view of humanity and the common problems of man in a hostile universe.

The analysis will follow Rudy Wiebe's novels in chronological order and will emphasize the literary techniques of the author as they progress from excessive usage of long dialogue and weaknesses in characterization to a more rounded approach which eventually culminates in a revelation of the author's vision by way of the portrayed lives of people of various religious and racial backgrounds.

Since it is a fact that Rudy Wiebe is a religious writer and a Christian idealist (more a theologian than a humanist), this aspect will not be particularly emphasized in this paper. That the form and structure of Wiebe's novels are archetypal is also considered to be self-evident for the basis of all religions is to be found in mythology and folklore, a fact well known in psychology.[1] Instead I will compare the actions of characters in the author's novels, plays, and stories with those which might be expected of Christian existentialists when they are in conflict with capitalist society and an economy which is based on wasteful consumerism and indoctrination of the individual through the mass media. I will search for similarities between the Christian existentialist views and those expressed in Wiebe's literary works.

The alienation which ensues when a person lives only for the acquisition of material wealth and for the purpose of satisfying his body's comfort and desires, i.e. when the person no longer has a sense of the Self and has given himself up entirely to pleasures, is a danger well realized by Rudy Wiebe. We can also see in all his novels and plays an emphasis placed on the strong person who is able to maintain his individuality and who refuses to follow some idol blindly. What can happen when people succumb to idolatry has only recently been shown again by the example of the Guyanese suicides of the members of the Peoples' Temple. But Rudy Wiebe's heroes, as a rule, do not succumb

to their encounter with nothingness; rather, they leave the scene with faith restored or renewed. The thesis will compare, in the final chapter, Rudy Wiebe's approach to nationalism and individual rights with contemporary political realities.

CONTENTS

Chapter One

The Isolation of the Christian Existentialist in the Capitalist System

It is not my purpose to attempt an elaborate analysis and explanation of existentialism in this thesis. This would be too formidable a task and perhaps worthy of a thesis on its own in philosophy. Suffice it to say that I will use the term here primarily in connection with all philosophies which emphasize "being" over purely speculative intellectual systems and argumentations, be they in the theist or atheist vein. In the religious sense existentialism is to be seen as an affirmation of active Christianity which gets involved in contemporary problems of life rather than dogmatic principles of institutionalized religion. Perhaps it is appropriate to insert here a quote from the concluding chapter of the book <u>The Existentialist Revolt.</u>

> The conviction of the <u>primacy of existence</u> is shared by all existentialist thinkers, ancient, medieval, and modern. Their concern with the individual, personal aspects of being, with the mysterious recesses of their own selves, places them in opposition to those philosophers who, like Plato or Hegel, in an attitude of detached reflection, allow the act of existing to be submerged in ideal forms or essences. <u>Existential thinking</u> may thus be defined as a type of speculation that is not only related to the concerns

> of actual life but decisive for human existence and human action. It is a kind of thinking that arouses and "makes" the human self. This is of course not quite as new as it may first appear: both the Socratic method ("the philosopher acting as a midwife") and the Christian way of "imitatio" (the "following of Christ") are types of existential thinking. Both have their center of gravity not in pure thought or pure knowledge as ends in themselves, but both gravitate toward "existence," that is, toward a "way of life." [2]

A primary and generally recognized proponent of such active Christianity in more contemporary terms is Soren Kierkegaard who first established the concept of "existence" in his aesthetic, philosophical, and religious publications. I will be quoting from Kierkegaard's texts in some instances.

In our western democratic society the individual who stands against the tyranny of equality, that is the imposition of the lowest common denominator of the masses on each individual, is isolated from society and often discriminated against because he is "different." This is not meant to be a condemnation of the capitalist system. It is well known that the individualist has a hard time in any mass-culture or group-oriented society. The communist system with its demand on the individual member of that society to strictly adhere to party dogma is certainly no better, and neither is institutionalized religion such as Roman Catholicism, although the latter no longer imposes cruel punishment on dissenters as a rule, whereas the communist systems, generally, still do resort to threats and torture to discourage

the non-conformist. I am merely using the capitalist system within the context of my thesis because this is the system within which Wiebe's novels are partially set.

It is sometimes said that Jesus of Nazareth was a rugged individualist and, through placing emphasis on the responsibility of each individual to live a pious and charitable life regardless how this might affect his fate at the hands of a worldly power, he was also the first true Christian existentialist. The theologist John H. Yoder writes in a chapter on the "Messianic Ethic:"

> The nature of Jesus' message was ahistorical by definition. He dealt with spiritual and not social matters, with the existential and not the concrete. What he proclaimed was not a social change but a new self-understanding, not obedience but atonement.[3]

Later on in the same book, Yoder writes about Jesus' objections to self-imposed isolation in conjunction with His affirmation of non-involvement in violence and revolutions:

> Social withdrawal was no temptation to him; that option (which most Christians take part of the time) was excluded at the outset. Any alliance with the Sadducean establishment in the exercise of <u>conservative</u> social responsibility (which most Christians choose the rest of the time) was likewise excluded at the outset. We understand Jesus only if we can empathize with this threefold rejection of both quietism and establishment responsibility, and the difficult, constantly reopened, genuinely attractive option of the crusade.[4]

A couple of pages further on Yoder analyzes the vocabulary used by Jesus: "his vocabulary and his picture of what must

come to pass were much more 'political' than they were 'existential' or cultic."[5] And again later:

> In line with the personal appeal which has been so central in Protestant faith since Luther, even more since Pietism, and especially since the merging of Protestant existentialism with modern secular personalism - and even more especially since Freud and Jung imposed upon everyone in our culture the vision of man as a self-centered reacting organism - it has seemed quite evident that the primary message of Jesus was a call most properly perceived by an individual, asking the hearer for something that can be done most genuinely by an individual standing alone. Whether this something that he can do standing alone be a rare heroic ethical performance like loving one's enemies, or a response more accessible to the common man, like sorrow for his sins, it is a response each individual can make only for himself. It has nothing to do with the structure of society.[6]

Jesus' "radical personalism" (rather than individualism) is stated to disclaim the validity of views which picture Jesus as a reformer of the structures of society. Obviously there are many parallels between Yoder's views and the theme found in Wiebe's novels. Wiebe's concern is with self-imposed isolation of communities which aim at preserving their religiously devout life within a sea of opposing cultures. It seems almost as if fear or simply a lack of self-confidence prevents such isolated and closed societies from shifting to open societies, because what binds the closed society together is the outside threat rather than any inner strength. Without inner strength as the cohesive

element of the group, it cannot survive in the open. If the final pages of Peace Shall Destroy Many are any indication of such a struggle, the author does not favour closed societies and any similar isolationist tendencies. Another indication of the author's preferences can be seen in Josh Bishop's statement in First and Vital Candle where Josh explains why he lives in the North with the Indians: "What we are doing now is showing them what a Christ-follower lives like - at least we're trying." [7] This is existential Christianity.

In a switch from Yoder to Kierkegaard, the reader finds more hints concerning the importance placed on the individual and his responsibility to lead a Christian life rather than simply to follow prepared dogma or, perhaps, in more contemporary terms, "party lines." It ought to be understood here, of course, that Kierkegaard's attack on Christendom was not intended to tear down Christianity but to strengthen it by lifting it out of mediocrity and softness. Particularly in Denmark where Protestantism was declared the official "State-Religion," the church became the instrument for a group-oriented mass-culture which is alien to the original Christian spirit. Kierkegaard implies that, by resisting that trend the individual will become a living Christian rather than one who pays merely lip-service. Some of Kierkegaard's thoughts are well summarized in F. H. Heinemann's book Existentialism and the Modern Predicament. He writes in Chapter III, "The Existential Christian," about

Soren Kierkegaard's The Point of View for my Work as an Author: "He sees his providential mission in exposing Christendom as a prodigious illusion and in calling its followers back to an existential Christian life."[8] Two pages later Heinemann comments about Kierkegaard's arguments with the philosopher Hegel:

> He rejects passionately [his] speculative talk about religion, and especially about Christianity. This kind of speculative interpretation seems to him a chimera and a sheer impossibility, based on a total ignorance of what religion and Christianity are. They are not something to be talked about, but something to be lived; religion is subjectivity, an inner transformation.[9]

After another two pages Heinemann comments on Kierkegaard's concern about the disappearance of the individual in the stream of collectivity:

> Levelling destroys the singularity and qualitative difference of the Self, and therefore the order of value and status. A sort of external alienation arises; the individual disappears in the mass. [the following is a quote from Kierkegaard] "To battle against princes and popes is easy compared with struggling against the masses, the tyranny of equality, against the grin of shallowness, nonsense, baseness and bestiality."[10]

Heinemann later refers to the existentialist philosopher Jaspers when he concerns himself with the dangers emanating from our modern, industrialized, and materialistic society where power and money make the man, and where the group forces the individual to abide by its rules and to forget about his own self.

> ...he wishes to remind us what it means to be a self and to preserve one's freedom in a world of pressure-groups. The philosophy of the psychopathologist-philosopher becomes essentially <u>therapeutic.</u> He wants to appeal to every individual to take care of his historical substance <u>qua</u> self.[11]

Jaspers is concerned about man in the welfare state losing his spiritual center because he no longer seems to be of any consequence. Man is merely a cog in a piece of machinery or a number in a computer. It can be safely assumed that Rudy Wiebe shares this concern expressed by Jaspers. The character Big Bear in Wiebe's novel <u>The Temptations of Big Bear</u> is perhaps a good example of Wiebe's ideal man: one who has not lost his spiritual center.

There is a clear warning in all of Wiebe's novels against the "drowning" of the individual in the sea of the masses and an emphasis on the importance of the existential Christian life. We see it in <u>The Blue Mountains of China</u> when Samuel U. Reimer, who is part of the mass-society and who is also an obedient follower of the rules, is no longer capable of making his own decisions. He fails to heed the call to go to Vietnam and proclaim peace. His failure, ultimately, results in death. It is the death of the individual. Although Reimer's predicament is presented in a humorous, satirical voice, it is nevertheless tragic in its consequence. Another example is John Reimer's cross and the Willms family in their Cadillac. The cross-bearer has maintained his individuality and is an example of an

existentialist Christian. The Willmses have succumbed to conformity and materialism and there, also, death is imminent.

There is no intention on my part here to classify Wiebe as an existentialist Christian philosopher. I have had the pleasant opportunity of a short and friendly conversation with Rudy Wiebe in Montreal in the fall of 1978. He mentioned at that time that he considers himself more of a theologian than a philosopher. He also remarked that the sentiments expressed in the book The Politics of Jesus by John H. Yoder are more in line with his thinking than the writings of Kierkegaard, Jaspers, or Nietzsche. Nevertheless, certain parallels do exist when one compares the writings of some existentialist philosophers and Rudy Wiebe's novels, and this is one area which I wish to explore.

It is possible that the fact Mr. Wiebe was not raised in a closed Mennonite community has allowed him to approach the problem of isolation without prejudice. It also may have caused him to be more sympathetic toward the existentialist approach. What life in a closed Mennonite community under ultra-conservative leadership can be like was pointed out in a newspaper article which appeared in The Montreal Star some time ago. In this article, the "Holdeman Sect" of Mennonites which had established itself in the area of Blumenort (approximately twenty miles south of Winnipeg) is explored, and the "shunning" practised there is discussed. This

relatively small sect is a "revival movement toward the old styles," the article says, and as for the reason for its existence, the article quotes,

> A church publication puts forward one explanation. It says: The first reason is to retain the purity of the church; the second reason is to reprove the transgressor in that he may be ashamed and repent; the third is that the church may not be blasphemed by the world.[12]

"Shunning" is directed against those members of the community who do not conform. Transgressors are prohibited from communicating with any member in good standing, even if they are of the same family. Those who do not abide by these rules are expelled from the church.

Wiebe's novels do not place high value on the kind of rigid and closed community demonstrated by the "Holdeman Sect." The heroes in Wiebe's novels are not Christian lawmakers and enforcers but rather individuals who live an existential Christian life in the secular world even though they may, by strict definition, be heathens (e.g. Big Bear).

The article in The Montreal Star quoted previously also presents us with an ironic twist. It notes that the practice of "shunning" has produced symptoms of marked depression in some of the community members. It is known that symptoms of depression are also common amongst isolated individualists in the "open" secular society. In effect, then, the effort to keep the members of one Mennonite sect away from the evils of the secular world has produced an increase in the same mental malfunction in their ranks that befalls those

who cannot get along with the rules and regulations imposed by the "open" materialistic society.

Carried to the extreme, a mental state of depression does sometimes result in suicide which the example of the Reverend Jones' cult in Guyana seems to prove. Suicide is the denial of life and of hope which is, naturally, totally alien to the teachings of Jesus. It is also in contrast to Rudy Wiebe's theme throughout his novels which is the affirmation of hope and a positive attitude toward life under even the worst of conditions. The author guides his main characters towards strong faith and a healthy self-confidence to enable them to complete a purposeful human journey rather than towards the role of conformist slaves to the arbitrary rules of a mass society.

The alienation of man who is put into a straightjacket by a purely materialistic society which does not approve of the real (existential) Christian spirit is very well described in an essay by Erich Fromm entitled: "Alienation Under Capitalism." Fromm writes:

> Work is becoming more repetitive and thoughtless as the planners, the micromotionists, and the scientific managers further strip the worker of his right to think and move freely. Life is being denied; need to control, creativeness, curiosity, and independent thought are being baulked, and the result, the inevitable result, is flight or fight on the part of the worker, apathy or destructiveness, psychic regression. [13]

About modern man's relationship to his fellow man, he

writes:

> Everybody is to everybody else a commodity, always to be treated with certain friendliness, because even if he is not of use now, he may be later.[14]

Finally, he continues:

> Our private dealings with our fellow men are governed by the principle of egotism, "each for himself, God for us all," in flagrant contradiction to Christian teaching.[15]

The attitude expressed in the above-mentioned essay is presented as deserving condemnation and ridicule in all of Rudy Wiebe's works. Bjornesen in First and Vital Candle uses the Indians as commodities in furthering his trade and in satisfying his urge for power. Abe Ross sympathizes with the Indians and refuses to exploit them. One knows immediately who is the villain and who is the hero. The redeeming element in man is not to be seen in total submission to dogma and regulations and accepted "values" of secular or religious groups, but in compassion and cooperation between individuals. The capitalist system promotes coldness and harshness in human relations and leads to the alienation of the individual, but the living example of the existential Christian does not.

Chapter Two

A Block Against Jesus and a Living Christianity: Peace Shall Destroy Many

Much has been written in Canada about the cultural and physical isolation of immigrants and political refugees. Many short stories and novels describe the immigrants' suffering due to discrimination and exploitation by those whose forefathers had already established themselves in the agricultural fields and in the industries of the land. The general theme of isolation, both culturally and physically, created by this kind of atmosphere as it appears in a large section of Canadian literature and particularly in Canadian fiction is well treated by John Moss in his book Patterns of Isolation in English Canadian Fiction. Moss shows in his book how the isolation of the immigrant tends to advance the feeling that the immigrant is an "exile in an alien land", and that he must maintain his cultural heritage rather than abandon it and become part of a melting pot of cultures and lifestyles.[16] Moss uses the author Rudy Wiebe as an example

of a writer who recognizes the exile mentality of the immigrant and the stress it can cause between different groups of people. Wiebe shows how to overcome isolation in exile through a strong belief in one's heritage, abilities, and moral strength. Moss makes special reference in this regard to "Wiebe's Mennonite stories [which] with meticulous precision, draw the problem [i.e. the immigrant's experience and his awareness of his 'personal and collective history'] into microcosmic focus."[17] Peace Shall Destroy Many is one of those "Mennonite stories" and, at the same time, the first novel published by Rudy Wiebe.

In Peace the author begins with a seemingly innocent prelude, two boys skipping school. The reader finds out later, in Chapter One, that one of the boys, Jackie, is a "half-breed" who is supposedly permitted to use bad words because he is, by definition, "bad," whereas Hal (or Helmut), a Mennonite boy, is not.[18] The reader here gets an inkling of what conflict he is to expect in the novel. In the same chapter Thom Wiens tries to explain to his child-brother Helmut why Mennonites must not participate in violence or wars. But Thom himself is not quite convinced that he is giving Hal a true picture of the situation or that he, Thom, has even the proper concept of what he is trying to explain. If people like Hank Unger did not fly warplanes and kill "bad" enemies, who would? How could pacifism and non-violence protect the community from a vindictive enemy?

The underlying philosophy in this novel is, quite naturally, the value of life and the fact that Jesus preached (and Wiebe also preaches here) that human life must not be wilfully destroyed but that a Christian ought to love his enemies. Yet, that a Christian must be prepared to isolate himself in order that he may maintain a high moral standard sounds paradoxical. After all, how can one portray an example of brotherly love if one shuts oneself off from everyone else?

While we sense the disgust of the Mennonites with a person such as Hank Unger who not only kills people but is also loud and proud about it, and the offense they take when they encounter people who are blasphemous and live an un-Christian life, we also perceive the apprehension within the Mennonite community about the fact that they, the Mennonites, let others do the dirty work of killing while their communities enjoy prosperity under the protection of those un-Christian persons. There suddenly arises a question about the righteousness of a community of "conscientious objectors" who enjoy the fruits of prosperity without taking the risk of having to protect themselves from attackers, without having to put their own lives on the line.

We might consider these dialogues between violent and pacifist characters in the novel the "opening arguments" in the case for Jesus and the values of existential Christianity. Further significant differences, although not the only ones, are the arguments between the teacher Joseph

Dueck and the old guard of the community headed by Deacon Block. Block is literally a block placed between the community and the teachings and politics of Jesus. There is also the demise of Block's daughter Elizabeth who is being sacrificed to keep the community "clean" for Block's son Peter (for the same reason the attempt is made to drive the half-breeds from the area and into Alberta by veiled threats). The proof of failure of the isolationist "holier than thou" attitude of Block is in the turning to physical violence of his own son Peter (ironically, the biblical "Peter" is to be the solid rock upon which a church will be built). In a straw-filled barn, of all places, Peter encounters the sensuous teacher Razia Tantamont ("razzia" is the German word for a police raid, and "Tantalus" was the son of Zeus who eternally suffered from deprivation) together with Hank Unger in a compromising situation. This leads to blows between the young Mennonite men.

Suppressed sex plays an important role in almost all of Wiebe's novels. Sexual pleasures are sinful in most Protestant teachings. Sex, for the faithful of the old order, is supposed to be for procreation only and not something to be enjoyed. Sex has been a psychological problem for mankind in various cultures, and this natural drive, if unduly suppressed, causes difficulties. An example of this problem can be seen in the fate of the younger Jakob Friesen in The Blue Mountains of China.

Most of the doubts and questions are brought out by

Thom, the "doubting Thomas." The method used is one of opposing views contained within the struggle between the greater (outside) and the lesser (inside) community. There is a noticable absence of a hero who has been replaced by the doubter Thom Wiens who questions the rules, but who finds out in the end that the rules are not wrong; they are only wrongly applied by well-meaning but misguided people. Peace, as it were, must come from within; it cannot be found outside the self, or outside of God who, in the final analysis, must exist within the self also.

The belligerent vs. pacifist arguments start with an exchange between an innocent child, Thom's brother Hal, and Thom himself. Hal is questioning why the police won't punish the bad people who try to kill those other people opposed to their evil ways. Thom answers:

> "Because there are whole countries of these people, and the police are few. So other countries feel they have to join together to kill those who are doing bad, so that they themselves and their families won't be hurt and killed --" (Peace, p. 16)

Thom stops himself as he feels he is treading on dangerous ground. He was just about to justify violence. At this point it is easy for Thom to send Hal on to the house to do his chores, thereby ending the discussion. It is not so easy for Thom when the teacher Joseph Dueck questions the validity of the Mennonite creed of non-violence. "Thom, [he said] you cannot, as it were, retreat from reality into worship without the proper ethics" (Peace, p. 52).

The irony of being a conscientious objector in war while growing the food which feeds the armies and profiting by it cannot be explained away. The church meeting (Peace, pp. 54-63) drives home this point. Joseph Dueck will join the Restricted Medical Corps and leave the community to live the Christian life as he perceives it should be lived, i.e. by helping others and by giving an example of brotherly love and understanding to all people, and not only to those who live within the narrow confines of a voluntary exile in an isolated community.

Unfortunately, there is very little in the way of characterization in this novel, and we do not get to know Joseph Dueck very well. The passage describing the church meeting is the only one in which we get a glimpse of his philosophy. There is, however, a beautiful analogy of a seeker of truth at the end of Chapter Four. Thom had earlier observed a moth which circled around the brightly burning and hissing lamp in the church, trying to get ever closer to the light it seeks without getting singed by the flame's heat (Peace, p. 60):

> The moth was gone now. From the blue flame spurting from the mantle he knew it had finally dared all for the light that drew it and now lay, a tiny cinder, on the bottom of the ruptured sack of ashes that still hung, giving less light now, but more heat. (Peace, p. 63)

Thom Wiens also questions the passivity of his father whom he thinks too agreeable. Is it "Christian" to accept everything (Peace, p. 68)? Thom's father goes out of his way

to avoid arguments. Even when it comes to getting a negligent neighbour (Herb Unger) to do his part of mending a broken fence so that his cows will not cross over into the Wiens' oatfield, he has to engage Deacon Block to do the arguing. At church meetings where the elder Wiens is secretary he never contradicts Block and always agrees with church policy. Thom is hard pressed to respect his father which is what his upbringing and his religion are telling him he must do. At the same time the departing teacher Joseph Dueck admonishes Thom to keep an open mind in a monologue which comes close to being another "Sermon on the Mount."

> There are Mennonites in the south - too many - who live in settlements as you people do here, but others are getting away from this 'physical separation' idea. They are living out our common faith. And they do it better, I believe, than you are here, because it reacts and comes alive in contact with people who do not have it. (Peace, p. 69)

We learn that even the immovable and presumably rock-steady Deacon Block has his doubts. The short description on page 70 of Peace gives Block the appearance of an Ahab figure: "The Deacon was a striking man, pale scar across his temple, steel-like hair bare to the sky." In the same paragraph, Block reminisces:

> He did not want his community to remain in ignorance of the outside world. He himself had been the first to buy a radio and mechanized farm equipment for after a few years he had realized it was impossible that they cut themselves off entirely from Canada. If the children could be taught just enough to know

> about the world's evil, they would be happy to remain in their seclusion... (Peace, p. 70)

A little knowledge is, as has often been said, a dangerous thing. What Block desires is as impossible as being a little pregnant. There will be more questions asked than can "safely" be answered. To entertain so naive a thought appears a little out of character for Block, who is represented as a tough-minded man. One cannot learn "just enough about evil," and where there is good, there must also be some evil; one cannot exist without the other.

We do not have to go far to find evil within the Mennonites' own closely knit community. A most devastating judgement in this regard is made through a thought offered by Thom Wiens when it comes to the "trial" of Herman Paetkau which leads to Paetkau's being expelled from the church. Racial discrimination is about the most un-Christian attitude one can imagine, especially when it is practiced against a person who converted to Christianity. Thom's mind perceives it this way:

> Why should Herman not have married Madelaine? The reason lay painfully open now: she was a half-breed, and a

> Mennonite just did not marry such a person, even if she was a Christian. (Peace, p. 110)

As it turns out later, Herman Paetkau, himself at one time unaware of the fact, was also an illegitimate child, adopted by his mother's sister after his real mother had died. All this was used against Herman with a certain brutality by Deacon Block at an earlier time when Herman had asked for the hand of Block's daughter Elizabeth in marriage (Peace, p. 114). The irony, of course, is that Elizabeth herself will be the mother of an illegitimate child fathered by the "half-breed" Louis Moosomin, and not through rape but by her own free will (Peace, p. 184). Elizabeth also dies, which seems to be the fate of most Mennonite women who have an illegitimate child. This is not done for the convenience of the plot or according to Victorian literary convention but instead suggests how strong the sense of guilt must be in this merciless community. We witness here a "turn-around" of values and purpose. Originally the Mennonite group of Christians is designed to protect the individual from evil so he be a good Christian; yet, in Herman Paetkau's case, the closed society turns against an innocent individual not because he has sinned but for the past mistakes of others.

