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FROM PREACHER TO PROPHET: A STUDY OF THE FICTION OF RUDY WIEBE

Vickie LeBlanc

A Thesis

in

The Faculty

of

English

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Abstract

From Preacher to Prophet: A Study of the
Fiction of Rudy Wiebe

Vickie LeBlanc

The purpose of the thesis is to discuss the fiction of Canadian Mennonite artist Rudy Wiebe. I intend to analyze the nature of Wiebe's religious vision and the manner in which it is expressed in artistic terms. I will also consider Wiebe's role in helping articulate a Canadian identity.

The analysis of the author's works will be pre-eminently archetypal; the emphasis is on the novel's structure or form. Although Wiebe's last two novels are tragic in structure, the thesis will define the author's vision as fundamentally comic in nature. The Christian myth of rebirth and redemption is the underlying form.

A chronological examination will reveal changes in vision and technique which indicate a reconciliation of what at first seem divided loyalties—Wiebe as Mennonite; Wiebe as artist. In his first two novels the author's ability as a story-teller is inhibited by his ideological beliefs. In his later works, the Christian myth of the search for grace is employed more freely to impart greater universality and credibility. This is accompanied by increasing complexity and experimentation in form and technique.

The thesis will relate Wiebe's fiction to Canadian literature as a whole. The author's works help articulate our imaginative response to the land and its peoples. It will be seen that, in Wiebe's view, the quest for faith is not divorced from the question of cultural identity. The final chapter of the thesis will closely relate Wiebe's nationalism and pre-occupation with history to his Christian ideals.

Editions Cited

Throughout the thesis, parenthetical reference will frequently be made after a quotation from one of the following books. The abbreviated title will be used. All page references to the works of Rudy Wiebe are to the editions cited below.

Peace Shall Destroy Many (1962), Intro. J.M. Robinson, NCL 82. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972. /PM

First and Vital Candle. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966. /VC

The Blue Mountains of China. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970. /BM

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

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

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Chapter One

The Quest for Identity

The thesis examines the fiction of Canadian Mennonite writer Rudy Wiebe. The paper will focus on the nature of Wiebe's religious vision as well as his role in helping articulate a Canadian identity. Both as editor and author Wiebe's contribution to Canadian literature is substantial. His work reflects many of the themes and patterns central to the Canadian imagination. Simultaneously, as a radically Christian novelist, his vision is relatively unusual in the mid-twentieth century. The stories he tells of our past celebrate a spiritual heritage not too frequently sung today.

Wiebe's first novel was published in 1962, his latest in 1977. The thesis will trace the development of vision and artistry through a chronological analysis of his novels, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, *First and Vital Candle*, *The Blue Mountains of China*, *The Temptations of Big Bear* and *The Scorched-Wood People*. Reference will also be made to those short stories and articles which further our understanding of the total design and direction of his work.

The analysis will be pre-eminently archetypal. The archetypal critic emphasizes the significance of a novel's structure or form. Northrop Frye recognizes four categories prior to genre: comedy, romance, tragedy and irony.[1] Comedy traces the movement from bondage to freedom. The comic action drives towards identity on three levels:

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[1] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism, Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 162.

social, dual or "erotic", and individual.[2] Wiebe's fiction defines him as a comedian; the Christian myth of rebirth and redemption is the underlying structure of his work.[3] For a Christian writer, tragedy is an episode in the divine comedy, the larger scheme of redemption and resurrection. Wiebe's last two novels are tragedies; we witness the collapse of the desired society, the death of the hero. But death for Big Bear and Louis Riel is apocalyptic; they each achieve their eternal reward.

The organizing principle of the analysis will be that of the quest for identity, one which is both spiritual and cultural in nature. The theme of the quest is basic to all literature. In his critical writings Frye identifies the quest as the central literary *mythos*, one which is itself part of the larger framework for all literature: the story of the loss or regaining of identity.[4] As a religious novelist Wiebe deals with this perennial literary theme in specifically religious terms as a quest for true spiritual peace, a reconciliation of man and God. As a Canadian, Wiebe's handling of the theme helps to articulate our imaginative and psychic response to a land too vast to be imagined and to the great mosaic of people who have attempted to make that vastness their home. These two concerns are not divorced from one another. As will be seen, they form the warp and woof of the fabric of his vision.

To establish Wiebe as a religious writer the term must be clarif-

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[2] Northrop Frye, *Fools of Time, Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), pp. 15-16.

[3] See Patricia Morley, *The Comedians: Hugh Hood and Rudy Wiebe* (Toronto: Clark Irwin, 1977), p. 4.

[4] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 215.

ied. A religious writer is concerned with the search for ultimate values and the conception of man as an ethical and spiritual creature. The quotation from St. Paul which serves as epigraph to *The Temptations of Big Bear* isolates the underlying and recurring theme of all Wiebe's fiction, that we should " . . . search for God . . . feel after him and find him . . . for in Him we live and move and have our Being." Wiebe's fiction presumes that only through a vital relationship with a merciful God can man be assured of the identity he so desperately seeks. Without such identity, man's life is less than human.

Rudy Wiebe is a Mennonite Protestant. His works reflect the radical and revolutionary beliefs of his people. The Mennonites were among several immigrant groups who came to Canada during the 1800s and 1920s in search of political and religious freedom. In the forward to *Peace Shall Destroy Many* they are described as modern Anabaptists, the latter being the extreme evangelical wing of the Reformation movement.[5] They were distinguished by their fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible, adult baptism, a radical discipleship to Christ, a belief in the universal brotherhood of man, non-violence and non-participation in war. The Mennonites were and are a separatist people. They have rejected the "evil" of the secular world in order to dedicate their lives to God and to the realization of His kingdom on earth. They are characterized by asceticism and an evangelical belief in the importance of personal repentance.

Wiebe was nurtured in the security of a Mennonite religious community. The dustjacket of his first novel describes him as a young theol-

[5] Rudy Wiebe, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962), Intro. J.M. Robinson, NCL 82 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972), preface.

ogian.[6] In an interview he confesses proudly, "I never had a great crisis of faith while in university."[7] Wiebe's fiction reflects his unwavering faith;he writes in a framework which takes for granted the existence of religious values, a context which he readily admits is no longer a common tradition.[8] Wiebe's acknowledged intent, to make religious experience relevant to a non-religious audience, demands great artistic resources. My contention is that Wiebe achieves increasing success and relevancy as he proceeds.

The author takes seriously his vocation as a writer. He considers it his primary mode of bearing witness to his faith.[9] Such a sense of mission has its dangers as he admits in his discussion of Christian writers with dedication but no respect for the discipline of their craft.[10] A religious writer may preach or prophesy. E.M. Forster distinguishes these two terms. The preacher talks of God, reflects, moralizes. The prophet may also have a message, but it is the "accent of his voice, his song" which commands our attention.[11] It is the conflict between the rhetorical impulse to assert and the poetic impulse to construct; the victory of the latter is the sign of the maturing of the writer.

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[6] George Melnyk, "Rudy, Riel and other rebels," *Quill and Quire*, November 1977, p. 31.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] Donald Cameron, "The Moving Stream is Perfectly at Rest," *Conversations with Canadian Novelists*, Part 2 (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1973), p. 158.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 159.

[10] *Ibid.* , p. 156.

[11] E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, ed. O. Stallybrass (Markham: Penquin Books Canada, 1974), p. 116.

Only gradually does Wiebe move into prophecy. In the first two novels his ideology partially interferes with his artistic ends. The voice of the preacher is strong. Didacticism, awkward dialogue, and restricted characterization result. From the start Wiebe is capable of rich characterization. Witness his depiction of Deacon Block and Abe Ross. However, secondary characters are often flat, emblematic mouthpieces for Wiebe's ideals. Later, even minor figures are shaped with vitality and complexity. The writing becomes more authentic and objective, with less sense of authorial manipulation.

Frye notes that within art religion functions as myth, providing a coherent metaphorical framework to the novel.[12] Patterns of apocalyptic and demonic imagery define the humanly desirable and undesirable. These patterns work dialectically, pulling the reader towards the metaphorical core of the work. A mythological structure can be delineated in all Wiebe's works. In his first two novels, however, metaphors tend to be overly exuberant, even blatant. Later Wiebe weds myth and reality with artful ease.

The author's work is characterized by increasing complexity and experimentation in form and technique. The first two novels are limited in space to a specific locale and in time to approximately one year. His later novels are epic in scope; they record a panoramic movement across time and space. We move from the limitation of one single point of view in *Peace Shall Destroy Many* to a variety of narrative voices and an increasing mastery of stream-of-consciousness techniques. A measure of the author's artistic growth is readily apprehended if we compare some of the

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[12] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 120.

awkward interior monologues of his first two novels with the smooth transitions of his fourth and fifth. The use of more experimental techniques allows Wiebe to depict the character's quest for spiritual identity from a more fundamental and complex level of consciousness. In the first two novels the characters must come to understand consciously and intellectually the steps towards revelation. Theirs is an explicit journey to Christian peace. In his later works Wiebe delves into the minds of a wide variety of characters to reveal their coming to terms with the most fundamental of existential conflicts prior to conceptualization. The novels achieve increasing psychological depth.

As Wiebe's artistry matures, so does his vision. Form and content coincide. The author progresses from a relatively traditional religious stance to a more mystical and universal vision. It will be shown that Wiebe's early fiction reflects some of the forces he consciously condemns. For instance, the author has a reverent and sacramental attitude towards both man and nature. His mysticism is based on the belief in the oneness of creation and the redemption of flesh by spirit through the universal atonement of Christ's death. Despite the conscious rejection of the life-denying elements of Christianity, a latent distrust of man's sexuality is evident in his first two novels. Moreover, Wiebe has the Puritan's overriding sense of the reality and strength of evil. His protagonists must comprehend the depths of their depravity, the sins of pride, violence and lust. Their quest for peace involves a well-defined and melodramatic repentance. The awareness of human failings exists throughout Wiebe's fiction, but in the later works he emphasizes what he calls the "stuff of human majesty."

It was stated earlier that Wiebe's fiction reflects many of the

themes and patterns central to the Canadian imagination. Wiebe's background, although unique, does not isolate him: he is an immigrant in a country of immigrants; a member of a religious community in a country where religion has been a major, if not *the* major, cultural force. One of the most pervasive aspects of our religious heritage is Puritanism. Indeed, Patricia Morley goes so far as to define the Puritan ethic as one of the "containing-imaginative forms" of the Canadian identity. "Puritanism is the traditional moral conscience and consciousness which marks Canadian culture."[13] It is a shaping factor of the Canadian character and imagination.

The Mennonites were a radical branch of the Puritan reformation. Their response to the Canadian frontier parallels that of many other Canadians of a Puritan background and provokes the fictional exploration of similar themes: the obsessive compulsion for work, the distruct of pleasure, fantasy and joy; the rejection of sex; the separation of flesh and spirit; pride; guilt; and a rationalistic and intellectual approach to reality at the expense of mystical experience. Like other Canadian novelists, Wiebe dramatizes the human conflicts arising from a misinterpreted Christianity which emphasizes the life-denying aspects of the Christian faith. It is these life-denying aspects of a distorted Puritanism which have led many Canadians to denounce their religious heritage completely. The more difficult task is to separate the wheat from the chaff. This is Wiebe's accomplishment.

The presence of affirmation in Canadian literature is a debated

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[13] Patricia Morley, *The Immoral Moralists* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1972), p. 128.

issue. Are we heroes or victims? Do we possess a positive imaginative vision? Some would contend that our social and physical environment militates against the emergence of a positive national myth such as developed in America. There are few images of a second Adam, anarchist and individualistic, trekking to a Promised Land. A puritan, loyalist conservatism and a stern geography and climate are said to have discouraged such naive optimism. Northrop Frye, writing of the narrative tradition in English Canadian poetry, suggests that the amoral and seemingly indifferent impersonal aspect of the Canadian wilderness demands a tragic resolution.[14] Margaret Atwood's provocative thesis is that we are a people with a "will to lose," unable to affirm anything beyond endurance.[15] Tom Farley also speaks of the lack of affirmation; our literature is one of exile: retreating, inverted, mourning, *not* interpretive.[16]

Other critics disagree. In "Survival, Affirmation and Joy," Patricia Morley contests Atwood's thesis. She argues that Canadian literature expresses joy as well as suffering, courage as well as fear. She notes that survival under difficult circumstances is a positive affirmative act; tragedy need not end on a negative note; victims may be victors. Moreover she points out that humour is as pervasive a theme as lonelin-ess.[17] Certainly this is true of Wiebe's work. In *Butterfly on Rock*,

[14] Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden. Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), p. 153.

[15] Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 245.

[16] Thomas Farley, *Exiles and Pioneers* (Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1976), pp. 20, 47, 168, 195.

[17] Patricia Morley, "Survival, Affirmation, and Joy," *Lakehead University Review*, Summer 1974, pp. 21-30.

D.G. Jones also locates an affirmative tone. He begins his analysis by referring to the Old Testament world of Adam—Adam separated from his creator, cast out of Eden to wander in the wilderness—as the single archetypal pattern in terms of which Canadian literature could be placed in perspective. But he notes that if the *conflict* is seen in Old Testament terms, the *resolution* can be found in the New Testament.[18] Death and suffering are conquered by love. This is the great sustaining myth of Christianity and it is the source of Wiebe's affirmation. Apocalyptic images figure throughout Wiebe's novels to suggest the possibility of human affirmation, metaphors identified with the goals of human civilization: the well-tended garden; the circle of love, security and fulfillment; the well of living waters; the river of peace. Wiebe's myth is one of love, community, grace and, most definitely, joy. His fiction offers a celebration of the life of the spirit as of the body. He tells us we have not only endured but have been heroic in so doing.

The most consistently isolated force shaping the Canadian imagination is the impact of the land. The response to the land reflects the author's moral vision while that moral vision is often shaped by the land. Hugo McPherson writes: "In looking at the transcontinental sweep of Canadian fiction, critics from Northrop Frye to Warren Tallman have seen its development as a struggle against the violence or the snowy indifference of nature—as an effort to humanize and give articulate shape to this vast landscape."[19] This is especially true of the literature of the

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[18] D.G. Jones, *Butterfly on Rock* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), p.15.

[19] Laurence Ricou, *Vertical Man/Horizontal World; Man and Landscape in Canadian Prairie Fiction*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1973), p.3.

prairies. This landscape is never merely tolerated, "It is loved and hated with equal intensities."[20]

Like many Canadian poets and novelists, Wiebe's response to the land is poetic, mystical and moral. Out of the challenging situations imposed by the wilderness and vastness, he shapes his affirmation. Wiebe views the land as part of a Divine Order, part of an ultimately moral universe under the benevolent eye of God. His fiction is an attempt to encompass the land and its inhabitants in imaginative terms and in so doing to articulate our oneness with creation. This is central to Wiebe's vision. His patterns of apocalyptic and demonic imagery are aligned with the forces which either encourage or inhibit this union.

The concluding chapter of the thesis will relate Wiebe's nationalism and his pre-occupation with history to his Christian ideals. The confrontation of primitive and "civilized" cultures provides a ready context for the elucidation of his beliefs. In no way has he cast off his personal religious faith. He is, as he tells Cameron, a believing and practicing Anabaptist.[21] In divesting his religious tradition of all limiting interpretations he moves to the core of Christianity, a religion which is seen to be revolutionary, universal and mystical in nature.

The changes in vision and technique which occur in the author's work indicate a reconciliation of what at first seem divided loyalties-- Wiebe as Mennonite, Wiebe as artist. The emphasis gradually shifts to artist. It is a significant shift which allows Wiebe's work to touch a widened audience.

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[20] Donald G. Stephens, ed., *Writers of the Prairies*, Canadian Literature Series, ed. G. Woodcock (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1973), p. 1.

[21] Cameron, p. 148.

Chapter Two

A Mighty Inner River

In *Peace Shall Destroy Many* the author's major concern is to define his concept of Christian peace. The need to differentiate between a peace which destroys and that which sustains is suggested by the novel's title and the epigraph from which it is taken. The biblical verse describes a vision given to Daniel in which a fierce king destroys a holy people, a time when the carelessness and selfishness of the peaceful led to their destruction. The Mennonite community of the fictional Canadian town of Wapiti is a contemporary expression of this complacency. Here the ideal of peace and universal love has degenerated into a quiescence masking intolerance and a self-righteous isolationism. The novel reveals that genuine peace is not an outward condition of separation from the evil of the world but an inner state of being born of an achieved relationship between man and God through God in Christ. This inner peace is perceived by Wiebe to be Christ's central message to mankind.[1]

The novel provoked mixed reaction when published in 1962. Although time has brought a more positive evaluation, critics originally dismissed it as a social document on the Mennonites.[2] Their way of life

[1] See Donald Cameron, "The Moving Stream is Perfectly at Rest," *Conversations with Canadian Novelists*, Part 2 (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1973), p.156, where Wiebe notes that he sees inner peace as the "main thing Christ is all about . . . the conscious knowledge of being at peace, in a state of rest in relation to everything around you, because somehow you are in a state of rest in relation to the God that has made it all. You don't have to be perturbed even if you are violently assaulted, because basically you're still at peace."

[2] Tom Saunders, Review of *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, *Aion*, III, 2 (May, 1963), 24.

did not encourage the development of the arts, especially fiction. Their sobriety and fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible led to a distrust of fantasy. J.H. Janzen, writing in *Mennonite Life* in 1946, reflects on Russo-Canadian Mennonites: "Mennonitism was considered in some respects as *terra sancta* in which the jugglery of *belles lettres* dared not appear. That Mennonites would write fiction was simply sin."[3] Mennonite reaction to Wiebe's first book was like that of Deacon Block to the young school-teacher in the novel. They were concerned with preserving an unblemished image, not with the truth of Wiebe's depiction or his serious moral questions. The author, working on a church paper at the time, was given a one-way ticket out of Winnipeg.[4]

Peace Shall Destroy Many reflects many of the archetypal themes and patterns of Canadian immigrant fiction. Critic John Moss notes: "The immigrant exile in an alien land is one of the most pervasive themes of Canadian prose fiction. . . . a novel like Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many* . . . is more typical of Canadian experience than might at first be realized."[5] For many immigrants, Canada was a new residence but not a new home. Rather than adapting to the exigencies of the environment they attempted to reconstruct an idealized past. This is dramatized in Deacon Block's desire to create a community such as their people had known in the golden days of Russia. The result is a self-imposed exile, a garrison culture. The immigrant's conflict is

[3] J. Thiessen, "Canadian Mennonite Literature," *Canadian Literature*, (Winter 1972), no.51, p.68.

[4] Elmer F. Suderman, "Universal Values in Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many*," *Mennonite Life*, (October 1965), vol.XX, no.4, p.175.

[5] John Moss, *Patterns of Isolation*, (Toronto:McClelland and Stewart, 1974), p.83.

between two orders of reality: the cherished, often illusory ideal of the past and the present. For David Weins, "the Canadian bush disrupted the whole order of things. . . . In Russia right was right and wrong was wrong. . . . Here, the people . . . lived such nonchalantly sinful lives . . . he felt as if the foundation of all morality was sliced from beneath him" (P 21). A central theme of Wiebe's first novel is Thom's emerging awareness of Canada and its native peoples, of the need to re-evaluate tradition in the direction of a more inclusive, universal view. As in many Canadian immigrant novels, only after death and violence have severed the ties with an inauthentic past do protagonist and community move forward to embrace this larger world.[6]

Wiebe relies on a Christian mythological framework to embody his theme of the quest. The symbols are tightly and consistently knit. The *mythos* or narrative pattern is comic in structure; it records the movement from bondage to freedom. The obstructing society, epitomized by the ruthless Deacon Block, is initially in control. Life is lived in bondage to the laws of the fathers, misinterpreted and followed with blind faith. We witness the disintegration of this world as Thom gradually perceives its inherent hypocrisy. At the close of the novel, Thom's drive towards the brightest star in the heavens intimates a comic resolution for both protagonist and community--freedom and salvation through Christ. Thom fulfills the narrative quest pattern of the archtypal hero: the departure from the traditional ways of the father; the initiation into the demonic world of experience; the ritual or symbolic

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[6] *Ibid*, p.81.

death; the rebirth into the apocalyptic world of grace.[7]

The four sections of the novel suggest the cyclic process of life: spring, summer, autumn, winter. The seasons function as metaphors for the stages of Thom's quest. Thom himself comments:

> Really the whole cycle of the seasons was an endless battle to retain existence. The buntings stored nothing against the winter: they merely found out if they had the hardihood to survive. Man also--perhaps man even had a spiritual winter. (P 199)

Each of the four sections is preceded by a lyrical prelude whose symbolism unites and foreshadows the ensuing chapters. The imagery of the first prelude defines the journey and the goal to be attained. Thom's younger brother Hal walks through the valley with the half-breed Jackie Labret. They crouch down on the beams of a culvert to watch the eternal refolding of water over rocks. The image of the stream is the central apocalyptic metaphor of the novel. Wiebe comments that the stream image of the biblical prophet Jeremiah is the best image for Christian peace; it is a recurring metaphor throughout his work.[8] The image is explicitly identified with Thom's quest in Joseph's letter: "Peace is not a thing static and unchanging; rather a mighty inner river that carries all outward circumstances before it as if they were drift-wood" (P 162). Hal symbolically worries off a sliver of wood watching it flow past. Stepping together into the cold stream they begin their search for frog eggs. This baptismal image recurs at the close of the novel to provide a unifying symmetry and to suggest the promise of

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[7] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, 2nd ed., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 30, 36-37.

[8] Cameron, p.156.

spiritual rebirth.

Hal is important in the novel.[9] His friendship with the half-breed Jackie Labret contrasts with the community's departure from its professed ideal of universal love. Moreover Hal is exuberant, joyous and imaginative. His responsiveness to the world is a welcome alternative to the Mennonites' sombre dedication to work. Hal's identification with the forces of life is suggested by his inclusion in all the preludes but that of winter.

World War II forms a backdrop to the action of the novel, a symbolic counterpoint to Thom's inner battle. The war precipitates his conflict. He must decide whether to refuse induction in accordance with the traditions of his community or to accept the beliefs of Joseph Dueck who argues that the traditional Mennonite position of pacifism must be re-evaluated; with their current stance, the non-Christian becomes the martyr for the faith, dying to secure the Mennonites a privileged peace. Thom's dilemma is that both Dueck and Block profess to offer Christian solutions: "guideposts bearing the same legend pointed over horizonless dunes in opposing directions."

The war provides an appropriate context for Wiebe to explore the ironies of the Mennonites' rejection of violence. Thom wishes there were enough bush-country to hide his people from a "blood-thirsty

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[9] See Hildegard E. Tiessen, "A Mighty Inner River: 'Peace' in the Fiction of Rudy Wiebe," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 11, 4 (Fall, 1973), p.72. Tiessen suggests that Hal represents the "positive force which is sustained throughout the novel and which finally points towards a renewal of the life of the community." She notes that it is only at the conclusion of the novel that the rest of the community reconcile themselves "to a mode of acceptance already practised by this simple child who innocently embraces the world."

Hitler." The Mennonites consider war the culmination of world evil from which they have consciously severed themselves. However Joseph acknowledges their contradictory fascination with violence: "And if Germans are involved this unconscious admiration is even bolstered a bit by our almost nationalistic interest in Germany." The school-teacher's allusion to the Mennonites as "displaced Germans" implies that no bush can protect them from the violence within their own community.

The opening scene of Chapter One functions dramatically and symbolically. Thom ploughs the land in the tradition of his forefathers. His work is obstructed by rocks strewn about the field. The image suggests a spiritual analogy. Thom works to reap the gift of eternal life but is obstructed by the patriarch Deacon Block who is consistently aligned with these rocks. The elder Weins considers him "the one rock in the whirlpool of the Canadian world." In the larger narrative, the allusion is ironic. Block is a false cornerstone. He and his misinterpreted Christianity are the literal *blocks* to grace. As Patricia Morley notes, Wiebe inverts the image of the rock from its traditional apocalyptic role into a demonic symbol.[10]

Block is the main *alazon* or blocking figure in the novel, identified not only with rocks but with the rigidity of iron and steel. Thom's flashback to his childhood experience with the blacksmith suggests the error of identifying Christ's spiritual church with an immovable build-

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[10] See Patricia Morley, *The Comedians: Hugh Hood and Rudy Wiebe* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1977), p. 62. Morley notes that metaphors such as rock, cleanness, peace, are traditionally apocalyptic and that Wiebe's revolutionary bias is revealed by his ironic inversion of these images into their demonic form.

ing, or, by implication, with a rigid tradition devoid of the vitality of a living faith. Block's concept of peace is a community bound by morals and laws of an unchanging and "absolute" tradition. Under his guidance the Mennonites dedicate themselves to hard work, frugality, moral decency and peacefulness, all in preparation for the world to come. Block's obsessive compulsion for work militates against the joys of life. His other worldliness is in uneasy alliance with the economic prosperity the Mennonites enjoy at the expense of the less fortunate. Moreover the deacon's peace is a sham utopia, a whitewash masking moral apathy. The members of his family bear the scars of his compulsion: his wife, silent and powerless before his tyranny; Pete following blindly his father's rules; Elizabeth in her squandered womanhood, desperate for love.

The flashback to Block's past provides insight into his *humor* or obsession. As a conscientious objector in the forests of Siberia during World War I Block has been subjected to cruel treatment by fellow Mennonites. His narrow escape from death has brought him face to face with his own mortality. He becomes obsessed with a "son-necessity." During the famine of 1921 he abandons every Christian ideal in his wilfull determination to ensure his son's survival. When later his subterfuge is discovered his anger culminates in a cold-blooded act of murder. He is driven to confess and repent and to massive acts of dedication to his community. His devotion is far from selfless however. His only concern is to be an example to his son. Block emigrates to Canada in the hope of creating an ideal environment where Pete might grow with the moral guidance he himself has lacked. That guilt continues to

plague him suggests the deacon's repentance has been inauthentic. The ensuing action proves him still unable to yield to God's will.

