Sunday Morning Confession

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From the first of these Mennonite/s Writing conferences twenty-two years ago, Mennonite writers have gathered and told one another the story of Rudy Wiebe's troubles after *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. It's a story that says the publication of a work of literature by a big, worldly press (McClelland and Stewart) was so transgressive that Wiebe became an exile. That's more or less true, but the story has become a freighted myth of origins for Mennonite writers, which goes something like this: for his sin, Wiebe was cast out of the Garden. (Really, he had to endure a conversation with his bosses at the *Mennonite Brethren Herald* that was so awkward for everyone in the room that, in the end, Wiebe knew what he had to do and resigned.) Carl Kreider, academic dean at a Mennonite college in the U.S., caught Rudy's Fall (sudden unemployment and the condemnation of certain church leaders) and offered him a job teaching somewhere East of Eden in the Land of Goshen. There Wiebe got to know people like John Fisher and John Howard Yoder who influenced his work in important ways. Eventually, he returned to Canada as a professor-writer and joined an urban Mennonite Brethren church.

We have said that ever since the publication of *Martyrs Mirror* in 1660, there was no *serious* Mennonite literature until *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. This myth of origins suggests that writing—like the testimony of the martyrs—comes at a great price, and that the author must take up the important, somewhat glamorous roles of transgressor and exile. The writer steals the fire of authority previously held by the big men in the church, and from that small flame literature blazes. (It's Adam and Eve and Prometheus and James Joyce all at once!)

It's a myth I helped to write here in the United States. It was there in the *Festival Quarterly* article I put together after the 1990 Mennonite/s Writing conference at Waterloo,[1] and it has been repeated in various

*Julia Kasdorf is professor of English and women's studies at Penn State University. These thoughts, slightly revised with the addition of elaborations and citations, were shared after the worship service at the Mennonite/s Writing Conference, 2012, in response especially to critical papers by Robert Zacharias, Daniel Cruz, and Ervin Beck; to Scott Holland's sermon on the theopoetics panel; to Ann Hostetler's tribute to Elaine Sommers Rich; and to Paul Theissen's decision to weave details about the publication history of *Peace*

ways by other people in other contexts. It feels true in the way that archetypes express truth. Indeed, it resonates with lived experience, especially for those of us who got baptized with coverings on our heads, and for those of us who wrote with our ears to the ground, listening for stories and gossip that had previously been held in oral tradition. Perhaps it's not only a conflict between the authors and church-men-historians who compete to "manage Mennonite memory," a phrase I can't resist borrowing from a former Archives of the Mennonite Church website.[2] Conflict also comes when individuals write from traditional contexts, and thereby contribute to the tensions between folk and high culture that Ervin Beck long ago noticed. ("Me, 'high,'?" this writer asks.) Di Brandt has profoundly and personally explored oral culture and language in several gorgeous essays,[3] but I suspect that many younger Mennonite writers regard traditional communities from a great distance.

Whatever its foundations in actual experience, the transgressive myth of origins is constructed partly from fact and partly from personal need, or at least from a need of the generation that gets to do most of the speaking at these conferences. It gets repeated every time we meet. The idea of transgression being a means of grace is nothing new, of course; in fact, the myth may feel so true because it resonates with theological memory. At the conference, Scott Holland sketched out one plan of salvation: "transgression, excess, grace." I wonder if that pattern reflects the experience of writers coming from Mennonite backgrounds now. I don't regret my choices, but worry that moves I made in my early 20s, desperate to find a place where I could learn to write without censoring myself, have become a prescriptive burden for others. I wonder what ghoulish or egotistic appetites the transgressive myth satisfies for individuals like me who keep repeating it. I wonder what other stories we could tell.

Instead of writer as transgressor, for instance, a more sustainable Mennonite archetype might be the trickster. In 1964, two years after *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, Elaine Sommers Rich published *Hannah Elizabeth*

Shall Destroy Many into his remarks while serving as master of ceremonies at the Saturday evening banquet. These thoughts also come in response to that banquet table's conversation with John D. Roth and to Anita Hooley Yoder's comment later in the closing panel when she said that she once thought that a person could not remain in the Mennonite Church and become a writer, thanks to my example. And these thoughts are the product of my own guilt, which woke me in the wee hours, and which I recognize to be a vain and dubious motivation.