Block has obviously set himself up as the leader of the church-government of this minor community (Wapiti) within a larger community (Canada), but, as the biblical quotation says at the beginning of the book, "he shall be broken without hand" (Daniel 8). The validity of Block's leadership

is laid open to question when the reader is informed that Block has once murdered a man (Peace, p. 131). No matter how justifiable Block's rage might have been at that moment in his past in Russia, when the whole community was faced with starvation, there is no excuse for murder in the Mennonite church, and Block knows it. Block says so himself when he tries to explain to the new teacher that, even though the community speaks German, they do not side with Hitler: "Killing is never right" (Peace, p. 121).

Nevertheless, Block is a competent leader. He means well for "his" community and governs well along accepted principles. He certainly does not deserve a "just rebellion" in the sense of the "normative" view in the Calvinistic tradition which states that when a government "fails adequately to fulfill the functions divinely assigned to it, it loses its authority."[19] Block's intentions cannot be faulted. Thom realizes that when he pursues the opposite view near the end of the novel.

> Thom could not avoid the conviction that Elizabeth had faltered; his compulsion against Block could not forever hide that fact that, despite her father's rigidity, she still had to consent personally to that act. If she was not really responsible, then Block was not either, because then he also had been, helplessly, moulded by his training. Following that back, you arrived at Adam: what then? You blame God. And you go through life doing what you do because you can do no else. (Peace, p. 231)

That view, of course, is fatalism. "Whatever is, is the will

of God. When we see what exists, we know thereby what God desires us to do."[20]

Yoder's chapter "Romans 13 and the Authority of the State" does argue the point that non-resistance and obedience to the secular state are necessary, and that the sword is also a necessity for the secular state for imposing punishment or in defence against aggressors, but that Christians must not wield the sword themselves in defense of their own cause or in vengeance against the perpetrators of sin. It is, again, the existential Christian life of being at rest and at peace with God under all circumstances, which is to be the example to others, which has to be lived. In that respect, quite aside from the fact that murder is a capital sin in itself, Block has failed as a Christian when he killed the Bashkir thief, even if the state eventually would have executed the thief anyway. It is not for the Christian to exercise revenge. By the same token it is not for Thom Wiens to have vengeful thoughts against the Deacon for his hardness and mercilessness in Elizabeth's case. Block knows his sin; Thom must find the inner peace which a true Christian must have in order to do the work of God and to be able to forgive while living in an imperfect world.

The denouement of the story starts with Chapter Ten. Elizabeth gives birth to an illegitimate child, fathered by Louis Boosomin. Nothing worse could happen to Deacon Block. All his well-intentioned authoritarian rule has not enabled him to keep evil away from Wapiti, not even from his very

own family.

Block's reaction when he finds out the truth about Elizabeth is tellingly un-Christian. His primary concern is for hiding the facts from "his" community. There is no compassion for either his daughter or his wife. Speaking the truth or admitting a failing does not even enter his mind. The only remedy he can think of is to isolate the community further by driving out the remaining half-breeds who live at the fringes of the community and have so far provided some cheap labor. He will soon realize that removing the half-breeds will not help much either. Block is moving along the road where he will be broken. The point the novel makes here is quite obvious. One must live within the contemporary world and with this world, evil as it might be, and give an example to others of what a good Christian life ought to be. This applies to any small community as well as to the open world. Even a United Nations organization could not exist if every country were to withdraw behind its borders and were to refuse to communicate and exchange ideas with others. The problems of wars, of poverty, and of illegitimate children do not disappear simply because one chooses to ignore them.

In his reaction to crises the Deacon shows indeed that he is a block against Jesus and a living Christianity. However, it will not do for Thom Wiens to chastise Deacon Block and end up hating him. Instead, he lives with the experience which has opened his eyes to human failings but

does not forsake his religious beliefs and convictions. Thom Wiens now knows the values of an existential Christian life. It is, perhaps, a little unfortunate that the author has to resort again to unnecessary "preaching" in the last few paragraphs of the novel which diminish the otherwise dramatic conlusion:

> There must lie the way. Not the paths of conscienceless violence or one man's misguided interpretation of tradition. They brought chaos. But the path of God's revelation, Christ's teachings stood clear in the Scriptures; could he but scrape them bare
> .....
> No. If in suppression and avoidance lay defeat, then victory beckoned in pushing ahead. Only a conquest by love unites the combatants. And in the heat of this battle lay God's peace... (Peace, pp. 237-38)

The reader need not be told this but can reach this conclusion on his own if he fully understands the novel.

While this novel restricts itself to the Mennonite community of Wapiti and thereby to an environment and to situations with which the author is most familiar and most comfortable, it does nevertheless illuminate the universal theme of the diminishing strength of existential Christianity. The closed Mennonite communities are becoming increasingly prosperous not only through hard work and efficient farming but also by benefitting from the wars in which their members do not actively participate because they are conscientious objectors. These Mennonite communities support missionaries in foreign countries, but they refuse,

by isolating themselves, to be missionaries of Christendom in their own country. By the same token, those people (and that includes some Mennonites) outside closed communities who are Christians in name only while pursuing purely materialistic goals, mediocre values, and mainly the pleasures of life, have lost even the knowledge of how to give a good example of a Christian lifestyle. Their conscience is served by their putting money in the collection box.

Rudy Wiebe in his early novels presents us not only with a history of the plight of the Mennonites but also with his personal philosophy which tells of a conviction that the politics of Jesus were correct and that a good Christian has to live a non-violent Christian life and give a Christian example wherever he may be. In his later novels he applies this philosophy to all communities, and we may be surprised to find, as in The Temptations of Big Bear, that those we might be tempted to call heathens can live a more Christian-like life than some self-righteous Christians. To imitate Christ's ways is possible for anyone, even those who have never heard of Jesus of Nazareth.

Chapter Three

Abram and Sarah

To Glorify God in the Wilderness

Rudy Wiebe chose not to deal with a Mennonite community in his second novel, perhaps for good reason. Shortly after publication of Peace Shall Destroy Many, Wiebe lost his job as editor of a Mennonite journal in Winnipeg.[21] Apparently the Mennonite church leaders were not pleased with what they assumed to be the author's implied criticism of life within Mennonite colonies.

It is refreshing to get away, in First and Vital Candle, from the somewhat oppressive and confined setting of Wiebe's earlier book. The author addresses the same problem of religious faith, or the lack of it, but reverses the approach followed in his first novel. In Peace, the doubter Thom Wiens, who is the central character, is a believer at the outset. He makes up his mind to become an existentialist Christian at the end of the novel. In First and Vital Candle, the main character is Abe Ross who is skeptical at the outset but who, by the end, understands the power of faith. Yet, we are not convinced that he has found inner peace: hope, perhaps, but not peace, because all that he has experienced "made the life he still had to live hardly less fearful" (Candle, p. 354).

Abe Ross is a man who is bitter about his experiences in life. He questions the validity of religious beliefs

because of a severe childhood under the rule of a cold-hearted and overly strict father who eventually cursed Abe and expelled him from the family. Abe's subsequent exposure to the perils of war and to the sermons of revivalist preachers has not helped matters.

The novel starts in Winnipeg with Abe's search for God's grace which he senses to be incorporated in the white shape of a graceful woman he glimpses. Near the end of the novel he finds that woman, Sally Howell. Under contract to the Frobisher Company, Abe goes to Frozen Lake to fight for the survival of one Frobisher trading post located there, but he must also fight against the influence of Satan who appears in the form of Sigurd Bjornesen. Abe's unbelief is mocked by Josh Bishop, a preacher at Frozen Lake, who cautions Abe against trying to find a rational explanation for everything. When Abe is ready to go to an Indian conjuring session, he opens a conversation with Josh with a condescending remark:

> "I guess I better go down and see what's going on. I wouldn't want to miss being convinced." "You shouldn't fight so hard," Josh said, "It takes an educated man to be less human than a heathen."
> "Less human!"
> "Yes. Thinking he can logically explain everything that happens." (Candle, pp. 144-145)

Abe does get physical evidence that conjuring can work (his previously lost hand-gun is magically returned to him) which shatters his self-confidence.

At Frozen Lake Abe also meets Sally Howell, a teacher

who instructs the children of the Indian camp. Sally finally succeeds in rekindling the flame of Christian faith within Abe. Unfortunately Sally dies during a spring flood which swamps the cabin on Brink Island to which Sally has retreated for solitary prayers, and Abe's physical love for Sally is left unfulfilled. The brilliant, golden glory of God's grace, however, remains within Abe as a result of Sally's influence on him during their short acquaintance.

Wiebe makes use of color symbolism, death imagery, and even satanic imagery to emphasize Abe Ross's position as one who has lost faith in God and is obliged to struggle with demons in his journey through life. The function of the novel is well enough defined in the epigraph, a quotation from Gerald Manley Hopkins' poem "The Candle Indoors."

> Some candle clear burns somewhere I come by.
> I muse at how its being puts blissful back
> With yellowy moisture mild night's blear-all black,
> Or to-fro tender trambeams trunckle at the eye.
> By that window what task what fingers ply,
> I plod wondering, a-wanting just for lack
> Of answer the eagerer a-wanting Jessy or Jack
> There God to aggrandise, God to glorify
>
> Come you indoors, come home; your fading fire
> Mend first and vital candle in close heart's vault:
> You there are master, do your own desire;
> What hinders? Are you beam-blind, yet to a fault
> In a neighbor deft-handed? are you that liar

> And, cast by conscience out, spentsavour
> salt?
> (Candle, epigraph)

This passage seeks to glorify God and revitalize the "first and vital candle" of religious faith within the heart of man.

As Abe Ross walks aimlessly through Winnipeg in pursuit of peace of mind, he notices the image of a "white shape" (Candle, p. 9), a beautiful female figure, which is Wiebe's metaphor for a state of heavenly grace which will, if reached, lead to inner peace. This grace, however, escapes Abe and vanishes into the night. As it does, Abe's fight with the demons of the under-world and his inability to experience Christ are expressed in color symbolism which contrasts black and dark-blue[22] with the color white.

In pursuit of the graceful white image, Abe descends into "pale blue light," is addressed by a waitress whose "black dress pushes her body at him." He orders "black" coffee while, "on the edge of his vision like a white curve sat the girl" (Candle, p. 10). When Abe tries to follow her home, he remembers his arrival in Winnipeg by plane. "Flying in at night the reflection of the streets shone purple on the ebony of the two snakish rivers" (Candle, p. 17). The blackness (ebony) and snakishness of the rivers are examples of satanic imagery, which is ironic because Wiebe normally uses the image of the river as a metaphor for Christian inner peace.[23] Abe's "glance snagged against blue" (Candle, p. 18) again as he searches for the elusive graceful woman

through the glass of a store window. Finally, he stares at a "black" cab whose driver is watching him (Candle, p. 18).

At the end of Chapter Two in Part One of Candle, which follows an almost violent argument between the German harpsichordist Schwafe and an American airforce officer, Bill Granger, about war and killing of human beings (Candle, pp. 34-37), Wiebe uses death imagery in the description of a dance scene. Abe dances with Sherris Kinconnell, "her eyes hollow in the faded light ... her open mouth a pink-rimmed hole...," and he continues with his observation of the other dancing couples "-they blurred past battered to ugliness, gruesome, led by the thin American and his partner, faces skull-like in the darkness, their bony arms rising and falling alternately in crooked sickle-sweeps" (Candle, p. 38). The metaphor used in the description of Sherris Kinconnell shows contempt for decadent civilization, and the dance-scene makes the statement that spiritual death has occurred in this society, prior to normal, physical death.

The author experiments in this novel with the stream-of-consciousness technique, particularly in flash-backs. He does so in Chapter Ten where he uses this technique within conventional descriptive passages as Abe returns to his college years and to the time when he was an infantry-man in the Second World War (Candle, pp. 180-184). Another example of the stream-of-consciousness technique can be found in the flash-back while Abe is in the "Red Vine" night club together with Jim MacLaren (Candle, pp. 61-62).

It is applied to good purpose there as it points a finger at the "false Christianity" of revival meetings, which are likened to the sometimes senseless lyrics of songs in the night club and to the contorted dance scenes there. The same technique is used again in the long flash-back passage in Chapter Seventeen (Part Seven) of the novel where the howling of the dogs prevents the preacher Josh, standing beside the conjurer Kekekose, from addressing the Indian band.

Howling dogs are symbolic of Satan's presence in several passages of the novel. When the preacher Josh is temporarily prevented from addressing the Indians (Candle, pp. 309-310), their howling signifies the presence of Satan who is about to be driven out through the force of prayer, both from a distance (Sally in the cabin on Brink Island) and at the Frozen Lake camp. The howling of a dog also plays the role of announcing Satan's approach before Bjornesen's arrival at the conjuring session (Candle, p. 159). Bjornesen promptly destroys the tent in which Kekekose, an Ojibwa conjuror, was trying to work black magic in order to save the life of Harry Sturgeon, the man who was cursed by Bjornesen earlier and now appears to be dying as a result of that curse.

The reference to Sally's "terrifyingly perverse heavenly lover she now sought and who found her alone" (Candle, p. 321) presages her death. She will be taken away by her heavenly lover to be with Him forever. Abe, in his

mind, connects the "great white dog" he sees loping into the grey underbrush (Candle, p. 322) with Sally, sitting at the table in her cabin, praying. Indeed, the dog is "an emblem of faithfulness ... In a more profound sense, though still related to the foregoing, the dog is ... the companion of the dead on their 'Night Sea Crossing'."[24] The flash-back in this chapter is well placed, as it impresses on the reader a sense of the drama in the high point of the story, which is Sally's sacrifice and the success for Josh and Lena in the conversion of the Indian band to Christianity.

Much of the story is held together by the convincingly told drama of the tough life endured by the people of the north country. Rudy Wiebe is at his best when he tells stories about man engaged in the struggle for survival in a rugged, untamed land. A particularly good example is Part Two of the novel (Candle, pp. 67-84) which describes the fate of one Eskimo woman, Oolulik, who has to kill the maddened Ukwa in order to save her own life and those of her children.

The inadequacy of the Judeo-Christian religous laws and the white man's secular laws is clearly demonstrated in an environment where the survival of the fittest is the only way to maintain the species. Oolulik, who was converted to Christianity, promptly loses the little faith she had left when she thrusts the Bible, without opening it for reading, under the rocks which hold the remains of her husband Itooi.

Although the story in Part Two of the book is obviously

inserted to provide a stark contrast to the senselessness of civilized society in the big city (Winnipeg) and to emphasize Abe's doubts about the purpose of human life, it provides a drama and tension that is very rarely found elsewhere in the book. The ultimate obscenity is RCMP Corporal Blake's unfeeling application of the white man's law. Oolulik commits suicide in jail, having lost her faith and, with the loss of her family, her purpose in life. One senses that she could never have received proper justice. The white man's law provides for a suspect's right to be judged by his peers, but would there have been any Eskimos on any jury judging Oolulik? - hardly! The same dilemma returns in Wiebe's fourth novel, The Temptations of Big Bear. Chief Big Bear is judged by a jury of white men who are unfamiliar with the realities of life within an Indian band and with the need of the Indian nation for hunting grounds.

The names of most of the main characters are taken from Old Testament mythology. "Abe" Ross reminds the reader of Abram (or Abraham), "Sally" Howell of Sarah (whose role as Abram's wife will never be fulfilled), "Josh" of Joshua, which is a variant of Jeshua or "Savior" (ironically, the Biblical Joshua was also a military leader and the conqueror of Palestine). Only Josh's wife Lena, a minor character, is connected with a figure from the New Testament, Mary Magdalene (a harlot converted to Christianity and serving as a symbol for the repentent sinner). Even Satan is present in

the shape of Sigurd Bjornesen, who is called "Wagoss" (fox) by the Indians (Candle, p. 123): the fox was a symbol of the devil in the middle ages.[25] These characters do not exactly recapitulate the roles of their Biblical namesakes, but by using their names the author, quite intentionally, provides us with Biblical allusions which serve to underscore these characters' numerous religious dialogues and arguments.

While Rudy Wiebe's strength and the success of his second novel lie in his competent and gripping telling of the stories of the native people, the weakness and, perhaps, ultimate failure of First and Vital Candle show both in the lack of characterization of all the supporting figures and in their (and Wiebe's) repeated and persistent efforts to preach certain religious beliefs - even, more or less, to push those beliefs - upon the reader. In terms of characterization, the reader only gets to know Abe Ross really well. His Presbyterian "hellfire and brimstone" upbringing and his righteous but cold-hearted and cruel father explain Abe's attitudes and the disbelief which he retains through most of the novel. The reader learns from Abe's experiences, effectively presented by the flash-back technique, why he harbours a violent streak and why he dislikes pushy missionaries. All this is very real and understandable. The passages of religious dialogue, however, somehow seem unreal. The supporting characters do not speak as one would expect real flesh-and-blood human beings to speak in the scenes which are set up by the author. Much of this might be

due to the lack of characterization.

Practically nothing is disclosed about the Icelander, Mr. Sigurd F. Bjornesen, with the exception that he is a "big grey-headed brute" (Candle, p. 110) and that he was a trapper (Candle, p. 106), "born on Hecla Island, Lake Winnipeg, Manitoba, and ... visited his father's ancestral home in Iceland for three years when he was twentyone" (Candle, p. 214). His facial expression of "so clear and clean a hatred" (Candle, p. 115) of the Frobisher stores seems exaggerated. Why does Bjornesen practice black magic by cursing people like a true Satanist when he already has a firm grip on the trading business, and why the hate for the Frobisher stores when he must know already that Frobisher at Frozen Lake will not survive the competition with him? Josh thinks Bjornesen might be doing this simply for "amusement" (Candle, p. 173). This seems a strange reason for a sane human being who acts normally otherwise.

The preacher Joshua Bishop, like Abe, no longer believes in the creed of the church he attended as he grew up, but he has retained his belief in God (Candle, p. 174). He is profoundly opposed to violence and believes that love conquers all. We get to know very little else of him. We know even less of Lena Bishop. Sally Howell is a sacrificial lamb and a sounding board for the author's religious theories. The latter also applies to Josh. The pretext for religious dialogue is, in the case of Josh, Abe's attempt to learn the Ojibwas' language, and in Sally's case it is Abe's

search for grace which leads to his growing love for Sally. Out of a book totalling 354 pages, 47 pages (or 14%) are devoted to religious dialogue. This makes First and Vital Candle truly Rudy Wiebe's most didactic novel.

The arguments between Granger, Schwafe (Candle, pp. 34-37), Marsden and Josh (Candle, pp. 238-245) concerning military force versus pacifism have a familiar ring to them. Marsden's argument in favor of the military "Because somebody's got to do the dirty work" (Candle, p. 240) mirrors the argument between Thom Wiens and Annamarie in Peace when Annamarie talks about the probable thought that might go through the mind of a so-called "un-Christian" participant in the war: "[If] we must fight to protect pacifists so that they may have the right to think as they do, then the majority, the non-believers, die so that the minority, the believers, may live. Who, then is the martyr for faith?" (Peace, pp. 45-46).

When Sally says to Abe: "When weighed in the final - God's - balances our very best, or what we think it is, is little more than scum" (Candle, p. 315), the reader is hard pressed to believe that a woman in the northern solitude, while being embraced by the man she loves, would talk like that. It might just barely be believable if this had been uttered by a Mennonite within a closed Mennonite colony but not in the setting we are presented with. Yet, we know the author means for Sally to say exactly that, because it is quite similar to Josh's statement earlier in the novel when

he says to Abe: "human decency and goodness, beautiful as it is to man, the Biblical prophets tell us isn't worth much in God's eyes; in fact it's worth nothing" (Candle, p. 173).

A further fault of the book is its slide into melodrama at the end, when Abe is at Sally's graveside. "Crying in tides that crested and fell and rose again: all the years of dearth moving in him at last to balance again the ledger of his humanness, not of agony but of tears" (Candle, p. 352). One might also regret the inconclusive nature of the ending. Abe goes "to the city perhaps" (Candle, p. 354), Violet might become a teacher to replace Sally, the Frobisher store will close, but the Indians, the Bishops, and Bjornesen will still be around, doing what they have always done. Perhaps there will be a little less violence.

The great moments in Candle are the insights the reader gains into the life of the people of the northland. These are fascinating and make for exciting reading. In Rudy Wiebe's later novels we find the technique of story telling more prevalent and the "preaching" dialogues less obvious, while the idea about the importance of living an existential Christian life remains forever present.

Chapter Four

The Mennonites' Pilgrimage and Spiritual Experience

Wiebe's The Blue Mountains of China (1970) overcomes most of the artistic problems, especially that of overt didacticism, which were present in his first two novels. The author makes good use of his strength in story telling.

At first sight, the novel seems to be a collection of short stories centering around the moral that "the grass is not always greener on the other side of the fence," if one substitutes the word "mountains" for the word "fence." The title might remind the reader of Thomas Campbell's 1799 epic poem "Pleasures of Hope," which contains the following lines:

> 'Tis distance lends enchant-
> ment to the view
> And robes the mountain in its
> azure hue.[26]

The epigraph to The Blue Mountains of China, a quotation of the last five lines in Part VI from a poem titled "The Pride" by the Regina-born poet John Newlove, however, is appropriate to a novel which will concern itself mainly with the proud history of the Mennonite church and her followers.

> the knowledge of
> our origins, and where
> we are in truth,
> whose land this is
> and is to be.[27]

A closer examination and thorough reading reveal that

this novel is indeed more than a collection of short stories. As a matter of fact, it is well integrated and works on two levels: the physical pilgrimage of the Mennonites from communist Russia to the American continent, and their struggle to keep their faith intact, both individually and collectively in a violent and materialistic world (i.e. their spiritual pilgrimage). Rather than being told by the author how a Christian life ought to be lived, the reader now experiences, through a number of stories, each of which gives an account of the fate of a Mennonite family, how important it is to man to be at peace with God and, thereby, at peace with himself. Perhaps the best example of this philosophy is David Epp's final action in Chapter Nine. He returns to the abandoned village in Russia, having helped most of the community to escape into China from that village, because he feels guilty about the fact that some Mennonites from neighbouring communities had to be deserted and will now be exposed to the wrath of the communists. He sits at the empty table in his former home, thinking:

> over every hilltop is peace now every
> treetop moves through you: every breath
> cease the nestlings hush in the wood now
> only wait you too will soon have peace.
> (Mountains, p. 140).

Through his apparently irrational act of returning to the place where prosecution by the communist authorities will be a certainty, Epp has reached the peace of reconciliation with God.

The stories are told from the points of view of nine

different characters. One page after the chapter index of the book, a list of principal characters is supplied which helps to emphasize the connections between all thirteen chapters. The author makes successful use of the flash-back and the stream-of-consciousness, which serve to round out the characters involved and to help the reader understand the characters' actions.

One chapter title appears four times: "My Life: That's As It Was." These titles are inserted in the novel in an expanding arithmetical series of chapter numbers, i.e. Chapter One, Chapter Three, Chapter Six, and Chapter Ten. In these chapters Frieda Friesen narrates her life-story in a sometimes rather dry diary style, often humorous, but always in character, the way one would expect a woman with only four or five years of Mennonite village school education to communicate. Frieda is a woman who maintains her peace with God in all situations and who is capable of overcoming temptations when they arise.

Frieda is already a great-grandmother ("Urgrossmuttchi") and has just returned to Paraguay from a visit to Canada. She begins to recount her early life, starting with her birthday on April 22, 1883, in Neuboden, Manitoba, to the point of her engagement with Johann K. Friesen of Schoenbach, Manitoba in 1902.

Chapter Two, "Sons and Heirs," tells of the fate of Jakob Friesen the fifth, in Karatow in the Soviet Union. It is told in the third person from Jakob's point of view and

contains numerous flash-backs and stream-of-consciousness passages which explain the reason for Jakob's destruction.

Chapter Three returns to Frieda Friesen's narrative and accounts for her life between her engagement and her arrival in Paraguay. It covers her marriage, birth of ten children, and her moment of temptation which she overcomes, finding forgiveness of all sins in God's grace (Mountains, p. 46).

Chapter Four, titled "Black Vulture," introduces the reader to Samuel Reiner and his family's history. It is presented in the third-person voice from Samuel Reiner's viewpoint as he tells it to his son John. The "black vulture" is an allusion to the "GPU's long black limousine --- that Black Raven" (Mountains, p. 65), but it also signifies the "blackness" of the fourth Jakob Friesen's soul which is the soul of a man who has long before replaced obedience to God and Christian faith with obedience to money and material goods. This chapter provides a continuation of Chapter Two where the reader has met Jakob Friesen, the son abandoned to the GPU in Karatow.