Block is the most compelling character in the novel. Despite his ruthlessness he emerges as a figure of pathos. He is distinguished not by villainy but by lack of self-knowledge. While opposed to Thom and Joseph he admires their integrity. Of Joseph he comments, "for a moment he could have wished him his son" (P 71). Block's inner suffering and tentative gestures of tenderness towards Elizabeth just prior to her collapse succeed in drawing our sympathy. Although he is the personification of many of the forces which negate authentic peace, his calm efficiency and dedication to his community are in themselves positive values. His strength is such that even Thom comprehends why all feel compelled to turn to the deacon for help. The final pages of the novel intimate that he is capable of humility and consequently of redemption.

Joseph Dueck is Wiebe's principle spokesman and Thom's spiritual mentor. His sermon by the lake, his departure on horseback with few possessions and his evangelistic role identify him as a Christ figure, but a Christ of the sword. Joseph refuses to accept tradition blindly. He petitions Thom "not to be afraid of your mind." Block insists children must be taught their beliefs. Joseph, like the original Anabaptists, is evangelical in emphasizing the personal rediscovery of faith. Spiritual truth cannot be handed down through tradition. Unlike his biblical namesake, Thom's doubt is not seen as a negative value but as a necessary step towards a mature faith. Although Joseph leaves Wapiti early in the novel he continues to exert his influence on Thom

through his letters.

One of Joseph's letters differentiates the several ways of apprehending peace. The word may refer to a state of restfulness. This is the evasive peace frequently applied in church meetings. "As long as everything goes smoothly and they themselves cannot be blamed 'peace' is being maintained." Secondly, peace means a state of safety or blessedness such as God promised Israel. To many Mennonites this meant material prosperity, a misconception Wiebe explores in *The Blue Mountains of China*. "As long as God gives us good crops and we don't have to fight in any war we are at peace." Indeed, Block interprets their prosperity as God's blessing on the righteous and their neighbour's misfortune, His curse on the heathen. The peace of the New Testament is quite different.

> According to Christ's teaching, peace is not a circumstance but a state of being. . . . [Christ] never compromised with a sham slothful peace as we want to . . . He brought . . . inward peace that is in no way affected by outward war but quietly overcomes it on life's real battlefield: the soul of man. By personally living His peace, we are peacemakers. (P 162-3)

Wiebe internalizes the concept of isolation. By living Christ's peace one may be *in* the world but not of it. Dueck suggests the Mennonites must express their love for mankind, not in sterile passivity but through active pacifism. The Anabaptist definition of a Christian is consistently conduct-centred, as it is for all the historic Puritan groups. Faith must be active; by our deeds are we known. As Joseph tells the congregation prior to his enlistment in the medical corps, words can change nothing: "As a Christian I must do something about the misery in the world." Both Thom and Joseph are characterized by the religious zeal which is central to Wiebe's earlier vision.

The author metaphorically identifies the narrow path to authentic peace. Thom and Annamarie, the pastor's daughter, visit the Wapiti River under the moonlight. The scene is replete with apocalyptic images and brings together the three structural metaphors of the novel: river, bush and rock. They follow a "narrow road over the rock-rumped earth" into "another world." Only the sound of frogs and the wind sighing, symbolic of the breath of the Holy Spirit, disturb the silence. Penetrating the bush which identifies the barrier between Wapiti and the world, they emerge at the fire-lookout, a universal archetype which functions here specifically as a metaphor for Christian peace: "here peace as when only two people and God were on earth." Thom's covenant with Annamarie, Joseph's female counterpart, the embodiment of Christian love and integrity, suggests Thom's commitment to the quest. Annamarie's re-appearance at the novel's conclusion implies its fulfillment.

Initially Thom is one with Block. He attempts to drown any unconventional or disturbing thoughts in the routine of work. The first incident which significantly undermines his faith in the deacon is Block's condemnation of Joseph for preaching in English rather than the customary German. To the school-teacher the Christian injunction to love all men implies a concern for their salvation. Block's only worry is that in questioning their pacifist stance Joseph has shed doubt on Mennonite integrity in front of half-breeds. Thom perceives that Joseph is coerced into asking forgiveness where there is nothing to forgive, that Block's quiescence leaves unresolved the serious moral issue being raised: how are the Mennonites expressing Christ's message

of love in the comfort of Canada. At this point Block's misinterpreted Christianity is equated in Thom's mind with the demonic image of broken gargoyles.

Each stage of the quest is metaphorically outlined. The hero's loss of innocence and separation from the father is identified in the storm imagery of the summer prelude. The thunder, associated with the righteous voice of God, rumbles like "long walls breaking." The walls of Jericho, the old order, must fall. The negative effects of Mennonite withdrawal are evidenced in Thom's lack of response to the radio broadcast conveying the emotions of the Parisians liberated after four years of war. Thom listens but "the idea held little meaning for him." He must wake to the larger world of mankind and specifically to a consciousness of a new country in which the old European order has no more validity.

Thom's discovery of the buffalo-skull allows him a momentary glimpse into the uniqueness of Canada and the unknown world of the Indian. The Indians figure only peripherally in *Peace Shall Destroy Many* as a measure of Mennonite intolerance. However, signs of Wiebe's later preoccupation with the natives are evident. Already the author is aware of the biases of recorded history. "White men reckoned places young or old as they had time to remould them to their own satisfaction. As often, to ruin"(P 82). Pete can only respond to Thom's imaginative exclamations with conventional trivia. Like his father he clings to the barren security of a garrison culture. Wiebe's empathy with the Indians and half-breeds and his interest in Big Bear is apparent. Thom recalls Madeleine's words:

> She told of the great Indian who had ruled the Plain Crees as a true monarch;. . . who in his old age could not prevent blood-maddened warriors from massacring nine white men at Frog Lake. . . . Hearing her tell of Big Bear, Louis Riel, Wandering Spirit, Thom glimpses the vast past of Canada regarding which he was as ignorant as if it had never been, of people that had lived and acted as nobly as they knew and died without fear. (P 111)

Although Thom is shamed by the community's neglect of a fellow Mennonite, he shares in their bigotries. He is repulsed by the marriage of Mennonite and half-breed even though Madeleine has turned Christian. He tells his sister, "A Christian can't just up and marry any person the storm blows into his house. There have to be rules." Thom now begins to face his own "monsters." Despite his summer work among the half-breeds he realizes that he has failed to see them as fully human.

The author's attitude to the Indians is decidedly sympathetic. They are portrayed as eagerly receptive to Thom's Bible lessons. Their living quarters are squalid but they themselves are characterized by warmth, humility and a ready humour. Thom's growth is measured by his willingness to continue the Bible classes with them and, finally, by his ability to see them on a par with Mennonites. Significantly, it is Jackie Labret who leads the way to the manger in the Christmas pageant.

Elizabeth Block is the *pharmakos* sacrificed for the community's rebirth. The autumn prelude, the ghostly owl shadow and the "prostrate" field, foreshadow the tragedy. The first episode of the section introduces Razia Tantamount who is explicitly identified with the forces of death. The sensuous and worldly school-teacher simultaneously provides a critical perspective on the repressive nature of the Mennonite community. She considers Wapiti a midnight graveyard where all exuberance for life is quickly squelched. Elizabeth's existence bears tragic testimony

to this repression. Mennonite intolerance extends to their own people; Block forbids Elizabeth's marriage to Herman Paetku because the man was born out of wedlock. Elizabeth's love becomes a dark and frustrated passion. As an aging spinster she desperately seeks the affections of Block's farmhand, the half-breed Louis Moosonin. Aware that Mennonites consider sexual immorality the nadir of sin, she secretly hides her pregnancy. While Elizabeth lies dying from childbirth midst the background sounds of threshing, the biblical parable "As you sow, so shall you reap" readily comes to mind. The Mennonite community deservedly harvest death. Wiebe implies Block's cruel denial of love is no less repellent than sexual immorality, that there are subtler forms of violence than fighting in wars.

Ironically Block considers Elizabeth eternally damned while blind to his own need for forgiveness. According to the original Anabaptists, whose beliefs Wiebe continually affirms, the deacon's is the greater sin. He consistently pits himself against God's will.[11] In his determination to buy out the breeds and in his violent threats to Louis he abandons every Christian ideal and consciously damns his soul to hell. His humor, his "son-necessity," still obsesses him;that Wapiti is clean for his son is his only concern. Block's realization that he himself has "harboured the snake" is dramatically ironic. He identifies the serpent with Louis, not with his own sinfulness.

Elizabeth's funeral is held on the day set aside for the annual Thanksgiving Festival. The funeral hymns and biblical passages remind

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11 R. Kenneth Davis, *Anabaptism and Asceticism: A Study in Intellectual Origins*, (Pa:Herald Press, 1974), p.154.

us that for the Christian death has lost its sting. Wiebe suggests that death and life are not opposed to each other but work towards the unfoldment of a moral universe. Elizabeth's spirit lives on in Thom. Recalling her words he feels "eternally committed," though the nature of his committment is as yet unclear. Thom's descent into her grave and his nightmare signal the hero's ritual death. In the dream a holocaust of fire devours him and he is symbolically severed from the patriarchs of tradition. Later, recalling the sight of miles of burned bush that opened Wapiti to the outside world, Thom considers that if such a fire occurred, he could jerk out the stumps and "really farm." The spiritual analogue for the scene is implicit.

The imagery of the winter prelude, the more deadly silence following the brutal blizzard, suggests Thom's purging has left in its wake a spiritual vacuum which works against life as effectively as inauthentic tradition. Disillusionment with his community reaches its zenith when he learns of the deacon's calculated purchase of Métis land and his rôle in his daughter's death. He determines to join the last German offensives in an outright rejection of the Anabaptist pacifist stance. Thom has earlier doubted his community's *expression* of faith; he now questions that faith itself. His perception of the evil in Wapiti is only a partial *cognitio*. He must understand his own need for redemption, his own lack of love evident in his attitude to Herb Unger. Thom condemns Block's ruthless intolerance but is himself guilty of evading his Christian responsibility. He enlists rather than confronting the upheaval his continuation of the Bible classes would provoke in the community.

In the final chapter Wiebe employs dramatic juxtaposition and

parody to underline the inadequacy of moving "in harmony with the world." The entire community, including the Unger brothers, is gathered in the schoolhouse for the Christmas play. The Mennonites regard the Ungers as the "incarnation of sin." Both Herb and Hank are characterized by violence and lust. They are as much victims as villains however. Wiebe is sympathetic in his portrayal of the humiliation they have had to suffer due to Mennonite hypocrisy and self-righteousness. Hank Unger is home on furlough and his crude outbursts are heard against the background message of peace and goodwill crowning the Christmas tree. "When I shoot down a Nazi pig . . . .Only one question crosses my mind . . . 'Will he blow or fry'?"

The Christian myth of the Three Wise Men points the path for Thom. As the three kings follow the star towards Bethlehem Thom comprehends that "truth must be followed as a star" but he is torn between two opposed interpretations of truth. When the kings enter the manger Thom is blocked, unsure whether he can find the answers he needs in Bethlehem. The need for redemption finally overwhelms him in the tableau in the barn; Razia is discovered in the hay with Hank, an ironic parody of the nativity scene. Thom is shamed and appalled at his own violent assault of Herb. He rediscovers for himself the worth of the Mennonite ideal of pacifism. He rejects both tradition and violence as inadequate responses to life. He recalls Jackie bending to the manger and decides there must lie the "way," the path of God's revelation. Thom comprehends that Christian peace is an inner state of being that has its foundation in love: "Only a conquest by love unites the combatants. And in the heat of this battle lay God's peace."

The final image is of Thom driving towards the brightest star in the heavens. His *anagnorisis* is not the experience of God's grace but the realization of the need for it. We are left with the hope it will be attained. Wiebe does not evade the difficulties of the Christian's life. As Mrs. Weins has commented earlier, Christ leaves man no easy way, only the hard demand to love. The open nature of the ending conveys Wiebe's understanding of the Christian's life as an on-going transformation towards that ideal.

The closing scene successfully unites all thematic threads of the novel. The quiescence of Wapiti has been unmasked. Hal's pronouncement that the world is really round infers the community's participation in the larger world of mankind and their cognition of the futility of attempting to secure their own salvation through physical isolation. The community has shared both in Thom's quest and in his repentance. All characters are humbled by the tableau in the barn. They drive away shamefacedly, each contributing "the corpse of his silent agreement with Block." Pete's determination to think for himself and his outburst of violence in the barn are the final blows which fell the patriarch. He is broken without hand as the fierce king of Daniel's dream: "Métis and Mennonite, standing in an old barn, heard the sobs of a great strong man, suddenly bereft and broken. They heard, terrified"(P 236-7). Razia is also repentent; she runs from the barn,humiliated.

All three Frygean categories of identity or comic resolution are realized. On an individual level, the protagonist moves from self-righteousness to an authentic understanding of the meaning of Christian peace. Annamarie's reappearance at the end of the novel implies,

however subliminally, the fulfillment of the "erotic" or dual identity. Social integration is seen in the repentent society and Block's deposition as tyrant. The emerging society of comedy is inclusive. In *Peace Shall Destroy Many* this society is not only a united Wapiti but, by implication, the brotherhood of mankind. The community's immigrant exile ends; the Canadian world has been let in. The presence of the half-breeds at the Christmas play and Jackie's central role as shepherd implies their participation in the Christian quest as well as their attainment of grace. Hal's reference to the coming spring and his search for frogs' eggs unifies the mythological structure. The seasonal cyclical movement as well as the dialectical movement of the narrative is fulfilled, from spring to spring, and from demonic to apocalyptic world.

This portrayal of the Mennonites is not simply a condemnation. It merely forces discrimination between the inauthentic and authentic expression of their faith. Wiebe radically affirms specifically Anabaptist ideals. We have noted the concern with active pacifism. The author sees action as ideally directed towards loving service to God in imitation of Christ. The Mennonites' reliance on scripture as the written record of God's revelation to man is reflected in Thom's final *cognitio*. He comprehends the need to scrape Christ's teachings bare of all acquired meanings and see them as the first disciples had done.

The novel reflects Wiebe's Puritan sense of the strength and reality of evil. The narrative moves towards the understanding that sin is inherent in our nature, that the "animal nature" Block perceives to be the exclusive mark of the Indian is common to all men. The emphasis on

repentance is strong. Thom must wake to the knowledge of his capacity for lust and violence prior to receiving grace. Wiebe is compassionate in depicting the manner in which we are shaped by our environment. Witness his treatment of Block and of Herb, "a poor whipped animal." Nevertheless he preserves the human responsibility for sin;man is not a victim of circumstances. Elizabeth's tragedy is not entirely her father's doing. One senses Wiebe's agreement with Mrs. Wein's and later Thom's conviction that she must be held partially responsible for her fall. However Elizabeth recognizes her need for forgiveness;her ability to love and forgive her father proves her worthy of redemption.

Like many Canadian writers, Wiebe condemns the Puritan's disdain of pleasure and their narrow definition of what is useful. Block's obsessive compulsion for work militates against the joys of life. In comparison Thom is characterized by an exuberance which overflows the confines of necessity. Witness his rejoicing as he rides over the land, his song "reaching into each body cell tip." Thom's imaginative receptivity to the Indian's world is lost to the dullard Pete. When Thom asks Pete whether he ever wants to "yell like mad" or ride breathlessly in the wind, Pete cannot see any usefulness in such behavior. His only concern is to get the work done. Thom's comment that "You have to get rid of it somehow," infers that the repression of exuberance and creative energy is a denial of life, that passion outlawed from the home inevitably finds its outlet in the shed.

It is pre-eminently the land which incites Thom's exuberance. Wiebe's attitude to nature is mystical and reverent. Patricia Morley comments on the "idealistic myth in Canadian literature based on the

land, seen as part of a Divine Order."[11] Wiebe shares in this idealism. He sees nature as permeated with God's immanence and man as capable of communion with it. Thom achieves ecstatic union with the earth: "with his face in the sandy loam, arms and legs yearning, he was beyond himself." Wiebe's sensitivity to nature is apparent in the poetry of his descriptions. They are not only lyrical but extend our understanding of his religious reverence:

> Packed by the snows, the earth twisted free and lay open, crumbling at the edges, intruding no questions, offering itself and its power to life to the man who proved his belief with his calloused hand. And the believers went on turning its pages, while round the world it was wounded to death by slashing heathen tank trucks.

Victor Doerkson gives a detailed analysis of this passage. The allusion to the earth as a book as well as other images, (the rhythm of horses' hoofs on the stubble "like dry bread under a rolling pin"), suggests the earth is not only alive but a source of eternal revelation.[12] In *Vertical Man/Horizontal World*, Laurence Ricou notes how consistently the farmer's task is regarded as sacred in literature of the prairies, for he is intimately involved with the natural rhythms of seedtime and harvest, rhythms basic to all creation.[13] This tendency is reinforced in Wiebe by his specific heritage.

Wiebe's mysticism extends to human relationships. The Anabaptists were fervent believers in the value of a spiritual brotherhood. It was

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[11] Patricia Morley, *The Immoral Moralists* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1972), p. 128.

[12] Victor Doerksen, "The Style of *Peace Shall Destroy Many*," *Aion*, III, 2 (May, 1963), pp. 13-15.

[13] Laurence Ricou, *Vertical Man/Horizontal World, Man and Landscape in Canadian Prairie Fiction* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1973), p. 27.

the desire for a community of believers who corporately might nurture Christian virtues in one another that led to their withdrawal from secular society. Wiebe suggests the twentieth century demands a different approach. Physical isolation is no longer possible; moreover, such isolation precludes the spreading of the gospel.[14] Nevertheless, the author lauds the loyalty and sharing possible in a close community. When Thom's plow is jammed by a tree-root, Pastor Lepp comes to his aid. His comment that "Everything's easier done together" applies spiritually as well as physically. We have seen how various characters act as agents in Thom's transformation. Joseph, Elizabeth, Annamarie and his mother all commit him more rigorously to his quest.

Despite this reverence for human relationship, Wiebe's attitude towards human sexuality is not only distinctly Puritan but reveals a latent tension in his mind between body and soul. The sacramental basis of Christianity witnesses to God's immanence in the flesh. It was noted earlier however that the Anabaptist's ascetic origins often tended to a radical dualism between flesh and spirit which only narrowly escapes heresy. The patterns of light and dark, life and death and the alignment of characters suggests this unconscious dualism in Wiebe's own mind. I am not implying the author consciously thinks of matter as evil but his first novel suggests that he identifies lust with the human body and love and beauty with the immaterial spirit. Annamarie appears as little more than a disembodied ideal. Her slender figure

[14] See Cameron, p.157. Cameron asks Wiebe if he thinks it is possible to really say no to the modern world. Wiebe asserts it is if you were to retreat far enough into backcountry but that you are then cutting yourself off from any "possible effect you could have on other people."

"barely touches the ground." Her beauty is not associated with her shape but "reached beyond her appearance into her purity." She is contrasted with Razia Tantamount, whose name suggests the death forces she is identified with. From the perspective of Elizabeth's grave Thom looks up at the unknown face and envisions her as a "death's head." Razia's lustful reactions to Pete, Thom and later Hank are not totally creditable. Nor is Thom's impervious naivety in her presence. He no more sees her as a woman "than if she had been an icicle dripping from the roof." The discovery of his own capacity to lust for Razia is central to Thom's quest. The disgust and shame it occasions is distinctly Puritan: "Such wells of depravity yawned in his empty self that he could only shudder and pray for diversion."

Wiebe's handling of women is marked by a simplicity of characterization and awkwardness of description. He resorts to stock clichés: Razia stretches as sensually as an alley cat, is as "willowy as a whip." His later works confront human sexuality more directly and reveal a better understanding of women in general.

The novel has its weaknesses. Characterization is restricted. Annamarie and Joseph are flat emblematic figures, merely vessels of Wiebe's ideology. Whereas the German vernacular affords atmosphere and the hymns suggest joy and eternal peace and are thus thematically relevant, the dialogue is frequently contrived and literary. Witness Annamarie's lengthy quote from Joseph's letter while berry-picking. Or Thom's self-questioning: "Should one say I act this way because my father tells me so? Should one talk about Mennonite tradition before one spoke of the only possible basis for that tradition: the personal

commitment to Christ?"(P 178-9). Such passages speak too awkwardly and directly to the audience.

Most critics consider the novel overly didactic. The discussions Thom has with Annamarie, Pastor Lepp, Block and Joseph, as well as the latter's confrontation with the church elders, all explicitly probe the problems of non-violence. At times the fine points of Christian faith are intellectually pursued in language more suited to theology than fiction: "The Christ-follower has the peace of reconciliation with God and therefore the peace of conscious fellowship with God through God in Christ . . ."(P 162). Wiebe establishes his theme dramatically and through the patterns of imagery but he does not yet trust his craft.[15] He is unable to rest with the metaphorical expression of truth. An otherwise dramatic conclusion is flawed with an explicit definition of the nature of Thom's *anagnorisis*:

> 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. . . . We are spared war duty and possible death on the battlefield only because we are to be so much the better witnesses for Christ at home. . . . If in suppression and avoidance lay defeat, then victory beckoned in pushing ahead. (P 237-8)

Wiebe's tendency to preach may be a flaw but *Peace Shall Destroy Many* is a remarkable achievement for a first novel. It is highly structured and thematically unified. The plot is compelling, the language, though sporadically awkward, is rich and poetic. Wiebe deals openly and honestly with the difficulties of the Christian's life; he provides no

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[15] See Cameron, p.157. Wiebe admits his hesitancy to give himself over completely to his craft: "If you are what you are, and what you're making is any good, it's there anyway; you don't have to spell it out. Sometimes I don't trust this kind of thing enough yet, the gut instinct of writing . . ."

facile solutions to the problem of evil in the world. The themes of exile and the religious quest reach beyond the narrow confines of an isolated Mennonite village in the wilds of northern Saskatchewan. Thom is disillusioned with his former beliefs and in search of life's meaning. Wiebe simply employs the materials he is most familiar with to present a fresh illumination of the universal theme of the quest for identity.[16] At the same time he provides a vivid portrayal of one of Canada's many ethnic and religious minorities. The novel is important in clearly defining the foundation of Wiebe's beliefs. It is a probing exploration of the central Christian message of peace.

[16] See Elmer F. Suderman, p.173. "While this novel takes place in a typical Mennonite setting, depicts thoroughgoing Mennonite characters, and exhibits unique Mennonite themes, its greatest virtue is that it transcends the particular Mennonite concerns and ultimately touches universal concerns. . . . Wapiti, then, is any community which is unaware that it is living in the twentieth century." See also Patricia Morley, *The Comedians*, p.63.

Chapter Three

"And He Shall Make You Free"

First and Vital Candle combines frontier drama with Christian myth. A forty year old fur-trader ventures to an isolated Indian outpost in Northern Canada. The conflict within the community provides the context for the protagonist's quest for identity. The narrative is constructed around a Christian theological and metaphorical framework. The outline of biblical myth is apparent in Wiebe's choice of names: Adam, Joshua, Abraham and Sarah. The novel traces the comic movement from winter to spring, from law and ritual necessity to love and grace.

The narrative techniques are more experimental than in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. The novel divides into seven sections which alternate between past and present time dimensions. Immediate events compel Abe to confront a past he has sought to repress and evade. The flashbacks of Parts Two, Four and Six are narrated in first person and time present (in alternating chapters) by a third person narrator whose omniscience is confined to Abe's thoughts and actions. The effect is the portrayal of a single consciousness but the shifting viewpoint establishes an ironic perspective for the audience. The book contains a great deal of conventional description interspersed with stream-of-consciousness techniques. These are used most experimentally in Part Four.

The chapter title is taken from the novel's epigraph, a poem by Gerald Manley Hopkins. The poet identifies the first and vital candle as that which alone will banish spiritual emptiness, "Night's blear-all black." He petitions us to repent so the "fading fire" of the spirit may be renewed by the fire of grace. In the novel the candle is

identified with the flame of Christ in each man's heart. Abe must repent of his sins before experiencing Christ's peace. The patterns of light and dark, fire and ice figure consistently throughout the novel to clarify the movement towards redemption.

Scots-Canadian Abe Ross is a man in search of values. He is embittered and disillusioned. A harsh Calvanist upbringing, experience in the war and with the Eskimos in the northern barrens have led to a rejection of all religious belief. The convoluted texture of the opening sentence suggests Abe's desperate state. He wanders along Portage Avenue in Winnipeg, hopeless, lonely and with no direction. Chapter One concludes with the river image, Wiebe's metaphor for Christian peace. Abe runs parallel to the invisible river in an attempt to escape the loneliness of the city and his inner emptiness.

Wiebe presents a number of episodic scenes which foreshadow the larger narrative and eventual resolution. The woman Abe pursues through the city is explicitly identified with grace and his attraction to her quiet beauty foreshadows his love for Sally Howell, the missionary school-teacher. Abe suffers from the proverbial Calvanist hatred of the flesh; he rages in self-condemnation for his lustful yearnings. Moreover he is blind to the nature of his own desires;he confuses sexual and spiritual needs. Another episode witnesses Abe talking with a child in a restaurant. The boy is attracted by his beard, a stigmata linking him with his biblical namesake. Abe's tale of near-death off the Labrador coast prefigures the climax at Frozen Lake in the spring break-up and his eventual spiritual freedom. Abe notes that the iceberg moves according to deep ocean currents invisible to the eye.

The comment is thematically significant. Abe believes only in the evidence of his senses. The inadequacy of his rational approach to life becomes evident as the action unfolds.