1. "The Making of Canada's Mennonite Writers," *Festival Quarterly* 17:2 (1990), 14-16.

2. http://www.mcusa-archives.org/.

3. Di Brandt, *this is the world & here I am in it* (Edmonton, AB.: NeWest Press, 2007).

with another big, worldly press, Random House. Perhaps because of its genre, this young adult title did not cause the stir that Wiebe's book did. Essentially an author's coming of age story, the novel follows a Conservative Mennonite with a "secret ambition" to be a poet when she grows up. Throughout, Hannah Elizabeth obsessively ponders opaque Bible verse fragments, turning them over and over in her mind like worry stones until they resist meaning altogether. In the passage that Ann Hostetler read in her banquet tribute to Rich, the heroine listens to her own Grandfather Schrock, a Mennonite minister, as he confronts outspoken church members who wish to forbid the reading of fairy tales. After some debate at a congregational meeting, the patriarch rises and reads, "without comment," Judges 9:8-15, a marvelously imaginative passage that describes trees walking around arguing amongst themselves.[4] The Bible settles the matter, of course. "A rush of love and gratitude for Grandfather filled Hannah Elizabeth. Mother, Hans Christian Anderson, and all the world's storytellers had been vindicated in the Mennonite meeting," the chapter concludes.[5]

Through a clever interpretive move, this episode—which Rich told me was drawn from an actual event in her childhood—demonstrates that the tools to subvert censure and repression already exist within the community's store of resources. You only have to know how to read. You only have to know how to write. And, not least, people have to grant you enough authority to listen to you when you speak up. What a trick Grandfather Schrock performed! This is trickster Menno Simons who leaps into the molasses barrel on which he had been preaching to escape the authorities as their horses stamp outside the stable door. And then, so that he will not leave a sticky trail as he flees, all the sisters in the front row take a turn at licking off his stockings.[6]

Could it be that Hannah Elizabeth sees in Grandfather Schrock's performance the artist or intellectual who is an ironist, to call up Richard Rorty's term? Probably not. It's me who sees in the education of 11-year-

4. "One day the trees went out to anoint a king for themselves. They said to the olive tree, 'Be our king.' "But the olive tree answered, 'Should I give up my oil, by which both gods and humans are honored, to hold sway over the trees?' "Next, the trees said to the fig tree, 'Come and be our king.' "But the fig tree replied, 'Should I give up my fruit, so good and sweet, to hold sway over the trees?' "Then the trees said to the vine, 'Come and be our king.' "But the vine answered, 'Should I give up my wine, which cheers both gods and humans, to hold sway over the trees?' "Finally all the trees said to the thornbush, 'Come and be our king.' The thornbush said to the trees, 'If you really want to anoint me king over you, come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, then let fire come out of the thornbush and consume the cedars of Lebanon!'" (Judges 9:8-15).

5. Elaine Sommers Rich, *Hannah Elizabeth* (New York: Random House, 1964), 61.

6. Ervin Beck, "Mennonite Trickster Tales: True to Be Good," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 61 (Jan. 1987), 74.

old Hannah Elizabeth the makings of an ironist, a figure who, according to Rorty, fulfills these conditions:

1. She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered;
2. She realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts;
3. Insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself.[7]

Irony is the opposite of common sense. Ironists need common sense to react against and feel alienated from. An ironic alternative to the metaphysics of "transgression, excess, gift" might run along these lines: play, improvisation, (self) creation.

In this spirit, I wonder what possibilities might open up for Mennonite writers if we told other myths of origin when we gathered. We honored the fiftieth anniversary of Wiebe's important first novel in 2012. It may not be incidental that I also celebrated my 50th birthday last year; it's about time that I changed my mind. As we recall the conference, perhaps we can ask not only what new stories (and poems and essays) we can write to contribute to this good, growing work of Mennonite literature, but also what new histories of this literature can we tell.

7. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 73.