In "Over the Red Line" (Chapter Five) the movement from childlike innocence into the realm of experience is told by way of Liesel Driediger's travel across the equator on the ocean liner which is transporting a Mennonite community on their way from Canada to Paraguay. Liesel observes the tempting world outside the confines of the rigid Mennonite community. It is tantamount to a "rites of passage" ceremonial. After observing, secretly, a pair of dancers in the

first-class salon and listening to the syncopated dance music, she runs to the bow of the ship and experiences her first orgasm (Mountains, pp. 81-82). After that experience she observes a couple having sex on deck behind an air funnel and she feels revulsion (Mountains, pp. 82-83). Finally, by accident, she falls into the ocean for her baptism (Mountains, p. 84). Liesel Driediger reappears in the final chapter as "Dr. Elizabeth Cereno," a quite worldly person (Mountains, p. 189) with little of her Christian faith intact.

Chapter Six continues Frieda Friesen's life story with her and her family's arrival at Puerto Casado in Paraguay and the trials and disease she and 2000 other Mennonites encounter in that rough, hot, new land. Frieda loses four of her own children to typhus fever in Puerto Casado. Settled down in Schoenbach, their new village in the Chaco, Frieda Friesen reports the birth of her last child, Johann, on November 1, 1928. Her account ends with the wedding of her daughter Marie to Heinz Fehr in 1933 and the subsequent move of Heinz and Marie Fehr and four hundred other Mennonites back to Canada a year later.

Chapter Seven, "The Well," describes Anna Funk's experience - and the meanderings of her mind concerning Mennonite women's lot - at the well in Schoenbach, Paraguay. Anna is a daughter of Frieda Friesen. Her father's strictness and his fatalistic attitude, "fighting one's destiny is rebellion against God" (Mountains, p. 100), had

precluded the possibility of a marriage between her and a more liberal-minded "Russlander" Mennonite. Abram Funk, Anna's husband, is more in line with Johann Friesen's ideas of what a Mennonite woman should be like.

"Cloisters of the Lilies" (Chapter Eight) returns to the fate of Jakob Friesen IV who is on the way to a labor camp in Siberia. In a ruined building which appears to have once been a cloister, Jakob witnesses the sacrifices an unknown man and woman make in order to have a chance to be with their son. This contrasts strongly with Friesen's abandoning of his own son to the GPU, but he does not seem to grasp the meaning of it all.

Chapter Nine portrays the sacrifice of David Epp who is instrumental in spiriting part of a Mennonite community out of Russia across the blue mountains of China. This is the chapter from which the novel takes its title. Stream-of-consciousness and flash-back techniques are applied here to good purpose. This chapter also lays the ground work for and supplies the contact to "The Vietnam Call of Samuel U. Reimer," the penultimate chapter of the novel. "Drink Ye all of It" transforms David Epp from a guilt-ridden man into a martyr who surrenders himself totally to God's grace. It starts with a louse which David kills, and it ends with a louse which he, while back in the abandoned house, permits to feed of his own blood as he is waiting for the ultimate peace in a dream-like passivity.

Frieda Friesen returns with the final instalment of her

life story in Chapter Ten. The war between Paraguay and Bolivia has finally ended. Frieda becomes sick with cancer of the tongue but survives the ordeal. She accepts all, because " ...it comes from God, strength and sickness, want and plenty" (Mountains, p. 145). Frieda survives her husband who dies in 1958 and goes to visit her relatives in Canada who have grown wealthy. She soon returns, however, to Schoenbach in Paraguay. For Frieda Friesen speed and wealth are of no consequence.

Chapter Eleven, "Wash, this Sand and Ashes," is a six-page interlude, describing David Epp's and John Reimer's impressions of the tribal lives of the wild Indians of Paraguay. As the reader learns later from a discussion between Samuel Reimer and a psychiatrist, David Epp is the son of the David Epp who sacrified himself, after having helped part of a Mennonite colony in their flight from Communist Russia to China, to atone for abandoning other innocent Mennonites to the communist wrath (Mountains, p. 171). He works as a missionary amongst the Indians but makes no serious attempt to convert them to Christianity. Instead he tries to understand their faith and their rituals. This may be a primer for Rudy Wiebe's next novel, The Temptations of Big Bear, where the author attempts to make the reader understand that a so-called "heathen" is not necessarily un-Christian.

Chapter Twelve, which tells the dramatic story of Samuel U. Reimer, contains many ironies and instances of

black humor. Mennonites do not, as a rule, use middle initials in their names. It can therefore be assumed that the "U" implies an addressing of "You" as the contemporary human being, the quasi-Christian. Sam Reimer supposedly hears the voice of God telling him to go and proclaim peace in Vietnam. No one, of course, believes him, and he fails to carry out God's wish. This is juxtaposed with David Epp's action in China. Sam finally dies, his spirit broken. His final words make the connection between David Epp's martyrdom and Sam Reimer's failure.

> "It was a mistake. When I heard the voice, I should of gone. Left a note and gone. When you know like that, are chosen, you shouldn't wait, talk. Go."
> "Sam," she said, "Sam, what would it have helped? What?"
> "Maybe not a thing, nothing. Like that Epp that went back." He thought a little. "Yes. It would have helped nothing. But do it, that's it. Some of it, just do it," he added heavily.
> (Mountains, p. 179)

Some of the tragedy of Samuel U. Reimer's fate carries over into the final chapter, Chapter Thirteen, titled "On the Way." In that chapter John Reimer carries out a "walk of repentance." With a heavy wooden cross on his shoulder he walks alongside the Alberta highways just east of the Rocky Mountains (Mountains, p. 194). John Reimer is Samuel U. Reimer's brother, the same man who accompanied the missionary David Epp in Paraguay in Chapter Eleven. The final chapter is masterfully done, because it brings together many of the characters the reader has met in previous

chapters. It also shows the development of many of the individual characters of the novel by revealing how they have reconciled their lives as Mennonites and as Canadians with contemporary, materialistic society. Very little of the real Christian spirit seems left in them. Except for John Reimer, they have all "made it" in the world (Mountains, p. 204). Nothing remains in most of them which bears any resemblance to the strictly controlled life within a Mennonite colony, nor does God's peace rest anywhere within them. It is not intimated that any of these characters are against religion, God, or Jesus, but it is clearly shown that they no longer really care about the true meaning of Christianity and that they are not even aware of that fact.

The above cursory recapitulation of all chapters of The Blue Mountains of China shows how the physical pilgrimage of the Mennonites from Russia to America is unified into a novel from a string of short stories, each of which concerns itself with the fate of a Mennonite family. But the book is much more than this for it shows the attentive reader how the author balances the ideal existential Christian faith with the original Anabaptist rules and the all-too-strict regulations of some closed Mennonite communities and how he comes out squarely in favour of the existential Christian life. This message is delivered with only a few scarce remnants of didacticism in this novel.

The problem of violence, for lustful purposes, material gains, or in self-defense, is again explored as in the

previous novels, but it is treated much more thoroughly. While in Peace Shall Destroy Many we learn about Deacon Block's sin of murder only through Block's own thoughts as he thinks about his past hard times, in The Blue Mountains of China the reader actually experiences the young Jakob Friesen's dilemma by observing his actions. The reader is permitted to look into the disintegrating mind of a young Mennonite whose world is crashing down around him while he is unprepared for this catastrophe.

After the young Friesen was released by the GPU and returned to the farm, his first impression was: "The house was a black hole. Black." (Mountains, p. 13). The "black hole" is Wiebe's metaphor for spiritual depravity. He used it in his previous novel, First and Vital Candle, where he described Sherris Kinconnell's features during the dance at the Kinconnell party, although the "blackness" is only implied there: " ...her mouth a pink-rimmed hole" (Candle, p. 38).

A narrative flash-back tells all about the un-Christian attitudes which were prevalent in the Friesen household. The passage is rife with expressions of pride, greed, and violence, and the tone is condescending:

> His father had told him how Escha arrived four years before while he was away in his last year of Zentralschul, barefoot in ripped pants and forearms hanging like hams, knowing one Lowgerman word: awbeide, awbeide, as if Friesen didn't know Russian better than he. Friesen had said, "Go clean the barn," and when the schlunga [rascal] had stolen nothing more than two pans of

> buns cooling in the pantry window and bent over to take his whipping with less screaming than standard, Friesen gave him a shirt, a blanket for sleeping in the loft, grease to rub on his cuts and said stay. When Jakob came home with his diploma his father said now they had a steady to do the ox-work and they would really start to farm.
>
> .....
>
> What anarchy, drought, fear left could be had for the spitting; in two years they controlled the mill, owned four farms, equipped, and managed the village studfarm where eight Cossacks worked, the biggest operation in Karatow Colony despite taxes on every knife and straw. After harvest in 1928 the whole family even took a holiday in Odessa, travelling first class on train and ship. (Mountains, pp. 19-20)

Both Friesens, father and son, have developed a spiritual blindness which prevents them from realizing what everyone observing them can see. They have committed the sins of pride and disrespect for their fellow human beings and show concern only for their own well-being. Saving their souls through prayer and obedience to basic moral laws has been turned into a farce without any real value.

There can be no doubt how the young Friesen feels when he confronts Escha who, to Jakob, appears to be little better than an animal. Escha satisfies his natural drives and enjoys them without suffering pangs of guilt. This contrasts sharply with Jakob's attitudes. In a well presented stream-of-consciousness passage, the reader learns about Jakob's repressed natural instincts which will prove to be his final undoing.

> ...the Russian girl in the water naked squatting and rising I never confessed

> that I saw my sister when and wet
> playing with Jesus has come again will
> you be ready when the trumpet sounds six
> times I was not ready with all my sins
> he has come... (Mountains, p. 14)

Jakob's earlier quoted recollections concerning Escha's background and the way in which he was hired by Jakob's father follow closely Jakob's mirror-experience. As Jakob observes his unshaven, haggard face, a result of his imprisonment, in a mirror, he suddenly realizes Escha is standing behind him, looking very much like Jakob himself.

> ...caved-in eyes glaring; a hideous
> face that bound him, staring, and
> heavily, heavily in its shadowy swaying
> it broadened, began to double in
> grotesque extended repetition, the
> double lips twisting, lengthening slowly
> like a water image into grin that jarred
> him to comprehension and he wheeled to
> Escha so close his shoulder hoisted him
> under the chin and against the table...
> (Mountains, p. 19)

Escha, it seems, resembles Jakob's darker side or shadow. There will be continuous fighting between Jakob and Escha.

It is of interest, in connection with Jakob V's fate, to read C. G. Jung's essay entitled "Introduction to the Religious and Psychological Problems of Alchemy," which attempts to explain psychoanalytical problems encountered in the treatment of neuroses.

> During the process of treatment the
> dialectical discussion leads logically
> to a meeting between the patient and his
> shadow, the dark half of the psyche
> which we invariably get rid of by means
> of projection:
> .....
> the personal unconscious (i.e., the
> shadow) are indistinguishably merged
> with the archetypal contents of the

> collective unconscious and drag the latter with them when the shadow is brought into consciousness.[28]

C. G. Jung makes other statements in his essay which come very close to the concerns Rudy Wiebe expresses in his novels, particularly in The Blue Mountains of China. For example,

> The great events of our world as planned and executed by man do not breathe the spirit of Christianity, but rather of unadorned paganism.
>
> .....
>
> Christian civilization has proved hollow to a terrifying degree: it is all veneer, but the inner man has remained untouched and therefore unchanged. The soul is out of key with the external beliefs. In his soul the Christian has not kept pace with external developments. Yes, everything is to be found outside - in image and in word, in Church and Bible - but never inside.[29]

Jung is talking about the "inner peace," the "mighty inner river" which is so much of Wiebe's concern. Jakob Friesen IV does not have it, and neither has his son. Their outward beliefs are Christian, but their actions are pagan. This may well be the reason for The Blue Mountains of China ending on a somewhat sour note. Chapter Thirteen shows that there are only a handful of true Christians. John Reimer, who has the inner peace, and perhaps Jakob Friesen IV and Elizabeth Cereno who might yet find it.

Wiebe discusses sex explicitly in this novel. The basic, instinctive sex-drive is juxtaposed with the beauty of true, purposeful love between husband and wife. The young Jakob Friesen, for example, cannot overcome the

psychological pressures created by heretofore suppressed natural drives. He hears from Escha about available sexual pleasures with "a girl from Borsenko ... for a ruble" (Mountains, p. 20), and he witnesses Escha's finishing of a sexual encounter with this girl in the hayloft of the big barn which Jakob's great-great-grandfather had built in 1839.

> Escha's body humped up, flying from straw, sent by a long naked leg that held extended, delicately toeing circles in the mist ... His mind as if exploded, Jakob saw only him: immense naked man of varied gigantic columns half-gilded, erect in the sun ... She sat motionless and they stared at each other. Then, deliberate as sunrise, one round arm moved down and her tipped breasts stood separate in the suddenly bluish light with a great shadow cleft between them, one half-shadowed on the other. Until the arm rose and the blouse slid over the white shoulders. (Mountains, p. 24)

The scene has its natural effects on Jakob, as Escha observes: "Your pants tight as a hide - look!" (Mountains, p. 25). All this is happening simultaneously with Jakob's realization that he has lost his status as boss over Escha, or over anything for that matter. It has the effect of driving Jakob literally crazy. He subsequently chooses the route of inviting his own death. His last hold-out was his attempt to resist his sexual urges and murderous instincts. "That was all that was left, to think, to brace against. And he wedged against these, these last two remnants of do not, in final, desperate refusal" (Mountains, p. 35). Jakob eventually succumbs. After a heated dance with Escha and the

girl from Borsenko Jakob realizes he can no longer resist. "But now, like then on the studfarm, he had played with himself; alright, wanted himself to be played with, and he was beyond control" (Mountains, p. 39). Jakob kills Escha, his alter ego upon whom he has heaped all his guilt-complexes, and then rapes the Russian girl. This action provides a final relief for Jakob who now feels free and easy. "No more unthinkable black shadow waiting, watching, knowing more than he did himself and leering for a slip. That was better than good. He felt -- clean, strong, swinging his long legs along in the centre of the communists and the trailing Mennonites..." (Mountains, p. 41). Jakob assaults the communist Commissar Serebro by kicking him violently in the groin and literally dies laughing, "laughing so dry and hard, he did not stop when down into his face the first gun barrel smashed" (Mountains, p. 41).

Jakob's fate is in agreement with the possible reactions to violence imposed by others upon the self as suggested by the stranger in "The Cloisters of the Lilies" to Jakob's father. "There is only this: if you want anything, survive. There is nothing else. If you have nothing left you want, jump up and be done, quickly" (Mountains, p. 113).

The brutal male sexuality of Escha has a feminine counterpart which replaces male brutality with female pride in beauty and softness and woman's knowledge of what she can do to a man. In Chapter Seven, "The Well," Anna Friesen

compares the lot of Mennonite women with the sexual freedom of the Lengua (Indian) women in Paraguay.

> They did not come like the Lengua women, one pot balanced on their head and the other in their hand, staring wherever their eyes strayed.
> .....
> the women of Schoenbach stooped forward whether they carried water or not. Which was a becoming posture for a woman, according to Elder Wiebe the Younger.
> .....
> Looking everywhere with unblinking shamelessness can lead to nothing but - things like the Lengua women who in their savage dances were said to lay their hands on any man they pleased, to lead him to whatever she wanted, out of the firelight... (Mountains, p. 98)

Anna Friesen's psyche can cope with the temptations offered; in effect, she makes no attempt to understand why the Lengua women act as they do. The reader is not sure, however, if Anna is really happy with her decision to marry Abraham Funk instead of the more liberal Russlander Mennonite, or if she simply submits to the elders and adjusts to what seems to be the inevitable fate of Mennonite women. It adds, perhaps, an ironic twist when the reader realizes that contemporary man prefers by a wide margin the proud Lengua-type woman to the stooped Mennonite counterpart.

Between the young Jakob Friesen's fate, as he succumbs to his violent, destructive sexual drives, and the fulfillment of legitimate sexuality between husband and wife, as shown in Frieda Friesen's narrative biography in the four chapters titled "My Life: That's As It Was," lies a grey

area of sacrificial love and a black area of purposeless lustfulness. The former has to do with the non-violent acceptance of inevitable realities, the latter with pure self-gratification.

The first example of violent sex forced upon and suffered by non-violent people is Muttachi. She had sacrificed herself for her family.

> ...to run after revolution and starvation and Makhnovski and they split my old Jakob in half from head to stomach and your Mutti and you and Mari under the manure in the pig shed so those who wanted had to work themselves dry on me- (Mountains, p. 17)

A similar situation exists in "The Cloisters of the Lilies" where a stranger with his ill wife happens upon the Russian guards who are taking a group of prisoners, Jakob Friesen amongst them, to a labor camp in Siberia. The man and his wife have fled from a labor camp because the wife has set her mind on seeing her children one more time before she will die. She suffers rape by the Russian guards for the love of her children, and her husband lies still for his wife's sake, so that she may have her last wish fulfilled through her sacrifice. The man is symbolically crucified: "the man's form lay totally devoid of human motion. As if stretched out and nailed down on its back" (Mountains, p. 113). They both escape the following morning and, "as God is good," they might succeed in seeing their children one last time.

In Paraguay, the story is also one of sacrifice, as

Frieda Friesen tells in the last installment of her life story. "An old man, Nicholas N. Toews, in Halbstadt in our colony was shot trying to get his daughter away from some soldiers, four girls had been mishandled and two babies born but one died in a week" (Mountains, p. 141). Only the Mennonites who settled in Canada seem to have escaped that kind of violence.

The dark episode in which young Liesel Driediger observes sex performed purely for pleasure on board the ocean liner which transports a group of Mennonites to South America is told from Liesel's viewpoint:

> She stood in the shadow and eventually could distinguish the white uniform and the arm reaching down, hoisting the skirt which darted gold stray light in all directions, higher and higher so that dark bands of stocking tops and garters emerged on white thighs. She wondered in idle distaste why, if they wanted to do that, they did it so awkwardly, the man standing between the woman's legs which she now seemingly was trying to twine up around his hips, and slipping, making that silly sound. Her shiny stockings were probably too slippery. Finally the man got sensible and laid the woman - or perhaps they collapsed - the woman was flat on the deck and she could jerk the garter rigging and stockings up over her white knees. Their heads, dark bumps in the darkness, still seemed welded together and the man knelt over her, a white arm between her arching legs, the other fumbling into his trousers. Liesel suddenly felt the funnel at her back and she turned without thought, back to the light. Cold and ugliness dropped away like blots. (Mountains, pp. 82-83)

The detached and dry account of Liesel's observations is not

devoid of humor, but the sexual activities Liesel has seen are nevertheless treated with contempt. The reader has no doubt how Liesel judges this kind of intimacy. It has no meaning. Liesel turns away from the darkness and back towards the light.

Frieda Friesen's wedding night is quite another matter. Sex can be enjoyed, in contradiction to some Puritan teachings, when it is legitimate, and no lewd details are called for and none are provided.

> On September 21, 1903 we were married
> .....
> They'd even lit a lamp though it still was long till winter, and he stood with his face in the shadow
> .....
> All at once he said, "Well we wanted us, and we've got us, what do we want now?" Somebody in the kitchen dropped dishes with a crash, I snorted so loud.
> .....
> This time light burst and rolled over like it was falling right off someplace into somewhere big, gigantic. Huh, that was a whaling all right. (Mountains, p. 45)

The numerous allusions to human sexuality in this novel are presented as part of the Mennonites' life during their physical pilgrimage in their continuing search for a promised land.

> "That's the trouble with Mennonites; they show it clearer than most other Christians, especially Protestants. They wish they were, if they could only be Jews." (Mountains, p. 227)

The Mennonites have of course a homeland which is Germany, but it is not a Biblical land and not a "promised" land

where they can live unmolested. Jesus did not give his Christian followers any promised land on earth. The Christian's promised land is within himself: it lies in God's grace and in God's peace within man. It is nothing that one can hold in one's hands.

While the pilgrimage of the Mennonites on the physical level shows that they can survive as a group under almost any adverse conditions, the novel shows more pessimism when it comes to their spiritual pilgrimage. Greed in large measure stands in the way of spiritual fulfillment and spiritual love. The various Mennonite communities do not succeed very well in giving an example of Christian living. The Mennonite community in Schoenbach, Paraguay, seems to be a mirror image of the community in Wapiti, Canada, as depicted in Peace Shall Destroy Many. Elder Wiebe the Older intones Deacon Block's thoughts of teaching the children "just enough about evil" when he says, "New ideas, book learning, singing in several voices are unnecessary and dangerous. The desire for knowledge leads to pride and self-deception" (Mountains, p. 100). Spiritual love is not served by this kind of attitude. Schoenbach is one more example of the kind of Mennonite community Rudy Wiebe abhors, as he has said during an interview with Donald Cameron.

> The really conservative groups that came to Canada in the 1870s felt that part of what made their whole world tick was the fact of the German language, for example. They had never learned Russian very much in Russia, and they didn't learn

English very much in Canada.

.....

You did not sing in harmony in church; you sang one line.

.....

CAMERON: ...You don't regard yourself as a Mennonite?
WIEBE: Yes, I do - but not one of <u>those</u> kinds of Mennonites,

.....

You could retreat ... But then you are, in a sense, cutting yourself off from other humanity, too. Are you going to cut off any possible effect you could have on other people, in an attempt to preserve your own integrity?

.....

I've got to do something in it [the world] that will somehow reveal what my life style, my work, my way of looking at the world is...[30]

Another spiritual disaster area exists in the more open and more prosperous Canadian community in southern Manitoba where Samuel U. Reimer lives. It cannot really be called a "community" in the original sense because Reimer's house, formerly a part of the village of Gartental, now stands alone. "The village here was gone now, theirs the only well and yard left behind the long rows of cottonwoods. Where had all the people gone?" (<u>Mountains,</u> p. 161). But even though the larger Mennonite community beyond Sam's house seems to be very unrestricted, the people are isolated in their uncaring attitudes, and even the Mennonite church building is cold and isolated. The author manages to convey this isolation through Sam Reimer's experience extraordinarily well.

The dialogue between Sam and Emily, his wife, is typically contemporary Canadian suburban style. If it

weren't mentioned that Sam Reimer was a "southern Mennonite" the reader would not have guessed it at that point in the story. When Sam shakes Emily in bed to awaken her so that he can tell about the voice he has heard she says, thinking he wants sex, "Sam, for cripesake I wanna sleep!" (Mountains, p. 158). This is an indication that sex has become physical and commonplace for Emily. She could just as easily have said "I have a headache!" Sam's approach to God's voice is initially one of disbelief. This chapter is a good place for employing humor because it gives some relief from the otherwise quite tragic events. But, inasmuch as the grim humor here is an indication of lacking faith and of the loss of the ability to recognize one's inner voice, it is a rather sad comment on contemporary Christianity. One example is the following passage which expresses Sam's initial disbelief through humor of exaggeration, giving Sam the attributes of a country bumpkin and making him look ridiculous to the educated. It sounds almost like a "Newfie" joke.

> Even for a southern Manitoba Mennonite Sam Reimer was known as careful; not always completely slow or stubborn, but careful. He had once heard an agricultural extension lecturer say that in order to keep track of modern farm complexities farmers should use memos freely. Sam's pockets were always stuffed with papers but his groping fingers now found only a clotted handkerchief. He glanced about in the half darkness, saw his wife's wall pad and grabbed the pencil while tearing away the top sheet.
> "Cou - could you say that again, hey?"
> "Of course." The voice continued at dictation speed, "I am the God of your fathers, the Lord your God. Go and

> proclaim peace in Vietnam."
> .....
> For only the sound he could not have believed it; not even after three calls and the statement twice. But the "of course" too. It was written over "Pork chops lean 4 lb." ... (Mountains, pp. 158-159)

The passage just quoted is followed by considerations in Sam's mind of how the old house was torn down and replaced by the bungalow the Reimers now occupy. This is followed by everyday arguments with Emily about money problems and business decisions. What really matters to Emily is how well the children will look in church in expensive calfskin gloves. Emily says: "Oh sure. Any old thing is fine so I'm ashamed to show my kids in church. You don't care what your kids wear but I'm not going to - " (Mountains, p. 160).