The urban setting of Part One dramatizes the opposition of secular and spiritual values. Abe attends Bach's St. John's Passion and is moved by the worship and beauty of the music. Wiebe employs musical lyrics and hymns throughout the novel to support the narrative movement. Abe is like the oppressed souls in the Passion; he must journey to Golgotha to share in Christ's death and resurrection. The spiritual beauty of the music is juxtaposed with the Kinconnell party, a microcosmic image of the secular world, a place of lust, death and bondage. Abe finds himself ringed by demonic grins. His dance with Sherri Kinconnell degenerates into the macabre skeleton of a dance; skull-like faces and arms fall in "sickle-sweeps." Wiebe presents a harsh portrayal of an undesirable society where men are lured by the flaunting of half-revealed bodies and the seductions of advertising. Religious meetings are replete with sexual overtones. The music in the Red Vine Cafe and the remembered charismatic prayers merge in Abe's mind into a senseless cacaphony: "drink drink let the glass clink let every true lover say jesus jesus jesus oh my jesus put your arms around around me honey huddle up . . ." (VC 62). The tables look oddly like wooden confessionals. However Abe muses that there is no absolution in this world.

The urban landscape is used effectively to present Wiebe's pacifist beliefs. The erected and re-erected forts of Canadian history are imaged as beasts with demonic black maws devouring mankind. Abe re-

marks that dreams, specifically the dream of peace, are only expressed in churches.[1] St. Boniface Basilica, perched at the juncture of two rivers, presages the cabin on Brink Island where Sally drowns. The Christian myth is evoked by the image of two boys fishing in the river. Abe muses that mankind's dreams are buried between basilica and river. The comment proves ironic; this is precisely where Abe's dream of peace is fulfilled. Significantly, Abe's attention is caught by a gravestone in memory of four persons drowned in the Red River. The stone's engraving, "The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord," implies a trust and faith in God that contrasts tellingly with Abe's bitterness.

Part Two recounts Abe's life at Tyrel Bay and the tragedy of the Eskimo community. The tale of Oolulik's loss of faith and hope is brilliantly and dramatically rendered. It is one of the most memorable scenes in the novel and offers a foretaste of the quality of writing seen in Wiebe's later works. The action unfolds quickly, vividly. Wiebe's handling of wilderness scenes are consistently authentic compared to the awkwardness evident in his depictions of urban life.[2]

The story offers a harsh condemnation of some Christian missionaries and white social power. The Eskimos abandon their own beliefs to eagerly embrace the whiteman's religion. The missionaries fail to provide an authentic understanding of Christian faith however. Consequently

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[1] The author's revolutionary bias and later interest in Louis Riel is anticipated by Abe's musings over Riel's tombstone. The protagonist notes that "Governments too preferred facts to dream, especially if the dreamer was so foolish to try to realize them" (VC 45).

[2] See Patricia Morley, *The Comedians: Hugh Hood and Rudy Wiebe*, (Toronto: Clark, Irwin, 1977), p.87, where the author also comments on the discrepancy in quality of writing between urban and rural settings.

when the Eskimos' prayers fail to bring back the deer and starvation decimates the people, Oolulik buries her Christianity as she has buried her husband and children. One of the blacker ironies of the tale is that Oolulik is condemned by white authorities for murdering her half-brother, broken mentally under the long hunger. He has stabbed her husband and daughter and Oolulik strangles him to save her remaining children and herself. Her first night in jail she commits suicide.

The incident underlies the need for values other than survival. At the Kinconnell party Abe argues that the Eskimos' moral code is based on the mechanics of staying alive. Lootevek's wife's demonic laughter amid the split bones of her children attests to the inadequacy of such a morality. Abe is unwilling to confront the implications of Oolulik's suicide. The indiscriminate death and injustice at Tyrel Bay simply confirm his conviction of the absurdity of life.

In Part Three Abe attempts to escape from his feelings of emptiness by accepting a job as fur-trader among the Ojibwa Indians of northern Ontario. The second stage of the quest conventionally removes the hero to a realm beyond the ordinary world to confront the forces of evil.[3] Frozen Lake is such an area. The name metaphorically identifies the spiritual winter of protagonist and community. It is described in mythic terms: "Nowhere to the very edge of the horizon was there relief from the stare of the dull green flat laying in gigantic hostile emptiness below them . . . this was sheer cosmic unthought." Sig Bjorenson, a gigantic Icelander, figures as the devil incarnate. His

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[3] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 97.

Indian name is Wagoss, fox, a symbol of the devil.[4] He is the main *alazon* or blocking figure whose dramatic function is to perpetuate the state of bondage. The Indians are his slaves;he cultivates their addiction to homebrew by selling them yeast. Bjorenson is consistently aligned with the "iron grip" of winter; those associated with him are "fist-beaten" like the land. Abe recognizes the Icelander as the foe and is eager to embrace the contest. Like Thom, he has yet to perceive that the real enemy lies within; Bjorenson merely personifies the evil within the community.

The Indians' quest for freedom from Bjorenson's tyranny parallels Abe's individual quest. Both live in bondage to hate. Like Abe's father, Bjorenson is the embodiment of hatred: "Abe would not have believed it possible for a human face to express so clear and clean a hatred" (VC 115). The Indians seek escape from their dilemma through the false nirvana of drink, as Abe does through work. An Indian who has opposed Bjorenson lies near death under the mysterious power of the tyrant's curse. Kekekose, their spiritual leader, conjures unsuccessfully with the spirits in an attempt to break the spell. The Indian dies and Kekekose's wife is paralyzed. The failure intensifies their bondage; they sink further into drunkenness and sexual depravity as the pall of winter thickens.

Abe has little patience with Indian religion and mocks the missionaries and school-teacher who concede the power of the spirits. His rationalism is undermined when his lost gun is retrieved from the bottom of the lake at the conjuring: "He could no longer believe in his senses

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[4] J.E. Cirlot, *Book of Symbols* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 108.

and he knew of thing else to believe" (VC 140). Again, Abe refuses to contemplate the consequences of the incident. Sally notes it is a spiritual refusal; some men would rather not know the truth if it disturbs their "system."

Joshua Bishop and Sally Howell further Abe's quest. Both are exemplars of Wiebe's ideals. They are never aggressive about their faith. Patiently they help the Indians to live a cleaner and better life, offering their beliefs to those who would listen. As the biblical Joshua led the Isrealites to the Promised Land, the missionary guides the community and Abe to Christ. Josh is evangelical in his beliefs, emphasizing repentance and the need for grace. Thus, while he concedes that Abe is a moral individual--in his dealings with the Indians he is portrayed as honest and liberal--Josh notes that human goodness is inadequate; "We need God's grace for all the rest." Their conversation triggers off the flashback of Part Four.

In a hallucinatory stream of consciousness Abe recalls events which have directly determined his spiritual paralysis. The memory of two former October showers at university and in the war trenches merge with memories from childhood. Standing naked before the mirror he remembers his father's chastisement: "The sin of man was in his body and no Ross would expose himself, ever, for any reason." While he spars with Ken in the improvised shower on the front the sense of physical and emotional release from the dirt and tension of battle vies with shame of his "heathen" body. Wiebe counterpoints physical with psychic violence. Hayes' hatred and his jeers that man is merely a "highly specialized and adapted animal," and the sudden barrage of enemy fire both explode

outwardly as the last props of Abe's faith shatter within. When he discovers Ken has lost his legs during the attack, he senses that his own continued existence is merely a whim of the universe. The emptiness he feels is the "earnest of the coming long years where at worst I would be a bone to quarrel over, at worst nothing more or beyond but only myself" (VC 185).

Abe is in a state of limbo. He can affirm no faith; he sees himself as a rational physical animal but feels no comfort in his physical survival. Although he rejects his father he is marked by a similar disgust with the human body. Waking from a hang-over in his Winnipeg room, he sees his jacket, "bent, corded at the elbow like a crumpled pipe of a breast's esophagus sliced rawly through" (VC 40). In fury he flings the Bible at the image. Later in the abandoned conjuring lodge he is repulsed by the smell of the human animal: "Only the unwashed human body covered with rags or hides not of its own growing smelled really fetid, as if rotting while it moved" (VC 219). Abe is aware of his vulnerability to women and hates himself for it; he is unaware of the infusion of flesh with spirit.

Part Five witnesses the rise and initial fall of the demonic forces within the community. The narrative moves towards a dramatic repentance. Abe is filled with increasing self-disgust as he recognizes the hate, violence and pride within himself. He seeks more desperately to regress into a death-in-life, to "drop half the year down the hole of unconsciousness" like an animal, or to succumb to his lust for Violet as a means to oblivion. He is angered by the lustful taunts of drunken Indians but forced to acknowledge his perverse longing for

Violet. When he stumbles upon her and Alex in the snow, his jealousy and frustration goad him to cruel mockery. Abe retreats to his cabin full of self-hatred. The sounds of howling dogs and beating drums are juxtaposed with the innocent voices of children singing Canada's first Indian Christmas carole: "Jesus your king is born/Jesus is born/In excelsius gloria." Wiebe again employs musical lyrics to suggest the resolution.

Rising disorder in the community parallels Abe's torment. His liberalism in allowing the Indians to spend their government cheques where they please has only served to tighten their bondage to Bjorenson. He would solve the dilemma by appealing to their sense of pride. Sally forces him to recognize that pride is man's original sin, the sin of Adam and Bjorenson. Both believe in their own goodness, not in God's grace. "To follow Christ means to hope, believe always that his grace, not your own merit, will succeed . . . ." Man's best, even his love, is perceived as little more than "scum" in the eyes of God. According to Sally the Indians must desire of their own free will to stop drinking and that desire can only emerge from faith in a God of compassion and mercy.

The dialectic of freedom and bondage corresponds with that of love and hate. Adam Ross, described as a slave-driver, curses his son. His hate has bound Abe's life and deprived him of the power to love. Bjorenson's curse has caused the literal death of a protesting Indian. Josh notes that even the Indians whose tightly knit community does not tolerate open violence hate intensely: "They may hate silently for years. . . . There's no provable crime. . . . But everyone in the village knows why

that person is dead. Hate"(VC 236). Hate begets hate. Josh seeks to overcome hate with love. He defines love as a universal value, "the very stuff of our creation." In loving one's enemy, one appeals to his conscience. This seems a striking reversal of the whole thrust of the novel which suggests the inadequacy of human love. The contradiction remains unless we perceive here the Anabaptist belief that each individual, though fallen and sinful, has the ability to respond to grace and love.[5] Josh notes that it is Christ who gives man the power to love fully;as the embodiment of love He frees man from hate and fear. The missionary informs the Indians that God has sent his son "Ginn Jesus" to make them completely free.

Josh's statement that hate and fear are self-perpetuating is dramatically realized in Abe's attack on the Indians in the furloft. Violet's abduction provides Abe with the excuse to bombard their demonic celebration. He unmasks the devil as a sapless fraud with false teeth. The humiliating loss of his teeth signals the end of Bjorenson's tyranny. Abe attempts to shame the Indians but his curses only incite their hatred. Josh also probes their slothfulness but his words are loving and they respond in kind. Kekekose's willingness to hear more about Christ marks the turning point of the novel.

Simultaneously the winter darkness begins to break. On Good Friday Abe takes Sally to Brink Island, a symbolic cosmic naval, to pray for the conversion of the community. They enter a "white and green world" where all creation comes to life. Sally's song and dance is an

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[5] Kenneth Davis, *Anabaptism and Asceticism: A Study in Intellectual Origins*, (Pa:Herald Press, 1974), p.147.

expression of joyful exuberance contrasting sharply with Sherri Kinconnell's demonic movement. Sally moves in the "white silence," her face lit with sunlight and serenity, "like a spring-rose bursting to the violent sun." Apocalyptic images of purging fire and water abound. They hear the water trickling beneath the facade of "iron snow." In a parody of romance, which is itself romantic, Abe and Sally share a communion supper. Sally's discussion of her faith explicitly identifies Christ with the first and vital candle. Abe "flinches" from the fire within her, unable to accept or understand her belief in Christ's grace. He still desires a rational explanation. Sally remarks that God's love cannot be explained rationally, "It's experience and conviction, not idea first of all." Wiebe does not reject the significant and even indispensable spadework of reason. Witness Josh's logical argument for pacifism. But the accent falls on the supra-rational nature of faith, on God's *inexplicable* love for man.

In conversation with Sally Abe has comprehended that his refusal to contact his family for twenty-three years proves him as implacable and unforgiving as Adam. Part Six records the scene of his father's curse. Adam Ross is the epitomy of the hard-working, self-righteous Calvinist. He works his family to death to ensure himself a place in Heaven. His Christianity lacks in joy, grace or love. His god was a deity of success, law, absolute election and damnation. His cruel treatment of his wife finally unleashes his son's anger. Adam is not one to condone backtalk. Holding the Bible like a "high and mighty weapon," he intones the Old T estament curses which sever the bonds of fatherhood. As Morley notes, the first words of the chapter, "From

the beginning," evoke the Edenic myth. Abe departs from the Eden of childhood for the fallen world, taking with him the sin of hatred.[6] As Peter denied Christ three times, Abe denies Adam and by implication his inheritance of sin and his need for redemption. Earlier Josh's tale of the Prodigal Son has linked Abe with the unforgiving elder brother. Now Abe acknowledges his self-righteousness and self-deceipt. The postcard he mailed to his mother once a year he now admits was merely an excuse for his revenge.

> . . . the one last act of love and decency paid to her now so long dead recognized at last as nothing but the final twitch of excuse to scream back at his voice still pounding in my ear . . . "You slave driver. . . . Working us all to death to buy your God damn stinking soul into heaven." (VC 305)

Part Seven witnesses the conversion to Christ and the completion of the quest. Released from the past, Abe openly acknowledges his love for Sally. For the first time he experiences joy and laughter. He tells Sally, "We didn't laugh much when I was growing up. And not at all on Sundays." Sally's happiness and her appreciation of beauty contrasts with Adam's asceticism. Both she and Josh are frequently found laughing at themselves and their religion. Wiebe emphasizes that joyful exuberance is part of the fullness of life possible through Christ's grace. Sally shares Abe's feelings but considers marriage to a non-Christian inauthentic. Abe ironically refers to Sally's union with Christ as a tryst with a perverse lover. Despite his jealousy he is aware that the fire within Sally, the first and vital candle, is the source of their love.

Abe returns alone to Frozen Lake. Kekekose's account of his con-

[6] Morley, *The Comedians*, p.92.

version counterpoints Abe's struggle to believe. While Josh baptizes four Indians a sudden rainstorm symbolically baptizes the entire community. The land is used to metaphorically identify the end of the spiritual darkness that has engulfed the community. Abe's *anagnorisis* comes in confrontation with Bjorenson midst the sound of crashing ice. Abe now recognizes his own pride; success has been as essential to him as to his father and he had been willing to kill Bjorenson in order to succeed. As he negotiates with the Icelander for a mutual evacuation, he admits his concern for the Indians has been self-seeking (VC 331).

The final chapter records a version of the mythic deluge. Abe wonders whether the universe had "turned to water and they were all to strangle in it." The author denies a conventional romantic conclusion. Sally brings Abe joy and hope but it is only through her death that he discovers the goal of his quest. Sally is entombed for three days at Brink Island while Abe waits helplessly for the rain to abate. The symbolic number three recurs in the death-rebirth motif. Abe rescues Sally on the third attempt. His descent into the black deadly waters signals his ritual death. He remains unconscious for three days. When he wakes, Josh reads a passage from St. Paul which extends the groaning metaphor used previously. All creation and humanity groan inwardly "for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (VC 350). In Christian theology creation is redeemed through Christ's atonement. Here, Sally is the paschal lamb, sacrificed for the redemption of the community.

The last two pages conclude the comic narrative pattern. We learn that Sally is a diminutive of Sarah. In the biblical parallel

Sarai only becomes Sarah when Abram becomes Abraham, a chosen man of God. The final scene of Abe's repentance and rebirth occurs at Sarah's grave. Abe cries not only for his own pride and suffering but for that of all mankind, "all the millions suspended in voids of self-assurance by righteousness, with nothing" (VC 352). Abe's rebirth is described in apocalyptic terms of light and laughter; he is reborn into the happiness and light of Sally's faith. Abe is freed to leave the outpost for the larger world of mankind; he carries his beloved within him. The last scene is of the golden sun piercing through thunderclouds.

The analysis of the thematic and metaphorical motifs reveals a highly unified structure. It is the flame of the first and vital candle which ignites the faith in Josh and Sally. It is from this fire that Abe has flinched in fear and evasion. In reliving and exonerating his past, he has comprehended his own sin and his need for grace. The candle has come indoors to Abe's heart. We have moved from a world of darkness to a world of light, from spiritual winter to spiritual renewal at Easter. And Abe has arrived at his Golgotha. Both the cyclical and dialectical patterns of the comic mythos are fulfilled.

Again, the drive towards identity is fulfilled on three levels. Socially, the community is converted to Christ; Bjorenson has been deposed though not ostrasized. The new society is inclusive;Bjorenson has saved Abe's life and, along with Marsden, has helped in the rescue of Sally's body. The love relationship of Abe and Sally is consumated, if not in body, in spirit. On an individual level, Abe is transformed from oppressed soul to believing Christian.

The author conceives man's salvation in terms of a vital faith. He is aware however of the difficulties of faith. Abe's belief "made the life he still had to lead hardly less fearful." Josh notes that belief in God opens one to the worst temptation: to detest God for life's seeming injustice. However we are urged to see in death and suffering God's mercy and love, to rescind judgement and embrace trust. Sally identifies trust as the primary motion of faith. God's will is seen to derive from a centre beyond human comprehension. Josh informs Abe, "I think that God is overall and whatever happens for good is of him, whether it happens through people or animals or what, always keeping in mind that what to me seems at the moment good may not necessarily be so. Nor what I think is bad . . ." (VC 233).

Wiebe again differentiates between authentic peace and outer quiescence or material well-being. Both Abe and the Indians long for a lost Eden. The cardboard box Abe finds in the conjuring lodge with the image of the "eternal boy in the yellow beam of light," reminds him of the Indian's search for Pimadaziwan, the "good life." His thoughts imply that he also longs to be "forever child." Kekekose recalls a time when whitemen and Indian lived as one. Abe notes the old man dreams after a utopia. The Indian's desire for Pimadaziwan, a life free from suffering and pain, is another version of the pastoral myth, a withdrawal from the actual world of the present into a world of childhood, memory or dream.[7] The true Christian understands that his faith does not exonerate him from the sufferings and tragedies of earthly existence.

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[7] Ronald Sutherland, *Second Image: Comparitive Studies in Quebec/Canadian Literature* (Don Mills: New Press, 1971), pp.9-10.

God's blessing is the *inner* state of trust and joy embodied in Josh and Sally.

Abe's quest is universal, a search for meaning and identification, but the elucidation of the quest reflects specific Anabaptist concerns. Reference is made to adult versus infant baptism, Christian versus state loyalties. Emphasis is placed on man's sinfulness and the necessity of repentance. The accent is on faith as an inner experience. Wiebe is equally critical of a rationalistic approach to belief as an idea and the emotional mood-making of the charismatics.

The theme of pacifism is focal. The uncomfortably didactic conversation between Marsden and Josh at Frozen Lake and the more dramatic scene of Anton Schwafe's tale of murder identify Wiebe's stance. Hate is described as the feeding force of aggression and war, "a luxury no nation can afford." Josh offers a scathing attack on a professedly Christian society that worships the pagan idea of aggression as the only way to freedom and peace. He notes that it is the moral compromise of men like Marsden, working for the airforce, that allows evil men to dominate the world. Josh would appeal to the enemies' conscience by loving their hate to death. He is aware of the difficulty of following Christ's command, especially for nations, but considers it the responsibility of every individual. The missionary notes that conventional society is so conditioned to aggression that the Christian ideal appears as nothing less than foolish. This anticipates John Reimer's closing remarks in *The Blue Mountains of China* concerning the nature of a true Christian society: "it is the most stupid foolish thing on earth or it is so beyond man's usual thinking that it could only come

as a revelation right from God." Wiebe's belief in the overriding necessity of love begins with the individual but emerges clearly as the only hope for the salvation of mankind.

First and Vital Candle witnesses to Wiebe's belief in the transcendent power of prayer. Abe is irritated by Horst Jeffers' prayers; he considers the man ignorant of the cold facts of the world. However, Josh affirms that prayer can overcome evil. When the sound of howling dogs assaults the community as Kekekose recounts his conversion Josh notes: "when God is working we can expect the Evil One will work too. . . . But believing prayer, that breaks them." Sally retreats to Brink Island in the hope that her "practical prayer" will break the evil at Frozen Lake. The novel implies that the conversion of the community is the effect of her retreat. Later, as Abe experiences his rebirth by Sally's grave, Josh silently prays in the canoe. This ending suggests the centrality of prayer in Abe's conversion.

Wiebe's mystical attitude to man and nature is evident in his first novel. The descriptions of land in *First and Vital Candle* are evocative but here nature functions less as a source of ecstatic rejoicing, as in Thom's "the mountains shout for joy," than as an instrument of God's will. In his analysis of French and English Canadian novels, Ronald Sutherland isolates three major interlocking themes, one of which is the land and the divine order. Nature, with its mixture of cruel severity and arbitrary sustenance, becomes symbolic of a divine order that often presupposes a sacrifice.[8] This need not imply the

[8] Ronald Sutherland, *Second Image: Comparitive Studies in Quebec/Canadian Literature* (Don Mills: New Press, 1971), pp. 9-10.

existence of an angry and willful God but rather a higher moral order incomprehensible to man. Wiebe participates in this tradition in *First and Vital Candle*. The land is evoked in its beauty but more so in its terror. However the sacrifice demanded by the land becomes revelatory, driving the hero to an acceptance of death and an affirmation of life. Josh argues that he must see in Sally's death God's mercy.

The author's reverence for human relationship is evident in the transforming effect the characters have on one another. Sally and Josh are the catalysts of Abe's conversion. Horst Jeffers speaks of the inner strength he derives from the brotherhood of his church. In the final pages of the novel the spiritual union Abe and Sally achieve through Christ is a radical affirmation of a mystic union transcending time and space.

In the preceding chapter we noted a latent tension in the author's mind between flesh and spirit. This is less true of *First and Vital Candle*. The negative depiction of Adam Ross who believes man's sin is in his body reveals the author's condemnation of distorted Puritan attitudes. Josh's quote from St. Paul specifically refers to "the redemption of our bodies" effected through Christ's atonement. Wiebe attempts to enflesh his spiritual ideal in his depiction of Sally. It is not only her inexplicable faith which attracts Abe but her physicality:

> he thought of all those lovely, proper things about Sally, but lately he remembered more and more the slight angle of her nose set in the delicate oval of her face against the hood-fur . . . the tension of her arm, alive under his hand. (VC 357-58)

Their love is no longer a disembodied ideal. They experience physical passion: "they were kissing . . . hard, fierce as if all their lives

they had searched relentlessly for no more than this one unspoken, violent contact"(VC 310). Compared with his first novel, this is a conscious attempt to confront the theme more openly.

Wiebe remains distinctly Puritan. He is excessively critical of conventional society where sex is "grossly overplayed." He differentiates between lust and the tenderness of spiritual love which finds expression in human flesh. He takes seriously the Christian concept of marriage as a spiritual union in Christ.

The author's attitude to Indian and Eskimo is sympathetic. Abe consistently recalls the simplicity and warmth of his Eskimo friends. Next to Abe, Kekekose is the author's most sympathetic character. His wisdom and wry humour are highlights of the book. Significantly it is Violet who assumes the leading role in the closing scene. She leads Abe away from the grave, as Jackie Labret led the way to the manger. Contrary to Abe's estimation Violet proves more than a beautiful sensual girl; she is a converted Christian, a woman of integrity and intelligence.

In *Peace Shall Destroy Many* the Indians function as background to Thom's quest. Here ther religious beliefs are given more serious consideration. Josh and Sally do not reject the power of the Indian conjurors to control spirits. However the minor miracles they effect are not to be confused with the miracle Christ wrought in the human soul, making man "holy in God's eyes." In the baptismal scene, Josh stresses that the greatest evil is "believing and worshipping things, even spirits and not the one great God." Josh perceives that belief in the magic of spirits is not enough to give life meaning and this is his

ultimate concern. Josh and Sally do not forcibly push their religion but they are marked by missionary zeal. The accent is on the *conscious* knowledge of Christ's grace as the only salvation for mankind.

Wiebe draws a parallel between the Indian concept of a Kitchi-manido as a sovereign deity disinterested in mankind and the angry and righteous Jehovah of the Old Testament. Both gods are inadequate. Sally notes that only belief in a compassionate God of mercy and love will break the demonic circle. Josh attempts a merging of the two religions in the fashion of St. Paul speaking to the Greeks: "the Kitchi-manido wants us to be free. And he has sent us Ginn Jesus to make us free completely"(VC 273). Wiebe moves much further in his estimation of Indian religion in his later works. In Big Bear's eyes, Only One is deeply concerned with the destiny of his human children.

First and Vital Candle is the author's only work which has not yet been republished. Criticism has been largely unsympathetic. Reference is made to the stultified quality of the prose. One reviewer notes that the novel is "diffuse" and "disconnected in its Faulknerian techniques."[9] Besides the fact that Wiebe's techniques are far from Faulknerian, the experimentation enriches the novel. The stream-of-consciousness technique results in greater psychological realism and more authentic characterization; Abe is a moving and memorable hero. Admittedly, the technique has not been fully mastered. At times dashes are used skillfully. Witness the juxtaposition of Joe Loon's tale of the kingfisher with Abe's conjecturing over the number of Indians who will trade with him and Bjorenson. At other times the continual interjection of Abe's cynicism

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[9] Merle Meeter, "The Blue Mountains of China," *The Banner*, March 1971, p.25.

and torment veers on badly handled melodrama or results in an awkward intrusion of the author's voice.

This is Wiebe's most didactic novel. The sudden intrusion of the prophetic-looking old man who explicitly defines Abe's quest as a search for values is especially weak, as is the pacifist discussion with Marsden. Abe's conversations with Josh and Sally serve to define very specifically the themes of spiritual pride and the need for grace. Wiebe seems overly concerned with the fine points of theology.

In his descriptions of the land, however, Wiebe weds myth to reality in an aesthetically satisfying manner: "the land, rocks, trees, impersonal and gigantically cold, loomed like an immense fist thrust into the darkness, shaping a darkness all its own." The passage serves its symbolic function but blends unobtrusively with the realistic level of the book. The use of specific Christian symbols lacks this subtlety. The elusive woman in the opening chapter is too obviously an image of grace. Her profile is "exquisite in grace." Her scarf adds a "grace note" to her coiffure. Abe imagines her "gracing" the couch. Josh and Sally are obvious Christ figures. Josh is frequently found praying and is consistently surrounded with light. His role in the furloft scene is heavily symbolic. He enters "as if that instant he had fallen out of the sky." As he intercedes to save Abe's life, Abe stares into unearthly eyes. The missionary suffers the mythical wound but it holds no pain for him. With the exception of her dance and behaviour in the cabin on Brink Island, where the parody of romance is skillfully rendered, Sally is unconvincing in her eternal goodness and self-sacrifice. She too is surrounded in a yellow halo of light; her movements are

"like a grace." In general, characterization is manipulated to serve thematic ends. Bjorenson is simply a malevolent devil figure. Unlike Block who serves a similar though less sinister dramatic function in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, Bjorenson remains an enigma. Insight into the forces which have shaped him is lacking and, consequently, so is his credibility. Descriptions of women are still awkward and ridden with clichés such as "slim legs in their tall boots" or "playtexed friends."

In conclusion, the raw elements of story in *First and Vital Candle* are compelling. Wiebe shapes scenes of suspense, drama and economy, the best examples being Oolulik's tale, the moosehunt and the rescue of Sally's body. The novel would make a good film and a very Canadian one. But Wiebe's Christian message is not well-integrated into this framework. Too frequently the author's moral earnestness dominates our awareness. The emphasis falls heavily and explicitly on man's sin, the need for redemption and the *conscious* knowledge of Christian grace. In his succeeding novels, this tension between art and ideology is reconciled.

Chapter Four

As God is Good

The Blue Mountains of China recounts the epic saga of the Mennonites in their quest for a temporal and spiritual Promised Land. The novel traces their pilgrimage over four continents, from Russia to China, to Canada, to South America, and spans four generations, covering events from 1920 to 1967. We are confronted with Christian heroes and martyrs who bear witness to their faith amidst persecution and tribulation. These individuals know the peace which passes understanding. There are others who give way to despair, doubt and the temptations of material wealth. They suffer accordingly. Yet Wiebe's compassionate handling of their conflicts endows each of his characters with human dignity. We are made to comprehend the context out of which despair or belief is born.

The author's third novel is closely linked to his first; the central theme of both is the quest for peace. However while *Peace Shall Destroy Many* defines rather didactically the abstract principles of Christian faith, *The Blue Mountains of China* dramatizes with subtlety and humour the manner in which that faith is lived or lost in the ordinary events of daily life. The context is again the Mennonite world but it is much less isolated. Wiebe's imaginative recreation of Mennonite history is a segment of Canadian history and becomes a metaphor for the history of mankind. In the quest for peace we move both horizontally across time and space and vertically from the surface of external event and conscious thought to the inner recesses of man's being, resulting in a rich blend of historical and psychological fiction.

The characters are unmistakably Mennonite. Each shares in their peculiar cultural and religious traditions. No one character is the central protagonist; the group as a whole assumes this role. The portrayal is admirably objective. The Mennonites have been savagely martyred and persecuted throughout history, continually forced to emigrate to maintain their faith. At times the motives for isolation or retreat were less pure; Wiebe reveals the hypocrisy and material ambition often underlying their professed religious idealism. His approach to the history of his people has been described as that of a movie-editor who has spliced several incidents from the whole and allows those episodes to represent their entire saga.[1]

The Mennonite history offers insight into one of the many immigrant peoples who pioneered Canada in the early days of western settlement. As part of our ancestry, an understanding of them and their background extends our understanding of ourselves. The novel's epigraph, a quote from "Black Night Window" by Canadian poet John Newlove, suggests that this is Wiebe's conscious intention:

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

The Mennonites' attempt to transplant themselves and their foreign way of life in a land of harsh extremes is a record of the fight for survival—a recurring Canadian theme. No less, it is a record of joy, humour and grace.

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[1] Bernie Harder, " Let My People Go: Rudy Wiebe's *The Blue Mountains of China*," *The Canadian Mennonite*, December 4, 1970, vol.18, no.47, p.7.

Wiebe portrays the uniqueness of the Mennonites without sacrificing a sense of universality. The dimension is conveyed, firstly, through the variety of settings and characters, ranging from the primitive Ayercoa in Paraguay to the sophisticated Elizabeth Dreidiger in a twentieth century Canadian society. All of the major characters are Mennonites but they emerge first and foremost as human beings. In the final chapter of the novel John Reimer defines himself neither as a Mennonite nor as a Canadian. He is merely a "dying human being, walking the land."

The Mennonites trek from one side of the globe to the other like wandering Isrealites in search of a Promised Land. Their recurring patterns of movement gain mythic overtones. This is especially true of Freida Freisen's panoramic history. Her life is measured by the cyclical passing of the seasons and the coming of the rains, by the birth and death of her children and her children's children. Settlement becomes a ritual continually re-enacted. Historian Lewis Mumford writes that the original purpose of human community was to provide a symbolic point of intercession between the divine and human worlds, to impose order, the humanly desirable, on surrounding chaos.[2] The names of the villages become metaphors for the desired apocalyptic union: Gartental, garden valley; Blumenau, flower meadow; Rosenfeld, field of roses; Gnadenfeld, field of grace; Freidensrach, place of peace. The settlement of Schoenbach, the planting of the garden and the digging of the well, re-enacts this universal human ritual. The discovery of the well, symbolic of the well of living waters, demands a ritual *pharmakos* or scapegoat: a well-digger is buried at the village centre. All congreg-

[2] Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations and Its Prospects* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1961), pp. 6-10.

ate for communal celebration: "Everyone gathered bare-headed in the sun and thanked God, drinking." Throughout the novel individuals share food and drink, universal archtypes of communion. Participation in the recurring cyclical process becomes a pleasing ritual. Man's life-span is telescoped into perspective against the stream of time but time has its axis in eternity. God's immanence is felt in the very act of mythic repetition.

Wiebe draws upon more experimental techniques to accomodate the epic scope of his vision. Compared with his first two works, *The Blue Mountains of China* reflects a deeper understanding of the manner in which man comes to terms with his faith. This is communicated through the use of different narrative voices and stream-of-consciousness techniques. Such devices as flashback, montage, free association, symbolic fantasy and myth are employed to disclose the many forces which impinge upon man's being. The approach is cinemagraphic: the author pans outward over time and space, then zooms inward to the intricacies of consciousness.

The structure of the novel is also unconventional, precisely suited to the author's artistic purposes. Critics acknowledge the novel's strengths: the broad epic scope of vision, the authentic characterization and the tremendous stylistic range. The one repeated criticism concerns the novel's unity and the confusion engendered by the variety of characters and settings.[3] The book requires careful reading. It is not unified in the Aristotelian sense of a plot with a causally related

[3] Bernie Harder, p.7.

beginning, middle and end. Neither is it a random selection of short stories. Each of the thirteen chapters is a story sufficient unto itself with a high degree of internal unity. Yet each chapter derives greater impact and meaning when seen in the context of the whole. Wiebe employs a number of devices to achieve the necessary artistic unity to make the work a novel.

The book is thematically unified. Each character seeks peace and each episode leads towards a more complete definition of the nature of faith and Christian salvation. Secondly, the Mennonite group as a whole lends coherency to the novel. The conflicts emerge out of the particular nature of their faith. Moreover, several individuals recur throughout as unifying threads, especially Freida and Jakob Freisen and John Reimer. An effective use of symbols also strengthens the links between chapters. The most obvious image is the blue mountains themselves which metaphorically identifies the central irony of searching for a *temporal* promised land.

Neither are the chapters haphazardly arranged. They flow in approximate chronological order and are so placed as to achieve an effect like that of a musical composition. Freida's narrative is spliced in four and interspersed throughout the book. Thus, despite the shifts in emotional range from fear and pity to pathos and laughter, a recurring stream of quiet and acceptance underlies and qualifies the eddying human dilemmas. This modal counterpoint, a term Frye uses to describe the combination of several literary modes within one single work, enriches the novel.[4] Wiebe moves with ease from mythic to ironic mode. Signif-

[4] Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism. Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 50-1.

icantly the final chapter ends on a comic or affirmative note.

The central organizing motif in the novel is that of the pilgrimage, one both external and internal. Characters journey physically from one locale to another by dirt road, highway, train, boat, plane, on foot or on wheels. The quest metaphor recurs throughout Anabaptist literature where life is conceived as a pilgrimage characterized by suffering.[5] This is vividly communicated in the book through the images and metaphors of speech and the rich oral tradition of hymns and prayers.

> On this sad earth I am a pilgrim
> and my journey, oh my journey
> Is not long. (BM 73)
>
> . . . I am weary the wandering
> From earth would take my leave (BM 87)

In Anabaptist theology, a correct attitude towards suffering, an attitude of acceptance in imitation of Christ, was considered a means of sanctification and salvation.[6] In this novel the characters are defined by their attitude towards their tribulations. To affirm life and its attending tribulations is not easy but, in Wiebe's view, such affirmation is the foundation of any meaningful existence.

Freida Freisen is the central pilgrim in the book. Her attitude of acceptance of both want and plenty most clearly defines her as the novel's heroine. That Wiebe names his heroine Freida, *peace*, testifies to his continuing concern to fictionally define the peace of reconciliation with God.

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[5] See Kenneth Davis, *Anabaptism and Asceticism: A Study in Intellectual Origins*, (Pa: Herald Press, 1971), p.180. "Life is seen as a pilgrimage towards the eternal kingdom and this pilgrimage is a path of suffering; it is a continuation of Christ's atonement."

[6] *Ibid.*

In blunt, plain language, Freida recounts her life from birth to old age. Although the syntax is often awkward and difficult, the broken English and low German add authenticity to her characterization. Freida relates the bare facts of her life with little expository comment. Her understated monotone merely accentuates the enduring strength of her faith. The tale of her spring birth, which quiets the screeching winds of winter, opens her four part narrative. The last we see of her is again in the spring in hot, dry Chaco. Apocalyptic images surround her. She is "happy and at peace" in her house by the grapefruit trees, caring for her garden and the flowers along the village street. The village is Schoenbach, "beautiful stream." The old woman is thus associated with Jeremiah's river image, a biblical image but, as Wiebe notes, also a prairie one.[7]

The first chapter records Freida's life from birth to her betrothal. The song she sings as a child at the spring picnic identifies the theme of the quest and of Christian renewal:

> All is made new by May
> Makes the spirit fresh and free
> Do come out, leave the hearth
> Weave a flower wreath. (BM 9)

Freida bears throughout her tribulations the inner grace and purity these flowers symbolize.

Freida is no ascetic Puritan who denies herself the appreciation of the beauty and joy of creation. Nor is she content with mere survival. The novel opens with the peculiarly Canadian image of howling snows, bare-boned prairie and a sod hut. Her act of painting the sod hut white

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[7] Donald Cameron, "The Moving Stream is Perfectly at Rest," *Conversations with Canadian Novelists*, Part 2 (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1973), p. 156.

is an act to beautify the land. It is an act of affirmation beyond survival. Unlike Wiebe's former heroines she does not deny the beauty of her own sexuality. In Chapter Three she describes her first sexual encounter with her Johann in decidedly apocalyptic terms: "This time light burst and rolled over like it was falling right off some place into somewhere big, gigantic. Huh, that was a whaling all right" (BM 45). Her reaction to the Paraguayan soldiers reveals the depths of her acceptance of human sexuality. Their natural sexual instinct is "Just like everywhere in the world." In contrast to Elder Wiebe's rejection of the Indians as lustful and heathen, Freida depicts them as helpful and friendly. However, Wiebe does not sanction indiscriminate sexual behaviour. Freida enjoys her man but when God later sends her "temptation and doubt" she finds her answer in Christ. Through God's grace she is forgiven her sins and "comes to the true quiet faith." Freida does not condemn her own sexual instincts but neither does she freely indulge them. She finds the solution to her dilemma in a higher moral order.

Freida's personal ontological experience that "it all comes from God, strength and sickness, want and plenty," allows her to respond openly to life's vitality without fear. She perceives life's exuberance as a manifestation of the holy mystery of God. Reconciled with Christ, she walks for the first time without fear in the thunder: "If you were looking right at it where it split you'd be blind . . . as if you shouldn't have seen anything so beautiful or holy. And then the cool rain came like the blessings from Jesus" (BM 47). Biblical images permeate her narrative but do not intrude; her Christian faith is woven

into the very fabric of her being.

Freida's humour further qualifies her as heroine.[8] Recounting the visit to her children in Canada she comments, "I told them I had had such a good visit but there wasn't need to spend my last few days running like an unheaded chicken and meeting my Lord too tired and old to even say a hallelujah" (BM 149). Freida sees herself as the garrulous old woman she is, as a wayfaring pilgrim whose sojourn here is short. Humour is an essential aspect of the Mennonite power of endurance. As Morley points out, it is a survival humour much like that of the Jews.[9] Muttchi comments, "Maybe it helps to laugh if you want to start in Canada." God himself is seen to have a sense of humour. As the deafening groan of "lumberwagon" frogs fills the Paraguayan night, Frank Epp notes, "A few things the dear Lord exaggerated for fun . . . living here is so hard otherwise in the sand and cactus" (BM 53). The ability to laugh, especially at oneself and midst deprivation becomes a saving grace.

Despite a lifetime of hardship Freida's faith in God's goodness and her all inclusive love enables her to utter words of thanksgiving for the peace and quiet she has known. Her life illustrates that peace is not an outer circumstance but an inner state of being. Even amidst the plagues, death, and wars of her first years in South America, in a land of dust, heat and dry bitter grass, she salvages moments of beauty.

[8] Rudy Wiebe, "In the West, Sir John A. is a bastard and Riel a saint. Ever ask why?", *Toronto Globe and Mail*, March 25, 1978, p.6, where Wiebe writes that he had tried to capture the self-deprecating humour of the Mennonites in his characterization of Freida Freisen.

[9] Patricia Morley, *The Comedians: Hugh Hood and Rudy Wiebe*, (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1977), p. 75.

The Mennonite communal gatherings and lyrical hymns offer her hope and comfort. Above all is the "strength which comes from prayer."

The novel presents a world in which faith is the central question of existence. The attitude towards that faith and the struggle to maintain it midst adversity is explored from various perspectives. Freida Freisen represents one response and provides a backdrop against which all other pilgrims are seen and measured. Jakob Freisen represents another. His material greed, bitterness and spiritual pride betray Christian ideals. Viewed in the successive roles of haughty kulak, frightened fugitive, guilt-ridden exile and, finally, as pilgrim walking in the furrow of John Reimer's wooden cross, Wiebe succeeds in creating a monumental, almost mythic, character. Jakob Freisen arouses our condemnation, but Wiebe's control of tone, his ability to render vivid the depths of suffering beneath a proud and abrupt exterior, establishes a mutual identity and sympathy.

Freida and her husband do not leave Canada to save their lives but to maintain their customs and beliefs. On his deathbed Johann comments: "Maybe we were wrong, maybe we were right, but we believed it. . . . We did what we believed" (BM 148). Less worthy motivations characterize Jakob Freisen. As eldest son, Jakob has inherited his father's prosperous farm in Karatow. To keep the land intact Freida's father, Isaak, is sent away. Under communist pressure in the '20s many Mennonites flee to Canada and South America. Not Jakob Freisen. When he hears of their flight he is black with rage: "let them run . . . . can't fit in when a little changes or some stupid communist says don't preach so much let them run won't take this from me they can't do anything without me

and they'll have to keep exile pooh I'm no preacher" (BM 27). Jakob builds his fortune on the misfortune of his own people. Only when his physical survival is threatened, not his spiritual existence, does he flee to Moscow, abandoning his son to the Communist police. Guilt plagues him throughout his life. We are given closest insight into his internal torment in "Cloister of the Lilies."

Along with two other prisoners and guards, Jakob Freisen finds shelter in an abandoned cloister whose walls are decorated with white lilies. The flowers symbolize Mary's purity and recall to Jakob Christ's parable of the lilies of the field which petitions us to trust in God and take no thought of tomorrow. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." Jakob seeks justification for that evil. He lacks the faith and acceptance implicit in the parable. He can forgive neither himself nor others. The strangers who stumble in from the storm, anonymous mythic shapes, embody the ideal of acceptance. The woman is identified with the purity of the white lilies; Freisen recalls the "white in the darkness of her coughing." While her husband and Jakob lie and listen, her body is crucified by the guards' lust. To Jakob's anger and moral indignation, the stranger comments that man cannot be a hero--an ironic statement. The true heroism is the endurance suffered in the name of love: "for her I take it, I lie still." Similarly, the woman's devotion to her children transforms the sordid act of lust into an act of sacrificial love. Jakob's confession of his betrayal draws from the stranger, himself identified as a Christ figure, the repeated affirmation that to live, God's goodness is "the most necessary possibility." The ambiguity of his words blazes momentarily with wisdom but their meaning only becomes clear to Jakob in the final chapter. There John Reimer tells him

that midst the worst tribulation, "even then I could know . . . that as long as I am alive the possibility can never be completely closed that God is good" (BM 225). This is no complacent statement of faith. The stranger's affirmation is voiced in a context where the temptations to doubt and despair are utmost. The miraculous escape of the two fugitives confirms their faith.

The faceless figure tells Freisen, "If you want anything, survive. . . . If you have nothing left you want, jump up and be done, quickly" (BM 113). That survival is meaningless in itself was a central theme of Wiebe's second novel. This recurs in *The Blue Mountains of China*. Wiebe dramatizes the need for values transcending physical existence and sheer necessity. The values he upholds are the Christian ones of compassion and selfless sacrificial love.

In "Drink Ye All Of It" David Epp realizes the emptiness of his physical survival once these values have been betrayed. This story illuminates the thematic significance of the novel's title. The Mennonites portrayed have grown fat and complacent on the rich black soil of the Amur Valley in north Russia. Their ideal of a spiritual brotherhood is dead;when they seek escape to China under mounting communist pressure, each village must fend for itself. In the freezing dawn David Epp and his village cross the river into the blue mountains of China. David's salvation is secured but he cannot evade the knowledge of his betrayal of those left behind. The drama of their arrival and the flashbacks to the agonies of escape unfold against the haunting refrain of the Lord's supper and the Christian warning that he who partakes of "the body and blood of Christ unworthily drinks damnation unto

his soul." David is unable to reconcile himself to his betrayal, to concede the necessity of survival. The anquish of his realization that he must return to Russia is conveyed in the tortured rhythms of his thoughts as he refuses to think beyond the moment: "Yes I do I do it must be it has to be yes dear God but how now in this tangle I need time she needs time I need she will understand yes but how now so fast dearest God my God how"(BM 136). His self-sacrifice tellingly contrasts with Freisen's abandonment of his son.

David recognizes the deception of his father's belief that "over every hilltop is peace." The beautiful blue mountains of his imagination now appear as "black and jagged, black in the heartless cold . . . nothing like the think blue sketch, beckoning from across the river, the beautiful mocking blue"(BM 126). David's peace is the peace of conscience, an inner state of reconciliation with God. In the end, seated before the crumbs of an abandoned meal, he symbolically participates in the sacramental supper. He willingly opens himself to the louse to suggest his acceptance of suffering and through suffering participation in Christ's grace.

The tale of David's martyrdom becomes part of the Mennonites' oral heritage and serves to inspire others long after his death. We see the workings of a living brotherhood of the spirit in the influence David's act has on Sam and John Reimer and his own son. Conversely, the sins of the father may be visited upon the son.

This we witness in "Sons and Heirs", a Kafkesque tale of anarchy, torture and fear. Wiebe parodies the C ommunist quest for a new "paradise" on earth while simultaneously dramatizing the degeneration

of Mennonite religious values. Jákob V's death is to be seen as the final consequence of a religious upbringing devoid of true spiritual understanding. Ecstatic with his miraculous release from prison, the son returns home to find only a "black hole." All that remains of his once familiar world is old Muttachi and their Russian worker Escha, who emerges from Jakob's bedroom instead of the barn where Russians "belong." Jakob's interior monologue reveals the deapth of his Christian conditioning. Ironically, the sins he consciously confesses are as nothing to the sin of hatred and spiritual pride apparent in his unconscious attitude towards Escha.

> . . . jesus has come again and taken them and I am left for hell . . . his angels and the place prepared . . . he could not take me with him . . . I never confessed when I saw the answer and wrote it down I didn't want to see it I the Russian girl in the water naked squatting and rising I never confessed that I saw my sister when and wet playing with
> (BM 14)

The story readily lends itself to Jungian analysis. Escha figures symbolically as Jakob's shadow. He stands "close as his shadow . . . watching him . . . his tormentor." Cerebro wryly comments on their likeness and the possibility of their relationship as half-brothers lurks on the edge of Jakob's consciousness. Escha's emergence from behind Jakob's image in the mirror further establishes the symbolic identity. In Jungian psychology the shadow figure is the vital animalistic aspect of man, not necessarily evil but destructive if repressed.[10] The story witnesses Jakob's undoing as he is forced to confront a vitality he has all his life been taught to repress. Until now, thought had been his redemption:

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[10] Calvin S. Hall and Vernon J. Nordby, *A Primer of Jungian Psychology* (New York: New American Library, 1973), pp. 48-49.

> . . . he had been taught to think; in the home, in the church, in the school he had been taught to think on his sins: this is not right and this is wrong and this is everlasting wrong. He had been taught man is not a carefree brute; he is a thinking creation made in the image by the hand of the holy terrible God who has said once and for all in a voice dry and hard as the rock of his mountain, 'Thou shalt not.' He had been taught his sins. (BM 39)

In his dance with the Russian girl and his fight with Escha Jakob for the first time sees himself *beyond* thought, a creature of lust and violence. His mechanical intoning of the prayer, "Blessed Saviour make me pure that I may get to Heaven" is an inadequate bulwark against these last two remnants of "do not." He is edged further towards madness as Escha taunts him with the knowledge of his lustfulness: "Studs, mares you watched when you think nobody's looking . . ." Escha is himself aligned with horses in Jakob's mind. Wiebe's complex pattern of imagery suggests that the horses represent more than a negative animality.

The girl is described as a mare to be mounted yet simultaneously her laughter is that "total kind of happiness" Jakob has never known. She stands at the "sunlight's cross" in the aisle of the barn dancing, eyes afire, moving him like a "great tree in wind." This blend of sexual and apocalyptic imagery reflects the ambiguous nature of Jakob's experience. It suggests that man's sexuality may be a source of joy, beauty, communion, not merely the seat of destructive lust or violence with which it is all too readily associated in the Mennonite world.

Jakob's physical survival is devoid of meaning. He drifts in space like a "sack hung empty by a string in a wandering wind." Life is more meaningless than it had been in the prison cell. There the yearning for his family had given Jakob the will to survive. Now, bereft of any restraining values, he indulges his violence and lust, brutally

murdering Escha before climbing the rafters to the girl. Jakob's final *cognitio* is the inadequacy of his violent response to life. Just as inadequate is his religion. Thom had arrived at a similar realization. He finds his answer in the hope of Christ's grace. Jakob's realization comes too late. At his death, his demonic laughter is dry and hard like the God he has been reared on, a God of thou shalt nots.

Conventional Mennonite religion is shown to be a fertile source of error, frequently inhibiting the forces of love and human communion in the very name of Christ. This is clearly dramatized in "The Well." The story reveals Wiebe's freer use of the Christian myth. The well does not figure exclusively as a symbol of grace but as a universal archetype, a matrix from which life's mystery flows. The well has its source in the beautiful stream running invisibly beneath the land, Wiebe's metaphor for peace. No drought discovers the "well's bottom, the stream's end." The mythic description of the well's discovery, construction and joyous celebration blends unobtrusively with the realistic dimension of the story.

The well is Schoenbach's most valued possession but the life force it symbolizes is thwarted by Elder Wiebe who presides over the community. He epitomizes all that Wiebe disdains: fearful intolerance, a rigid inflexibility, self-righteous pride and an ascetic denial of the joys of God's creation. The Elder intones that

> the Bible, the Catechism and the Kirchenbuch, the plow and the shovel were the faith of their fathers. It was enough for them and it is enough for their children and their children's children now and for evermore. To have too much is to want more. New ideas, book learning, singing in several voices are unnecessary and dangerous. To long for change is to fight one's destiny. Fighting one's destiny is rebellion against God. Man's duty is to obey, pray, work and wait in terror for God's wrath. (BM 100)

The sermon is invoked against the more carefree Russlander Mennonites.

Anna, thoroughly conditioned by her secluded upbringing, reiterates Elder Wiebe's intolerant opinions. The story's tone and imagery betrays her unconscious yearning for the vitality and freedom these Russlanders represent. Anna is both frightened and fascinated by the Russlander young men, as she is by the Linqua Indian women who "walk like stallions in the spring, staring wherever their eyes strayed, so fluidly, powerfully free"(BM 98). They also are identified with animals; the sound of their laughter and songs remind her of "coyotes or wolves under the moon in Canada", an image evoking a sense of fear as well as of freedom.

The motif of the pilgrimage recurs; Anna staggers along the "hollowed path" towards the well in a blinding sandstorm, heavy pails across her stooped shoulders. The Russlander Joseph Hiebert finds her attempting to pull out the thorns from her fall. His removal of the thorns suggests that the vitality of spirit he embodies might relieve Anna's sterile existence. Their meeting is surrounded with apocalyptic images: the laughter of grace, the communal drink of terrere. Their gaze into the well suggests a mystical communion: "One early summer as the November sun stood so directly overhead that it cast no shadow, Anna Freisen discovered when she leaned over the rim she could not tell whether she was looking into the well or out of it"(BM 96).