After these first steps of demonstrating to the reader the hollowness of contemporary although well intentioned Christians' beliefs, the author introduces the Mennonite church and shows that it fares not much better than any other Christian church. After Sam Reiner's arrival in town where he has to wait for his trunk to be repaired, he feels isolated. People look at him and then look away without even a word. "the small town wagged on, but he was somewhere not touching it" (Mountains, p. 162). His impression of the Mennonite church building is telling: "in gray noon loomed the Mennonite Church. Its sheer modern roof looked almost like an old barn; and as vacant" (Mountains, p. 162). Sam approaches the pastor to discuss his problem about the voice

he has heard, but not much help is forthcoming. The pastor suggests "to test it - this voice. Make sure" (Mountains, p. 165). A man of the cloth who is supposed to look after the spiritual needs of his parishioners suggesting to Sam to be scientific about the "voice" and to record it on tape to have "plain, factual, respectable evidence" (Mountains, p. 165) is ironic. It also suggests that Sam's testimony is not "respectable."

Sam's experience is indicative of the appearance of a "new religion" which bears the name "Science" and of the inroads this quasi-religion has already made in the church. The increased importance of empirical knowledge was implied earlier in the description of the Mennonite church building which was vacant. "Only an educational wing window showed light" (Mountains, p. 162). Samuel U. Reimer himself exhibits some of the hallmarks of a contemporary "Christian." He rarely reads the Bible any more, he doesn't listen to the sermon in church, nor does he read newspapers or listen to the radio. His tinkering with his tractor shows that even Sam has been affected by the mechanisms of materialism and science. But there is that mysterious voice of which he cannot be certain. The voice is, of course, the calling of his conscience, a call from the God within the self, and only Sam can hear it. It is a last attempt of his collective Mennonite unconscious to re-awaken his spiritual being - but it fails for it has been allowed to wither for too long. Materialism and science are symbolically deified

when Sam sets up the recorder for the purpose of recording "the voice." "The recorder sat in light filtered through window ice" (Mountains, p. 166); in effect, it has a halo. Sam's interest in papers, the Bible, and a daily newspaper has been revived (Mountains, p. 169), but it is to no avail. Just as he had not listened to the world, the world now refuses to hear him or understand him, save for some special interest groups who want to use him for their own purposes.

Sam reaches more of a rapport with the psychiatrist in Winnipeg than with the past[illegible], but when it comes to discussing the history of David Epp whose father was Sam's father's cousin (Mountains, p. 171), the conclusion is the same as always - "The psychiatrist said after a pause, "So what did his going back help?" (Mountains, p. 172).

This question of "What would it help" comes up numerous times in the book. It is an indication of the importance placed by the author on the need for man to act not solely for a specific purpose with specific, foreseeable, tangible results. The sacrificing of oneself for others, even if there are no personal rewards and when it will not change the situation for those involved, is the zenith of spiritual love which takes man out of his personal isolation and makes him part of the universe. When Jesus died on the cross, mankind's lot did not improve immediately, but the sacrifice of Jesus has influenced civilization for thousands of years.

Sam's efforts to make it to Vietnam are frustrated by an uncaring community. A real, understanding Christian is

nowhere to be found. Sam "was butting a rubber wall, in a place where he had lived eleven years of his life" (Mountains, p. 174) when he tries to get references for his passport application form. He meets derision, laughter, and un-funny jokes wherever he goes. At the post office the waiting farmers are talking behind his back. Sam has become the "odd man out" in his community. The tragic irony lies in Sam's unsuccessful attempt to take himself out of his isolated state. He was isolated from mankind because of his care for material values. His hog-raising venture was meant to improve his income and his stature in the Mennonite community, but it caused Sam to neglect human values beyond his personal concern. When he realizes this, as God's voice calls upon him, his subsequent actions promptly isolate him again. At that moment he becomes isolated from his own community and his family without having attained his goal of opening himself up to the world.

The turning point in Sam's fight is his last talk with the pastor of the Mennonite Church. At that point, when he speaks his final two sentences to the pastor, Sam gives up all hope for success in his quest.

> Then his terrible bitterness lurched in him to hopeless conviction, "I think you are the Devil."
> The pastor smiled painfully. "Wouldn't 'servant of the Devil' be enough?"
> "No," he got himself to his feet and felt for the door. "Then you wouldn't have been so helpful - and understanding, right at the start." (Mountains, p. 178)

With the abandoning of his quest, Sam's physical death is only a matter of time. He sells the last remnant of farm life, the one cow they had. Now everything becomes mechanical. He takes the tractor apart, piece for piece, inside the "skeleton" of the unfinished hogbarn (Mountains, p. 178). Then he dies.

Emily appears on the verge of losing her mind after Sam's death. She feels guilt, subconsciously. She tries to burn down the hogbarn wall and after that she tries to put the tractor back together as if, by this action, she could bring Sam back to life. "she was trying to put together the tractor which, as Sam had dismantled it to the last screw, lay in neat patterns the length and breadth of the long aisle" (Mountains, p. 179). It is as if the tractor were crucified, as a symbol of mechanics and science attempting to save mankind from the ravages of nature; however, this mechanical "grace" cannot save Emily. Emily only returns to her senses when one of the few existential Christians, John Reimer, Sam's brother, is with her: "with him to help in time Emily's symptoms slackened and disappeared" (Mountains, p. 179). But her salvation is short-lived. Sam's testament leaves a great deal of money to her and the children, and also $5,000.00 to Sam's brother John. Emily immediately succumbs to hedonism, whereas John, as the reader hears in the final chapter (Mountains, p. 205), gives away his portion of the inheritance. Emily's spiritual death is symbolized at the end of Chapter Twelve by way of the dust,

a symbol of death, trailing behind her.

> It was a hot summer and there was too much dust to tell for certain whether she had moved to a Chrysler or a Cadillac, or Thunderbird. (Mountains, p. 180)

The chapter "The Vietnam Call of Samuel U. Reimer" is easily the most significant chapter in the book, but it also makes the most haunting and pessimistic statement about contemporary Christianity. The existential Christian life is shown as being on the verge of extinction. It is frightening to realize the extent to which mankind has become isolated from God or from man's spiritual centre, his soul. The final chapter brings important characters of the book together and helps to reinforce that view, albeit in a less humorous manner.

It matters little to the individual whether or not he is a Christian - even a heathen or an atheist needs something more than material goods and earthly pleasures. Sigmund Freud makes a point of this in his essay "The Future of an Illusion," in which he argues in favor of the values of civilization and forms a connection with the value of religious ideas. Some rules must be imposed on man to make life livable. Freud says: "the principal task of civilization, its actual raison d'etre, is to defend us against nature."[31] Freud argues that, as more and more laws of physics explain natural phenomena, man's helplessness against the acts of nature has to be overcome by some belief.

> The gods retain their threefold task: they must exorcise the terrors of nature, they must reconcile men to the cruelty of fate, particularly as it is shown in death, and they must compensate them for the sufferings and privations which a civilized life in common has imposed on them.[32]

The argument goes on to show that there is no proof of, or any compelling reason to believe, the authenticity of religious teachings, yet that there is a need for faith in something which has maintained religious teachings to this day and that a gnostic attitude ("as if") might be necessary. Freud's essay concludes:

> I am reminded of one of my children who was distinguished at an early age by a peculiarly marked matter-of-factness. When the children were being told a fairy story and were listening to it with rapt attention, he would come up and ask: "Is that a true story?" When he was told it was not, he would turn away with a look of disdain. We may expect that people will soon behave in the same way toward the fairy tales of religion, in spite of the advocacy of "As if." But at present they still behave quite differently; and in past times religious ideas, in spite of their incontrovertible lack of authentication, have exercised the strongest possible influence on mankind. This is a fresh psychological problem. We must ask where the inner force of those doctrines lies and to what it is that they owe their efficacy, independent as it is of recognition by reason.[33]

Rudy Wiebe, in contrast to Freud, feels that the "inner peace" and a "state of grace in God" are the final solution. That this is the way shown to man by the passion of Jesus of Nazareth - the only, unquestionable way - is the main theme

in all of Wiebe's novels. It is therefore surprising to find the intense pessimism in the final chapter of The Blue Mountains of China.

"On the Way" brings together a number of characters which the reader has met earlier in the novel. Their coming together signifies the end of the pilgrimage for the characters in this novel and suggests the continuing pilgrimage of mankind. We are all "on the way." All pieces fall into place, but only one Christ-figure remains: John Reimer. Unfortunately, with the final appearance of John Reimer the author again falls into the trap of didacticism. From near the top of page 215 to the top of page 216 in Mountains the reader is given a lecture about Jesus. It is, basically, a statement in favour of existential Christianity. "The church Jesus began is living, everywhere, a new society..." (Mountains, p. 215). This piece of optimism contrasts with John's remarks when he tries to explain why he walked with the cross.

> "So finally it seemed I should walk. But I did not want people to think me a hitchhiker going somewhere. I am not going anywhere; at least not in Canada.
> .....
> Just a tired, dying human being, walking the land." (Mountains, p. 225)

Dr. Elizabeth Cereno meets Jakob Friesen at the airport in Malton where she is asked to translate for him at the airline counter. They travel together to Calgary, and during the trip both become more closely acquainted. Dr. Cereno is Liesel Driediger from Paraguay, but there isn't much of a

Mennonite's character left in her. Her body is empty and her soul unfulfilled. Her dream of the pleasures of sex and a life in "freedom" has become a nightmare (Mountains, p. 196). She has come a long way from the innocent little girl who experienced her rites of passage on the ocean liner while crossing the equator on her way to Paraguay as part of a group of Mennonites.

Liesel is now a professor of linguistics but, strangely, she seems more isolated on her professional plateau than a Mennonite in a secluded colony. There are few people she can communicate with. She has also lost interest in helping others where there is no reward and in participating in any religious activities. She is no longer a believer. When she observes the "foreigner" (who is Jakob Friesen) in trouble with the airline counter personnel, she does not feel like helping.

> She didn't much relish getting up; Toronto International Airport no less and it would be doing well if at any given moment it could officially muster someone who spoke French; a few years ago she would already have been over there - she smiled; admit ten. In any case too long now to glory in her knowledge, at least unless the helplessness reversed to smiling gratitude;... (Mountains, p. 181)

Nevertheless, Liesel tries to understand Jakob Friesen and shows sympathy toward him later on. He seems to be able, by his sheer presence, to unfreeze her isolation and cause her to have a "Woat derchfaul" (Mountains, p. 190) or "Wort-Durchfall" (diarrhea of words).

Both Jakob Friesen and Liesel Driediger no longer profess to believe in the value and importance of God's grace or in the creed of the Mennonites. While Liesel speaks to Jakob on the airplane in Lowgerman, he continues answering in Russian for quite some time. It seems strangely paradoxical when Jakob answers to Liesel's observation that he looks very strong for his age.

> "Yes, I have a strong body. That is why I survived. And because I believe nothing."
> "You believe...", for an instant she doubted her knowledge of the word.
> "Yes. Like you, I have no longer anything with the Mennonites."
> .....
> despite his lifetime wandering there was for him still only one thing to believe or not to believe. Well, she did not believe it any more either. In that one and only way. (Mountains, p. 193)

This passage opens the door to a possible salvation for both Liesel and Jakob, because the grace of God is not, as the author has made quite clear throughout this novel, restricted to "that one and only way" but can be found inside anyone who can accept the final main statement of John Reimer which is quite dramatic. After Jakob Friesen's repeated remarks that praying and believing had helped nothing, and as "a wind moved high in the trees" (a sign of the presence of the spirit world), John Reimer says;

> "Surely even then I could know, as I know now, that as long as I am alive the possibility can never be completely closed that God is good."
> "Ah-h-h. If there is one."
> "That possibility cannot be closed either." (Mountains, pp. 225-226)

This is basically an agnostic statement, and it comes close to the "as if" position as quoted from Sigmund Freud's essay earlier in this thesis. It is not a very positive statement in the face of what the reader sees of mankind as it parades through the book. It cannot be because so few existential Christians are alive in the mass of "nominal Christians" that their possible influence on mankind must be questioned.

The newspaper report of John Reimer's pilgrimage with the wooden cross implies that John is doing penance for the general loss of faith of mankind. John is the symbol of the ideal Christian. He cares not for money, he cares not if people curse him or laugh at him, but he is prepared to demonstrate for anyone how a Christian should live during the human journey on earth. This is juxtaposed with the appearance of the "establishment" Christians who are Mennonites in name only, the wealthy Willms family whose members have even changed their names to "Williams" to obscure their Mennonite heritage and to be more acceptable to the establishment. This technique of juxtaposing two radically different viewpoints in order to encourage the reader to draw his own conclusions, although there can be no doubt where the author's sympathies lie, is vastly superior to the moralizing which permeates the earlier novels. Wiebe makes increasing use of this technique in his later novels, to good advantage.

John Reimer is immediately attacked by the establishment, as all true Christians are inevitably attacked by

those who might rule the material world, even though they all are (except for the motor-cycle gang members) or were, at one time, Mennonites. Dennis Willms sees in the wooden cross an "ugly wood tilted against the bank" (Mountains, p. 203).

> Dennis spoke rapidly, in Lowgerman, "Reimer, what is this dummheit [foolishness] running across the country, like that? Attracting bike rifraff and such like vultures to os [us], a Mennonite talking to newspapers about it. What's the matter with you?" (Mountains, p. 204)

Obviously, these Mennonites are worlds apart. The next two pages (205-206) show the gap even more clearly. Some Mennonites have now become "respectable" millionaires. Being a Mennonite alone is no longer respectable, it seems. During all this arguing, John Reimer remains calm but saddened by his experience.

On pages 207 to 212 of this novel the Mennonite families are brought together, assembled in a ditch of the highway between Calgary and Edmonton, and it is explained how they are all related. This is almost like reading a history book on the Mennonite movement. Rudy Wiebe employs a very effective technique here. The reader is led from one conversation to another as if walking between the various groups of people who talk about different things simultaneously. The reader hears part of one conversation, then is switched to part of another. From these conversations there is implied the common history of man, that is to say, we are

all brothers and sisters, the *halunk* [rascal] in the ditch and the millionaire in the Cadillac alike. What man will be ultimately judged by is not what material status he has achieved on earth but how he has lived his life. The Willms family has suffered spiritual death, and physical death may not be far away. Just as it was implied with the dust trailing behind the new car of the widow of Samuel U. Reimer, it is implied at the departure of the Willm's Cadillac.

> "Na, we'll see you on our way back, in a couple of days, Charles."
> "Who knows," and he raised his hand in greeting as the car murmured, leaving him open across the black pavement to the valley and the mountains against the flaming sky, his hand raised in farewell as if he knew already before Edmonton Charles would find out more than he ever dreamed of driving the Cadillac much too much over the speed limit, could already hear the sirens trying to wedge a way before them into the darkness, could already see the bright lights of the hospital: that would not be nearly bright enough. (*Mountains*, p. 217)

The futility of striving for riches and a "better" life is beautifully expressed by John Reimer near the end of the novel. After Jakob Friesen has asked him why he did not keep going west, John says,

> "The mountains. They look so nice, I thought sitting on those hills outside Calgary, almost like a new world, sharp, beautiful, clean. But usually when you

> get over there's always more of what you climbed to get away from. So one morning I started north." (Mountains, pp. 226-227)

This passage closes the circle in that it refers back to the title of the book and the trials of the older generation of Mennonites in their various attempts to escape from communist Russia. The blue mountains of China were also beckoning, but peace was not to be found after those Mennonites who succeeded in their escape had crossed over them. Their struggle continued in a different way, but life will always be a struggle. There is no escape.

In The Blue Mountains of China the author succeeds in a masterful fashion in tying mankind to the pilgrimage of the Mennonite "tribes" who wished they could be like Jews. One may perhaps be able to identify with those Mennonites as our civilization is going through upheavals and revolutions which continuously create problems with refugees. Almost every day there is news of people trying to flee a country or a region. Refugees abound, and so do refugee camps filled with uprooted people who are losing all hope in a future for themselves and their children. All of mankind is looking for a promised land, but few look inside themselves. Also, few are willing to sacrifice themselves for their brothers and sisters or are prepared to be faithful to their kin beyond death. It is truly a history of man, what Rudy Wiebe has created here, and it is perhaps his best novel.

Chapter Five

I Gave Them My Hand as a Brother

It is not quite so easy for the reader to identify with the Canadian Indians for their fate is quite different from what we are accustomed to. Rudy Wiebe's novel, The Temptations of Big Bear, may very well be more difficult to grasp for that reason. With this next novel the author leaves the Mennonite community and opens his view to a wider world. John Reimer walks the land. He knows the grass and he can feel it as he walks upon it. He is close to nature. He hears the leaves rustle, the coyote howl, and the birds sing. John Reimer was once in a Mennonite mission in Paraguay, working with the Ayerooa Indians, trying to learn about them and their customs and how they live with nature instead of fighting it. This is what the reader will find in The Temptations of Big Bear: an attempt to understand the Canadian Indians and their world which is so close to us, and yet so remote from our sensibilities. This is still another pilgrimage of the oppressed minorities.

In The Blue Mountains of China, the Mennonites' quest for the promised land in the face of continued persecution is the root cause for their pilgrimage. In The Temptations of Big Bear it is the plight of the Canadian Indian, who is being pushed off his land by the white man, which leads to a pilgrimage of the oppressed. The Indians' land and their spiritual heritage are being threatened by the colonists and

soldiers who have no respect for the land or for nature's precarious balance, and who have little sympathy with Indian culture because they have no understanding of it.

The epigraph to The Temptations of Big Bear is taken from the New Testament (Acts 17) and is an indication of the concerns in this novel. The quotation is not exact. The Gideon Bible shows it the following way:

> 24 God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands;
> 25 Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things;
> 26 And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation;
> 27 That they should seek the Lord, if happly they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us:
> 28 For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.

Wiebe has used the following lines for the epigraph in The Temptations of Big Bear:

> God who made the world and all that is in it, from one blood created every race of men to live over the face of the whole earth. He has fixed the times of their existence and the limits of their territory, so that they should search for God and, it might be, feel after him, and find him. And indeed, he is not far from any of us, for in him we live, and move, and have our being.
>
> Acts 17

This indicates that the novel's main concern will be with the importance of the land as a gift from God to all the people on this earth (that is, all the races are from one blood, and their territory is limited to this earth to be shared equally) and with man's need to search for God's grace. An interview by George Melnyk with Rudy Wiebe serves to re-inforce that view.

> I. The land means a lot to you, doesn't it?
> W. Yes it does, that's my tradition,
> .....
> I. Have you learned anything from the Indian consciousness of the land?
> W. One very beautiful thing about the Indian people is their belief that the land was given to everyone. As Big Bear in my latest novel says when the commissioner offers him a section for every five members of his family "from whom am I going to receive the land."
> The concept of receiving the land boggles the Indian mind. This is also a basic Christian belief - that the land is a gift of God! It's not something to hang on to. The land and what it produces you don't make - the seed, the rain, the sun. You are thankful for what it does. You don't push it around; you work with it ...[34]

Historical facts provide the basis for the novel, and fiction is the vehicle which makes the facts come alive in flesh and blood characters. There is also a significant departure from the usual accounts about the tough life in the "wild" West inasmuch as this novel in its main parts is told from the viewpoint of the Indian rather than that of the pioneer-settler. Within this framework the author

remains deeply committed to his theological views, but now he leaves the narrow confines of Christianity in order to encompass all peoples who are capable of spiritual beliefs and are striving for a communion with the god of their choice in harmony with their heritage.

This book opens new vistas, also, on the social and political consequences of racism. While in Peace Shall Destroy Many and The Blue Mountains of China racism is expressed only in terms of discrimination by the Mennonite communities against Metis and Russian peasants respectively, in The Temptations of Big Bear the reader becomes acquainted with the broader implications of racism. The "inferior" race, as perceived by the white colonists, lends itself easily to exploitation in an economical and political sense. A good example is the ploy of "giving" the Indians portions of land as "reservations" while simultaneously destroying their heritage and livelihood as nomadic hunters who cannot be confined to parcels of land designed for farming purposes. The Indian had never been a successful farmer, and the young braves cannot find any heroism in farming. The dangers posed by this divergence between the philosophy of the white man and that of the Indians are expressed in several instances in the book. For example, it is expressed in the thoughts of missionary John McDougall about the possibilities of having a lasting peace between the Indians and the colonists. "All the plains chiefs understood now; only white men could protect them from the American whisky

runners; the chiefs listened. But there were always the savage young men astride their beautiful horses. They wanted glory."[35] It is stated again explicitly by Big Bear at Frog Lake as he tries to warn the white traders of impending violence:

> "No young men can talk and dance forever, just listening to what others did. That is not strange, for it is in the nature of young men to do dangerous things. It is strange, unless we shoot someone nobody hears us. Whenever somewhere there is killing, suddenly doors with food behind them open and open. That is strange." (Bear, p. 227)

Wiebe's fourth novel also makes a statement against institutionalized Christianity and Puritanism. This is, perhaps, due to the author's closeness to the land and to nature and the emphasis he places constantly in all his writings on the importance of the individual as opposed to institutions. John McDougall's recollections, in that they presuppose that only the white man's prayers are answered to his advantage, can be taken as an example of the prejudice of the Christian missionary.

> The prayers that concluded every meeting I had with the prairie bands in 1874 - they prayed in their fashion as fervently as I; most whites find it impossible to imagine how deeply every Indian action is rooted in his, albeit almost completely false and most tragically limited, faith in The Great Spirit - were so movingly answered. The Queen's law had come, what could I say? (Bear, p. 42)

The "Queen's law," as the reader learns in the book, works entirely in the white man's favor and helps to destroy the

Indians' heritage. The Indian is confronted with the big stick of annihilating war and the sugar-pill of the white man's welfare handouts. This is not much of a choice.

The predilection of so-called Christian nations for conquest, subversion, and eventual destruction of opposing religions and cultures, particularly in past history, stands in stark contrast to various other religious groups who do not have missionaries and show no appetite for converting others. Even the policies of the Roman empire in its days of glory were remarkably different. Ancient Roman rulers tried to extract allegiance from the conquered peoples by allowing them to maintain their spiritual practices. The Romans often even included the gods of conquered nations in the Roman temples so that everyone could find something of his heritage in Rome.

> Rome, the capital of a great monarchy, was incessantly filled with subjects and strangers from every part of the world, who all introduced and enjoyed the favourite superstitions of their native country. Every city in the empire was justified in maintaining the purity of its ancient ceremonies;[36]

It cannot escape the reader's attention that all positively projected missionaries and existential Christians who appear in Wiebe's novels are those who do not attempt to cajole unbelievers into being baptised. This was true of Josh Bishop in Candle and John Reimer at the Paraguayan mission in Mountains. How low in the white man's esteem institutionalized Christianity has sunk is reflected in a

passage in Edgar Dewdney's letter to Sir John: "The Blackfoot Confederacy we can keep perfectly under control with priests and police agents" (Bear, p. 122).

Big Bear declines to accept baptism (Bear, p. 402) for he recognizes it as a purely external symbol of Christianity. He is part of the land and the spirit world and needs no stamp of approval by institutionalized Christianity. Just as Samuel U. Reiner eventually rejects the institutions of the Mennonite Church and calmly proclaims that one of the ministers of that church is the devil incarnate, so Big Bear rejects institutionalized religion in favour of the pure faith and pure life, untainted by bureaucracies. He simply wants to go home to his world and back to the earth. A similar statement is made in The Scorched-Wood People where the Catholic priests, symbols of a church organization, abandon Louis Riel in his hour of need and cross over to Riel's enemies. Clearly, institutionalized religion is not supportive of the free spirit of the existential Christian. As a consequence of this, this kind of religion is in decline to-day. As Rudy Wiebe said in his interview with Donald Cameron: "Jesus Christ had no use for the social and political structures of his day; he came to supplant them."[37] The implication is that, if Christianity is to survive, it must return to the way of Jesus Christ.

The Temptations of Big Bear sticks closely to historical data. By repeatedly returning to historic facts, even

to the point of quoting the text of some letters and speeches verbatim from historical records, particularly in the court proceedings against Big Bear, the novel keeps reminding the reader that it is not a totally fictional story. The intensely existentialist-religious character of Big Bear is the hero in this novel. Unlike in any other of his novels, Rudy Wiebe has succeeded here in portraying what in his own mind must be the ideal human character.

The author uses a variety of prose styles in this novel to good effect. We have the blunt, and then the humorous, reporting as for example, in Chapter Four, Part One, and Chapter Five, Part Five respectively. Then there is the stream-of-consciousness technique which is known from two previous novels and which is further refined here. There are numerous narrative voices which help to shift the reader's attention between scenes of conflict on the one hand and Big Bear's visions of the past and future of the Indian nation in particular and mankind in general on the other. The author's excellent use of language and his technique of changing the tone from character to character convey the feelings of these people particularly well.