The spontaneous impulses that might be released in love and give life to the community are denied. Anna's experience with Joseph frees her but momentarily. She is devastated by fear and guilt, and passively accepts her father's rejection of the Russlander. The source of vitality, like the repressed shadow figure in "Sons and Heirs," becomes de-

structive. Joseph leaves the community for the big city with its painted women. Time dulls Anna's memory. She marries Abram Funk, bastion of those forces which work against the human values Wiebe affirms, values infused with religious feelings of wonder and awe.

Although Wiebe condemns religious attitudes which thwart life, he is aware of the darker implications of a freedom devoid of moral values. In "Over the Red Line" the young and imaginatively precocious Liesel responds to life with the spontaneity and frankness of the innocent. In this chapter the Mennonites voyage across the ocean to Paraguay in quest of greater religious freedom. Their world is bereft of joy: "All they ever did was talk . . . about the terrible communists . . . having no money . . . and what they would do in the green hell with the heathen and wash their old rags again and cry and sing long heavy songs and celebrate funerals." Liesel is repelled by her elders' gloom and her long black robes. She enviously watches the worldly passengers on A-deck moving "so free and dignified . . . their laughter like a grace." But Liesel also perceives something sinister in their freedom. Their dance becomes demonic, "ebony shoes glinting like knives, arms flicking like . . . a writhed fiend." Overcome with disgust and fright at the lustful contortions of a man and woman on the deckfloor she runs to the ocean. Alone, her senses roused by the music and the motion of the waves, she experiences the ecstasy of orgasm: "Everything within her surged as though tiny seeds spilled out of herself pouring over the world. She floated free" (<u>BM</u> 82). The naturalness of Wiebe's handling of the scene compares with his earlier evasiveness. We are offered an image of beauty and freedom devoid of

moral earnestness.

The author's fiction collapses any easy distinction between fact and fancy. In this story he works easily in the mythic mode. His use of stream-of-consciousness captures the complexity of man's inner experiences. As Liesel wanders to the open ocean of the steamroom, the smokey atmosphere, the memory of the map's red-line marking the equator and images of the "green Hell" in Paraguay coalesce in her vision of Neptune with tri-pronged fork sitting in judgment like Jehovah. Mesmerized by the ritual cleansing and absolution, Liesel falls in at the symbolic red-line. Her sea-change brings the realization that the red-line is only man made, that life is no different from this side of hell, or by implication, in the glamorous world on A-deck. Wiebe's rendering of her anagnorises is subtle and artfully undefined.

Dream, vision, imagination are seen to afford insight into another order of reality as valid as that of common day. Unfortunately the modern world conspires against the man of vision. The forces of rationalism, common sense and materialism predominate and nowhere more fully than in professed Christian communities such as that depicted in one of the most striking chapters, "The Vietnam Call of Samuel U. Reimer." Wiebe's humour and satirical tone belie the seriousness of the questions being posed, not only to Mennonites but to all of us, as the "U" in the title implies. Samuel Reimer's call lacks the majesty of his biblical namesake. The seriousness of the message juxtaposed with the circumstanes in which it is received heightens our sense of the absurd. In the dead of night, over "pork chops lean 4 lbs.," Sam writes the words of his dream, "I am the God your father, the Lord your God, Go and proclaim peace in Vietnam." The voice changes his life. He has until now

been a complacent "still" Mennonite who, as he tells his pastor, lacked the imagination to even "dream" of such a voice. But as he reads of the suffering and injustice recorded in the newspapers his former concerns retreat into insignificance. He is tormented by the "humanness of children, women, men who must endure living."

Sam's community does not share his largeness of vision. Even his church pastor shuns the possibility of a call from God in the twentieth century. He suggests Sam test God, as Gideon did in the Old Testament. The biblical sheepskin is replaced by a tape-recorder but when he plays back the tape, only Sam can hear the Lord's words. He continues to plan his departure but the community conspires against him. They not only make it impossible for him to obtain a passport but eventually have him committed for insanity. The psychiatrist proves sympathetic, however. Sam tells him that he must care for all of mankind, not merely for his own family, that he must do "something, anything . . . about what he thinks is worst"(BM 172). He is released from the asylum but his frustration and feeling of helplessness rob him of the will to survive; he dies of a mysterious ailment. Conventional morality has defeated Sam as surely as his own hesitation. At his death he tells Emily, "When you know like that, are chosen, you shouldn't wait, talk. Go . . . Perhaps it would have helped nothing but do it. Some of it, just do it"(BM 179).

In Wiebe's former comedies the sacrifice of life ensures redemption for the community. The comedy here is black. Sam's death at Easter affords no such renewal. In a final stroke of irony, with the estate money Emily buys a new limousine. She is last seen driving through town but no one can distinguish the make of the car; it is

covered in dust, a traditional symbol of death.

Sam continually recalls the story of David Epp's martyrdom. John Reimer is similarly moved by the heroism of his fellow Mennonites. The knowledge of their self-sacrifice contributes significantly to his final realization—the novel's central theme—that God's Promised Land is not on earth. The three chapters in which John appears, interspersed throughout the novel, result in a sequential record of the pilgrimage to Christ. They imply, as does the chronological history of Freida and Jakob Freisen, what Hildegard Tiessen has called the "meaningful and coherent nature of experience."[11] Time is a worthy continuum in which to discover Christ's peace.

John Reimer first appears in "Black Vulture" as sympathetic audience to Frank Epp's tale of the tragic events of November 1929 in Cliasma, Russia. Hounded by communists, the Mennonite families wait fearfully for passports to other countries. The menacing atmosphere provokes the worst and best in man's nature, evinced respectively by Balzar's spiritual myopia and his wife's contrasting Christian compassion. In the crowded lodgings, Frank witnesses Jakob Freisen's arrest by the GPU. While he is dragged away, Balzar rejoices at his own escape: "Oh God, my God how marvelous are thy ways, how He answers prayers." Stunned by such insensitivity to the suffering of others, David Epp reminds Balzar that Mrs. Freisen was also praying.

Later than evening Frank hides in the shadows before the Kremlin struggling with fear and despair at the impossibility of his mission; he is to deliver the Mennonite signatures of appeal to Stalin. Prayer

[11] Hildegard E. Tiessen, "A Mighty Inner River: 'Peace' in the Fiction of Rudy Wiebe," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, vol.11,no.4,Fall 1973, p.76.

offers him no solace. Having witnessed Balzar's "blank happiness" he realizes the inadequacy of praying for his own personal salvation. His fear reaches hallucinatory heights. He envisions the burdened masses, a long bloated line of shapes, bent forward fumbling through the snow, followed by the silent unearthly "Black Vulture." This is a haunting image of crucified mankind. The sinister black vulture is the GPU limousine leading the Mennonites to prison and, more significantly, a nightmarish spectre of death itself. Frank Epp's conversion is not depicted in terms of an explicit discovery of Christ or a harrowing awareness of his own sinfulness. The conversion becomes more universally relevant; a movement from youth to adulthood, from limited awareness to universal compassion for suffering humanity. It brings in its wake the courage of self-sacrifice. Frank endangers his life to mail the letters.

Years later in the quiet of Paraguay the spectre continues to haunt him. The forces of darkness the black vulture represents are not to be negated. The image of the vulture as bird of prey is alluded to in the closing chapter of the novel. Freisen and John discuss the various scavenger birds. Canada has "magpies"; they at least "look nice."

In "Black Vulture" John Reimer gains knowledge of his ancestry. Balzar is none other than his father and John's determination is to fight such spiritual insensitivity within himself. John again appears in "Wash: This Sand and Ashes." As a volunteer for Intermennonite Church Service, he joins David Epp among the wild Indians of Paraguay. David works as missionary but he is not attempting to convert the

Ayerooas to Christianity. Slowly John understands why. The story emphasizes the need for re-evaluating one's religious beliefs in the name of a greater humility and universality. John's conventional assumptions about the role of a Christian are undermined by the awareness of man's universal brotherhood united in suffering as in grace.

As noted earlier, Wiebe moves from a depiction of explicit Christian repentance and salvation, as defined theologically, to a wider interest in any genuine religious or mystical experience. In Christian mysticism, the universe is infused with God's grace; man's communion with any aspect of creation may assume religious or holy dimensions. The yearning for communion is universal and, in Wiebe's view, so is its availability. The Ayerooa Indians live in the awareness of a higher reality to which their rituals and songs are directed. John watches in awe the strange ritual ablution of the Ayerooa girl, first with water, then as deliberately with sand and ashes. He is moved by the young Indian's longing for his wife and the rhythmic intent of the Indian songs. Moreover he is able to surmount barriers of language to vicariously participate in their communion, "tears standing in his own eyes though he knew no word" (BM 154).

John is not only moved by their songs. Their strange burst of "violence, pathos and raging laughter" fingers through him like fear. John is confronted with the paradox of man, capable of love but equally capable of irrational violence. David tells John of the ritual spring killings among the tribes to ensure adequate water. His allusion to a similar ritual slaying of kings recorded in the Old Testament makes an attitude of self-righteousness impossible. The parallel cuts across time

to endow the individual episode with universal relevance. With a new-found humility, John realizes that "perhaps it was impossible to get at anything about people by understanding" (BM 155). He comes to believe that his Christian duty is not to convert the Indians but to relieve their suffering. His realization is essentially a repentance: He recognizes his helplessness in the face of human violence. Thom and Abe had arrived at similar realizations but in the first two novels, their repentance is treated in a melodramatic and didactic manner, not with the subtlety here displayed. Symbolic and realistic levels of the novel are completely integrated in the pilgrimage motif which concludes the chapter: "The jeep began to move. Staggering through the spines of the ditch. Trying to crawl up again on the abandoned oil road."

"On the Way" is a masterful conclusion to the novel. The chapter unifies the numerous thematic and metaphoric threads of the twelve previous stories. The cross John bears suggests the Christian resolution. The title eludes to the pilgrimate motif and the on-going nature of the pilgrimage. It is also ironic: eternity awaits us but God is also immanent; His peace can be known while the quest is enacted. This is inferred throughout the novel.

The first two of the three sections of the chapter introduce Elizabeth Dreidigger, the child in "Over the Red Line," now a sophisticated professor of languages, and Dennis Wilms, successful Mennonite businessman. Their lives, devoid of faith, are lived in anguish and emptiness. Their fear of death is a measure of their inability to participate in life. Ironically, Elizabeth's mastery of several languages, "the magic of language knowledge," unlike the "word," fails to secure communion or

even communication. It merely separates her further from herself and the world. Upholder of bourgeois individualism she objects to John's new society. However, Liesel, unlike Dennis Wilms, is a sympathetic character. She responds compassionately to Jakob Freisen's pain. Along with Freisen, she does not believe in that "one and only way."

Dennis Wilm's material success reveals that upward mobility is possible in Canada, that "you can get somewhere." However the price is often one's integrity, with "somewhere" as an arid spiritual dessert. Wilms has rejected his heritage. He changes his name to Williams to slip more comfortably into the conventional mould. He has never thought about the mountains and, by implication, the life of the spirit. It is starkly ironic that he should accuse John of endangering the Mennonite image. For Wilms the image that counts is one of material success not religious integrity: "Our people came here with nothing and built up this land and worked for recognition . . . and we made it."

Jakob Freisen reappears in these final pages. He has left his home for old people to visit his daughter but his betrayal of his son long ago in Karatow continues to haunt him. With Elizabeth and the Wilms family, Jakob joins John Reimer as he rests by the roadside on his "walk of repentance" across Canada. The motley group of Mennonites celebrating a symbolic supper in the ditches of an Albertan highway is a microcosm of Canadian society but also of mankind. John is identified, as were David and Freida, with the peace of God; his silence enfolds everyone in its "resting serenity." Various narrative threads are resolved as these pilgrims discover their common history. The most poignant moment is Jakob's recognition of another "red blond Freisen" in Irene Wilms. Their confrontation rekindles not only his pain but the

young girl's first faint understanding of her heritage.

The chapter explicitly defines the revolutionary impulse which informs Wiebe's vision. His social views parallel those of the original Anabaptists.[11] They imply a complete negation of the world as it is. Unfortunately the author regresses into didacticism in John's explicit definition of a "jesus society" and the true meaning of a living church: "This is the new society of 'church' and Jesus is its Lord. . . . The Kingdom of God is within your grasp, repent and believe the good news" (BM 216). John notes that Christ was on earth to lead a revolution for "social justice." A Jesus society is a new society that demands a new attitude toward everything, toward everybody. Wiebe redefines repentance not as feeling badly about one's sins, burdened by a sense of debilitating guilt as some of the pilgrims of this novel are. Authentic repentance means learning to think differently. The author affirms the need for a radically new social order fed by the vitality of the spirit and founded on the Christian values of compassion and sacrificial love. John speaks to the Mennonites on the eve of Canada's centennial. Undoubtedly the ideals expressed are offered as an alternative path to Canada as it heads into its second century.

In the final section two pilgrims walk the ditches of Canada in the growing dusk. Jakob Freisen follows in the furrow of John's wooden cross. The image suggests his discipleship to Christ. The skillful juxtaposition of Jakob's bitterness with John's recounted conversion re-emphasizes Wiebe's affirmation. Throughout the novel Jakob has been unable to accept his yoke. While John explains the reasons for his walk of repentance, Jakob intones that

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[11] Cameron, p. 148. Wiebe comments that the original Anabaptists felt that the social structures that had evolved in the west had no sanction. "Jesus Christ had no use for the social and political structures of his day; He came to supplant them."

his faith has had no effect. He still seeks justification and understanding of God's ways to man but as Freida knew and as John now declares, "understanding is not the right word." Only God can understand. Despite life's seeming injustice, one must have the courage to affirm creation and its creator as ultimately good. That is the "most necessary possibility" for life.

Like many Christians, Jakob has sought tangible evidence of God's grace. He is one with the Mennonites who wish they were Jews with "somewhere to go," a land to which God had called them. John realizes there is nowhere to go: "I am not going anywhere, at least not in Canada." His decision to head north and nor west over the Rockies in search of the beautiful but mocking blue identifies his central *cognitio*: the promised land is not an outer circumstance but an inner state of being. "The Mountains look like a new world, sharp, beautiful, clean. But usually when you get over there's always more of what you climbed them to get away from" (BM 226). Wiebe offers an ironic counterpart to the myth of the western frontier.

The story's imagery further clarifies Wiebe's awareness of the duality at the heart of life. The Canadian prairiedogs are not guided by a mere instinct for survival but by an impulse of love. When one is runover, the other sits loyally by his side until he too is hit. The darker side of life is identified by the lone coyote who wails menacingly in the night. Coyote's words are excerpted from *The Double Hook* by Sheila Watson where the trickster animal is identified with the forces of death and violence. The coyote remains but the community conquers its fear of the forces it represents and the novel concludes on a note of redemption and affirmation. Wiebe similarly acknowledges

the presence of a sinister force within the universe but the ending of *The Blue Mountains of China* is also affirmative. John asserts God's goodness in the spirit of trust implies in Christ's parable of the lilies. He determines to "live the concern for others Christ shows." This is an affirmation of love such as Sam Reimer makes, not for oneself or one's family alone but for all of mankind. The former is but another version of a garrison mentality be it defined as cultural or religious.

To Jakob's complaint that Jesus gives you nothing to hold in your hand, John replies, "There are many things you can't hold in your hands." This is fictionally conveyed in the wind metaphor which ends the novel, a perfect metaphor for God, not only biblical but one that recurs in prairie literature. The metaphor communicates God's transcendence as well as His immanence. "The poplar leaves clicked in the wind, the slope rustled as from feet"(BM 227).

The Blue Mountains of China testifies to Wiebe's radically Christian vision. The themes reflect his continuing exploration of specifically Anabaptist precepts. The author continues to re-evaluate conventional interpretations of those precepts in the direction of greater universality. The Christian myth is more freely employed and thus the conflicts become more meaningful to a non-Christian audience. Wiebe affirms Christian belief but just as significant is the affirmation of the universal necessity of participating in the central mystery and joy of life.

Wiebe has consistently condemned the ascetic denial of life's joys and the denunciation of flesh as evil. We have witnessed his hesitancy however to deal openly with man's sexuality. In this novel, the por-

trayal of Freida, Jakob and Liesel illustrates the ease and honesty with which he now handles this theme. Human sexuality and the senses in general are worthy modes of communion and joy. Man's instincts are not necessarily destructive. Nevertheless Wiebe's vision is eminently moral and Puritan. The novel attests to the dangers of unhampered freedom or the unconditional indulgence of one's instincts. It is always a higher moral order to which we are led. Freida resists sexual temptations through the strength derived from prayer.

Again Wiebe asserts that the living church of Christ is not a brotherhood of believers physically isolated from the world in a garrisoned community. The brotherhood is spiritual, alive in the act of love and in the inspiration one man's heroism may provide for another.

The novel marks a great leap forward in terms of artistry. It displays a more satisfactory integration of ideological and artistic concerns. The didacticism which flaws the first two novels has largely disappeared, although Wiebe does return to an explicit definition of the Jesus society in the closing pages. Characters are no longer mere vessels of Wiebe's ideology; they are alive with all the complexity and contradiction of reality. Syntactical awkwardness occurs but is mostly due to the author's conscious attempt to capture the contorted language of the Mennonites.[12] Wiebe's formerly lengthy exuberance gives way to a more finally honed prose.

The Blue Mountains of China explores Wiebe's personal ancestry,

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[12] Rudy Wiebe, "In the West . . .," The author remarks that he had tries to capture the contorted language of the Mennonites. One reviewer had consequently "found the language impossible: enough as she said in an inimitable phrase, 'to make out-group of us all.' That was the fall when *The Joys of Yiddish* was raved about on every book page in the country."

the moral and spiritual difficulties of a people whose isolation is self-imposed. We have noted the author's sympathy for the natives of Canada, a people whose isolation was *not* chosen. Their confrontation with a secular white world posed even greater emotional and spiritual dilemmas. In Wiebe's first two novels the salvation of the Indian is seen in terms of Christian conversion, the *conscious* knowledge of Christian grace. Here, John and David are specifically not converting the Indians to Christianity. The Ayerooa Indians' ritual ablution is treated in apocalyptic terms and John is capable of comprehending and participating in their communion. It is significant that John heads north, an area inhabited mostly by half-breeds and Indians. Like the Mennonites, both these peoples were and are persecuted minorities with strong religious traditions. It is to them Wiebe next turns his attention. His pre-occupation with their history can be seen as an extension of his concern to affirm a way of life that is radically religious.

Chapter Five

Prophets of our Past

Georg Lukàcs claims that the historical novel deals primarily with the destiny of a nation and that its principal subject is the gradual disintegration of a society in confrontation.[1] *The Temptations of Big Bear* and *The Scorched-Wood People* are both historical novels dealing with the period of the Northwest Rebellions in Canada. These years, from 1870-90, witnessed the confrontation of two opposed world orders: one--primitive, communal, religious, sacramental; the other--Puritan, individualistic, rational, capitalistic. In the annals of our history it is an epoch of glorious pioneering heroism; white civilization moves courageously westward to conquer and subdue both land and savage in the name of progress, God and the queen. From underneath the slag heap of this history, Wiebe has dared to unearth another version. The author recreates our past through the eyes of Indian and Métis. From their perspective, our history is anything but glorious. It is the story of the contemptuous assimilation of a religious by a secular society, the conquering of a minority culture by vastly more numerous and powerful intruders from the east.

Wiebe notes that he marches into battle "against all the clotted ignorance of myself and my people."[2] The comment communicates his skepticism of recorded history. Wiebe would deny that history is the objective rendering of events; each man records and interprets events

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[1] George Melnyk, "Rudy, Riel and other rebels," *Quill and Quire*, November, 1977, p. 31.

[2] Rudy Wiebe, "All That's Left of Beg Bear," *Maclean's*, September, 1975, vol. 88, no. 9, p. 55.

from his particular level of consciousness, reflecting the biases of his world view. The line between history and fiction is "an impossible one."[3] In "Where Is The Voice Coming From," Wiebe cannot possibly reconcile the feminine description of Almighty Voice with the face in the picture before him: "a steady look into those eyes cannot be endured. . . . It is a face like an axe." Confronted with inherent contradictions in the facts themselves Wiebe can no longer pretend to "objective omnipotent disinterestedness. . . . I am no longer spectator. . . . I am become element in what is happening at this very moment."[4]

Like the historian, Wiebe is an ardent researcher, ploughing through documents, newspapers, diaries, memoirs. He adheres scrupulously to historical data in creating an authentic historical image. Unlike the latter however, the fiction writer makes no claim to objectivity. He does not permit the tyranny of facts; they are merely the scaffold of a larger truth, the truth of the imagination. The arrangement, selection and dramatization of historical material force the reader to re-evaluate events. The fiction writer assembles facts into an artistic form which reflects the concept of man and the world. Both *The Temptations of Big Bear* and *The Scorched-Wood People* testify to Wiebe's belief in man as an ethical and spiritual creature capable of affirming and celebrating communion with the god of his faith. Wiebe remains a religious writer with a deeply theological perspective. Both novels are not just histories but spiritual commentaries.

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[3] Donald Cameron, "The Moving Stream is Perfectly at Rest," *Conversations with Canadian Novelists*, Part 2. (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1973), p. 158.

[4] Rudy Wiebe, *Where Is The Voice Coming From* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), p. 141.

The historical novelist has social and political importance; he provides a society with cohesion and self-consciousness. Wiebe accomplishes this for the Mennonites in *The Blue Mountains of China.* In his latest novels we gain an authentic feeling for the uniqueness of Indian and Métis culture. Simultaneously an underlying sense of our common humanity is focal. Wiebe comments that in some ways historical novels are not historical at all. They are about people struggling with "exactly the kinds of things we struggle with, except for a slight shift in time and place."[5] The Métis and Indian dilemma is the recurring one of a people striving to maintain their spiritual and cultural integrity in the face of assimilation.

The Temptations of Big Bear is superb art: unsettling, demanding, visionary. It is to date Wiebe's best novel and secured for him the Governor General's Award for Fiction in 1973. Margaret Laurence considers it the best work by a Canadian novelist.[6] John Moss lists *The Temptations of Big Bear* as *the* great Canadian novel:great in vision, heart and understanding.[7] George Woodcock refers to the book as one of a handful of novels that introduces a new sense of history merging into myth, of theme coming out of the perception of the land, of geography as a source of art.[8]

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[5] Cameron, p. 159.

[6] Margaret Laurence, CBC Radio Broadcast, April 1978, University of Alberta.

[7] John Moss, *Sex and Violence in the Canadian Novel. The Ancestral Past* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), p. 6.

[8] George Woodcock, "Possessing the Land," *The Canadian Imagination. Dimensions of a Literary Culture*, ed. David Staines (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), pp. 94-95.

The author tells Cameron that the novel is non-religious in a formal sense but in another way "it's fantastically religious, because once you get to know what Indian people of that time were like, they were and are more religious than you can ever imagine a white man being. . . . You suddenly see a community, a people who truly see things religiously, who don't see things only in terms of the here and now.[9] Wiebe works outside a Christian context but his preoccupations have not changed. The epigraph suggests that man's relationship to his god is still the primary concern: God "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." Big Bear's temptations to violence, hate, doubt and despair are resolved in religious terms, upholding values that are Christian in their essence. Big Bear is not a thinly disguised Christian; he is hugely, gigantically Indian. Rather Wiebe perceives Christian values operating outside a narrowly defined Christian context.

In the creation of the major events of the novel Wiebe does not veer from historical fact: the treaty signing, Crozier's confrontation with the Indians at the Thirst Dance, the Frog Lake Massacre, the seige at Fort Pitt, Big Bear's long trek north pursued by the forces of Middleton and Strange and, finally, the trial scene. Every date is precise, where history allows for precision: "only four months after the fact not one of the witnesses who was at the sacking of Fort Pitt can agree on what day it took place."[10] Frequently Wiebe quotes verbatim from recorded

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[9] Cameron, pp. 158-9.

[10] Rudy Wiebe, "All That's Left of Big Bear," p. 54.

speeches. However he employs a variety of narrative techniques and voices which allow us to perceive these events from widely different perspectives. An omniscient narrator moves unobtrusively through the novel to provide a panoramic view, filling in factual details to ensure a sense of continuity. The combination of objective data with imagined scene undermines our faith in recorded history and emphasizes the gulf separating Indian and white worlds. This juxtaposition is used to great effect throughout the novel: the incident of Indian interference with government surveyors as remembered by Col. Irvine contrasts with the memories of the People; the Craig affair and Crozier's confrontation at the Thirst Dance as seen through Big Bear's eyes contrasts with Robert Jefferson's version. The Frog Lake Massacre is seen from several different viewpoints as is the trial scene where Kitty McLean's stream of consciousness is juxtaposed with the endless deliberations of the court.

The use of diverse narrative voices gives rise to a wide variety of prose styles from blunt reportage to a convoluted stream of consciousness pro[illegible]t captures the most personal responses of characters through the ton[illegible] texture of their language: the Victorian stuffiness of Governor Morris, the sexual perversity of John Delaney; the lyricism of Kingbird's thoughts on his first horseraid; the rich tumbling metaphors of Big Bear's inner world. The use of so many prose styles and narrative voices requires careful attention and agility on the part of the reader, especially the stream-of-consciousness narration. Each sentence is rich in implication and feeling. However, it is primarily Wiebe's command of language that enables him to authentically recreate Big Bear's life. In the words of John Moss, Wiebe renders "the feel of one language into the

word structures and cadences of another."[11] He creates in the rhythms and images of language the consciousness of a people.

The novel has a well-designed tragic structure. Each of the six chapters is divided into sections marking a shift in scene or narrative voice. The informing centre is the voice of Big Bear. He is the tragic hero who pulls into perspective all other responses to events, as did Freida Freisen in *The Blue Mountains of China* . Big Bear's fall from leadership marks the downward movement of the *mythos*; the Indian hope for peace dies; violence makes inevitable their bondage and the death of their culture.

Canadian fiction records the vast gulf that has existed between indigenous and immigrant worlds, explored as a conflict between reason and instinct, Christianity and paganism, civilization and nature. *The Temptations of Big Bear* reflects this gulf. The *agon* or conflict centres on the discrepancy between the two worlds, so different that communication is barely possible. The nineteenth-century Indian lived in the daily awareness of a transcendent reality to which his every thought and act was related. The earth was perceived as a gift from "The Only One." In Big Bear's words, all living has "soul." Every interaction with the world assumed sacramental overtones from horse raiding to treaty signing to the killing and eating of buffalo. These Indians are an honourable, moral and generous people with a deep regard for community and individual relationship. In contrast, the whiteman lives in a world of disorder and placelessness, although as Big Bear notes, order is all they speak of and they erect buildings that cannot

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[11] Moss, *Sex and Violence in the Canadian Novel*, p.270.

move. Theirs is no community but rather a molecular tension of egos. They are enclosed in rationalism and motivated by individual greed. Their colonial and garrison mentality has severed them from the harmony of the natural world.

Individuals within each world order attempt to surmount their cultural attitudes. Some succeed more than others. Wiebe comments that the rebellions were a hellish dilemma, not only for Indians and Metis, but for white administrators and missionaries. Robert Jefferson, Poundmaker's brother-in-law and farming instructor, offers an ironic but scathing attack on the white world. In a tone of shame and anger he recounts the Craig incident: "Pray God no Canadian schoolboy ever has to memorize that date. Our bruised Craig snores on. This game is not worth my candle, nor anyone's" (T 177). He conveys his frustration with white pomposity and officialdom: "Written authority to wipe my goddam ass!" (T 172). The Methodist missionary John MacDougall is portrayed as a man of integrity and honour who enjoyed a deep communication with the Indian; he could preach better in Cree than English. Nevertheless, he was still an absolute Methodist and royalist: "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" (T 42).

The worlds of Indian and whiteman readily lend themselves to analogy with the two extremes of myth, the apocalyptic and demonic world of heaven and hell, the humanly desirable and undesirable. As the tragedy unfolds, the apocalyptic world of the Indian's sacred life circle is divided into squares and straight lines by government surveyors searching for gold and plotting the great steel lines of our national dream. Even

the caressing chinooks now fail to blow. The sun which has worked every day to "enlighten the world" is no longer round; it has four corners. In the end it seems to have disappeared completely. The transition from a buffalo culture to the one symbolized by the railway also identifies the downward movement of the narrative. The iron road, a "slug trailing slime in the sunlight," slits open the living earth, wounds her with its iron spikes. The tragedy is of epic mythic proportions; the destruction of the Indian's way of life heralds the destruction of the universe. The metaphors are radically employed as in the mythic mode. The primitive mind has not lost the sense of identification with the non-human world. Myth is the only appropriate mode to render their world imaginatively authentic, a world of undisplaced metaphorical identity. Big Bear is not merely *like* the sun; he becomes one with the whole circle of the universe: sand, rock and sun.

Big Bear's fall from leadership is not due to *hubris* or pride. As Frye notes, a tragic hero's *hamartia* is not necessarily wrong-doing or moral weakness. Big Bear is merely a strong character in an exposed position of leadership. Up to the climax of the Frog Lake Massacre he is "head and soul of the Plain Cree," and commands the respect of over a thousand Indians. As a youth the Spirit Above All had gifted him with the power bundle from the Great Parent of Bear, the most powerful spirit known to his people; hence his power as a young warrior and his prophetic visions. Because of his close relationship with the Only One the Indians respect his leadership. He leads through wisdom, not tyranny. However his wisdom isolates him further and further from both Indian and white. His people reject his prophetic warnings to follow the short-sighted and violent ways of the warchief Wandering Spirit. The tragic catharsis of

pity and fear rises as Big Bear's sacred circle of life shrinks and his voice is lost among the warcries of his young braves.

Big Bear is a hero of epic scope, consistently identified with the apocalyptic symbols of sun and circle. We first see him isolated through the telescope of Governor Morris, "barely moving in a flat, constant green circle." Wiebe's skill in creating a dramatic scene is apparent as we hear Big Bear's voice rise up from the earth: "The mouth opening gigantically, black—'I find it hard to speak.'" Governor Morris finds his head turning into "blackness, slowly down into the enormous strange depths of that incomprehensible voice. 'There is a stone between me and what I have to say. . . . There is a stone.'" Big Bear stands wrapped in his buffalo robe, "huge against the sun" (T 19-20).

The opening image of the blood splattered treaty, along with the bent poplar bearing the Queen's flag, suggests the inevitability of the ensuing tragedy. Fort Pitt, September 13th, 1876: Sweetgrass has signed the treaty. With twenty-seven X-marks the natives have extinguished forever all rights to several thousand miles of land. Only Big Bear's signature remains to conclude the treaty. He hesitates for he perceives that the treaties take much but give little. Within the first chapter he exposes the hypocrisy and presumptions of the white world.

When Sweetgrass meets the wily Governor Morris his poetic invocation identifies the Indian's religious attitude towards the treaty signing, an attitude encouraged by the whitemen for their selfish ends. "The Great Spirit has put it in our hearts that we shake hands once more. . . . When I hold your hand I feel the First One is looking on us as brothers." Big Bear is aware such words are mere "makeshift jumble" to the high-bred sensibilities of Governor Morris who mouthes spurious

ceremonial platitudes about the great White Grandmother under the Great Spirit. Later at Fort Carlton Big Bear remarks that had the government not invoked the name of The First One the Indians would never have signed any treaty.

Big Bear refuses Governor Morris's offer because of his single dread of a rope around his neck. He refers to his vision of six Indians dressed in the blackcoats of whitemen, their faces swollen with blood from a hanging rope. Big Bear's picture language is meaningless to Morris who tells him that there is one law, the Queen's law, which is for all alike: it punishes murder with death. However Big Bear comprehends that the law itself is part of white culture. Its unquestioned and frequently irrelevent application provides black comedy at the novel's end: As Wiebe notes, the whiteman refuses to consider the context of native actions. Big Bear comprehends that laws are relative: each society functions according to different values. He tells Governor Dewdney, "I let the eagle go in his own way and the bear in his!" (T 148). For an Indian anxious to prove himself a worthy young man, horse stealing is culturally acceptable. Big Bear respects that in the white world it is unlawful. When his young warriors steal horses from the soldiers he quickly negotiates their return.

The differing attitudes towards the land most clearly reveal the discrepancy between world views. The land is life to the Indian. In order to convey the tragedy of its loss, Wiebe powerfully evokes the vastness and beauty of the prairies. The novel is as much a story of the land as of anything. Wiebe comments that before completing *The Blue Mountains of China*, he was searching for larger story in which he might "touch this land with words":

> . . . to break into the space of the reader's mind with the space of this western landscape . . . you must build a structure of fiction like an engineer builds a bridge or a skyscraper over and into space. A poem, a lyric, will not do. You must lay great steel lines of fiction, break up that space with huge design. . . . it must be giant fiction.[12]

The Temptations of Big Bear provides the necessary epic structure. The land appears as an eternal backdrop, a silent witness of the unfolding human drama. We first view the Indians outlined against the bare elements of sky and earth. They are seemingly motionless in relation to the "sky, the sage gleam of the river, the green land. . . . One figure, another, and another vanished but at the top of the ridge there was always one more so the line simply remained drawn against those three elements" (T 15). As Kitty notes, "against this bright green and blue world the soldiers seem only overpoweringly unnecessary." Big Bear, confronting Crozier at the Thirst Dance, is sick when he sees why they are gathered together on the beautiful earth: "No joy, no joy." Several scenes dramatically juxtapose the futility and cruelty of human action with the beauty of nature. As they slog through muskeg on the trail of Big Bear, the soldiers notice "purple wood violets blooming." In the midst of Kitty's imprisonment, isolated for a moment at sunset, she hears a loon softly ululating on the water. Filled with peace she returns to camp only to be wakened before dawn by an eruption of gunshots. Such images underline the depth of the crime being committed against creation.

The immensity of the land is so overpowering that even the whiteman must respond to it. Governor Morris cannot imagine so much land: "even

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[12] Rudy Wiebe, "Passage by Land," *The Narrative Voice*, ed. John Metcalf (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), p. 257.

after driving over it, day after day . . . through and over and under the relentless sky, he could not . . ." (T 10). The whiteman may admire but his basic impulse is to exploit. To control, humanize, structure and package the continent under two steel lines, it is ironically suggested, would bring any engineer more joy than the lyrical prospects of heaven. The concept of ownership is unfathomable to the Indian and the whitemen readily take advantage of their incomprehension. They sign treaties believing their land to be borrowed, not bought. As Big Bear tells the government, "No one can choose for only himself a piece of Mother Earth. She is. And she is for all that live alike." In the first confrontation with Morris he voices the unspoken question lurking under all the queries and bickerings: "Who can receive land? From whom would he receive it?" The government has received it from the Hudson's Bay Company, for more money than the Indians have seen in eight years of treaty payments.

The Indians' response to nature reflects Wiebe's Christian belief in a creation pervaded by God's immanence. The natives consider that it is The Only One who makes the grass grow, the rivers run and the buffalo feed. Having given away this gift, Big Bear considers it inevitable that the buffalo should disappear, the sun no longer shine and the chinooks fail to blow. The scene of the last buffalo hunt conveys their sacramental attitude to nature. Spread out upon the "sweetly singing grass," Big Bear is consumed with joy. He becomes a wave breaking upon the beach of earth; his horses drum him into "another country . . . calling and calling and it came to him he had already spread his robe on the Sand Hills." It is a moment of epiphany: in the apocalyptic circle of sun,

sky, earth and death,. Big Bear stands complete. He begins and ends the hunt with thanksgiving to The Only One. The buffalo are spiritual as well as physical nourishment for the Indian. Big Bear gives himself to the cow's living warmth, feeling her "heat mould him, curl him up within itself against the fulfilled dome of her belly shining against the sun" (T 129).

Unlike most Indians, Big Bear knows that the buffalo will not return. He alone perceives what can save his people from the encroaching world of the whiteman: a united confederation of Indian and Métis, "words" of negotiation, not violence. In 1879 Big Bear meets in council with Sitting Bull and Crowfoot in an attempt to form a "life circle" with these former enemies. Big Bear understands that the treaties are both their damnation and their only hope. He wants to petition "the one whiteskin than whom there is none higher" to change the treaty terms. Big Bear's first attempt fails. Crowfoot wrecks the confederation. He naively believes the buffalo will suddenly appear and holds fast to his hatred of Sioux and Cree. Not only the whiteman is victim of pride. Sitting Bull lacks the moral vision and wisdom of Big Bear. He would kill every whiteskin; some may be good but they are always and only "white."

The council scene clearly defines Big Bear's temptations. Like Sitting Bull, he has considered killing but rejects violence on moral grounds. It is wrong in the eyes of his god: "It is not given to us by the Great Spirit that redmen or whitemen should spill each other's blood." Moreover he perceives the futility of fighting an enemy who supply their ammunition. Big Bear is tempted to despair, to doubt his god's goodness in sending strangers who have disrupted their whole way of life. His

humanity and credibility as a character emerge from his capacity to experience such despair to its depth. The terror of an indifferent universe overwhelmes Big Bear as he watches the ghost dancers light the sky, beautiful but terrifying "in their absolute disregard for prayer or pleading." Like Freida Freisen however Big Bear is heroic in overcoming his despair and affirming G od's goodness despite his tribulations. He refuses to believe in an uncaring god, a god whose compassion is anything less than universal. He seeks to find the way in which The Only One wants him to live with the whiteman.

In the face of mounting starvation Big Bear reluctantly signs the treaty. The use of flashback again highlights the gulf between the two worlds and allows us to understand what has led Big Bear to his decision. While officials read the meaningless rhetoric Big Bear thinks about the beloved sun in mythic and anthropomorphic terms. He recalls the summer on the prairie bare of buffalo, the railway "shrieking spasms" into the air and the demonic vision of red blood the trickster Coyote had forced him to see. His vision prophecies that if violence erupts, his people will die. Big Bear's tale of former treaty-making amongst the People contrasts tellingly with the scene at Fort Walsh. It had been approached with reverence and celebrated with joy. Here no sacred pipe is smoked and the sun has disappeared. The chapter closes on a note of pathos, "I am an old man and it is not given to me to feed my people. What more can you want?"

Big Bear does not immediately choose a reserve nor has he forsaken his hope of a confederation. In the spring of 1884 he gathers with two thousand Indians at Poundmaker's Reserve for the annual celebration of the Thirst Dance. Wiebe's handling of this section, including the Craig

incident and the negotiations with Crozier, reveals clearly how Wiebe has shaped history to reflect his world view.

Although no historical data refers to Big Bear as the central participant in the Thirst Dance, Wiebe's chieftain assumes that role. The portrayal of his ecstatic communion with Thunderbird and his sacrificial prayer of thirst and suffering convey the depth of his faith in the power of prayer. It is the sacrificial aspect of the dance which is accentuated, not the torturous tearing of skin and muscle of the young braves' initiation ritual. Wiebe's Anabaptist concern with the value of suffering was noted in *The Blue Mountains of China*. In "All That's Left of Big Bear," the author writes: Big Bear "fasted and prayed until finally out of his accepted suffering the overlord of all bear spirits came."[13] Big Bear is beyond prayer for himself; his concern is for the "blessing of all men" and more specifically for the united council of River People. Thunderbird accepts his prayer of thirst and suffering. The blessed rain rushes the valley. Again, Big Bear's prophetic-vision rises from his achieved union with the spirit world. In the midst of his ecstasy he suddenly sees six men hanging distorted in a glazed eye under a black rim hat.

The Craig incident, where an Indian brave who had been denied food for his family hit the pompous farm instructor, has been thoroughly documented. The whites unwisely seek the Indian's arrest at the height of the Thirst Dance. History refers to Poundmaker as the chief negotiator in this confrontation. To avoid an outbreak, he offers himself for arrest in lieu of the young warrior. In the novel, this rôle is ascribed

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[13] Rudy Wiebe, "All That's Left of Big Bear," p. 54.

to Big Bear. Crozier refuses to accept Big Bear and Poundmaker as substitutes; the white law must be administered to the letter to preserve white dignity unblemished. All historical records fail to explain how the throttled violence never broke into open rebellion. Crozier himself was puzzled.[14] As Wiebe portrays the scene, it is the power of Big Bear's prayer that alone prevents a catastrophe.

The chieftain succeeds in avoiding violence but is overwhelmed with a sense of futility. The temptations to doubt are strong. His demonic visions and the incomprehensible depths of white ignorance have filled him with despair of effecting peace. He has reached a spiritual crisis as much as a political or cultural one. He can no longer affirm the reasons for avoiding violence or the faith which has sustained him all his life. We are given no drama of his reconciliation but his words at Duck Lake and Fort Carlton the following autumn indicate a spiritual resolution: "It is good in one way I am cheated, for now I begin to understand what great good The Only One had given me. Now I can truly worship the kindness of That One."

The hope of a confederation and the promise of another council end Chapter Three on an affirmative note. The events into which we are plunged in the following chapter witness the final unleashing of violence. Wiebe continually switches perspective in recounting the events of the Frog Lake Massacre. He relies on factual data but his fictional recreation dramatically underlines the dissent among the white settlers, most of whom are portrayed in unflattering terms. John Delaney, victim of a distorted Puritan upbringing, seeks escape from a lifetime of repression

[14] Harold Fryer, *Frog Lake Massacre* (Aldergrove: Frontier Publishing, 1975), p. 7.

in his lust with Kingbird's wife. In the attack before his death he prays that a stray shot might rid him of his pure and other-worldly wife. Significantly the attack occurs during the Christian holy week and Wiebe juxtaposes words of the liturgy and eucharist with the violence and the fear-ridden thoughts of young Solomon Pritchard. Wiebe often relays events through the bewildered yet perceptive eyes of children, a technique which affords a relatively unjaundiced response to life. In recreating the historic massacre Wiebe maintains a delicate objectivity. He rouses our sympathy for the Indians and makes their rebellion understandable, even inevitable. Preceding the outbreak, various historical quotations establish the government's callous indifference to native starvation. Nevertheless, Wandering Spirit, the Cree war chief, is a demonic figure, motivated by pride and hate. The massacre is no more a solution to events than was the violence of Thom, Abe or Jakob Freisen in Wiebe's previous novels.

Big Bear consistently attempts to prevent violence. His dramatic appearance at the Hudson's Bay Shop as the Indians pillage the supplies is reminiscent of Josh's entrance into Bjorenson's cabin in *First and Vital Candle* although the symbolism is more subtly rendered. The sunlight splays around Big Bear brilliantly. Wiebe metaphorically identifies the turning point of the narrative. Big Bear has formerly appeared bare-headed. Now he wears a tall black hat. The image appears throughout the novel. As he signs the treaty at Fort Walsh he suddenly remembers Dewdney in the hat. It is worn by the little men of his first vision; it envelops the six hung men in his vision at the Thirst Dance. The black hat is also worn by the unsmiling Hodson, the McLean's

cook who later becomes the hangman for the government. In Big Bear's mind the black hat becomes a symbol of the evil and absurdity of the entire white world.

Although Big Bear opposes the violence of his young braves, he does not abandon his people. In the Indian world, if a chief's advice is rejected, he must concede. However, Big Bear does continue to protect the prisoners from the sinister threats of the more violent warriors. At the close of Chapter Five Wiebe communicates Big Bear's sorrow and the pathos of his fall: "I have prayed about this for years, and cried for it today. There was a time when young men sat around me to listen; I was the greatest chief of the First People. But now they laugh at me. For some time they have been trying to take away the good name I have lived so long, and now they have done that very well." Big Bear's last words, however, are words of resignation: "It is gone and I am old. That is the way things are" (T 267).

The seige of Fort Pitt and the life of captivity is recounted through the eyes of Kitty McLean. More than any other character Kitty reflects the author's sympathies. By filtering events through her consciousness, we are afforded an ironic perspective on the whiteman's reaction to life in camp and a sympathetic response to the Indian world. The distance from Big Bear permits a more objective portrayal of his heroic stature. He has fallen from leadership but is still a hero of mythic proportions whose voice is like the golden sun and whose high oration melts into chant or dirge. Big Bear continues to plea for pity as we hear in his last council speech:

> I pity every whiteskin we have saved. Instead of speaking bad about them, give them back some of the things you have taken. Look at them: they are suddenly poor. Naked. They have never before, like us, been often hungry; they haven't known until now how the teeth of cold bit. Look at them and have pity! (T 285)

The hero's isolation increases as he is pursued further north into muskeg by the forces of Governor Middleton and General Strange. Their clumsy efforts provide moments of comic relief. An unnamed Canadian volunteer recounts with heavy wit and irony the pursuit under the command of Strange, "our terrifying Mogul of the Mustaches." Their manoeuvres are absurdly inappropriate, Victorian mannerisms in an untamed land. The troops are endlessly delayed by scheduled halts for bread and marmalade.

At Turtle Lake Big Bear is alone with one lodge. The novel is given a unifying symmetry as Big Bear recalls Sweetgrass at Fort Pitt nine years earlier signing the treaty which marked the commencement of the tragedy. In the shrunken yet still sacred circle Big Bear smokes the pipe, praying for compassion for all mankind. His poetic tribute to his dead son Twin Wolverine is one of a number of legends in the novel which conveys the Indians' warrior spirit and thirst for enemy blood. This is also described in the short story, "Along the Red Deer and the South Saskatchewan." Killing a man, like killing a buffalo, is part of their initiation to adulthood, an ennobling act. However their killing is not wanton. The stronger impression is of their honour and their deep respect for a morality operative even among enemy tribes. Twin Wolverine's courage is recognized by his enemy. They retreat in order that someone be left to tell his story. Moreover it is the awareness of a reality beyond

the tangible world that predominates in the mind of the native, even in the midst of a war hunt. The keening that echoes through the camp after Big Bear's lament is not merely for Twin Wolverine but for the death of their culture.

In the midst of defeat Wiebe offers hope that the spirit of the Indian world will endure. This is suggested by the anticipated birth of Kingbird's son and by his generous forgiveness of his wife. Kingbird offers to accept even the white child of John Delaney. Throughout the novel this youth has acted with the nobility and sensitivity which characterized his father. He inherits Big Bear's sacred bundle in order that the power and vision it contains might remain amongst the People. A further affirmative note is seen in Big Bear's return to Fort Carlton. History speaks of his "capture" but it seems more likely that he turned himself in at the place he desired, as he tells the jury at his trial. Big Bear has come full circle, returning to the place of his birth. One of his visions had foretold the fire at Fort Carlton. Big Bear now sees the burnt timbers but just beyond he beholds the tree where he had fallen at birth, as he has noted earlier with characteristic humour, head first into "something the bear left behind." The tops of this tree are still green, promising rebirth.

The lengthy trial scene emphasizes the tiresome irrelevancies and questionable integrity of white justice. Big Bear stands accused of treason, that not regarding his duty of allegiance to "our Lady the Queen . . . [he] did . . . compass, imagine, invent, devise and intend to levy war . . ." (T 352). Big Bear is told his duty was to be found in law and order, white law and order, not in rebellion. The only excuse

recognized in justification of his treason is the threat of death. But survival in itself is as meaningless for Big Bear as it is for Wiebe. His loyalty would not have been shaken by the fear of his own death. It is precisely his selfless dedication to his community which is the mark of his integrity.

Big Bear perceives that no words or signs will adequately convey the whitemen's attitudes. Wiebe juxtaposes the deliberations of the court with Kitty's thoughts as she interprets the proceedings from less jaundiced eyes. Through her consciousness we comprehend how absolute Big Bear's isolation is, how totally unable the Indian is to understand the ways of the white world. The pathos of his situation being clear, we feel terror. As in the short story "The Fish Caught in the Battle River," there is no Cree translation for "her crown and dignity." Thus, Poundmaker and Big Bear stand accused of "throwing sticks at the Grandmother and knocking off her hat." In the short story, at the sound of these words a wrinkled old squaw screams, a cry containing all the frustration of a people helpless in the face of such incomprehensible absurdities.[15] Big Bear does not laugh at the ludicrous accusation as Kitty thought he would. She finally realizes that Big Bear truly has no sense of what is happening: "I didn't know she had a hat and I never wear hats . . . women's hats are nice but a man would be drunk . . ." Black humour indeed.

In his defence Big Bear speaks with characteristic dignity, wisdom and humour. Warmaking demands warpaint: "I threw my paint away long ago, because, as you can see, my face is too old now to be helped by painting." He utters a few words of vindication but the major import of his speech is a plea for pity for his people. The final irony is that his words are virtually ignored by a so-called Christian society. Judge Richardson's

pronouncement to Big Bear brings us face to face with the depths of our ignorance and self-deception:

> This land never belonged to you. The land was and is the Queen's. She has allowed you to use it. When she wanted to make other use of it, she . . . let you decide which of the choicest parts of the country you wanted, to reserve them for yourself. Your people can live there because the Queen has graciously given it to them. The land belongs to the Queen. (T 399)

Bear Bear is further assured that his people will be cared for as if "nothing at all had happened." He is pronounced guilty of treason and sentenced to three years in Stony Mountain Penitentiary.

Big Bear's imprisonment signals the death of the Indian culture, but the pattern of metaphor in the final pages offers a further note of affirmation. As in *The Blue Mountains of China*, the affirmation is the more impressive for being voiced amidst tribulation. Big Bear's isolation has reached its limit; reality fades as he lives increasingly within his own mind, barely able to understand that he has been released from prison. Wiebe poetically evokes his final trail to the Sand Hills. At first there appears to be no sun, a demonic image of an indifferent universe. But at the very end, the blessed red shoulders of Sun emerge at the rim of Mother Earth. Big Bear closes his eyes and turns into "everlasting and unchanging rock." His last prayer to The Only One is of thanksgiving and a plea for pity and forgiveness for all he has been unable to understand. Like John Reimer Big Bear recognizes that he does not understand even in all the time his god has given him. To the end however he has trusted in God's goodness and His compassion. He has accepted his suffering and attempted to live life in accord with the dictates of his conscience.

As noted above, Wiebe comments that the fiction writer has the

freedom to shape historical data to reflect his world view. However also admits his respect for story as an entity in itself.[16] What is most striking about this novel is that Wiebe's creation of Big Bear's speeches is entirely in keeping with the nature of the historical record. This truly is Big Bear's story. Wiebe's fictional character is both mythic and real. He is a man who resisted temptations to doubt, despair and violence and consistently petitioned for peace and compassion. His vision was universal: "We must work together, that good work as long as Earth is. We have the Spirit . . . our spirit must work constantly to enlighten everyone. . . . Why keep it here among ourselves." These historically accurate words insinuate what Wiebe's novel suggests, that Big Bear and his people have something to teach us which we ignore at our peril.

The Indians share with other men the contradictory impulses towards love and hate, hope and despair, peace and violence; Wiebe does not lapse into a noble savage idealism. But they are a religious people who honour values such as those affirmed by the author. Authority is rigid among them but they are motivated by a strong sense of individual honour and freedom. As Dewdney remarks, their concept of individual liberty goes beyond all democracy, "It is anarchic and this the missionaries have not much affected—Christianity seems in part actually to support it" (T 121). This is balanced by a loyalty to community and an expression of sharing far surpassing "what contemporary Christian society is."[17] Their ethic of giving is exemplified when Big Bear notes that the people of the Sand

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[16] Cameron, p. 155.