Governor Morris can only talk in "law and order" terms. He has little room for humor and does not even try to understand the Indian's apprehension about the white man's law. Morris repeats and repeats what has been said before (Bear, pp. 17-35). When Big Bear makes the simple statement that "The White Queen is - a woman" (Bear, p. 21), which

produces laughter amongst the Indians, Governor Morris neither shows understanding for the status of women in the Indian culture, nor tries to overcome the tense moment with some witticism. He is simply insulted. "Tell that - that - I didn't come here to have my Sovereign Queen insulted by some big-mouth savage" (Bear, p. 22). This contrasts with Big Bear's depth of feeling and understanding whenever he speaks or when the reader gains access to his thoughts.

In Chapter Five, Big Bear's simple act of urinating, as observed by Kitty McLean, reveals a profound understanding of nature and the importance of the number four in paganism by Big Bear.

> - Big Bear stood half-turned against a bush, an arch of golden water curving from him in the sunlight, joining him to the creek, ...
> "That feels good," he said, not smiling; "to embrace the whole earth in one flowing stream."
> .....
> "A good life should be told in four parts, like everything is four in the life of a person. The first is to be a child, the second a man proving himself, the third to be known to your band as a good man. And the fourth, if The Only One gives it, is to be known to all the People, everywhere; and honoured..." (Bear, p. 290)

It is somewhat strange how Wiebe's metaphor for peace, "the mighty inner river," connects Big Bear with the world. It is, nevertheless, a valid expression inasmuch as understanding, spiritualism, and self-sacrifice meet and combine in the hero of this novel, Big Bear, as in no other character of any other of Wiebe's novels.

Wiebe's fourth novel is basically a prose elegy which laments the inescapable death of the Indian culture. Big Bear is painfully aware of the Indian's desperate situation throughout the novel. He tries to follow a path between confrontation and negotiation, but without the use of overt violence, although violence is one of Big Bear's temptations: the other one being total resignation, loss of faith in "The Only One," and his abandoning of his people. Big Bear does not succeed in his quest, and the pilgrimage of his people ends in failure and defeat, but he never abandons his faith, his cultural background, or his people. During the events Big Bear behaves more like a follower of Jesus than a pagan.

The novel needs to be very carefully read to gain a proper understanding of it. It is virtually a kaleidoscope of stories told by different characters, covering the period between 1876 and 1888. Chapter One bears the title: "Fort Pitt, September 13, 1876," and is devoted to the effort undertaken by the government of Canada, represented by Governor Morris, to extinguish all native rights, "finally and forever," to several hundred thousand square miles of land. Gabriel Dumont's name is mentioned in this chapter, and Big Bear makes his grand entrance. It is the classic confrontation between proud Indian and calculating white man. Neither understands the other.

It is obvious that Big Bear wants to negotiate and talk, whereas Morris simply wants Big Bear's approval for

everything which was designed and decided in advance in distant Ottawa. Big Bear wants a fair deal for his people while the governor is only interested in completing his job so that he can go home to his familiar, stuffy, Victorian surroundings with a sense of having served his Sovereign well. When Governor Morris says to the assembled Indians: "We have come together and understand each other" (Bear, p. 18), it sounds like a bad joke. The reader learns about the governor's real character when he enters into his thought processes:

> A wild people coming in kindness. If there was some way this scene, the feeling of this world could be captured for the Prime Minister. Or even for the Court in - that was too much; what could such crudities, such make-shift jumble, indeed, such stench mean to highbred sensibilities. (Bear, p. 18)

This is contrasted skillfully with the Indian's down-to-earth oneness with nature, described symbolically earlier, in the scene of the Indian's approach.

> ...each horse and rider seemed to hang still on the open ridge slanting to a cusp of poplars down, behind a fold in the earth. One by one, as if on parade, in single file they moved and when the lead horse with its moulded rider merged down into the trees even the seeming motion disappeared in relation to itself, in relation to the sky, the sage gleam of the river, the green land now tinged brown and gold in the September sun
>
> .....
>
> a flicker of motion downward from the notch of blue sky, downward into the earth beyond the water. (Bear, pp. 15-16)

The contrast and lack of understanding between the white man and the Indian could hardly be described in better terms than it is done in this opening chapter.

Inserted between Governor Morris's departure and a description of life in Big Bear's camp which ends in Big Bear's oracle-like vision of impending doom is a section which consists of the recollection of missionary John McDougall. This structuring of the opening chapter in four parts permits the reader to immerse himself in a rounded-out sequence of events viewed from various angles. First the clerk, then Governor Morris and the encounter with the Indians, then the situation from a missionary's point of view, and, finally, the Indians' viewpoint. Big Bear, in the tale which he presents to a circle of warriors and friends, predicts the outcome of the Indians' struggle with the white man and the white man's law. He also intends it as a warning for his compatriots.

> Then in front of me I saw a shape, and another beside it, and another until I saw six coming towards me; at first they seemed coming far away like out of a long thin hole in the ground but soon they were close enough I could see heads and bodies and legs, and then I saw they were People. They were stiff up and down and they wore black clothes like Whiteskins but I could see they were River People. Those were River People, their hands behind their backs and their heads twisted to the side as if their spirits had been jerked out at their necks and their necks frozen. They did not seem to be standing, they just were there in a row coming closer and turning a little as if air turned them. I could see the circle like a burn around each crooked neck and their faces were

> swollen thick full of blood and I could not recognize anyone. But it seemed to me I knew each one of them. (Bear, p. 65)

This passage is very effective as an oracle and prepares the reader for the closing of the novel.

"Between the Forks and the Missouri" (Chapter Two) covers the time span between 1878 and 1882. There are six parts to this chapter. The first part is very short and represents an accounting of the whiteman's "victory" in so many dollars per head for so many square miles, as recorded by David Laird. The second part describes an Indian horse-raid which contrasts what is of vital importance to the Indian over against what the white man finds important. Kingbird, one of Big Bear's sons, proves himself to be a Worthy Young Man by succeeding in taking two good horses from a camp of Siksikas. This is interrupted by a recollection of events seen from the memory of North West Mounted Police Colonel A. G. Irvine concerning Big Bear's interference with government surveyors near Medicine Hat in 1878. Part Two of Chapter Two ends with an account of the event as seen by Big Bear's tribe. It differs significantly from an earlier account of the events by Colonel Irvine (Bear, p. 87). Each side claims to have won the argument.

The third part in Chapter Two describes a council of Chiefs in Big Bear's camp. Big Bear tries to convince Chief Sitting Bull from the Sioux, Chief Crowfoot from the Blackfeet, and Gabriel Dumont, that they must unite to

negotiate a better treaty with the white man from a position of strength. However, Crowfoot is eager to co-operate with the white man, and Sitting Bull has been too disappointed by the white people to think of negotiations. He advocates racism in reverse when he says:

> "The police chiefs I know are all good straight men; they share their food with me always when I have none, they punish whites for the same things they punish us, in the same way. They are straight men. But, they are white." (Bear, p. 102)

The divergences between the three chiefs are too great, and no agreement can be reached.

The fourth part consists of quotations from a private letter from Edgar Dewdney, The Indian Commissioner, to Sir John A. Macdonald. It describes in a "matter-of-fact" style what the Indians' problems are and how they affect the white man's policies from a politician's point of view. It also presents the reader with a good analysis of Big Bear's mind made by an outside observer. Part Five switches back to Big Bear and describes the last buffalo-hunt from the Indian's point of view. It is a sad comment on the end of an era and contains another one of Big Bear's premonitions of what lies ahead. He sees a fountain of red blood shooting up from the ground, unstoppable (Bear, p. 130). Violence will come and blood will be shed, but his statement that "I didn't feel a rope" (Bear, p. 131) signifies that Big Bear himself will not perish at the white man's hand.

In Part Six, the last part of Chapter Two, Big Bear's

thoughts describe how he sees the white man's warriors: "his men stood in soldier's straight lines like poles getting screamed at in front of the pole with the Grandmother's rag on it:" (Bear, p. 133). Big Bear must finally admit defeat for he cannot see anything other than hardship and whiteman's machinery, soldiers, and settlers in the future. He signs the treaty on the eighth day of December 1882 at Fort Walsh in the Cypress Hills.

The first two chapters of The Temptations of Big Bear establish the pattern for the remainder of the book. Chapter Three starts with a statement by the North West Mounted Police; it then moves into the spiritual world of the Indian with the description of Big Bear's "Thirst Dance." This is followed again by police observations concerning the mishandling of farm instructor Craig by an Indian and their apprehensions about the thirst dance and the arrest they will have to make. Then Big Bear makes his last important speech to the tribes. He is at the height of his power which he is soon to lose. His young warriors are determined to wage war against the white man and will ignore Big Bear's advice.

Chapter Four opens with police reports and political infighting concerning the Indian situation. It continues with a description of life at the community of Frog Lake and in Big Bear's band, camped nearby, as news arrives about Dumont and Riel fighting at Duck Lake. This is the turning point in the novel. Big Bear loses control over his young

warriors and power over his tribe. Fighting begins, even though Big Bear is doing his best in trying to prevent it. The violence started by the Battlers, the young Indian warriors who decide to fight the white man, results in the death of nine of the white settlers and merchants at Frog Lake and in the hostage taking of the remaining population.

In Chapter Five the experiences of the white hostages in Indian camps are juxtaposed with the first attempts of the white authorities to re-establish their control over the Indians. It contains the humorous account of "A Canadian Volunteer" who describes the lumbering foray executed by the Alberta Field Force commandeered by Major-General T. Bland Strange, whose exploits are strange indeed.

The final chapter brings the conclusion of the story with the trial of Chief Big Bear at Regina, his conviction, incarceration at Stony Mountain Penitentiary in Manitoba, and his final return to the earth as he becomes an integral part of it in the shape of a rock. This final chapter reinforces the dual theme which runs through the whole novel: the value of the existential life which the Indians are leading, and the incredible isolation the Indian people are suffering in what, after all, used to be their own homeland. The author had expressed his concern about this in the Cameron interview where this fourth novel was discussed prior to its publication.

> "I'm working at it from the point of view of what happened to the Indians at that time, which is really quite different from what happened to the Metis,

> especially one like Riel, who was educated as a white man and who never felt this total kind of alienation, you know, of a totally foreign group moving in and taking all his land away. Riel was trained in church schools in Quebec, he was still a French Canadian, he still had friends there, he still spoke the language, he could still communicate well in English. But the Indians? I mean, heck - nothing, nothing. [38]

In the final chapter this total isolation of the Indians becomes patently obvious. Big Bear makes use of the fact that he did not wear war-paint as a defense against the accusation that he waged war against the Crown. Such a point would be important for an Indian. It means nothing to the white man, and none of Big Bear's peers are included on the jury which is to judge him guilty or innocent. Big Bear's final plea for forgiveness and for help for his brethren - he is not at all concerned about his own fate - falls on deaf ears.

> "I ask the court to print my words and scatter them among White People. That is my defence!"
> "Next," Richardson said, "Next!" Hammering. (Bear, p. 400)

The accounts which follow (i.e. press reports of interviews with Big Bear) serve to underscore this terrible isolation and alienation of the Indian.

The significantly different approach which the author takes in this novel - in contrast to his earlier ones - concerning the problems of isolation, the difficulties in living an existential Christian life, and the problems inherent in the attempts to accept or avoid violence bears

closer scrutiny. All these problems are treated in the context of the subjugation of the Indian under the white man's rule. Obviously, the Indian cannot move to a different country as the Mennonites in The Blue Mountains of China were able to do. The Indians' pilgrimage is an internal one and they have to solve their problems, isolated as they are, between the two extremes of violence and submissiveness. But even negotiation, the "middle of the road" approach which Big Bear advocates, is blocked due to the remoteness of the white power centres. It is a typical no-win situation for the Indians.

The isolation motif manifests itself in the earlier mentioned technique of juxtaposing the Indian's and the white man's interpretations of events as they happen. For example, in Chapter Two, when Big Bear tries to stop white surveyors from measuring the land at the South Saskatchewan near what is now known as Medicine Hat, he is confronted by the police and his archenemies, the Bloods and Siksikas. Big Bear has no recourse to any courts of law to fight on the white man's level, but he is forced to give in to whatever is being done, rightly or wrongly. In the Indian camp it is nevertheless celebrated as a "great negotiated triumph."

> The thirtysix police would return to Fort Walsh, the surveyors return to Battleford for winter, the Indians disperse; Big Bear would settle the matter with the Governor when the leaves came out. The Governor was to bring him some other messages from the Grandmother and her Councillors at that time anyway. (Bear, pp.89-90)

This differs considerably from the viewpoint of Colonel A. G. Irvine who reports,

> ...so when Big Bear saw this courier hand papers to the surveyors and saw the Blood chief and his brave beside me, it occurred to him that there was a concerted action between the Bloods, Siksikas and police to attack him, and he calmly and submissively consented to allow the surveyors to go on with their work; and they never afterwards were interfered with by any of the Indian tribes. (Bear, p. 87)

Another example of isolation, and a particularly pitiful one, is the futile attempts by Big Bear to talk to the highest white authority and get a better deal from a treaty for his people. The reader knows from earlier accounts (in Chapter One) of the chain of command and the general political structure of the white man's authority, which will not permit such an approach, even if Big Bear were capable of uniting the various Indian tribes. Big Bear is tilting at windmills.

> "What I see is this: I speak out to one white man, and there is always one higher. I speak for my band as a chief speaks for his people when they have decided, but the Whiteskin I speak to isn't like that. Even the Governor, or the one who came talking so loud and fast from Ottawa and left before the first snow would freeze his shining skin, there is always one higher whom I never see. This is the thought that has come to me: who wastes a bullet on a tail when he knows that sticking out at some other end there could be a head with bear's teeth? It is time to see that one Whiteskin <u>than whom there is none higher</u>! (Bear, p. 197)

The hopelessness of the Indians' alienation is further

amplified by what appears to be a type of war propaganda uttered by Little Poplar as he proclaims himself war-chief.

> He had made some big police jump, he declained, and after a few days rest it would be time to kill all the Whiteskins: first in Battleford and then Prince Albert. At that place he knew there were big boats to go down the river and across the lake to Winnipeg and when every white there was killed they would go on the Iron Road to the east and kill every one there too, especially the man who was the Master of the Government. After that no white from anywhere, even the Grandmother, would want to come and take land away from the People; if anyone did, he would easily be killed as well. For himself, he had never thought very highly of the old fat Grandmother anyway; he declared the Americans laughed at her and they had more to eat than anyone. (Bear, p. 303)

The reader knows, of course, that for the Canadian volunteers, police, and General T. Bland Strange all this was only a minor engagement and, perhaps, even fun. There was no way for Little Poplar to realize his ambitions.

The existentialist motif is rooted in the life of the Indians who live in accord with nature. The author uses color symbolism to draw attention to the Indian's closeness to nature and to Big Bear's closeness to "The Only One." The first example of this is shown on pp. 15 and 16 of the book and was quoted earlier in this chapter. "The green land now tinged brown and gold in the September sun" indicates the communion between natural life (green), earthly roots (brown), and the mystic aspect of the sun (gold) which is important in Indian paganism.

An Indian camp from which Indians are riding out for a buffalo scouting mission is depicted in a colorful passage similar to a Paul Kane painting:

> The grass shimmered in the morning air along the line between sky and land. Out of that line the lodges developed, another feature of the land forming against space, against shouldered hills and an ultimate suggestion of mountains. But more ancient than the blue-green hills were these lodges, their weathered poles reaching swallowtail through smoke-blackened vents, out from the smoke grey and rubbed white of their base clutching at, rooted down squatly into the earth. From the scattered grey and whitish line a shape spread, dark and gradually bumbling up until it broke apart, flaring wide into pieces whose running sound was the beating of the earth itself as they grew larger, gigantic, their shadows passing over like hawks or eagles. Horses and men drumming over the land. (Bear, pp. 123-124)

This passage presents a masterpiece in powerful literary description or literary painting. The colors suggest not only the Indian's closeness to the earth but also his spirituality through the line between sky and land and the suggestion of mountains and blue-green hills.

Kitty McLean, while in captivity in Big Bear's camp, comes closest of all white people to an understanding of Big Bear's world. When Big Bear tells her the story of "Bitter Spirit," a story which predicts the ending of the novel where Big Bear is transformed into eternal rock at the Sand Hills, she achieves a kind of spiritual union with the chief.

> She was beside him in fiery warm

> clothes, listening intently, her hair blonder then and not frizzed as it was later but very long and loosened as though incandescent about her shoulders and down her back; he squatting on his heels, she almost pulled together under that worn blanket. Two tiny figures on sand and surrounded by light. (Bear, p. 315)

The colors in that passage suggest spirituality. The "incandescent" blond hair suggests the color gold, and the two figures "surrounded by light" suggest a state of grace.

The description of the land and the weather at Turtle Lake, the final camp of Big Bear's band prior to the chief's surrender, is a colorful premonition of impending doom and signifies the end of the existential life for Big Bear, at least the end to his dreams and wishes as to the possible continuation of the existential life he and his band were able to live in the past. There is a blackness to the clouds which are "streaked with dirt," and the cloud formation together with the "blackish and purple columns" of trees forms the shape of a scaffold, suggestive of a gallows.

> West above the centre of Turtle Lake the clouds were heaped in bright flounces, foam streaked with dirt, but below that they seemed supported by a horizontal wedge faintly brownish-yellow like a long polished stone anchored at its tapered end in a thin spit of trees on the curve of beach to the north and at its broader end by the opposite, even thinner, shore. Between this stone and the fading shore rose stubby blackish and purple columns, sheathed in changing grey on their inner curves, interlaced bars and beams like an immense neglected scaffold hurled over the water and sometimes lightning split through those beams into the lake; then they could hear the sound of it too, as of gigantic

> construction going on there which would never be completed in time. (Bear, pp. 328-329)

The problem of violence is treated in this novel as something people live with rather than argue about as was the case in the earlier novels. Violence and killing are presented as part of the Indians' community life, but so is sacrifice, and there is even an example of pacifism.

The reader learns of the bloody battles between the various Indian tribes and of horse-raids during which human life is not spared. However, it is not wanton killing but a demonstration of personal bravery by Indian warriors who must prove themselves in that way and who willingly risk their lives. After the war against the white man is lost and Big Bear reminisces about past heroic deeds in the camp at Turtle Lake, the story of one of those Indian battles is told by Big Bear.

> Above them we yelled in Blackfoot "We are here!" and galloped down those coulees clean and came out bloody on the river bank
> .....
> one big woman on the bank killed three warriors with her axe and her right arm was shot away and she picked up the bloody axe in the hand she had left and killed Blackstone too, in the middle of his song, before Little Bad Man opened her with his knife from behind and let her great spirit go.
> .....
> Bear Son stayed behind his horse and killed a Piegan and smashed his empty gun into a Blood's face, breaking it Hey-Hey-Hey-Hey, and jumped on his grey horse and rode after us,
> .....
> The river's all blood! blood! .....
> (Bear, pp. 344-346)

In all its fierceness, the description of this battle does not evoke disgust. It somehow seems so much part of the Indian's life and part of nature's violence that it becomes acceptable to the reader. It does not have the objectionable connotation of the comment on Herb Unger's "flying warplanes and killing people" in Peace Shall Destory Many.

Further, this violence is balanced against Big Bear's attempts to negotiate with the white man rather than fight him and against an example of pacifism within the Indian ranks, reminiscent of David Epp's sacrifice and Samuel U. Reimer's failed attempt to proclaim peace in Vietnam in The Blue Mountains of China.

> He recalled the great sons of the people and how they had fought at Belly River and the Ochre Hills and Ribstone Hill and then the greatest of all, Broken Arm, the terror of the Blackfeet until he was given the vision of peace for all men like a giant bird rising as fire crowns a spruce and had never fought again, though at last the cowardly Blackfeet cut him down when he walked unarmed and alone into their war camp to speak for his sickened People. (Bear, p. 184)

There is also an example of the suffering of the innocent which is always part of any war or revolution. Cut Arm - an Indian of whom Mr. McLean says "Cut Arm hasn't done anything criminal, and he's had about enough" - is felled by a stray bullet as Kitty McLean watches.

> But then she was startled into dawn by shouts growing louder, by Cut Arm leaping from his blanket and saw his

> brown body jerk and collapse just beyond the flap. Dead before either of his wives could shriek. (Bear, p. 307)

The rights and wrongs of human sexuality are expressed in numerous passages in this novel. In the case of the Indians sex is consistently connected with the existential life of a people close to nature. In the case of the white man it is frequently connected with perversity. Big Bear is concerned with the white man's restlessness and constant forging ahead, and he wonders if only an Indian woman could stop him.

> Whites were only certain in changing; unless they took an Indian woman and she dragged him to a stop - maybe the only way to hold them tight was by the penis? - they kept on wanting some thing here or there and then another and wanting to change still another forever that kept them running forever and frantic. (Bear, p. 101)

John Delaney's fornication with Kingbird's wife "Sits Green On The Earth" has some similarities with the sexual encounter of Jakob Friesen's son with a Russian peasant girl in The Blue Mountains of China. Although Delaney is nowhere near as violent as Jakob Friesen, the underlying Jungian psychology is the same. Delaney is frustrated by his white Ontario wife's puritan attitudes towards sex. He expresses his alienation from the natural world due to sexual and emotional frustrations by making love to "Sits Green On The Earth" and muttering obscenities constantly during the act.

> An extraordinary feeling broke up in him: to say to her "Listen!" and then talk, endlessly, as long as he dared, knowing she did not comprehend a sylla-

> ble of the fly-blown obscenity he was laying over her... (Bear, pp. 233-234)

The whole paragraph as it appears in the book is a condemning criticism of puritanism and structured, institutionalized religion, and of the isolation from existential life which it causes for its adherents.

Delaney's sexual experience stands in constrast to the existential sexuality in unison with nature in Kingbird's world. This is seen as Kingbird fondles his father's mare.

> He was ... beside her, rubbing her ears. She nuzzled him and slobbered softly against the naked skin of his belly
> .....
> Kingbird liked the mare's lips on his skin; he liked her warmth, the press of her teeth against him.
> .....
> Above him hung the great barrel of the horse's belly, breathing, her lips against his neck. He lifted himself erect slowly, his left hand along her back to her loin, his right gently up the curve of her belly, back between her hind legs. His hand could sense the warmth of them before he touched them, a firm warmth like brushing against his mother, and then his fingertips touched her teat and her nose bumped, bumped on his buttocks. Not hard; like nudging her colt, so he lifted his hand under her again.
> .....
> his right hand moved ever higher; up under the tail he felt lifted to him. Lightly down the inner fold of her, and then he brushed her at her soft root. She stood rigid, shimmering, and under his left hand lowered still, widened immensely down and apart as his left hand circled, cupped the thick smooth base of her tail, down as if she planted and set herself down into the very earth
> .....
> Then his right fingers brushed a damp fold, slipped, and his left arm collapsed, he fell through it as if

> split, his right plunging by a membrane with a brush softer than sweetgrass down into a hot, boundless, swirling swamp. The mare screamed brilliantly. (Bear, pp. 53-55)

Even the rape of an Indian girl by Kingbird's half brother Little Bad Man, which Kingbird observes after his play with the mare, does not appear as an unnatural act.

> Slowly Little Band Man's great chest and head tilted forward, still heaving, where his arms reached and then Kingbird saw a shape on the ground over which he was curled, thrusting against.
> .....
> It was only when Little Bad Man stood up, stretched and vanished without a sound, seemingly even a motion, that Kingbird realized his half brother had been mounting a woman kneeling as if he were a stallion.
> .....
> Her arms splayed as if she had abandoned them; her face down in the dirt, away.
> .....
> tomorrow Little Bad Man might add her to his lodge, if he had liked her. (Bear, pp. 56-57)

All these examples of sexual activities are connected with natural things such as horses.

Contrasted against these natural happenings are the attitudes of the white soldiers which demonstrate a progressing alienation of the white man from nature. Indian warriors will leave a defeated and humiliated enemy alone so that he may recover and his remaining warriors may sing about the heroism and lament the defeat of their brothers. The white soldier destroys everything. Soldiers have no women or family with them to worry about while they fight, and soldiers are trained for killing which is their prime

purpose. They will keep coming until the enemy is eliminated with no chance to recover. When soldiers have sex, it is unnatural as seen through the eyes of an Indian. Little Pine expresses this clearly during a friendly meeting in Big Bear's camp.

> "Those soldiers ride everywhere, fast, fighting. They never have women or children with them and they never stop it. They're just made to fight."
> .....
> I'll tell you. All summer they fight and in winter they have something like women in their camps. They have holes like women but they can't cook or have children. They just lie in ~~their lodges~~ and those soldiers stand in line with presents to mount them. Then in summer they want to do the same with our real women." (Bear, pp. 60-61)

The white man's technological advances are also described in sexual terminology from the viewpoint of the Indian. It helps to explain the widening gap between the white man's aspirations and the laws of nature.

> ...but he could not understand what he was seeing any more than he could understand the scurry of huge horses pulling wheels and men so covered with smoke they seemed black
> .....
> Behind him a rifle cracked and the warriors streamed away from him to the hills.
> .....
> "I shot it in the penis," Kingbird was saying.
> .....
> "Did that have one?" said Miserable Man.
> "I wish I'd seen it." Kingbird laughed aloud, "That slippery thing near the ground going in and out, just like a man doing it."
> .....
> "To itself?"
> Big Bear said quickly, "The bullet

> didn't stop it." Everyone craned about to stare as if they had not remembered him. "Whiteskins can do anything, even to themselves." (Bear, p. 136)

This passage not only represents an attempt by the Indians to make sense out of something otherwise unexplainable, by drawing analogies with natural things such as sexual intercourse, but it also presents a warning from Big Bear to his warriors that the white man and his incomprehensible machines cannot be stopped by bullets. But his warriors almost do not remember that Big Bear is with them on this ride, which is indicative of his loss of influence over his warriors.

The one notable exception of natural sexuality within the ranks of the white people in all these sexual encounters is Kitty McLean's progression into womanhood. From her girlish, almost Lesbian, dreams in Big Bear's camp and her love for Big Bear's natural being she becomes a woman at Big Bear's trial. When she tries to sleep beside her sister Liza in Big Bear's tent, she feels the strain of her unusual environment and longs for warmth and love.

> ...her hands on my hip and shoulder, but the aching relief to my stiff side, the feel of her hands pushing the blanket solid and warm under me, turned, swims into the length of her legs against mine through the tied layers of cotton and when she eases down back to me my arm is in the hollow of her waist pulling the long roundness of her tight and warm and good between my thighs, the other hand over her almost hard nipplled breast with all that silly wool and cotton - on this ground the only warmth must be Indian naked - my arm and hand one splintering ache laid along the

> blanket of the ground holding her hard and this time she does not push me away, nor reach for Amelia breathing and warm just there beyond the cup and curve of my hands, my face in her sweet hair and her arm coming up to me, covering, drenching me over in spongy black sleep, weightless. (Bear, p. 280)

At Big Bear's trial Kitty regrets the loss of her childhood innocence which she had experienced in Big Bear's camp.

> ...once his good eye [Big Bear's] flicked to the judge and then her glare hooked him and he certainly never dared turn her way again,
> .....
> Her enormous certainties had somewhere leaked between her fingers, almost suddenly, she could not tell whether - she thought in a revelation it was the monthly blackness seeping through her and momentarily she would feel dampness, she was certain she felt it, once, and when she could look at herself there would be the dark worm crawling between the blackish hair inside her leg out of the unstoppable entrance into herself, she could never squat now as she had as a child and feel herself opened uncloseably, forever unlocked except she sit tight down on the gentle ground,... (Bear, pp. 383-384)

The two passages lead from innocence to experience. The first quoted passage is told by Kitty in the first-person narrative voice. It expresses concerns with warmth, and her comment that "the only warmth must be Indian naked" is not informed by a girl's sexual awareness but rather by her innocent longings for warmth and comfort in an unusual environment close to nature. The second quoted passage reveals that Kitty has reached awareness of her sexuality

and her womanhood. It is told from the third-person omniscient point of view which implies a certain remoteness of Kitty. There can no longer be familiarity between Big Bear and the Indians' way of life and herself in her world of the white woman. Nevertheless, she still maintains her closeness to the earth when she feels that the earth can protect her if "she sit tight down on the gentle ground."

The above examples of the problems of human sexuality and the isolation as well as the violence it can engender indicate how well Wiebe's technique of juxtaposing the Indian's viewpoints with those of the white man works in this novel. The importance for man of living with nature rather than trying to conquer it and the value of existential life are important concerns in this novel. Christianity works only indirectly, as a substratum, as one solution to man's problems on his terminal journey through life on this earth in The Temptations of Big Bear. It is well expressed in Big Bear's dislike of man-made things when he talks to Kitty at Turtle Lake.

> "Why not make canoes?" she asked,
> .....
> "The River People are now horse People. Water is for getting over and a horse does that better than a canoe because it has a tail to hold onto."
> "You get all wet with horse."
> "Yes, but there's always the sun. Once I wanted to cross the river at Fort Pitt when I had no horse and someone dead now gave me a canoe. But that turned itself over, very fast. Too fast, and I had to walk out of the shallow water where it did that and back to all of them on the shore. A horse will take you far enough so you won't get laughed at." (Bear, p. 312)

It is no coincidence that reference is made in this novel several times to the humiliating effect man-made, artifical things can have on man as opposed to the dignity which resides within nature. And human dignity is of great importance to the Indian which is the main reason for his objection to capital punishment by hanging. He wants to die like a warrior, that is, by being shot or in hand-to-hand combat. This, by implication, stretches out to cover institutionalized religion. There is no dignity in repeating meaningless prayers and in being baptised while waiting for the moment of being put to death by the hangman. Big Bear's last prayer to The Only One at the Sand Hills is far more powerful and meaningful.

The historical framework enables the author to impress upon the reader that the materialistic and over-structured life of modern society may well be its downfall. Man cannot forever violate nature without suffering the consequences. The existential statement this novel makes is relevant to existentialist Christianity in that it shows institutionalized religion to which mere lip service is being paid will become more and more isolated and removed from human realities. A strong faith in "The Only One" which Big Bear possesses is shown to be more important than baptism which is, after all, only a ceremony and not in itself a guarantee for eternal life. The real eternal life resides in Big Bear who, at the end, turns into everlasting

rock at the Sand Hills, although he was never baptised. He has never had a prayer book, but he understands enough to pray better than many a Christian when his time to leave this earth has come.

> "You Only Great Spirit, Father. I thank you. I thank you for giving me life, for giving me everything, for being still here now that my teeth are gone. So now I have to ask you this last thing, and I think it's like the first thing I asked but maybe you'll forgive that, since you have already known for a long time how hard it is for me to understand and learn anything, even in all the time you gave me. I ask you again. Have pity." (Bear, p. 414)

Big Bear has no fear of death. He dies with dignity in his faith which was the faith of his forefathers and is part of his cultural heritage. The reader may compare this with the pitiful and fearful approach to death expressed by the warriors who were converted to Christianity and are facing the hangman.

> Miserable Man lifted his great pitted face and his lips were moving for his hands could not, I want to eat and then be shot, not like this, you tell the boss; old Bad Arrow came head down, and behind him Round The Sky, his kind young face staring where sky should have been, somewhere, but Wandering Spirit was a skeleton still asking Mrs. McLean if he could be forgiven, crouched perhaps by a small fire and asking if punishment would last long, asking, asking, and Mrs. McLean certain that God always forgave everyone who truly repented of his wrong, he must now repent for what he had done and put all that away but the soldiers, now the white soldiers ... Little Bear's mouth gaped in warcry, his chin jabbing down at the still unhealed scars on his breast as he came in fury but it was his friend Iron Body alone

> who spoke aloud. He made very calmly, his lean face without any expression whatever, the longest speech of his life, and it seemed begging too: "We will need different shoes. On the white Jesus road it's a long way to the Sand Hills, and for that you should give us good Whiteskin shoes." (Bear, p. 411)

Christianity has made beggars of the once proud Indians, but it is not Christianity as it should be. It is Christian churches as institutions which, in the service of the white man's conquest, are subjugating and dehumanizing the Indian people.

As mentioned earlier, Wiebe has taken a fresh approach to the problem of violence in The Temptations of Big Bear. It appears that he is going even one step further in the next novel, The Scorched-Wood People, where one of the heroic characters, Gabriel Dumont, is actually proud of living a violent life with "Le Petite," his favorite rifle. It even serves him well later when it allows him to earn a living through his shooting skills as part of a circus act with Buffalo Bill. However, the importance of a strong faith and an existential Christian life remain thematic in The Scorched-Wood People as they have been in all of Wiebe's previous novels.

Chapter Six

Give Them That Faith Again

Wiebe's fifth novel, The Scorched-Wood People, leaves the reader somewhat unsatisfied. The author seems to be taking a step backwards from his two best novels: The Blue Mountains of China and The Temptations of Big Bear. Although the novel follows historical events in chronological order, the introduction of power politics and nationalism tends to have a polarizing effect on faith. The historically known fact of the total defeat of the Métis people seems to show that their faith did not help them to survive in a predominantly secular world. In the novel, even Louis Riel has his doubts about the practical value of faith when he says to General Middleton after his surrender:

> "I have been thinking. Whether, if the Lord had granted me as decided a victory as he has you, whether I should have been able to put it to good use."[39]

The failure of Riel's mission, in practical terms, and his naiveté in power politics are obvious. He becomes isolated even from his own people when, prior to his execution, he agrees to sign a statement of recantation which is presented to him by Father Fourmond in the prison cell at Regina. Father Fourmond was amongst those priests who had abandoned the Métis cause at Batoche. By extracting the recantation from Riel, the institutionalized church has triumphed again.

The novel operates on two conflicting levels. There is on the one hand, the religious socialism of the Métis leadership and the pure existentialism of Gabriel Dumont and his "savages" with their fighting spirit, "wild and living" (Wood, p. 42), which are both presented in a sympathetic light. On the other hand there is the pacifism of Louis Riel combined with his messianic fervor and his tendency toward transcendentialism, evident in passages where Riel speaks out, such as: "Why don't we make a heaven here in the North West, where we can have peace between all people. No killing..." (Wood, p. 53), or "Gabriel, we don't want to destroy people. I have nothing against the police or the volunteers - " (Wood, p. 244), and in Riel's visionary moments:

> ...there are three persons standing on Birdtail Rock, outlined against the sky like crosses, perhaps, and they were talking together; a priest, his brother - Joseph, it was Joseph clearly and Father André, and one more, a third. They are talking of his death, the third person says to Joseph, pointing down to him, "God will be with him. Though they cause him to die, God will raise him up again on the third day." (Wood, p. 343)

These ideas run in parallel and are never really reconciled.

Another jarring note is introduced by the narrator of the story, Pierre Falcon. Falcon was, by historical accounts, an oral poet of the Métis people and an illiterate. He died in 1876. As George Woodcock writes in a book review of The Scorched-Wood People,

> The narrator is a Métis oral poet, and we are led to identify him with Pierre

> Falcon, the most famous of the Métis bards,
> .....
> Unfortunately Falcon died in 1876, nine years before the events that mark the end of The Scorched-Wood People, and the idea of his continuing as a spectral narrator strains one's credence to the wrenching point.[40]

But it is also the way in which Falcon "talks" as the narrator in the novel which is not quite believable. Utterances such as the following,

> I always wanted to write a song about those two [Macdonald and Cartier], the slickest - there is no other word - political operators Canada would ever see, actually forging the second largest nation in the world out of a small complex of confronting hatreds rebalanced at every election with infinite care... (Wood, p. 88)

simply do not ring true when the reader bears in mind that this is supposed to be coming from an illiterate Métis nationalist oral poet with no particular interest in Canada's affairs and at a time when there was no telling if Canada would ever become the "second largest nation in the world."

Toward the end of the novel, the narrator speaks clearly in the voice of the author, as, for example, after Riél has signed his recantation in the Regina jail cell.

> Much has been made of his abjuration, was made by the priests who used it to convince the last implacable Métis left in Canada that Riel had confessed his grievous sins and returned to the eternally forgiving bosom of the Church
> .....
> The lost rebellion of course quite destroyed our people
> .....

> This is a sad song I cannot sing, no more than the machinations of eastern politicians who were now making certain Riel would hang and our people be crushed so they would never dare declare themselves again
> .....
> the hope that burst in him again and again that his vision for the North-West which had been printed so clearly in the newspaper of the world would suddenly blossom into the massive uprising of the oppressed of the world (Wood, p. 328-329)

The novel, in its closing, drifts into didacticism and melodrama; however, the book as a whole shines mainly because of the deep insight it affords the reader into the character of Louis Riel, and also because of the literary artistry of the author which it displays and which sustains the reader's interest even through the sometimes long moralizing passages.

The novel is based on historical facts, even though Gabriel Dumont seems to be misrepresented.[41] Part One consists of four chapters and describes the actions which lead to the declaration of independence at Fort Garry (Winnipeg). "Vive le North-West, vive le North-West libre!" (Wood, p. 31) sounds very much like Charles de Gaulle's exclamation at Montreal City Hall some years ago, only with "North-West" replaced by "Québec." Why the name "North-West" instead of "Nord-Ouest" is used in the otherwise French phraseology is a puzzle, unless the author meant to signify the importance of bilingualism. Part One also introduces Pierre Falcon, the narrator, and Gabriel Dumont although

historical data indicate that Dumont was not present during the repulsion, by the Métis, of the entry of the prospective Canadian Governor, William McDougall, at the Red River international boundary in 1869. Riel is elected President of the Red River provisional government (Wood, p. 71) and promptly plants the seed for his own destruction by allowing Thomas Scott to be executed (Wood, p. 88). The priest Ritchot, Riel's personal friend, tries to work a deal with Prime Minister Macdonald in Ottawa, but in the end, Riel is betrayed. In Chapter Four of Part One, one of Riel's bouts with "brain-fever" is described (Wood, pp. 94-101) during which he has one of his visions where he is called by God. (In some ways this is similar to Samuel U. Reimer's call to go to Vietnam and proclaim peace in The Blue Mountains of China. Reimer does not heed the call and dies in despair. Riel heeds the call and must sacrifice his life in consequence). This chapter also describes Riel's unearthly (perhaps "courtly") love for his sister Sara who is a nun.

Part Two begins with the flight of Riel and his provisional government from Wolseley's Canadian forces which arrive at the gates of Fort Garry on August 24, 1870. Riel is exiled in the United States, and his first refuge is with Father Le Floch in St. Joseph. Riel, although still exiled, is elected as the Conservative representative for Red River to the House of Commons in Ottawa several times, but when he tries to take his seat on March 30, 1874, he is promptly expelled and forced to flee for his life across the river to

Hull, Québec. On February 12, 1875, a general amnesty was granted by the Canadian parliament to all persons involved in the Red River uprising. For Riel, A. D. Lepine, and W. B. O'Donoghue this was conditional on five years of exile. It was during his stay in Keeseville, New York, that Riel received the fateful letter from the ultra-montanist, nationalist Archbishop Bourget of Montreal[42] which ended in the following sentences:

> But God, who has always led you and assisted you up to the present time, will not abandon you in the darkest hours of your life. For He has given you a mission which you must fulfill in every respect. May the grace of God keep you. (Wood, pp. 138-139)

Bourget fostered Riel's belief in his being chosen as the savior of French-Catholic nationalism in North America, thereby causing much of the megalomania and the contempt for the English from which Riel suffered. Riel's poem "Sir John A Macdonald" may serve as an example of Riel's feelings of disdain for the English:

> And all too long the children of New France
> Have borne the English yoke;
> And will not miss the chance
> Of crushing a decrepit race, and so revoke
> The rule of those who, in a pride not to borne;
> Have governed them with such inveterate scorn.[43]

Chapter Four of Part Two explains how Dumont comes to realize that the new Canadian law, which is being enforced by Inspector Crozier of the Northwest Mounted Police, would

be ruinous for those who rely on the buffalo hunt for their survival. The hunters must have the power to enforce their rules on the spot. Chapter Five shows Riel's fits of madness in the "Grey Sisters of the Cross" insane asylum in Montréal where he is sent for a cure in 1876. It is in these passages that Riel openly adopts the name "David" (advanced by his protectors as an alias) and searches for his Jewish roots in order to prove a connection to King David.

> I will use your enemies to make you resemble David, for it is your pretended friends who have given your secret name to the world to add to the lovely name of Louis the sainted King of France. For by the savage blood which runs in your veins, you are Jewish, and by your paternal great-grandmother you belong to the Jewish nation just as the first David belonged to the Gentile by his paternal great-grandmother; as David belonged to the Jews in all his other ancestors, so you belong to the Gentiles... (Hood, p. 161)

The passage just quoted relates to an earlier one where Riel theorizes that the savages of North America are descendants of the Jewish people (Hood, p. 159). Whether Riel actually thought that way or whether this is pure fiction is difficult to determine. It is, however, interesting to note that reference to the Jewish nation is made in many of Wiebe's novels as, for example, in The Blue Mountains of China where John Heimer says to Jakob Friesen about the Mennonites' desires, "They wish they were, if they could only be Jews" (Mountains, p. 227).

Chapter Six of Part Two is a two-page interlude,

similar to a short movie-scene showing the movement from one major event to another, which places Gabriel Dumont and some Métis companions near the Cypress Hills, on their way to find Louis Riel in Montana. They encounter a starving Indian child, a legacy of the advancing white civilization.

The last chapter in Part Two opens with Riel in Montana where he teaches Métis children. It moves from his lovemaking with Marguerite, his wife, through his cursing of those priests who describe extreme poverty as a blessing and a preparation for a better life in heaven, to the arrival of Gabriel Dumont who convinces Riel that he must accompany him to Saskatchewan to help in the fight of the Métis for freedom and survival. Part Two closes with a vision both Riel and Dumont have: the vision of a man swinging from a gallows on top of a hill (Wood, p. 188).

Part Three is the longest part of the book (156 pages) and contains the denouement of the story. In the first chapter the senior superintendent of the North-West Mounted Police, Lief Crozier, takes notice of Riel's arrival on July 1, 1884. Louis Riel immediately goes to work writing petitions to Ottawa and tries to enlist the support of the priests, but these refuse it unless the church will be allowed to take total control of the movement and everything remains within the confines of "Ottawa's law." Riel is informed that five hundred police are coming from Regina with orders to arrest him. He promptly defies the priests and Rome and moves to declare a provisional government of

the North-West. Riel is now on his journey to Golgatha.

Chapter Two covers the takeover of the Duck Lake stores by the Métis forces and the routing of Crozier's troops. Riel's concern about too much bloodshed leads to an important military mistake. Letting most of Crozier's men get away, which allows Crozier to burn Fort Carlton and retreat to Prince Albert, costs the Métis the guns and supplies they could have captured at Carlton. These will be sorely missed in the final battle for Batoche. The first encounter near Batoche between the Canadian forces and the Métis occurs at Fish Creek and ends in a draw.

Chapter Three of Part Three deals with the battle for Batoche. The first victim is an innocent baby. On May 12, the Canadians charge and eleven Métis soldiers are killed. The charge ends with the total defeat of the Métis, even though Gabriel Dumont carries on a private guerilla war of his own for a few more days. Riel surrenders on Friday, May 15, 1885, at noon to General Middleton, and Gabriel Dumont begins his flight to Montana the next day. Riel's "mission" has failed on the practical level.

Chapter Four of Part Three begins with Riel's attempt to organize his defense, and again he makes an unwise decision by retaining the liberal lawyers Fitzpatrick and Greenshields and allowing them free reign in the court. The case is lost, and Riel is convicted and sentenced to hang. Riel's final statements to the court and jury are largely ignored and, one must assume, soon forgotten by the audi-

ence, just as Big Bear's words were forgotten as described in the previous novel. After four postponements, the sentence is carried out on November 16, 1885, in Regina.

Part Four, which consists of only five pages, concludes the story with Riel's burial in Winnipeg and a final meeting between Gabriel Dumont and Lief Crozier in a New York bar on July 28, 1886. The final sentence is a call by the narrator for a return of that unwavering faith which would make people follow a visionary blindly, even if it leads to disaster in practical terms.

The technique of shifting scenes between narrator and events is expertly done and fulfills the author's purpose which obviously was not so much to write a historical novel as it was to project the visionary and messianic nature of Louis Riel. Most of the statements which favor an existential Christian life are contained in the narrator's passages. Riel expresses an opposition to institutionalized religion and its servants and a tendency toward pacifism. Riel's progress through life also shows the isolation every visionary who believes that faith conquers all must eventually suffer.

Several good examples of the cinematographic technique of panning in on the action while the voice of a commentator and a flashback are blended in exist in Part Three of the novel. On page 203 the scene shifts in one short paragraph from Batoche, during a discussion of the possibilities of starting an Indian war against "Ottawa," to Sir John A.

Macdonald's chambers in the parliament buildings. On pages 205 and 206 it shifts back to Gabriel Dumont and the offer of a bribe to Riel from Ottawa in the form of a "job with the Indian Department." On pages 270 to 271 the story shifts from Gabriel's demand on Louis Riel to call upon the Indians (Poundmaker and Big Bear) to join the Métis' fight, to action at General Middleton's camp. Middleton counts his losses from the Fish Creek skirmish and tries to make it look better by juggling the numbers of his troops. The switching between battle scenes and conversations perhaps reminds the reader of Tolstoy's War and Peace where this technique is expertly used. Another example is on pages 264 to 267 where Riel talks to Madelaine Dumont about the values of an unwavering faith and of brotherly love between all of mankind. The dialogue is interrupted repeatedly, often in the middle of a sentence, by reports from the Fish Creek fighting which is taking place at the same time.

The narrator's passages near the end of the book contain a few existentialist Christian statements and toward the end of the novel the narrator's voice tends to be more the voice of the author than that of Pierre Falcon. The most profound of these statements are included in the description of Riel in his jail cell in Regina.

> The priest's comprehension of God was bound by the Church, by the necessity of formula, but the revelation of those who dared believe took the believer far beyond that.
>
> .....
>
> The infinity of God in relation to the set formula of the priests was like

> sunlight on the open prairie in relation to the patterns of barred light on the floor at his feet. (Wood, p. 329)

There is a theme of distrust of institutionalized religion and its leaders running through all of Wiebe's novels which may have more personal roots within the author than might first appear. There is, of course, the author's quest for a return to the Jesus-like life of unquestioning faith and love combined with absolute non-violence, and the reader knows that Jesus also mistrusted the pharisees of his time. But perhaps some more light can be shed on the subject through perusal of an article which appeared in The Gazette some time ago and which suggests a more personal connection to the author's dislike of church leaders. The article, among other things, discusses the events which followed the publication of Wiebe's first novel, Peace Shall Destroy Many.

> The effect was explosive. The book was banned in many Mennonite homes; pastors inveighed against it from the pulpit and damned Wiebe to the farthest reaches of Hell. "I wasn't exactly sacked as editor of the Herald," says Wiebe, "but the committee came to me and said 'Ahem.' I resigned." The student minister preached his last sermon in Winnipeg in January, 1963. "There wasn't a pastor who would have dared ask me to preach in his church after that. They don't want some guy with strange ideas as a pastor. I'm too much of a maverick." The incident didn't separate him from the church, but it shook his faith in some of the church leaders: "The worst feeling was the way people treated my parents. They got the blame for not raising me properly. People would write letters to me like: 'You must have had a terrible home life. Your parents must have treated you

> badly.' It was a terrible hassle for them. They didn't really grasp what was going on.**

It would not be at all surprising if this personal experience had influenced Wiebe's writing.