[17] Melnyk, p. 31.

Hills will have an immediate opportunity to feel *good* by giving him clothes.

The Indian is profoundly sensitive to the natural world. He does not resist it, fighting like Governor Morris to stay alert and think logically in the face of the blinding sun. The Indians' life is one of rich sensual fulfillment. As Wiebe's earlier novels reveal, the senses are a worthy source of mystical feelings of wonder and awe. Their attitude towards sexual relations is sacramental. They are not bound by the strictures of a distorted Puritanism to deny the enjoyment of the flesh. We witness Big Bear's tenderness with his wives, the pleasure and comfort their physical presence provides him. More dramatic and humourous is the scene of Kingbird's caressing the mare. The ease of Wiebe's depiction of human sexuality is unqualified.

The natives are not in need of conversion. They remain Indian, marked by the uniqueness of their world view. However the best of them are loving, compassionate, and endowed with grace. The universal nature of Wiebe's Christian vision, evident throughout the novel, is explicit in his choice of epigraph from St. Paul: "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. . . . God is not far from any of us." Like Paul, Wiebe believes grace to be universally available. The effect of Christ's atonement is a liberating grace, common to mankind.[18]

The Temptations of Big Bear is a tragedy of personal and social proportions. It records the disappearance of a way of life as ancient as the hills. We have moved from apocalyptic to demonic worlds: from

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[18] See Kenneth Davis, *Anabaptism and Asceticism: A Study in Intellectual Origins* (Pa: Herald Press, 1974), p.147, for a discussion of common grace.

buffalo to railroad, from the sacred circle of sun and earth to the black tunnels of prison. It was noted earlier however that comedy is the ultimate vision of the religious writer; it embraces the tragic and delivers the peace of God. This novel laments the death of the Indian culture, but the final image of Big Bear merging with Grandfather Rock is an affirmation of faith and contains the hope that Big Bear's vision will not die. The tragedy of the novel is not merely that the Indian's land was taken from him but that in taking the land he was robbed of his spiritual identity. Wiebe unearths and articulates that spiritual heritage. Here, in his view, lies the foundation of any cultural revival.

Wiebe's movement from preacher to prophet is complete. The religious message is central but we are led to it through the skillful juxtaposition of fact with fiction. No didacticism intrudes. Theological and artistic concerns are fully integrated. We react to the unfolding drama according to the breadth of our conscience and the depth of our awareness. We are held to the pages of the novel not by its message, compelling in itself, but by the sheer force of the story and the language employed. We are no longer faced with jarring syntactical awkwardness but with a fluidity and ease of expression ranging in tone from cutting irony to religious awe. Of consuming interest is not only what the author says but the way he says it. When Big Bear enters the Hudson's Bay shop at Frog Lake, he is reputed to have shouted to the pillaging Indians, "Don't touch anything in here."[19] Wiebe transmutes his actual words into poetry to fully capture the spirit of the wizened prophet. The words convey more than any exposition could the central message of the hero and perhaps

[19] Fryer, p.13.

of the novel. "Morning is beautiful. Red and beautiful our father the Sun, beautiful to sing."

Wiebe's latest novel is also a tragedy of order. *The Scorched-Wood People* retells the history of the northwest rebellions from the perspective of the Bois Brulé. The Métis are defeated, as were the Indians, by the greed, ignorance and bigotry of the whiteman. Louis Riel is the tragic hero who speaks for the ideals of a higher world order. He attempts to unite heaven and earth, dream and reality. His vision is his strength and his fate alike; it was "too destructive of all that was; it had to be borne away by the violent."

The author's story "Games for Queen Victoria" identifies the theme and tone of the novel. It explores the adventures of Lieutenant Wm. Butler during the Red River Uprising and his meeting with Riel. Butler's sporadic moments of empathy with the Métis and the Canadian land fail to effectively disturb his biases. He remarks that the self-chosen leader of a new nation of the Northwest had everything to create a glorious empire; he could have been a veritable "Northwest Ghenghis Khan." Butler despises Riel's lack of imperial spirit because Riel had spoken to him like a priest, of peace and of preventing bloodshed.[20]

The Métis' dilemma differs from that of the Indian. Indian alienation was total, unqualified; their culture is made comprehensible to us

[20] Rudy Wiebe, "Games for Queen Victoria," *Saturday Night*, (March, 1976), p. 66.

but it is not ours. The half-breeds represent a meeting point, a synthesis of immigrant and indigenous sensibilities. Wiebe comments:

> The multi-racial world of the Métis was a possibility for only a short time. It simply couldn't stand the pressure of mass immigration, but their mixed blood world was really a new nation, a new people formed from Cree, French and Scots, but it stops. . . . The Métis had no chance to establish a new race but it would have been a beautiful one.[21]

One reviewer notes that the Métis, more than the Indian, can have meaning for a white man in search of indigenous roots.[22] The half-breeds achieved a reconciliation of opposed cultural and religious traditions. An orthodox Christian heritage is tempered and enlarged by belief in the Only One, a vital sense of community, and a deep spiritual affinity with the land. The novel is a testament to their culture.

The author combines historical data, including devastating excerpts from Riel's diaries, with imagined confrontations, prayers and visions. He moves smoothly from Ottawa's political intrigues to the internal drama of a mystic. The prose ranges in style from conventional narrative and honed understatement to a turbulent and lyrical stream of consciousness.

The narrator is Métis minstrel Pierre Falcon. He is not only a sympathetic raconteur but speaks from a decidedly religious perspective: "The ways of God on earth are mysterious to us and contradictory beyond our earthly knowledge; but rest content in faith, as I did: His ways are best." Commentary, lament and prayer punctuate the narrative. By the end of the novel the bard speaks unabashedly for the author. The traditional "I-you" oral technique suggests a limited perception but Wiebe combines this with the modern technique of rendering inner states. Fal-

[21] Melnyk, p.31.

[22] *Ibid.*

con moves alternately through Gabriel's or Riel's consciousness, providing an internal drama only plausibly afforded by an omniscient narrator. If there is a flaw in the novel, it is this combination of techniques. The narration is frequently confusing; we are not always certain who is speaking.

The novel divides into four parts, sixteen sections. We move from the Red River Uprising of 1869 to Riel's hanging in 1885, sixteen years. The book opens and closes with the refrain, "four perfectly completed fours of years." At the end it is "four and four and again four and four," sixteen men, who bear Reil's coffin to the cemetary at St. Boniface. The quaternary is a traditional image of man and of man in relation to God, an appropriate image for the story of a man called by God to create a second Eden on the Canadian prairies.[23]

The narrative traces both the political quest for peace and justice and the vagaries of Riel's individual journey to sainthood. It advances through a dialectic of action and vision, gun and cross, respectively embodied in the personalities of Gabriel Dumont and Louis Riel. Characterization supports theme and unites the two narrative threads. Wiebe comments that Riel is "the mystic, the spiritual man, the philosopher, the thinker. People like him make the world go round while Dumont is the warrior, only the man of action."[24] Their relationship becomes a metaphor for the transforming effect of spiritual vision on action.

Both characters in the novel are well realized. Louis Riel has been condemned as traitor, murderer, madman and as passionately exalted as prophet, saint and martyr. Wiebe admits he is a complex figure but

[23] Patricia Morley, *The Comedians: Hugh Hood and Rudy Wiebe* (Toronto: Clark Irwin. 1977), p. 64.

[24] Melnyk, p. 31.

sees him through the believing eyes of a Mennonite: "He had a vision of creating the kingdom of God on the Canadian prairie and once you give credence to the religious vision as the better way of living then you have to take Riel seriously."[25] What others might consider a morbid pre-occupation with self is portrayed as a necessary confrontation; the accent is on repentance and sacrificial suffering. Riel appears as a *pharmakos*: "you bear the sins of our people like a scapegoat." He is the mystic whose life is marked by omens, premonitions, clairvoyance and transcendent vision. His element is the air;he is forever "leaving his body," wandering somewhere in a world others cannot follow.

In certain respects Riel's education in Montreal alienated him from the traditions of his people. He is not only mediator between heaven and earth but between Métis and white world. Gabriel Dumont provides the more primitive perspective. He is the personification of the Métis spirit, the greatest of hunters, their leader and military chief. Gabr- iel's element is the earth and it is through his eyes that we sense the glory of the nomadic life and the beauty of the open prairie. As George Woodcock rightly notes, Gabriel is a type of Homeric folk hero.[26] His aggressiveness is countered by warmth and compassion. In the novel he is consistently aligned with guns, "Le Petit, I've worn out five of them. I live by killing things." However, recounting the killing of a Blood warrior, he muses: "He wore a little bunch of hair on a string around his neck, I don't know what it meant to him but I keep remembering that, and

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25 *Ibid.* Wiebe comments that he never would have tackled the complex figure of Riel if the Métis had not been as soaked in Christian theology as he was himself.

26 George Woodcock, *Gabriel Dumont: The Métis Chief and His Lost World* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1975), p. 11.

. . . [it was] funny"(SW 210). After the victory at Fish Creek it is his concern not Riel's, that the enemy be allowed to retrieve their dead. At Batoche we see him cutting bootlets for the starving children. Gabriel is also a religious man. He precedes buffalo hunt and battle with prayer. He tells Riel, "My hands and feet do my praying." Falcon comments that a hunt, woman or dance reached deeper in him than the contemplation of the lacerated Christ. By the end of the novel, it is Gabriel more than any other character who comprehends Riel's vision.

Wiebe adheres closely to historical fact in recreating the major events of the novel. Part One, "Riel's Province," deals with the first rebellion at Red River. Riel and his cavalry have overtaken Fort Garry to protest the sale of the northwest to the Dominion of Canada and to protect their rights as British citizens. A Provisional Government is declared to maintain peace and to negotiate their entrance into Confederation as the Province of Manitoba, "the speaking God," with rights to land, education and a guarantee of amnesty. Riel's choice of name suggests his religious pre-occupations.

The Manitoba Act guarantees Métis' rights but the amnesty clause is deleted. Ottawa assures them it is forthcoming but in word only. The delegation no sooner returns to Fort Garry than the amnesty is found to be conditional upon surrender of the fort. Later Sir John A. Macdonald denies not only the amnesty but even the fact of meeting a Metis delegation.

The meeting in Ottawa between Métis and Sir John introduces one of the major motifs of the novel, white hypocrisy. The morals and manners of eastern politicians are the butt of Wiebe's irony. There are seldom easily rejected villians in tragedy but Sir John proves an exception.

He is hypocrite, liar and racial bigot. Macdonald's comic humour or obsession is the Canadian Pacific Railway and he commits "sacrilege" to complete it. With characteristic cunning he grossly exaggerates the character of the Second Riel Rebellion in the public eye so no opposition will dare oppose the last gigantic loan to complete the financing of the railway. The CPR emerges from the northwest rebellions as one of the "most perfect monopolies on earth." Falcon comments that Macdonald forged the second largest nation in the world out of a small complex of "confronting hatreds rebalanced at every election."

The central conflict in *The Temptations of Big Bear* is between whiteman and Indian. Here it is as much the religious and politic tensions between eastern and western Canada. This finds its focus in the Thomas Scott affair. Scott was a violent, lewd and blaspheming Orangeman, executed by order of a Métis court-martial. Wiebe's rendering of the incident proves the Métis were adequately provoked. Riel has no thirst for blood; he allows Scott to be killed to assuage the humiliation of his people, consistently ridiculed, cursed and abused by arrogant Canadians. He hoped to gain Canada's respect; instead, he fomented the racial bigotries of Protestant Ontario. The Métis had been promised a new Governor and an impartial British force to help establish their province in peace. The Governor does not arrive; Colonel Wolseley does, with eight hundred Ontario Orangemen eager to avenge the death of Scott. Trusting in Ottawa's integrity, Riel rides out to meet Wolseley only to discover a demonic celebration of hate. His effigy swings above flames with a broken neck. The scene is dramatically rendered to capture the perversity masking as patriotism among the troops. The scene is also a

prophetic anticipation of Riel's execution at the novel's conclusion. The Métis abandon Fort Garry and Riel begins his life as political fugitive.

Part Two, "Wilderness," is more internal than external drama; Riel's religious self-discovery is its main focus. However the external plot is advanced through a series of well-etched scenes that convey the mounting political tensions and the increasing starvation of Indian and Métis. The violence underlying the civilized exteriors of white anglo-saxon protestants is identified in the account of Elziar Goulet's death; he is stoned by a rioting mob of Orangemen with whitewashed rocks from an English flowergarden. One of the greatest ironies of Riel's life is that by 1875 he has been elected four different times to represent his people in the House of Commons but dares not appear openly in Ottawa because of the $5000 reward over his head for the murder of Scott. Riel is expelled on his first appearance in the Commons and subsequently banished from the Dominion for five years. Another chapter describes Gabriel in the glory of a buffalo hunt, although his success is pathetically diminished by interfering whites. Inspector Crozier of the Northwest Mounted Police reappears and we hear echoes of his confrontation with Big Bear as he tells the Métis that there is only one law, the Queen's law, which of course has no provision for punishing men who destroy a month's food supply for a starving people. After numerous petitions to Ottawa have been ignored, the Métis send for Riel. "Wilderness" ends with Riel's return to Canada.

Part Three, "Gabriel's Army," recounts the Saskatchewan wars, Riel's trial and execution. Upon his arrival, Riel speaks moderately to both French and English of securing their just demands. Another petition is

sent to Ottawa. After characteristic procrastination, the government replies with a telegram promising to investigate their claims. Colonel Dennis attempts to speak for the half-breeds, " . . . surely something straightforward to meet their just demands." But Macdonald knows that this is not the way to get votes. Rather than negotiate, Sir John bribes Riel with a seat on council and $5000 a year. When he hears they are gathering arms, he sends Colonel Irvine north, with five hundred police and a cannon, to arrest their leader.

The Métis form a Provisional Government to fight for their "sacred rights": liberty, justice and peace. They win the first confrontation with Crozier but the bloodshed confirms Riel in his pacifist stance. He wants only to *threaten* violence in order to force Ottawa to negotiate. Riel thus forbids the Métis' greatest military strength—ambush; Riel cannot "see it" in his prayers. Gabriel defers to Riel in one of the most determining decisions in Canadian history. "I yielded to Riel's judgement although I was convinced that, from the humane standpoint mine was the better plan. But I had confidence in his faith and his prayers, that God would listen to him" (SW 189). Only when Major General Middleton is within forty miles of Batoche does Riel agree to retaliate. The half-breeds win their second victory at Fish Creek, fifty men against two hundred and eighty Canadians. For all, including Gabriel, the victory is the clean hand of God.

The developing political conflicts between Métis and Ottawa are paralleled by mounting religious tensions among the Métis themselves. The priests had originally supported their demands but Riel's defense of Indian rights, his influence over the people and his increasingly militant

tone create a rift that eventuates in a ruthless collusion of church and state. The priests preach that rebellion against the properly constituted authorities is as great a crime against God as rebellion against "the Holy Church or the Holy Father." They would separate religious and political concerns but Riel counters, "If we are a whole people, we mix everything we are" (SW 201). The priests comment that it is the mission of all people to serve God and do His will. Riel retorts that the Métis could serve God at Batoche in a way that would be a miracle. Riel does not want merely political rights but a Christian nation where all would live for the greater glory of God, a nation that would be a home for all the oppressed and hungry peoples of the world, a place of peace. The rift is secured when Riel's Exovede, "the chosen of the flock," pass religious resolutions. "We the Exovede acknowledge Louis David Riel as a prophet in the services of Jesus Christ." The heathen names of the days of the week are changed. The Lord's Day is returned to the seventh day. In accordance with the merciful nature of God, Hell is considered not to be everlasting. Riel is labelled a heretic. During the final battle, the priests effectively undermine Métis morale by refusing them the last rites. Eventually they desert for the enemy camp. Falcon comments that the crisis becomes more religious than political.

The Holy Spirit informs Riel that the enemy will be conquered at the ridge above Batoche. The Métis thus hem themselves into a position of inevitable defeat. They are afforded three days of reprieve due to the fumbling antics of "Bladder" Middleton, but his troops finally ignore orders and charge the Métis lines to end the final phase of rebellion in western Canada. Gabriel heads south to the States. Riel surrenders to

Middleton in order that the world may hear of his mission: "I come to fulfill God's will."

The pathos of Riel's trial is juxtaposed with the ironies of white justice. The Métis who fought and killed Canadian soldiers were considered to have engaged in battle "in intention only"; Riel, who raised only pen or cross, actually "waged war." He is charged with treason and his only hope of acquittal is to plead insanity. Riel is found guilty with a recommendation for mercy. One of the most telling excerpts is a juror's recollection of the trial:

> We were western farmers and we knew there never would have been a rebellion if the Government had done its duty. But we could not justify rebellion and we could not pass judgement on the Prime Minister because he was, unfortunately, not in the dock. . . . We refused to find him insane, dear God how often had we ourselves prayed for someone to do something desperate to get at last that old Ottawa bastard's attention! Riel was n ot insane; we believed him when he told us that by its absolute lack of responsibility the government had proven its own insanity, complicated by paralysis. (SW 323)

Riel tells the court the verdict is proof he was a prophet. He attempts to convey his vision of a paradise for the world's deprived in the northwest but it is ungraspable by any but himself; the CPR, Hudson's Bay Company, and numerous private speculators have quite contrary plans for the land. The church helps to destroy the concept of his mission among the Métis by forcing an awesome abjuration of his visions. However Falcon notes that although obedience was the bread Riel must eat, the logic of obedience was infinite like the will of God; those who believed in him would believe in him still. Ironies multiply in the political aftermath of Riel's death. Sir John was not alone in exploiting the prophet for his own political ambitions. Sir Wilfred Laurier used him when he was safely dead as the cornerstone on which to

build a Liberal wall around Quebec which would last a century.

The social quest for peace is given shape and meaning through Wiebe's rendering of Riel's journey to sainthood. The author admits that it is Riel's spiritual self-discovery that interests him more than his successful political manoeuvres.[27] History records Riel's religious pre-occupations developing after the loss of Manitoba. Wiebe portrays Riel as a prophet destined from birth. His mind wanders fluidly from past to present in a hallucinatory stream of consciousness that provides images of the pious child: "Thirteen and praying almost consciously moment by moment O God use my life for your glory, give me the vision of your divine call . . ." His sister Sara remembers a mystical blue light surrounding him.[28] In the summer before Wolseley's arrival Riel hears the Holy Spirit, "My son you have a call. My son . . ." The alternating waves of ecstasy and terror which accompany the vision are typical of his mystical experiences as they were of Big Bear's. Riel repeats his vow to God: "Give me ten years in the world and I will serve you forever." The words prove prophetic.

"Wilderness" focuses directly on Riel's spiritual development. During this time he begins to identify himself with King David. Sara first bestows the name on him: ". ... you are our singer king." Later,

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[27] Melnyk, p.31.

[28] Sara appears in the novel as her brother's female counterpoint. As children they contemplate sainthood together. She becomes the first Métis nun as Riel was to have been their first priest. Sara chooses her life as missionary in order to share her brother's exile and cross. In the novel their relationship is portrayed as a deep spiritual bond of love and trust. Her belief in Riel's sainthood sustains him during his moments of despair. Wiebe ignores the fact that Sara was known to have been deeply hurt by her brother's negligence;he rarely responded to her many loving letters. See Mary V. Jordan, *To Louis From Your Sister Who Loves You, Sara Riel*, (Toronto: Griffin House, 1974). There was

in December, 1875, at the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, Riel has his most determining vision:

> . . . I stood alone on a mountain top and the same spirit that appeared to Moses in the midst of a burning bush appeared in flames before me. The kingdoms of this world were at my feet. . . . I fell to my knees, but a voice of infinite gentleness spoke from the flame:"Rise, Louis David Riel. You have a mission to complete for which all mankind will call you blessed." (SW 139)

A letter from Archbishop Bourget in Montreal becomes for Riel episcopal endorsement of his call; it is repeated like a refrain throughout the novel: God "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 . . ." (SW 139).[29]

In *The Blue Mountains of China* Sam Reimer's call from God is the onset of his madness in the eyes of his community. Riel notes that within a few days of his vision, his friends begin to call him mad. Later he is considered to have suffered from an "insane delusion" because he believed he was in direct communication with the Holy Ghost. The coupling of insanity and vision is an ironic commentary on a secular society.

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also speculation as to the nature of their relationship. Wiebe does hint at Riel's more than brotherly affection for her but sees this reconciled in Chapter Seven of "Wilderness" in his union with Marguerite.

[29] Wiebe also plays down Riel's involvement with the Ultramontane School of Montreal. The movement aimed at restoration of the medieval Catholic Spirit. It held that Protestantism was not a religion. Priests designated favoured political candidates and determined in confessional if their flock had obeyed orders. It was an authoritative movement aimed at suppressing all freedom of thought. Not until Bishop Bourget became its leader in 1872 did it make much headway in Canada. One of the fine ironies of Riel's life was that he attempted to set up this prelate, who preached subservience to the Vatican in all things, as superior to the Pope. See J.K. Howard, *Strange Empire*, (New York: Wm. Morrow, 1952), pp.314-18.

Falcon comments that sanity is more a matter of majority opinion, not a test of the wisdom of what is spoken.

From 1876 to 1878 Riel was entombed in stone vaults with the violently insane. His madness was a controversial issue. Historians consider him a victim of megalomania, the mania of ambition.[30] In Wiebe's portrayal, far from yearning for worldly success, Riel perceives the vanity of human glory. His mission becomes for him the cross he must bear, his burden and his joy; he feels alternately drenched with happiness or weighted by the necessity of his commitment. This is Riel's dark night of the soul. The section's title evokes the Christian myth. Riel is kneaded to become a worthy and selfless instrument of G od. The accent is on his repentance and suffering, "O my God where have I sinned? Where has my zeal been too small, my humiliation too . . ." (SW 160). Repentance is the prelude to redemption and Wiebe ends the chapter with an apocalyptic description of Riel's experience of Christ's blessing. The blood of the sacred heart purges him with its "cleansing flood. . . . he experienced only the perfect rest, the absolute white beauty of peace."

Robert Kroetsch refers to the last chapter of "Wilderness" as the literal centre of the novel.[31] It is a complicated and hallucinatory chapter in which Wiebe defines more openly and artistically than ever his belief in the holiness of creation. Riel moves through barriers of self-deceipt and guilt to a mystical understanding of himself and his commitment. He penetrates the mystery of God through the sacrament of love.

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[30] Howard, pp. 323-24.

[31] Robert Kroetsch, "Mirror, mirror show us all," *Books in Canada*, January, 1978, p. 14.

Riel's sexual guilt is incurred from his education among French Catholic priests whose Jansenist ascetic attitudes parallel the harsh Calvanism of English Canadians.[32] Both are life-denying, and, in Wiebe's eyes, anti-Christian. Riel reprimands his wife for her sexual shame, "Love is a sacrament between a man and a woman" (SW 174). His words are ironic, however, since he suffers equally from guilt. In a moving scene of a woman's sexual emancipation, Marguerite leads him into her, slowly and at her own tiem. She thus forces Riel to confront his own dishonesty. The spiritual depth of their union is suggested by Wiebe's reference to the "word." Marguerite whispers words "like breath in his ear, or was it just one word."

The use of the groaning metaphor from St. Paul links Riel's individual *anagnorisis* with his sense of mission. Their shame and Marguerite's lifeless passivity becomes a metaphor for the Métis' cowering submissiveness before priest and whiteman; the beauty of their sexual liberation, the image of a free and redeemed people. They hear each other's groans "as if death had found them out both." Riel feels love over his body "forever groaning for redemption." The remembered misery of his people groans in him. In Part Three, he tells Gabriel, "when my wife came to me I knew a mystery, hidden til then; when she put her arms around me I heard as clearly as your voice . . . what I would do; should do, very soon" (SW 214). The Pauline words recur again later when Riel tells Gabriel's wife, "All creation groans for redemption . . . the world has never seen what would happen if a whole people would sacrifice to truly love God . . . the world will love each other holy and pure as Adam and Eve . . . without sin shining in God's holy light." Riel's vision is radically

32. See Ronald Sutherland, *Second Image: Comparative Studies in Quebec/Canadian Literature* (Don Mills: New Press, 1971), p. 61-63, "Canadian Puritanism has evolved in much the same way and has taken much the same form of expression in Protestant English Canada as in Roman Catholic Québec. . . . the Jansenism of French Canada and the Calvanism of English Canada inculcated exactly the same attitudes regarding man's relationship to God and his role on earth."

idealistic and mystical, a redeemed world, nothing less than God's perfect kingdom.

Part Two concludes with the return to Saskatchewan. True to Riel's prophecy, his people arrive for him on horseback. On the return journey Riel and Gabriel share a vision which secures for the prophet Dumont's unwavering fealty. Wiebe surrounds the episode with supernatural overtones. Riel prays in the voice of King David for courage, not only for glory and decision, but for the suffering he knows awaits him. Gabriel experiences the mysterious infilling of a prayer he was to repeat every day for the rest of his life. As they leave the church, they see a vision of a man swinging from a gallows. Historically, Gabriel tells of *composing* his own prayer, the clairvoyance is Riel's alone, and his prayers are tame compared to the biblical exhortations Wiebe creates.[33] Wiebe notes on more than one occasion that events taken by themselves rarely show their deeper human meaning; an artist organizes and interprets fact to illuminate what occurs in a profounder human way.[34] For Wiebe this is always a spiritual way.

Part Three depicts the meshing of vision and action and most explicitly defines Riel as prophet. Wiebe likens Riel's comprehension of God compared to the rigid formulas of the priests to sunlight on the open prairie in relation to the patterns of barred light on his cell floor. The issues Riel confronts provide a ready-made context for the exploration of Wiebe's ideology.

The outer tragic movement is paralleled by Riel's increasing

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[33] Howard, pp.361-62. See also Woodcock, *Gabriel Dumont* . . .,p.143.

[34] Wiebe,ed., *The Story-Makers* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1970), Introduction, p.xiv.

isolation as hero. His vision separates him from all but the most faithful. He is portrayed not as a zealous tyrant goading his people to rebel but as totally subservient to God's will. He is faced with temptations, as was Big Bear, to hate, kill, doubt and despair. Riel succumbs to hatred momentarily:"O Lord . . . tear out their hearts, rot them in the sun of your wrath . . . steel us in hatred . . ."(SW 226). However he prays as fervently to be filled with compassion for his enemies. Although in the heat of battle he yells "fire," Riel is a pacifist; he bears throughout the violence a cross, not a gun. He believes vehemently that it is faith alone that will bring victory. Trust gives way to despair not due to adverse external circumstance but because the Spirit within is silent. Riel tells Gabriel, "There was a time when everything spoke to me. Angels walked with me at night showing me the wonders of God's plan . . . everything was God's voice. . . . But here I hear nothing . . . the world is smeared over black . . ."(SW 214-5). He is also tempted to renounce his mission for a life of individual fulfillment with his family. Like David Epp he resists this choice, becoming a living example of selfless sacrificial love.

As noted, Riel does not blindly accept the authority of the church. Like the Anabaptists, he upholds the importance of personal communication with God, the search within for understanding. The issues he raises, changing the heathen names of the week, deciding hell is not everlasting, are less important than the fact that he forces people to question tradition, to believe that a decision about faith directly and personally communicated by God is possible. Falcon explicitly tells us that the "word and understanding is very near you. . . . ancient; if

all your hearts you truly seek God, you will surely find him" (SW 284).

Wiebe tells Cameron that Christ was on earth to lead a revolution against social injustice. This is precisely Riel's goal. His social vision parallels John Reimer's; it is destructive of the social institutions and governments of his day. Riel imagines a Métis nation as a paradise for all the oppressed of the world. It is not only revolutionary but decidedly idealistic:

> . . . a whole nation believing, holy enough to carry God's will into the world, that would turn winter into spring. We would not recognize the goodness and love that would run everywhere like water raining from heaven, every man love every woman, every woman every man, in purity like a mother her child . . . if we had faith, if we would repent of all our sins . . . (SW 265)

As noted earlier, the Anabaptists considered life a pilgrimage characterized by suffering, the acceptance of suffering, a means of sanctification.[35] Falcon comments that the way of the cross was humiliation. Riel accepts his privations with joyful resignation. In prison he prays, "O God I offer you through Jesus Christ my condemnation to death . . . ". Like Big Bear and Freida Freison, Riel is heroic in affirming God's goodness despite tribulation. Following the death of two innocent victims at Red River he quotes Amos, the Old Testament prophet who spoke for mercy and social justice: "Shall there be evil in a city and the Lord has not done it." In *First and Vital Candle* Bach's funeral cantata, "God's time is the best time," presents a major motif. The theme recurs here. Riel affirms in prison that his mission was to effect practical changes but that even if it takes two hundred years to achieve it, "what does that matter? God's time is not ours" (SW 326).

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[35] Kenneth Davis, p. 180.

Riel meets his end with peace and joy; he perceives death as the fulfillment of his mission. It is described in apocalyptic terms:

> . . . in the silence the level light of the sun burned the hoarfrost 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 . . . the glory of vision . . . consumed him in searing eternal fire . . . the earth fell away, he was free. O God free. (SW 245).

Death becomes a deliverance to God's infinity. The final epigraph presents one of Riel's lyric meditations on death and again affirms eternity.

Riel's last vision is an apocalyptic perception of nature. The land figures prominently in this novel as it does in *The Temptations of Big Bear*. Wiebe juxtaposes scenes of human strife and warfare with the beauty of the land. Between the mounds of rifle pits Gabriel sees a purple haze of crocuses, an image which also suggests resurrection. The river, Wiebe's image of peace, flows imperturbably on midst the terror of the last battle. Riel's words at the trial echo the epigraph to the author's former novel: "Who starts nations? The master of the universe, God . . . he gives a portion of his lands to each nation. This is a principle: God cannot create a tribe without locating it" (SW 324). In wresting the northwest from Indian and Métis Ottawa has not merely travestied human rights but has committed "conscienceless sacrilege," the desecration of the holy. The land is "touched with God's breath." Wiebe metaphorically identifies the depth of the crime in the apocalyptic image of Christ's sacred heart. It first appears in Riel's hallucinatory vision: "tree roots curling downward below water as if they were shaping a heart—sacred?—between them in the grey sand . . .

moulding themselves into a new world under the subterranean breath of God" (SW 20). Both in Red River and Saskatchewan the soldiers cut through the "heart" of rebel country. At Fish Creek the Canadian troops find a picture of the sacred heart of Christ in an abandoned farmhouse. It seems to "glisten redly, almost as if it were wet." Wiebe implies all creation, immanent with God's being, bleeds for the crime being committed.

While the Métis are linked with the land and the freedom of the buffalo, the white world is identified with the demonic image of the railway and the rigidity of iron. In the scene of Riel's visit to Ottawa, Wiebe compares white power with a petrified order that engulfs creation. Riel peers up at the dome of the Parliament Buildings, curving like a perfect white flower "groined by iron lace . . . . a polished symmetry that horrified him as nothing he had ever felt before." The white marble statue of Queen Victoria is "cold like rot to his touch." Part Three opens with Gabriel's recollection of their journey to Saskatchewan and the horses refusal to cross the iron tracks of the CPR. They are finally forced across but are black with dust and ashes, traditional images of death. Riel contemplates the human effort needed to belt that steel across a continent and compares the cinders at his feet with the brimstone that burnt the children of Isreal. When Judge Richardson pronounces sentence, and prays God to have mercy on his soul, Riel muses that he could as soon expect mercy from the white world as from the steel ball chained to his ankle or the iron bars of his cell.

Irony and pathos are balanced by humour. Much of the comedy is afforded by the incongruity of white behaviour in an uncivilized land. Middleton reappears with his fumbling military tactics and tea and jam

luncheons. When Gabriel sees Crozier in his formal uniform, complete with white gauntlets, he muses that he'll need more than one small washing machine where he's going. Elsewhere the humour is self-directed; the Métis thrive on survival humour as do the pilgrims in *The Blue Mountains of China*. Michel Dumas tells Gabriel, "I met a big bunch of gophers packed up and going south so I asked what was up and they said it's just too tough in Saskatchewan. They're all heading for the States." Humour is one mode of dealing with their plight. Falcon notes that the Métis enjoyed his songs so much because all men need to experience their own superiority, even momentarily, "even half-breeds."

Another major motif in the novel is the portrayal of the written word, marks on paper, as "unchanging and deadly." Riel, like Wiebe and Big Bear, is aware of the power of words, as blasphemy or truth. Both forms occur in the novel and it is suggested that for either the writer is called to judgement (SW 245). We are told R iel's spoken words are irresistible, like Big Bear's, although nowhere in the novel does he rise to the level of immemorable chant we hear from the latter. Throughout his life Riel writes to give his people a voice: "He must write their words down, the persistent sound of their words rising, vanishing with the grass, the fading buffalo;and who would hear them if he did not speak, did not write, write?" (SW 80). During his last days in prison he works arduously on his history of the Métis people. He knows if he writes enough words, they will be there to defy their forced disappearance.

The novel offers Riel's words and vision and fulfills Riel's prophecy that he will not be forgotten. The choice of artist/bard as narrator

suggests this victory through art.[36] The epigraph introduces the ballad of Pierre Falcon, a song to commemorate the glory and victory of the Métis. The novel is a prose song like Pigue Tonnerre's ballads of her Métis heritage at the conclusion of Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*.[37] Falcon himself recalls being told, "Pierre, you little chip of scorched wood, they'll sing your songs long after we're finished by the worms." In his introduction to *The Story-Makers*, Wiebe writes, "Story *is* much longer than fact."[38]

Gabriel's joyous affirmation at the novel's conclusion reinforces a sense of victory in time. In the epigraph the Prince of the Métis meets his old enemy Lieutenant Crozier in an American bar. Crozier implies the Métis are finished as a people but Gabriel disagrees. "You think like a white. . . . Riel said a hundred years is just a spoke in the wheel of eternity. We'll remember." The novel closes as it opened, with a prayer for faith, a faith this novel should go far towards renewing.

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36 Kroetsch, p.14.

37 *Ibid.*

38 Wiebe, ed., *The Story-Makers*, Introduction, p.xi.

Chapter Six

Myth-maker

> . . . every society, small or large is created and destroyed by myth and since Canada's larger society now appears on the verge of breaking apart we had better start to ask ourselves, where Lord, were our fictions inadequate to sustain us.[1]

Wiebe has always expressed a deep interest in the writing of this country. He believes with a passion that Canadian writing stands up to the best in the world.[2] He is not only author of five novels and numerous short stories but also has edited five anthologies of short stories, all of which deal, partly or specifically, with Canadian material. Speaking of the first two publications he comments that both were acts of faith in Canadian literature.[3] Wiebe's interests are specific. He is a staunch partisan of regional and ethnic literature and his overriding concern is to give voice to those elements of the Canadian mosaic which have not been heard. In "Songs of the Canadian Eskimo," he petitions us to explore our Arctic heritage.[4] In his introduction to his third anthology, he expresses his enthusiasm at the fact that the stories of Canada's northern peoples are finally being told: "The Canadian direction is true north; that way lies the interior that must be mapped."[5] The introductory quote is excerpted from a recent article entitled, "In the

[1] Rudy Wiebe, "In the west, Sir John A. is a bastard and Riel a saint. Ever ask why?" *Toronto Globe and Mail*, (March 25th, 1978), p. 6.

[2] George Melnyk, "Rudy, Riel and other rebels," *Quill and Quire*, November, 1977, p. 31.

[3] The two anthologies he refers to are *The Story-Makers* (1970) and *Stories from Western Canada* (1972). See Melynk, "Anthologies: a racket or a crusade?" *Quill and Quire*, May 1977, p. 3.

[4] Rudy Wiebe, "Songs of the Canadian Eskimo," *Canadian Literature*, vol. 52, (Spring, 1972), p. 68.

[5] Rudy Wiebe, ed., *Stories from Pacific and Arctic Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1976), p. 204.

west, Sir John A. is a bastard and Riel a saint. Ever ask why?" It is heavily ironic, the irony directed at the dominant Anglo-Canadian world. Wiebe notes that they still consider the prairies their literary colony; certain myths are acceptable to them, others embarrassing. He tells of being flown first class to New York by a publisher simply to be told that if only he'd been writing about the Jews instead of Mennonites, *The Blue Mountains of China* could have been a bestseller.[6]

It is to the ethnic and indigenous peoples that Wiebe's attention is directed. He helps to articulate a sense of identity through his imaginative recreation of history. The epigraph to Wiebe's third novel suggests that the knowledge of our origins contributes to a fuller understanding of ourselves and of the land in which we live. "On the Trail of Big Bear" further attests to Wiebe's fervent belief in the importance of history:

> All people have history. The stories we tell of our past are by no means merely words: they are meaning and life to us as people, as a particular people; the stories are there, and if we do not know them we are simply, like animals, memory ignorant, and the less are we people.[7]

At the conclusion of *The Blue Mountains of China* John Reimer tells his fellow Mennonites that Christ was on earth to lead a revolution against social injustice for the poor and oppressed peoples of the world. He further notes that this is the central concern of Christians even today. Wiebe's sense of social wrong is most fully provoked when the victims are a deeply religious people like the Canadian Indian and

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[6] Rudy Wiebe, "In the west . . ." p. 6.

[7] Rudy Wiebe, "On the Trail of Big Bear," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, vol.3, no.2, (1974), p.46.

Eskimo. The author has commented at length concerning his research for *The Temptations of Big Bear* and one cannot but be struck by his emotional involvement with these materials, the compassion and anger they aroused. He acknowledges this anger to be an impelling force in his work. Speaking of the jaundiced view of history his education had fed him, he remarks, "in forcing me to discover the past of my place on my own, as an adult, my public school inadvertently roused an anger in me which has ever since given an impetus to my writing which I trust it will never lose."[8] This anger is most evident in his latest two novels and in recent short stories dealing with Indian and Métis. Wiebe considers our recorded history an ocean of ignorance, "as horizonless as the prairies themselves." Through words Wiebe hopes to repudiate our biases. Like Big Bear he is a believer in the power of words, "rising from nothing into meaning." The author expresses his Christian concern with social justice in his fiction. As noted, it is his way of "bearing testimony" to his faith. When Wiebe deals with nature and human relationship he is a mystic but this always has a social reference. He is no contemplative. A revolutionary zeal for reform underlies all his writing.

In the Cameron interview Wiebe comments that he is attempting to find the "possibilities of seeing the standard things that happen to people, even in our history, but seeing them differently."[9] He further remarks that this was Christ's intent in recounting so many parables, to force people to think differently about ordinary events. One recalls John Reimer's redefinition of repentance, "you repent, not by feeling bad but

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[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Donald Cameron, "The Moving Stream is Perfectly at Rest," *Conversations with Canadian Novelists*, Part 2, (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1973), p.150.

by thinking different." Wiebe's fixation with our history is propelled by his religious convictions. He unveils the spiritual integrity of our ancestors and, by so doing, suggests the need of acknowledging the life of the spirit.

Wiebe's nationalism then is not divorced from his religious idealism. The original Anabaptists believed the Kingdom of God was not just transcendent but could have an earthly expression; as Christians they were to work towards its unfoldment. They considered the present world order invalid; it was dominated by Satan and destined for destruction.[10] This is reflected in Wiebe's ironic treatment of orthodox secular society. It was noted earlier that Wiebe articulates both a spiritual and cultural identity, that these two concerns form the warp and woof of the fabric of his vision. This becomes increasingly apparent in his work. In *The Scorched-Wood People* we are offered a perfect and radical fusion of political and religious goals; the spiritual becomes the inspiring foundation of the social identity.

It is revealing to compare George Woodcock's attitude towards our past with Wiebe's. Woodcock speculates on the ambivalence of Canadians towards heroes and on the kind of epic literature this produced. He notes that the epics we have, the stories of the fur-traders' journeys, the building of the CPR, etc., are "epics of endurance or imagination, not in any true sense epics of heroism. . . . the heroes we accept are like the epics we make; they are endurers and survivors."[11] He disapprovingly notes that we prefer the martyr Riel to the great romantic hero Gabriel

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10 Kenneth Davis, *Anabaptism and Asceticism: A Study in Intellectual Origins* (Pa.: Herald Press, 1974), pp. 141-42.

11 George Woodcock, *The Metis Chief and His Lost World* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1975), pp. 9-10.

Dumont because we fear his "sheer gigantic irrationalism." Note Woodcock's definition of heroism. Wiebe's fiction seeks to show us that heroism is precisely that which Woodcock casually dismisses—the moral and spiritual courage to affirm peace.

In "Songs of the Canadian Eskimo" Wiebe outlines the values consistently affirmed in his fiction. He notes that children and primitive people recognize what the adults of our civilization seem to have forgotten:

> 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 has ideas, feelings for friendship and community, sometimes even beliefs. These, rather than merely eating and being comfortable, make him a human being.[12]

Love, imagination, community, belief: values beyond mere physical survival.

Wiebe's portrayal of the individual's quest for identity was defined as a quest for God, for the peace of reconciliation with God. His entire work attests to the despair which befalls those unable to affirm that relationship. In his introduction to *The Story-Makers* the author summarizes the literary theory of anti-novelists and absurdists with the phrase, "Surface is all." Wiebe insinuates that their deterministic and rationalistic approach to life perhaps explains why "reasonable" man continues to murder himself so ruthlessly in this century.[13] Speaking with Cameron, Wiebe declares that religion is of the utmost importance to all men "whether they are aware of it or not."[14] All men inherently

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12 Rudy Wiebe, "Songs of the Canadian Eskimo," p. 57.

13 Rudy Wiebe, *The Story-Makers*, Introduction, pp. xxvii-xxix

14 Cameron, "The Moving Stream is Perfectly at Rest," p. 158.

seek to relate to something beyond their individuality. The dedication to large causes such as ecology is seen by Wiebe to be a manifestation of this one underlying desire.[15]

The relationship of man to God takes on both moral and mystical dimensions. As a Christian Wiebe affirms God's immanence as well as transcendence. Man's interaction with his fellow men and with nature assumes reverential and sacramental overtones. We have noted the communion enjoyed between Thom and Annamarie, Freida and Johann, Big Bear and his wives, Louis and Marguerite. In *First and Vital Candle* the author suggests Abe and Sally achieve a spiritual union which extends beyond death. Although there is an implicit tendency to separate flesh and spirit in the first novel, his last three books celebrate their fusion. The female protagonist in his short story, "There's A Muddy Road," remarks: "I always thought there had to be a God for how else could I explain love and the strange pull of it in such a strange place in my body. . . . Love has everything to do with your body."[16] Nevertheless Wiebe is religiously oriented. He consistently differentiates between lust and love. Freida Freisen finds her answer in Christ when temptation is sent her way.

Wiebe follows in the tradition of the best Canadian writers in his attitude towards the land. It is a source of joy, revered in its power to give life. One of Wiebe's strengths as a novelist is his power of description; this finds its greatest expression in his evocation of the beauty and vastness of the Canadian land. *The Temptations of Big Bear*

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[15] *Ibid.*

[16] Rudy Wiebe, "There's A Muddy Road," *Where Is The Voice Coming From* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), p. 55.

and *The Scorched-Wood People* most clearly define the land as a sacred trust from God, created from His breath. The author's attitude is poetic, mystical and moral. In *First and Vital Candle* the land appears hostile and demands Sally's life. However, this becomes a context for the discovery of Christ, for the affirmation of life and love. In "Tudor King," a less formally religious context but one in which religion forms the underlying substratum, the winter storm demands the life of an old hermit and his dog. Tudor's death becomes redemptive for others, provoking a young man's discovery of selfless love, the "stuff of human majesty."

Wiebe's God is an inclusive one. He contains both darkness and light, life and death. Nor does Wiebe attempt to explain this tension at the heart of creation. Life remains a mystery unfathomable to man. His heroes resist the temptations to despair in the face of suffering and death. They affirm that the acceptance of God's will and trust in His ultimate goodness are the most necessary possibilities for life. Their acceptance is no stoic resignation but a joyous affirmation. Joy and laughter are essential elements in Wiebe's vision.

One of the tensions explored in Canadian literature is the conflict between reason and instinct. Wiebe is aware of the dangers of over-indulging either one. Rationalism can lead to an ascetic denial of man's elemental exuberance for life. Instinctual freedom bereft of a guiding moral vision is no less repulsive. Wiebe's background makes him aware of the dangers of repression. As early as *Peace Shall Destroy Many* Thom comments that "he has to get rid of it somehow." When repressed, the vital energy, like Jung's shadow figure, turns destructive. Such is the dilemma of Jakob Freisen and Joseph Hiebert in *The Blue Mountains of China*.

Wiebe petitions for a socially acceptable release of these energies and feelings. Thom wants to ride madly in the wind. Primitive peoples find release through song and dance. In considering the oral poetry of the Inuit, Wiebe writes:

> In the festival house Eskimo find not only joy, but also social release. If someone has angered you, here you insult him to his face with a satiric song; then he leaps into the ring and insults you. Everyone laughs as the abuse piles higher; and in the laughter hard feelings vanish. This custom may explain why the subject of war is unknown in Eskimo poetry; they work out their hatred in songs; not like "civilized" peoples, by mass killings.[17]

Art and imaginative expression are important to Wiebe. Throughout his works, musical lyrics, hymns, funeral laments, poems, all figure significantly as sources of spiritual strength, joy and comfort. The author has strong faith in the creative role of language to recover that which is inarticulate in our lives and to contribute to a more profound and inclusive communion between men. In his introduction to *The Story-Makers*, Wiebe comments that the very act of shaping a symbol, literary or visual, enables man to relate to things in an essentially human way; it provides strange insight, mastery and enjoyment.[18] In "Where Is The Voice Coming From," he infers that only the power of the imagination is capable of overcoming the tyranny of facts.[19] Art is seen to serve the dual function of instruction and delight: "the emotional impulse to make story drives towards the principle of pleasure," but "story worth pondering is story *doubly* enjoyed."[20]

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[17] Rudy Wiebe, "Songs of the Canadian Eskimo," p.62.

[18] Rudy Wiebe, *The Story-Makers*, Introduction, p. ix.

[19] Rudy Wiebe, "Where Is The Voice Coming From," *Where Is The Voice Coming From*, pp.135-143.

[20] Rudy Wiebe, *The Story-Makers*, Introduction, p.ix.

In *The Blue Mountains of China* we witnessed the continual re-enactment of human settlement in the midst of wilderness, the cultivation of a garden in a desert. Wiebe sees the fulfillment of life in human community and in selfless devotion to community. He internalizes and universalizes the Mennonite concept of a brotherhood of believers. He articulates a spiritual community of mankind based on the fundamental Christian values of love and self-sacrifice. John Reimer, Big Bear and Louis Riel are men with a social vision inspired by these values. The affirmative vision they offer is meant to supplant popular social myths of individualism, progress, material prosperity and aggression. Wiebe sees these forces working against a viable human community.

The highest value upheld in Wiebe's fiction is that of agapé, self-sacrificing love. In *First and Vital Candle* John tells us that love is the very stuff of creation. Louis Riel's and David Epp's dedication to this ideal demands the sacrifice of their lives. Nevertheless it ensures them the peace of the kingdom of heaven. The love that Wiebe affirms is not only sacrificial but universal. The journey from an exclusive to an inclusive compassion is made by most of Wiebe's protagonists.

A review of the central metaphorical motifs reveals in a very formal way the nature of Wiebe's affirmation and defines him as a comic writer. In *Peace Shall Destroy Many* the attainment of Christ's grace is intimated in Thom's drive towards the brightest star in the heavens. *First and Vital Candle* concludes with the spring sun piercing the thunderclouds. The moment of Abe's anagnorisis is heralded by a "beckoning of great light beyond." In *The Blue Mountains of China* John Reimer bears the Christian cross, a fitting symbol of the Christian's burden which is also his joy. In *The Temptations of Big Bear*, Big Bear is complete once more

in the sacred circle of sun, earth and death. He merges with eternal Rock, "grandfather of all." Wiebe's last novel concludes with Riel's vision of a golden world; the hero is consumed in God's holy fire. The last two offer radical affirmations of immortality. Novelist Hugh Hood comments that death can be a victory if one accepts the Christian myth. Undoubtedly Wiebe does.

The one organizing metaphor of Wiebe's fictional world is Jeremiah's river image. This apocalyptic symbol of Christian peace appears in both religious and non-religious contexts. It is the organizing motif in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, It is central in *The Blue Mountains of China*; Freida Freisen is identified with the beautiful stream of Schöenbach. The river occurs at the beginning of *First and Vital Candle* and as a silent backdrop at the end of *The Scorched-Wood People*. It also appears in Wiebe's short stories, "Someday Soon Before Tomorrow," "There's A Muddy Road," "The Naming of Albert Johnson." In the latter story Wiebe reconstructs the historical chase of the mad trapper of Rat River. The mysterious and taciturn hermit outwits the combined efforts of mounties, radio and plane in sub-zero temperatures before he is finally gunned down. To this day the man's identity remains a mystery. The story concludes with the image of the roiled gold of the river curling back to the implacable Arctic sea. Albert Johnson has been effectively hunted down by the forces of civilization, severed from the silence and peace of the river world he had sought.

If we were to compare Wiebe's use of symbol at the end of his first and later novels, we perceive a definite progression in trust of his craft. Thom contemplates God's peace and it seems that he is driving towards the

brightest star in the heavens. Clearly the star represents the way, the path to Christ. In *The Temptations of Big Bear*, metaphor is more radically employed. Myth, Frye tells us, is the art of implicit metaphorical identification. Big Bear is not merely like the sun. The metaphor is undisplaced; he literally becomes one with the whole circle of the universe: sand, rock and sun.

In conclusion, Wiebe's development is marked by changes in insight and artistry. Wiebe is not a tempered writer. His prose is impassioned, turbulent and melodramatic. However the melodrama and exuberance are less self-conscious in his later works. Over-writing and didacticism give way to prophecy. We shift from the abstract principles of faith and an intellectual understanding of the specific tenets of Christian belief to an exploration of the experience of that faith as it is lived or lost from a level of increasing complexity of feeling and imagination. An over-emphasis on repentance and faint suggestions of Manichean attitudes towards the flesh give way to the depiction of man's more noble features and a profound affirmation of the oneness of flesh and spirit. He tells of the brotherhood of all men, united in suffering as in grace. Wiebe steps down from behind the preacher's pulpit to walk, now, as prophet among his congregation.

Wiebe quotes the convictions of Caribbean novelist Naipaul and Canadian Robert Kroetsch that a society gains its sense of identity from its writers and the myths they provide:"The fiction makes us real."[21] Wiebe must be considered one of our foremost mythmakers. As one reviewer notes, Wiebe has been the main agent of a new consciousness of prairie

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[21] Rudy Wiebe, "In the west . . ." p. 6.

identity as something beyond the white agrarian immigrant world.[22] He participates in a growing tradition among Canadian writers, the search for coherent origins in an ancestral past, the re-examining of ourselves "in the mirrors of indigenous mythologies."[23] His vision may be idealistic but as the introductory quote above implies, Wiebe's concerns are timely and vitally relevant. The author considers the defining of the myth by which we live no "academic" problem; it is a matter of life and death to a fragmenting Canadian society. We may not believe, like Wiebe, in the realization of the Kingdom of God on earth, but participation in his fictional world opens the imagination to attractive spiritual and social possibilities.

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22 Melnyk, "Rudy, Riel and other rebels," p. 31.

23 John Moss, *Sex and Violence in the Canadian Novel. The Ancestral Past* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), p. 308.

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