The ideas of Mennonite pacifism and violent revolution by the oppressed of the world both exist in the person of Riel which creates a kind of confusion. It is, perhaps, an indication of the mental instability of this messianic martyr that he is depicted as a Christian existentialist, pacifist, visionary, and religious socialist zealot all rolled into one. To quote some examples of Riel's instability, a few passages present a discussion between Riel and Dumont (a discussion which, by historical accounts, never took place because Dumont took no part in the Red River uprising):

> "No!" Riel's conviction burst from him "God's system is life-beauty, love, life!"
> "That'd be nice, yeah," Gabriel said, "but I don't see just that."
> "We all see enough of it to know it's the best. Spring, flowers, mothers loving their children - that's what Eden is about: nothing would have had to die, ever, if man hadn't sinned against God. Sin - evil has messed up everything." (Wood, p. 51)

and later:

> "That devil McDougall, he's ruined and running back to Macdonald like a whipped beggar and still he sends out that devilish proclamation - he wants Red River bloody, that's all."
> "War isn't all bad," Gabriel said. "People have words; they don't have to kill each other!" (Wood, p. 54)

The same Louis Riel shouts out in the Batoche church of St. Anthony in defiance of the priests and with a hatred totally foreign to traditions of the followers of Jesus:

> "...give us hearts of steel, that our knives may find their bones; when they would tear our daughters from us, tear out their hearts, rot them in the sun of your wrath, let beasts swarm in the strings of their intestines..."
> .....
> "...execute vengeance on the heathen, steel us in hatred, your divine and perfect hatred..." (Wood, pp. 225-226)

Only a few pages later, prior to the Crozier encounter, Riel is described again as trying to avoid violence:

> When a rifle is taken from the wall and loaded deliberately, eventually it will have to be fired; Gabriel had always known that, and so did Riel though now he was praying fervently against it. (Wood, p. 236)

Twice in the book, the vision of a Métis-ruled socialist heaven for the oppressed of the world is mentioned.

> "I hereby declare," Riel pronounced slowly, "the formation of a Provisional Government for the North-West. This government will fight for our sacred rights, the liberties and lives of our wives and children. It will fill our great land with God-fearing men and women from the poor of the world, from Poland and Bavaria and Italy and Ireland and France, everywhere. It will give the same freedom and honour to our Indian brothers as is right in the sight of God and men, and we shall live in peace. Have you all heard?"

and later, in the courtroom at Regina,

> Riel's careful explanation of how five-sevenths of the North-West should go to the landless believers of the world to create a new Bavaria and a new Italy and a new Poland and a new Ireland

> and a new French Canada; how British Columbia, which was of course also part of the North-West, should likewise become a new Norway and Sweden and Denmark of beautiful mountains and sea; and how the Belgians would also find a new land there, and especially the Jews, searching for a country for eighteen hundred years and rich, landless lords of finance would find a new Judea of consolation for their centuries of wandering in the sweet chanting music of the Pacific lapping against the mountains; to build a paradise for the world's deprived on the thousands of square miles of the North-West:... (Wood, pp. 324-325)

Why particular countries are singled out here by Riel as having "oppressed believers" is unclear. There were religious oppressions in those countries at times, but Bavaria, Poland, and France were certainly not altogether populated by large numbers of poor people. This kind of naive "vision" also raises much larger questions. There is no place in this whole world where some people are not oppressed and poor, and there never were such places. The United States of America originally opened its gates to "the oppressed of the world," but the black people were certainly very much oppressed in that freedom-loving country. How would a Métis government have treated an atheist? How far can freedom go before it turns into anarchy? These questions are not addressed at all. From all the history the reader knows, such an utopia in the North-West would never have succeeded; in fact, it would have been illogical and a practical impossibility.

The kind of vision projected in The Scorched-Wood

People could only succeed through a return to the principles of Jesus, and this is really what this novel is all about: to supplant the present institutionalized religious behemoth and reduce it to the basic form of faith in God combined with the expression of love between people, love strong enough to transcend all boundaries. Such a movement needs prophets and martyrs, and Riel is certainly portrayed in this novel as being exactly that.

> The way of the cross was humiliation; the prophet must die to reveal his ultimate vision, and this conviction transfigured Riel's understanding of himself even as he heard workmen at the end of the guard-house begin to hammer together what he knew must be his scaffold. (Wood, p. 330)

The novel takes into account the doubts which have supplanted faith in contemporary civilization in this final part (Part Four) where Crozier meets Dumont in a Staten Island bar in New York. "We'll remember" (Wood, p. 351) sounds much like the "je me souviens" on todays's Québec car license plates, but it is meant to show that the passage of time means nothing as long as the faith of a people cannot be shaken. "The vision" Riel had is timeless and limitless and more important than the political and military blunders he committed, but white people will never understand that because in their minds everything has to be logical. Thus Gabriel's laughter at the end and the closing statement of the book:

> O God I pray again, let our people not be confounded. Give them that faith

again. (Wood, p. 351)

The mysticism and the omens in this novel are often conveyed in conjunction with color symbolism. Perhaps the most beautiful example is the way in which the color of heavenly grace, gold, is used both at the beginning and at the end of the novel:

> I know he will hear only his own feet slur a steady prayer down the corridor, moving him to the wood he has heard them hammering together on the prairie outside his window, to steps he will obediently mount while a bulging sun burns the hoarfrost into sheet gold;... (Wood, p. 10)

and,

> The sky was blue as crystal, the earth a line drawn and in the silence the level light of the sun burned hoarfrost into gold, even the meanest grassblade in every split and bend stood gilded, flashed, glistened in a straight, golden path waiting for him, the whole great world itself rolled up into this final glorious beauty. (Wood, p. 345)

Color symbolism in the novel also appears in conjunction with instances of clairvoyance.

> ...they saw that hill again and in a glance knew they had both seen that revelation: a gallows there and a man swinging from that gallows. Vision and certainty. Though it might have been no more than a heat mirage bending a dead cottonwood up near the edge of the river, the wavering blackness a momentary crow perhaps struggling in a downdraft against the open sky, struggling upward. When you see that, you know. (Wood, p. 188)

and,

> Vision God gave, and sometimes miracle; last night he had seen a rider on a

> horse, the horse so pure white it flashed in the sunlight as the rider turned it off the road... (Wood, p. 301)

The white horse is significant here because "in Germany and England, to dream of a white horse was thought to be an omen of death."[45] Similarly, Gabriel Dumont has a dream which presages his future as he lies asleep in the arms of his wife after the defeat at Batoche.

> He had been in a blank white space with black stars shooting over him and he had to shoot them down, explode each as it streaked past him through whiteness and he could not so much as lift his Winchester but he had to shoot, shoot - by the merciful grace of God it was just a dream. (Wood, p. 312)

Dumont's dream comes true during his years of exile.

> "I didn't expect you to be shooting blue balls out of the air," Crozier said, "not with Le Petit."
> "Cody had to work out an act for me." (Wood, p. 350)

The number four is mentioned no less than twenty-one times in the text of the novel. The book itself consists of four parts. For a few examples in order to show that the references are no coincidence, the reader may refer to:

> ...four perfectly completed fours of years. (Wood, p. 10)

> ...as if he already saw ahead through four Indian fours of years to this very December day in St. Boniface Cathedral (Wood, p. 24)

> "For four months the English population of Red River has stood aloof. (Wood, p. 62)

> "Mr. Smith, you had no choice. The Métis have run this country by martial law for

> four months." (Wood, p. 84)
>
> Four years of messages, of keeping watch, of careful and uncaring love. (Wood, p. 131)
>
> ..."The fourth time, I have the assurance they won't ... do it, now, at all..."
> "When is the date?"
> "November sixteen, but I -" (Wood, p. 337)
>
> ...four perfect fours of years to the day after the declaration of the Port Garry Provisional Government
> .....
> carried it on their shoulders, four and four and again four and four by turn the six miles through the snow north to St. Boniface. (Wood, p. 349)

The number four may be seen as the connecting link between the spirit world and the earthly elements in a manner similar to that by which Gabriel Dumont (earthly) and Louis Riel (spirit world) are connected in this novel. It is also of considerable significance for the Indians as shown in The Temptations of Big Bear ("A good life should be told in four parts, like everything is four in the life a person..." - Bear, p. 290). Cirlot says:

> Four. Symbolic of the earth, of terrestrial space, of the human situation, of the external, natural limits of the "minimum" awareness of totality, and, finally, of rational organization. It is equated with the square and the cube, and the cross representing the four seasons and the points of the compass. A great many material and spiritual forms are modelled after the quaternary. It is the number associated with tangible

> achievement and with the Elements. In mystic thought, it represents the tetramorphs.[46]

The Scorched-Wood People also demonstrates the recurrent problem of isolation as it is suffered by the visionary. After the execution of Thomas Scott, Riel could not travel to Ottawa and carry on negotiations but had to rely on church emissaries who could not properly present his cause. Riel's isolation becomes even more obvious when the Federal Government in Ottawa refuses to send answers to his petitions directly to him which causes Riel to speak out before the assembled Métis at St. Anthony's church in Batoche:

> "I am a foreigner here now," Riel told the hundreds of faces lifted to him on the platform. "This Government will never deal with me as your leader. They have said what they will do, and it is no more and no less what they always promised - nothing. But I will return to Montana. I am of no use to you." (Wood, p. 217)

The Métis beg Riel to stay as their leader, but it does not help them, in the final analysis, in a practical sense.

The final, total isolation of the person of Louis Riel comes in the closing chapter. In the courtroom, his words are unheeded and not understood by those to whom they are addressed:

> "Is that all?" Judge Richardson asked wearily, fingering the sweat from his tiny round glasses.
> "No, excuse me," said Riel, "I feel weak, and if I stop at times, I wish you would be kind enough...
> And he spoke on, and on, but it was no use; the vision was ungraspable by any

but himself. (Wood, p. 325)

Riel's isolation becomes complete when he is isolated from his own followers through the signing of the recantation presented to him by Father Fourmond, as mentioned earlier.

Gabriel Dumont, the other of the two protagonists in this novel, is equally isolated as, during his exile in the United States, he loses contact with his people. He is shooting blue balls out of the air in a circus act, while the Métis people are being diminished to "road allowance people" (Wood, p. 328) in Canada.

There is not as much mention of sex as there was in The Temptations of Big Bear. A distinction is made between natural love as between husband and wife, violence in love as between stallion and mare, and courtly love (or non-sexual love) on a higher, spiritual plane as shown between Riel and his sister Sara. In the magnificent love scene between Louis Riel and his wife Marguerite in Montana all of these loves and religion-instilled guilt complexes come to the surface, as so often in Wiebe's novels. The following passages are explicit in this regard:

> He could feel her breasts, usually so bound and hidden against her chest by coarse dresses, swing down, almost as it seemed heavy against his hands. "Terrible sin, eh?"
> "You are such a man, so...big and you..."
> "When I want you?" he said, and his mind leaped to a sudden fury for he heard his own guilt in her hesitations, the sounds of nuns whispering, of priests clenching themselves in confessionals; and he sprang up, swinging her aside almost cruelly to find her glance in the last

of the evening sun. "Look at me," he said through clenched teeth. "Look at me! We are man and wife, married before God and Church!"
"But only after eleven months..."
"Marguerite, what are you saying? Before your parents, there was no priest in the Missouri brakes! I love you, we have a son and daughter, we...what is this, sin?" (Wood, p. 173)

...suddenly unexpected as rain he could study her nakedness, the dark circles of her hanging breasts and his hand came up, his fingers touched one as she opened the buttons of his trousers and she looked up at him, her eyes crinkling in a smile, and he almost shuddered aloud remembering in one livid blaze Andre Nault's stallion in the pasture beside the Seine, gigantic white-and-purple-ringed penis rising like some violent rooted lever between the stallion's powerful legs and then swinging over the small mare as he reared over, onto her, the mare's scream while her legs almost buckled under the stallion's drive...

.....

nothing so terrible could ever happen between a man and a woman - ... (Wood, p. 175)

...he was suddenly finding out the giant hollows of earth, and he thrust against her let her feel it and scream but she thrust back as hard as he, they were hammered down together like sheet metal, springing together in one rhythm against the naked spring night and what they heard were each other's great shuddering groans as if death had found them out; both. (Wood, p. 177)

But for me there was only Sara, my perfect sister like a perfect star to follow, so pure and perfect and holy and untouchable in her love, there was no woman on earth like I remembered her, and sometimes I dreamt I was her knight carrying her beauty I didn't have to see like a shield against the world, I could never touch her as a man does a woman, but she was a...like..." (Wood, p. 178)

In closing it should be mentioned that The Scorched-Wood People certainly remains faithful to the author's religious and visionary commitments and espouses the values of unquestioning faith and non-violent existential Christian living. However, it is flawed in the way in which the narrator is used, in the way in which the narrator "speaks," and through the misrepresentation of Gabriel Dumont's character. It is also a less convincing book than either The Blue Mountains of China or The Temptations of Big Bear.

Chapter Seven

The Dreamer and the Prophet: A Paradise of Love, Peace, and Social Justice in the Brotherhood of Man

In Wiebe's short stories, published in Where Is The Voice Coming From?, the author's mastery of language and the ease with which he maintains the reader's interest are particularly obvious. The stories emphasize the isolation theme even more strongly than the novels. The reader virtually feels the isolation of the land and the isolation of the people within that land when he follows the characters through winter blizzards and the wavering, layered heat of a hot prairie summer's day. The plot usually develops in a dream-like manner: it begins with unknown place and puzzling activity, rises to a tense, critical point which allows for recognition of meaning, and then abruptly breaks off without anything being seriously questioned or any resolution being sought. The reader's imagination is given free range as he seeks an interpretation of the "dream." Different techniques are used in different stories, but they are always the appropriate techniques. For example, in the story titled "Did Jesus Ever Laugh?" the stream-of-consciousness technique is combined with the first-person narrative throughout to display the thought processes in the mind of an alienated, psychotic sex-slayer. Throughout the story, which is partly based on the continuance of the "Michel Row the Boat

Ashore" and "Tom Dooley" songs, the world as seen by the narrator is filled with stereotypes and dishonesty. Few people have real feelings and, the reader feels, few people are "real" in this story, which creates an uncertainty as to whether this story is a fictional happening or simply a bad dream. Religion, in the mind of the psychopath (and, one hopes, only in the mind of a psychopath) is a deadly serious business with no room for laughter or love. The protagonist seems resolved to head towards his own sort of gallows. He says, "That's everybody's mistake about Jesus. He had a lot more things in his mouth than love"[47] which is indicative of the unforgiving "hellfire and brimstone" philosophy of a revivalist preacher one might expect to find at "the Willingman Brothers Evangelist Revival Incorporated" (Voice, p. 57).

A number of the stories in Where Is The Voice Coming From? will sound familiar to the reader. "Oolulik," for example, appeared verbatim earlier in Chapter Four of First and Vital Candle (Candle, pp. 87-102). It appeared again as a short story in an anthology titled The Story Makers in 1970 (quoted earlier).

"Someday Soon, Before Tomorrow" (Voice, pp. 27-36) was turned into a play which was aired over the CBC network on January 16th, 1977 and repeated on February 5th, 1978 in the CBC's "Journalistic Series."[48] The play is expanded from the short story into a large plot which includes the farmers' taking the law into their own hands by plugging up the Velva

Canal of the Garrison diversion project near Minot, North Dakota, because that project appears to be at the bottom of all the flooding problems in this fictional news report story. The plot was of topical interest at the time and reveals clearly one of the author's concerns. It depicts the continuous battle of the individual with his human problems against an unfeeling and unresponsive politicized bureaucracy.

"Along the Red Deer and the South Saskatchewan" (Voice, pp. 113-123) has a counterpart in Part Six of Chapter Five in The Temptations of Big Bear. Both the novel and the short story describe an Indian raid from the viewpoint of the losers. The short story concerns a raid by the Siksikas against the Plains Cree, whereas the novel is concerned with a raid by the Cree against the Blood and Piegan tribes (Bear, pp. 340-349) as recalled by Big Bear during his death song for his fallen son Twin Wolverine.

"The Fish Caught in the Battle River" (Voice, pp. 125-133) story has a connection with both The Temptations of Big Bear and The Scorched-Wood People, although it does not appear in the novels. The reader is familiar, however, with the date of the Riel rebellion (1885) and with the characters of General Middleton, Poundmaker, and the interpreter Peter Hourie. It is conceivable that some of these stories might originally have been part of the manuscripts or notes for the novels and the author may have decided against their inclusion.

Besides "Oolulik," one of the most gripping dramatic stories is the title story itself, "Where Is The Voice Coming From?" This story also contains a major statement concerning the dangers of isolation of the individual (here, a story maker) from reality, a statement which, as in the case of most of Rudy Wiebe's statements, applies not only to story making but to life in general.

> The problem is to make the story. One difficulty of this making may have been excellently stated by Teilhard de Chardin: "We are continually inclined to isolate ourselves from the things and events which surround us...as though we were spectators, not elements, in what goes on." Arnold Toynbee does venture, "For all that we know, Reality is the undifferentiated unity of mystical experience," (Voice, p. 135)

The drama in this story is raised through a peculiar, although very successful, technique. The narrator treats the events as a scientist would treat a research paper on the refraction of ultraviolet light. The narrator gathers "evidence." All this is juxtaposed with the death chant of "The Almighty Voice" which provides the dramatic high point as well as the ending of the story. The contrast between the drama of the voice and the nonchalant statement of the narrator at the end of the story could not be more cutting and icy.

> And there is a voice. It is an incredible voice that rises from among the young poplars ripped of their spring back, from among the dead somewhere lying there, out of the arm-deep pit shorter than a man; a voice rises over the exploding smoke and thunder of guns that reel back in their positions,

> worked over, serviced by the grimed motionless men in bright coats and glinting buttons, a voice so high and clear, so unbelievably high and strong in its unending wordless cry.
>
> The Voice of "Gitchie-Manitou Wayo" - interpreted as "voice of the Great Spirit" - that is, Almighty Voice. His death chant no less incredible in its beauty than in its incomprehensible happiness.
>
> I say "wordless cry" because that is the way it sounds to me. I could be more accurate if I had a reliable interpreter who would make a reliable interpretation. For I do not, of course, understand the Cree myself. (Voice, p. 143)

The reader feels the isolating gulf between the narrator and the reality of the life of the Indian warrior.

The first story in the book, "Scrapbook," provides some high human drama as a little boy learns about death when his sister Marg dies of an enlarged heart. The realization of the loss does not fully strike him until he is back at school and finds himself suddenly alone and isolated from all his classmates.

> He opened his desk and there, slightly dogeared and crumpled from much looking, lay the scrapbook. He and Marg had made it for health class. Actually Marg had done all the work; he had just watched. That was why his book had been first in class. On the cover was the bulging red tomato she had cut from the tomato-juice label, and there was the kink she had made when he bumped her because he was leaning so close as she sat propped in bed, cutting it out. He said, almost loud, "She's dead," and he knew that 'dead' was like the sticks of rabbits he found in his snares.
> And suddenly he began to cry. Everyone stared, but he could not stop. (Voice, p. 18)

The reader has the feeling, after having read the final passage of this story, of having actually been there himself, and he understands how a child eventually realizes the loss of a loved member of the family.

"Tudor King," the next story, is again about death - the death of an old hermit during a winter blizzard - and how a boy sees the hermit in a dream: "If before him was the nadir of humanity, the flashing eyes and the compulsive spirit moving there revealed the stuff of majesty" (Voice, p. 21). Between dreams and reality in the declining years of the hermit, there shines through one important fact of being human, and the boy realizes it as "he pushed his face against his brother's hard, cold shoulders; as if he were already remembering his own fierce happiness at once having recognized the fleeting stuff of human majesty" (Voice, p. 25).

The next two stories are concerned with the individual's fight against bureaucracy and blind adherence to doctrine. "Someday Soon, Before Tomorrow" was described earlier. "Millstone for the Sun's Day" dwells on an imaginary society where doctrine demands human sacrifice to be executed by an innocent child while no one can remember the original purpose for the sacrifice. "There's a Muddy Road" is reminiscent of "made-for-TV sitcoms." A woman is looking for another "experience" to replace a worn-out marriage to an eternal student-husband. The reader is stunned by the

revealed emptiness of life when it is without honest love.

The following story, "Did Jesus Ever Laugh?" has been discussed in detail earlier. It is followed by "All on Their Knees," which describes how a compassionate farmer saves an Indian from the white man's justice. "Oolulik" follows, which was also previously discussed in detail.

In "Bluecoats on the Sacred Hill of the Wild Peas" the author uses a technique which mixes history with contemporary science-fiction-like adventure. A family in a camper-trailer visits the gravesites of General Armstrong Custer and his personal command, while the radio blares out news of astronaut Neil Armstrong's descent from the lunar landing craft and his first step on the surface of the moon. The story connects past human history of pioneering in the American west with human history-in-the-making in space pioneering, and it emphasizes the importance of being aware of our heritage even in times of new, great strides in the fields of science and exploration. Our children should be aware of our past while they are looking ahead toward the future.

"Along the Red Deer and the South Saskatchewan" has also been discussed previously, as was "The Fish Caught in the Battle River," which is a story full of humor and ironies as it compares the white man's military procedures and tactics with those of the Indian. "Where is the Voice Coming From?" was discussed earlier as well.

The final story in the collection of short stories is

"The Naming of Albert Johnson." It uses the diary style to lead the reader through the death-hunt for one arctic trapper, a fugitive from justice. The story (or diary entries) begins with the death of the trapper and works its way backwards in time to arrive at the point where he received his name, "Albert Johnson." This technique is very effective as the reader knows the outcome of this event, which is based on factual history, but enjoys the probing into the past of someone now dead. Many readers may, perhaps, have experienced a similar excitement when they were probing into their family background in the attempt to establish a family tree.

All thirteen stories in the book titled Where Is The Voice Coming From? have, besides their recognized artistry, one thing in common; they are all about death and dying and how the acquaintance with death can further isolate the individual. The first two stories concern natural death as witnessed by a child. The third story concerns death of fertile land as it is flooded by foul water. Story number four is about sacrificial death which, in this case, is a wasted life for no true purpose. The fifth story, "There's a Muddy Road," is concerned with the death of a marriage, whereas the sixth story deals with violent death executed by a psychopath. "All on Their Knees," the centre story of the book, dwells on the meaning of Christmas, of love and help for fellow human beings and of forgiveness, but it is also connected with death. The man who is being helped to escape

from the constables had killed his brother-in-law and now has to hide out alone.

"Qolulik," describes violent but unpremeditated death in harsh, arctic surroundings. The ninth story juxtaposes the historic death of General Armstrong Custer with the event of human life coming to a dead planet in the person of Neil Armstrong, the astronaut. The subsequent three stories tell the reader about the glory, suffering, and death connected with Indian warfare, and the final story tells about the lonely and violent death of an isolated, hunted, fugitive trapper in the Arctic.

Some unfair criticism has been levelled against the author of the short stories published in Where Is The Voice Coming From? For example, in the West-Coast Review, one critic calls this collection of short stories:

> ...a pretentious little book
> .....
> Wiebe manages to put the reader's toe, stomach, and finally his mind asleep with an avalanche of useless detail and obscure religious nuances
> .....
> Where Is The Voice Coming From? is pure escapism, a product of our times, just another bird with his head buried in the sand.[49]

Obviously, this critic has not understood any of the stories. Perhaps he has not even made the effort of a serious reading in this case. Most readers will find Where Is The Voice Coming From? a most rewarding literary experience.

Besides Someday Soon, Before Tomorrow, there is one

more play Rudy Wiebe has written. It is titled Far As the Eye Can See and was staged by the Theatre Passe Muraille.[50] The plot revolves around human and social arguments, again similar to Someday Soon, Before Tomorrow, caused by a technical development which seems to ride roughshod over individual rights and liberties; it concerns the Dodds-Round Hill Power Project which was active in the Edmonton area in the years 1974 to 1976. Individual rights and the isolation of the individual from governmental policy-making bureaucracies are, of course, one of Wiebe's deep concerns. However, the play never reaches the powerful expression which the author is able to achieve in his novels and stories. The "Spirit" voices of Aberhart, Chief Crowfoot, and Princess Louise might remind the reader of Pierre Falcon in The Scorched-Wood People, but they are too farcical in their expressions and "actions" to allow a valid comparison.

The live characters in the play are stereotypes and fail to create any excitement. Caroline Kalicz is the typical university "youngster" of the time who is trying to "find herself"; she is the confused adolescent "hippy." Naturally, she wants to go back to the land. The farmers are upset about the encroachment of industry and science, but most of them welcome the opportunity to "make a buck" out of the situation. The people connected with the power project consist of pushy surveyors - the type the reader remembers from The Scorched-Wood People and The Temptations of Big Bear - and glib salesmen and con-artists except for one

"honest" man, John Siemens, whom Caroline first labels a "capitalist pig." Their enmity turns into friendship because John just happened to appear on Caroline's grandfather's farm as a cow is about to have a breech birth and, of course, John helps in the delivery and proves to be better at it than Caroline. At the end Caroline is in love with John Siemens, a graduate engineer from Calgary Power, and contemplates a vacation in Tahiti or Bermuda. The play ends with the Dodds-Round Hill power project scuttled, the young people again leaving the land for the city, continuing unemployment in the farming community, and no sudden riches for the farmers. The reader wonders what this is supposed to prove and finds himself a little bored by it all. The toying around with the various characters and the "Spirit" figures might create some laughter, but there is no probing into the characters and no measuring of their failings, which lends a sense of absurdity to the whole play. The reader soon realizes that Rudy Wiebe at this time is nowhere near as good a playwright as he is an accomplished novelist and story-maker.

Chapter Eight

A Voice in the Wilderness

> I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely.
> (Revelations, XXI, 6)

One message presented in Rudy Wiebe's novels and short stories is a call for love and peace. Hatred has reached a level where it is reflected in almost daily reports of attempted or successful assassinations, murder, international terrorism, and war. It is conceivable that mankind, if it continues on this path, will very soon destroy itself. That man's thinking must change from a philosophy of confrontation and competition to one of co-operation and understanding is obviously logical if an ultimate catastrophe is to be avoided. Unfortunately this does not seem to happen in either the microcosm or macrocosm of politics. The political realities expressed in The Scorched-Wood People appear to indicate that the Métis and the French-speaking people of Western Canada in the Canadian microcosm were a repressed and a disadvantaged people because of English Orangemen's hatreds. Presently an attempt is being made to reverse past injustices and outlaw the English language in Québec. This will only create another confrontation. Just as Riel suggested in the few pieces of poetry which survived him that the English should be crushed, so Levésque of Québec tries to accomplish the same aim in a much smarter

way. However, the "smartness" wears thin when one witnesses events where an English-speaking shopkeeper's storefront is defaced with painted slogans such as "go home" because he refuses to remove his English language signs and change them to French in Montreal, which is supposed to be a cosmopolitan city. Such occurrences simply remind the older reader of events some forty-three years ago when similar slogans were painted on other stores in another country and in another language.

In the macrocosm of world politics, events are no more encouraging than they are in our small world in Canada. The revolution in Iran, return of the United States to a policy of increased armament and confrontation with the Soviet Union, continuing atrocities in South America and the Middle East, and continuing war in Cambodia indicate that man has learned nothing from past history and still refuses to listen to the message of one Jesus of Nazareth whose ideas Rudy Wiebe so strongly advocates. It seems so clear that, if people would only have the faith to love their enemies and refuse to take up arms even in the face of their own destruction, and if this movement would seriously take root and spread throughout the world, the human situation could be changed to the better and the world could perhaps be saved, yet, as Gabriel Dumont says in The Scorched-Wood People, "I cannot see it." Man has had almost two thousand years to make it work, and the possibility of success to-day, when even powerful religious leaders continue to

incite their followers to violence and intolerance, is diminishing. The problem of isolation, one of Rudy Wiebe's main themes throughout his writings, is with us every day. One has only to read in the newspapers about attacks on elderly people in the streets and subways while bystanders are watching but refuse to help because they do not want to get involved, because they want to remain in their isolated safety zone, to realize what an isolationist attitude implies.

Isolation exists to-day very much, also, on the political stage. Instead of liberalizing the country and granting individual human rights, we are witnessing narrow-minded Québec nationalism, increasing popularity in the Canadian west of the western separatist factions, and provincial opposition to inclusion of a human rights clause in the constitution of Canada. It seems ironic, to say the least, because this amounts to a complete reversal of the situation as expressed in The Scorched-Wood People, where Riel had to fight Macdonald in Ottawa for liberty and human rights. Ottawa to-day, represented by the French-Canadian Trudeau, has to fight a majority of the Canadian provinces to accomplish part of what Riel had envisaged a hundred years ago. The Scorched-Wood People shows the contrast between politics of one hundred years ago and those of to-day.

In all of Wiebe's novels, as discussed in the previous chapters, there is the concern with a vision of a

non-violent paradise on earth and the concern with the heritage of all mankind. The author's sympathies lie consistently with the individual, the Christian existentialist hero in his isolation who dares to challenge institutions and who dares to dream of a better world, or a paradise on earth, if people would only listen and believe. It takes courage to swim against the stream of contemporary mass-culture which is built upon creature comfort and scientifically proven facts. With the event of man's imprinting his footsteps on the moon, new avenues have been opened into the world of wonders and imagination, but man tends to view this strictly from a technical standpoint. Wiebe is trying to recapture mankind's sense of wonder.

There is a tendency in the contemporary reading public to dismiss novels or stories which dwell on the spiritual and on the importance of faith and individual ideals, especially if, at times, they do not coincide closely with generally accepted standards or recorded historical events. The Scorched-Wood People is such a novel; however, it would be doing the author a grave injustice to dismiss it as irrelevant on the grounds of some historical inaccuracies and some utopian views expressed in it. Rudy Wiebe has, after all, made it quite clear in numerous interviews and in introductions to anthologies of short stories what his artistry in writing and his powerful usage of "Word" are meant to do.

For example, during the Cameron interview, when The

Temptations of Big Bear was still unpublished, Cameron asked:

> In your work, don't you express the validity and importance of religious values by taking them for granted as a framework, and then having the debate go on within that context - examining, for instance, the sense in which even devotion to religious life is a fertile source of error?
> WIEBE: Yes, and in this sense, I suppose, for most people that buy novels, this isn't really that kind of an option any more. It's not one of the areas that they really think about as important - like ecology, for example, or Amchitka tests, or something like that. It's not where most people live. But to my way of thinking that is a very important thing for everyone, whether they're aware of it or not. Many people find such devotion and value in other kinds of activities or causes, but basically it's the same kind of concern: to relate to something that is in a sense beyond, larger than, yourself, the other to which you can commit yourself. That's why you get many causes - very good causes, too. The cause I suppose I want to explore is these possibilities that relate beyond man himself, to that entity which we believe has created the universe itself, and is manifest in it.[51]

The interview ends with Wiebe's statement that,

> In one sense historical novels are not really historical at all. You could call The Blue Mountains of China a historical novel, but it's about people struggling with exactly the kinds of things that we struggle with, except for a slight shift in time and place. But that surely is all that fiction ever does anyway. How many human themes are there: love, war, what? You could sum them up on the fingers of two hands. It's how you get at it, how you face a thing, that counts. Consciously building a story is my way of trying to get at those big,

big questions.[52]

In an introduction to Double Vision, an anthology of twentieth-century stories in English, Wiebe writes:

> Story-making seems less physical than dance or song or mime, at which many animals surpass people, and its initial impulse seems less immediately imitative of the seen world than do those of drawing or carving. Even the sister art of poetry seems to root more deeply in song, in the emotional impulse to cry out, than in story which, at its purest, demands both the blaze of emotion and the cool, cerebral craft of the draftsman, the calculating designer.[53]

and he ends with,

> Throughout history the most original thinkers have also been great storytellers. I'm not sure what all this implies about humanity or the story-making impulse, but I am convinced that it means at least two things: story entertains and story teaches. Perhaps it also means that people like to participate in both the pleasure and the learning experience, that pleasure and learning are parts of the same thing. I doubt that any writers in this collection seriously consider themselves original religious thinkers, but in making their stories they are standing in the greatest of all human traditions - when we read their stories we not only experience pleasure, we also experience the desire to be better.[54]

In the introduction to The Story Makers, Rudy Wiebe, in effect, gives a twenty-two page lecture for a creative writing course, and a very good one. The impulse to "make story," Wiebe writes,

> ...simply is, like the impulse to sing, to dance, to play games
> .....
> the impulse to make story is connected with man's awareness of time. Time ends

> all acts, the more pleasurable often the more quickly. But time can be partly overcome by story
>
> .....
>
> If man was before he had words, I imagine he already dreamt, wishing the world different
>
> .....
>
> But you also have all the resources, strange as they are, to handle the implacable forces that pursue you, and eventually everyone gets what he deserves. That's dream.
>
> .....
>
> Also Old Man said to the people: "Now, if you are overcome, you may go and sleep, and get power. Something will come to you in your dream, that will help you..."
>
> .....
>
> The Iglulik Eskimos of the Canadian Arctic coast believe that every man is a poet; shaping poems requires no special gift which any one human does not have. Though we may doubt this concerning poetry, certainly in one significant way every human being is a story-maker; many persons, like many Eskimo singers, actually do tell beautiful stories without the conscious attempt at making anything beautiful. But most of us are not primitives and can never be, no matter how much we might wish it. Literary stories do require special gifts to make well, and they are well made when they give us pleasure...[55]

About the importance of myth and symbolism, Wiebe writes:

> Unthinking adults sometimes ask: why bother with writing or reading poetry? After all, poetry has no real use, like developing a hog with more bacon meat has real use. Neither small children nor primitive peoples ask for reasons to enjoy music, or dance, or poetry. They recognize what western adults seem to have had drilled out of them: that human beings must and do live as much by rhythm and symbol as by the tangible things that surround them. Man does not, like every other animal, merely gorge

> and rest and procreate; he also has ideas, feelings for friendship and community, sometimes even beliefs. These, rather than merely eating and being comfortable, make him a human being.[56]

Thus, the reader is told, the literary arts are part of man's makeup; man will ignore them at his peril and will suffer as much of a loss for them as he would if he ignored the totality of his heritage.

Rudy Wiebe's novels treat one or more individual characters, relating their experiences to the totality of mankind. So it is in Peace Shall Destroy Many where Thos Wiens learns that avoidance is wrong and that success lies in a conquest by love, not only within the Mennonite community but also outside, in the secular world. This is reinforced in First and Vital Candle where the preachers Josh and Lena Bishop are showing by their example what a "Christ Follower" (an existential Christian) lives like, and, hopefully, Abe Ross will take this knowledge with him into the world, and Violet will teach it to the children of Frozen Lake.

In The Blue Mountains of China, John Reiner takes the crucial truth of the existential Christian's (the Jesus follower's) way of life out of the confines of closed, isolated Mennonite communities into the world by carrying a heavy wooden cross on his shoulders along the highways of Alberta. It is not "something useful" but a "demonstration of faith." This novel, like none of the others, shows that

through persecution and assimilation a cadre of the faithful has remained and, for all we can tell, will continue to remain and will keep the faith of Christianity and, particularly, of existential Christianity.

The Temptations of Big Bear confronts the reader with a viewpoint of people who are non-Christians but are religious nevertheless. Big Bear's unshakable belief in The Only One and his oneness with the earth symbolize the religious, albeit not Christian, existentialist. He, too, suffers isolation when his own people refuse to heed his advice and the white man judges and incarcerates him, but Big Bear embraces sun and earth and all living things during his lifetime and at his death. He ultimately understands man better than man understands him.

The Scorched-Wood People is a further example of a local, isolated and confined conflict being expanded into a vision encompassing all of mankind, while the protagonist himself remains isolated and suffers the fate of an alienated martyr. The hero moves from the narrow-minded French-nationalistic separatist attitude to the vision of a liberated "North-West" where all the oppressed of the world can live an existential Christian life in freedom without threats of exploitation and violence. The vision, by implication, is that of a pacifist world of enlightened people without national boundaries where the Jesus-principle is obeyed, that is, "love thy neighbour." All problems should be "talked out" rather than resolved by confrontation and

war. This would amount to a paradise on earth where alienation and hatred are no longer problems, and that appears to be the author's own idealistic view, somewhat saddened by the realization that few will listen, and fewer still will understand.

Rudy Wiebe's short stories are significant because they show clearly a sense of concern by the author for the individual's problems with daily living and for the importance of man's heritage. It is easy to become familiar with the characters in each story even though they may be from a culture totally foreign to the reader, because they all ring true. Furthermore, each story is applicable to all humanity on this earth. As previously discussed, the isolation of the non-conformist is a strong theme throughout the short stories.

Unfortunately, Wiebe's plays do not reach the heights of either his novels or short stories. They seem unconvincing, farcical, and the humor appears contrived solely to make audiences laugh while any deeper meanings remain unrecognizable.

In his work, Rudy Wiebe expresses his own concerns about and opposition to the isolation of the individual and the isolation of communities from the totality of mankind. Throughout his novels and short stories, the artist's vision moves constantly, both in religious and secular terms, from a limited inward and, as such, isolated view (be it parochialism or narrow-minded nationalism) to an

all-embracing positive view of humanity and the common problems of man in a hostile universe.

Rudy Wiebe is prepared to throw his formidable literary skill and artistry into the balance to further the cause of love and peace, and to emphasize the importance of each individual's personal commitment and readiness to get involved. Wiebe succeeds extraordinarily well because the serious reader, as he follows the development of Rudy Wiebe's writings and reflects on what he has absorbed, must admit that he has gathered important new insights into the human tragedy. This holds true even if the reader has not gained that faith for the spreading of which the author hopes so fervently. Rudy Wiebe has achieved a very high level of artistic expression in fiction, and the reader can only hope that he will be permitted the pleasure of reading many more novels and short stories by this prolific western Canadian author in the future.

Notes

[1] C. G. Jung, "Introduction to the Religious and Psychological Problems of Alchemy," in The Basic Writings of C. G. Jung, ed. Voilet S. DeLaszlo (New York: The Modern Library by Random House, 1959), p. 464.

[2] Kurt F. Reinhardt, The Existentialist Revolt (New York; Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1960), pp. 299-230.

[3] John H. Yoder, The Politics of Jesus (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), p. 17.

[4] Ibid., p. 98.

[5] Ibid., p. 100.

[6] Ibid., pp. 135-136.

[7] Rudy Wiebe, First and Vital Candle (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1966), p. 246. Subsequent page references, enclosed within parentheses, will be to this edition and will be abbreviated: Candle.

[8] F. H. Heinemann, Existentialism and the Modern Predicament (New York: Harper & Row, Harper Torchbook edition, 1958), p. 31

[9] Ibid., p. 33.

[10] Ibid., p. 35. In the original the source is given as "The Journals (ed. A. Dru), para. 1317."

[11] Ibid., p. 60.

[12] Fred Cleverly, "'Shunning' Divides Mennonite Community," The Montreal Star, Feb. 18, 1979, p. H 14.

[13] Quoted from J. J. Gillespie in Erich Fromm, "Alienation Under Capitalism," in Man Alone Alienation in Modern Society, ed. Eric and Mary Josephson (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1962), p. 60.

[14] Ibid., p. 68.

[15] Ibid., p. 69.

[16] John Moss, Patterns of Isolation in English Canadian Fiction (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), p. 83.

[17] Ibid., p. 93.

[18] Rudy Wiebe, Peace Shall Destroy Many (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972), pp. 14-15. Subsequent parenthetical page references will be to the edition cited above and will be abbreviated: Peace.

[19] Yoder, p. 201.

[20] Ibid., p. 200.

[21] S. E. Read, "Maverick Novelist," Canadian Literature, 31 (Winter, 1967), pp. 76-77.

[22] See J. E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbolism (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 54 where " ... blue is darkness made visible" is quoted from Gaston Bachelard's L'Eau et les Songes, Paris, 1943.

[23] Hildegard E. Tiessen, "A Mighty Inner River: 'Peace' in the Fiction of Rudy Wiebe," Journal of Canadian Fiction, Vol. II, No. 4 (Fall, 1973), pp. 71-76.

[24] Cirlot, p. 84.

[25] Ibid., p. 113.

[26] T. Logie Robertson, M.A., ed. Poetical Works of Thomas Campbell (New York: Haskell House Publishers Ltd., 1968), p. 2.

[27] Rudy Wiebe, The Blue Mountains of China (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1970), epigraph. Subsequent page references, enclosed within parentheses, will be to this edition and will be abbreviated: Mountains. The entire poem can be located in: John Newlove, The Fat Man: Selected Poems 1962-1972 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), pp. 69-73.

[28] Violet Staub de Laszlo, ed., The Basic Writings of C. G. Jung (New York: The Modern Library - Random House, 1959), pp. 460-463. Translated by R. F. C. Hull from Collected Works, Vol. 12: Psychology and Alchemy, Bollingen Series XX (New York, 1953).

[29] Ibid, p. 442.

[30] Donald Cameron, Conversations With Canadian Novelists (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1973), pp. 148-149.

[31] Peter Angeles, ed., Critiques of God (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1976), p. 144.

[32] Angeles, p. 146.

[33] Ibid., p. 152.

[34] George Melnyk, "The Western Canadian Imagination: An Interview with Rudy Wiebe," The Canadian Fiction Magazine, 12 (Winter 1974), pp. 32-33.

[35] Rudy Wiebe, The Temptations of Big Bear (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1973), p. 37. Subsequent page references, enclosed within parentheses, will be to this edition and will be abbreviated: Bear.

[36] Edward Gibbon, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (New York: The Modern Library, Random House Inc., undated), Vol. I, pp. 28-29.

[37] Cameron, p. 148.

[38] Cameron, p. 150.

[39] Rudy Wiebe, The Scorched-Wood People (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1977), p. 315. Subsequent page references, enclosed within parentheses, will be to this edition and will be abbreviated: Wood.

[40] George Woodcock, "Riel & Dumont," Canadian Literature, 77 (Summer 1978), p. 99.

[41] George Woodcock writes in his book review in Canadian Literature, 77, quoted here, that "his [Dumont's] role in creating the quasi-republic of St. Laurent in the early 1870's is minimized and the clash between him and the Hudson's Bay people in 1870, which became an imperial issue with repercussions in Whitehall, is turned into a very minor affair. ...Dumont is represented as a crude and violent figure ... whereas in fact Dumont was a man of considerable subtlety of expression, and in his own way a highly sophisticated as well as a great and courageous man. ...Dumont emerges as a muscular oaf, and that is neither fictional nor historical justice." This point is also made in Woodcock's

biography of Dumont, The Métis Chief and His Lost World (Edmonton, Hurtig Publishers, 1975).

[42] Montanism was an apocalyptic Christian movement which originated in Phrygia in the second half of the second century A.D. It was disallowed by the Church and lingered on as a sect. This "new prophecy" was led by Montanus and the prophetesses Prisca and Maximilla. It predicted an early descent of heavenly Jerusalem and envisaged in Montanus the fulfillment of the promise of the return of a comforter, the Holy Spirit (John 14, 16). The sect advocated asceticism, condemned re-marriage, and denied forgiveness for those who committed a mortal sin; its most significant follower was Tertullian who interpreted Montanism as a third step of salvation after the old and the new covenant. (The foregoing was translated from Der Grosse Brockhaus encyclopedia, F. A. Brockhaus, Wiesbaden, 1955).

In the light of the above-mentioned data it could become understandable that Riel may have looked upon his sister Sara as a prophetess. It may also explain Riel's negative attitude toward Rome and the Pope, and his statements to the effect that Archbishop Bourget was "sainted."

[43] Translated by John Glassco and quoted from: Ramsay Cook, "The confessions of St. Louis Riel," Saturday Night, Vol. 92, No. 1 (January/February 1977), p. 77.

[44] Heather Robertson, "Western Mystic," The Canadian [inserted in the Montreal Gazette] December 10, 1977, p. 22.

[45] Cirlot, p. 152.

[46] Ibid., pp. 232-233.

[47] Rudy Wiebe, Where Is The Voice Coming From? (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1974), p. 68. Subsequent page reference, enclosed within parentheses, will be to this edition and will be abbreviated: Voice.

[48] Rudy Wiebe, Someday Soon, Before Tomorrow (Edmonton: Author's Final Draft - CBC Toronto, 1976). Subsequent page references, enclosed within parentheses, will be to this manuscript and will be abbreviated: Tomorrow.

[49] Don McLellan, West Coast Review, Vol. 9, No. 4, p. 16.

[50] Rudy Wiebe, Far As The Eye Can See (Edmonton; Theatre Passe Muraille, Stage Manuscript Copy, 1977). Subsequent page references, enclosed within parentheses, will be to this manuscript and will be abbreviated: Eye.

[51] Cameron, p. 158.

[52] Ibid., pp. 159-160.

[53] Rudy Wiebe, ed., Double Vision (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1976), p. ix.

[54] Ibid., p. xii.

[55] Rudy Wiebe, ed., The Story Makers (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1970), pp. ix-xxx.

[56] Rudy Wiebe, "Songs of the Canadian Eskimos," Canadian Literature, Vol. 52 (Spring 1972), p. 57.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Wiebe, Rudy. The Blue Mountains of China. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970.

_____. "Buffalo Run." Journal of Canadian Fiction, II: 2 (1973), pp. 39-41.

_____, ed. Double Vision: An Anthology of Twentieth Century Stories in English. Toronto: Macmillan, 1976. pp. ix-xii.

_____. Far As The Eye Can See. Edmonton: Theatre Passe Muraille, 1977.

_____. First and Vital Candle. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1966.

_____. "Games for Queen Victoria." Saturday Night, 91 (1976), pp. 60-67.

_____. "Grand Pursuit of Big Bear." Fiddlehead, 95 (1972), pp. 3-12.

_____. "On the Trail of Big Bear." Journal of Canadian Fiction, III: 2 (1974), pp. 45-48.

_____. "Passage of Land." Canadian Literature, 48 (1972), pp. 25-27.

_____. Peace Shall Destroy Many. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1962.

Wiebe, Rudy. Someday Soon, Before Tomorrow. Edmonton: Author's final draft for CBC Toronto, 1976.

_____. "Songs of the Canadian Eskimo." Canadian Literature, 52 (Spring 1972), pp. 57-69.

_____, ed. Stories from Western Canada: A Selection. Toronto: Macmillan, 1972, pp. xiv and 274.

_____. The Scorched-Wood People. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977.

_____, ed. The Story Makers: A Selection of Modern Short Stories. Toronto: Macmillan, 1970, pp. xxx and 354.

_____. The Temptations of Big Bear. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973.

_____. Where Is The Voice Coming From? Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974.

Secondary Sources

Angeles, Peter, ed. Critiques of God. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1976.

Barbour, Douglas. "Original People." Canadian Literature, 61 (1974), pp. 82-84.

Cameron, Donald. Conversations with Canadian Novelists. Toronto: Macmillan, 1973.

Cirlot, J. E. A Dictionary of Symbolism. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962.

Cleverly, Fred. " 'Shunning' Divides Mennonite Community." The Montreal Star, Feb. 18, 1979, p. B14.

Cook, Ramsay. "The Confessions of St. Louis Riel." Saturday Night, Vol. 92, No. 1 (Jan./Feb. 1977), p. 77.

De Laszlo, Violet S., ed. The Basic Writings of C. G. Jung. New York: Random House, 1959.

Dueck, Allan. "A Sense of the Past." Journal of Canadian Fiction, II: (1973), pp. 88-90.

Francis, E. K. In Search of Utopia. Altona: D. W. Friesen & Sons, 1955.

Gibbon, Edward. The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. New York: Random House, undated.

Gillespie, J. J. and Erich Fromm. "Alienation Under Capitalism" in Man Alone: Alienation in Modern Society, ed. Eric and Mary Josephson. New York: Dell Publishing Corp., 1962, pp. 56-73.

Heinemann, F. H. Existentialism and the Modern Predicament. New York: Harper & Row, 1958.

Mandel, Eli. "Where the Voice Comes From." Quill and Quire, XL: 12, pp. 4, 20.

McInnis, Edgar. Canada, A Political and Social History. New York: Rinehart & Company, Inc., 1947.

Melnyk, George. "The Western Canadian Imagination: An Interview with Rudy Wiebe." The Canadian Fiction Magazine, 12 (Winter 1974), pp. 32-33.

Moss, John. Patterns of Isolation. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974.

Newlove, John, ed. The Fat Man: Selected Poems 1967 - 1972. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979.

Read, S. E. "Maverick Novelist." Canadian Literature, 31 (1976), pp. 76-77.

_____. "The Storms of Change." Canadian Literature, 16 (1963), pp. 73-76.

Reinhardt, Kurt F. The Existentialist Revolt. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1960.

Robertson, Heather. "Western Mystic." The Canadian, [inserted in the Montreal Gazette] December 10, 1977, p. 22.

Schroeder, A. P. and R. Wiebe, edd. Stories From Pacific and Arctic Canada. Toronto: Macmillan, 1974, pp xv & 284.

Spettigue, D. Review of First and Vital Candle by Rudy Wiebe. Queen's Quarterly, 73 (1966), pp. 607-608.

Tiessen, Hildegard E. "A Mighty Inner River: 'Peace' in the Fiction of Rudy Wiebe." Journal of Canadian Fiction, II: 4 (1973), pp. 71-76.

Wittke, Carl. A History of Canada. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, Limited, 1935.

Woodcock, George. The Metis Chief and His Lost World. Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1975.

_____. "Riel and Dumont." Canadian Literature, 77 (Summer 1978), p. 99.

Yoder, John H. The Politics of Jesus. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1972.