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WANDERING HOME IN RUDY WIEBE'S *SWEETER THAN ALL THE WORLD AND OF THIS EARTH*

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To concern oneself with Rudy Wiebe's fiction is to concern oneself with movement. In his novels, everything moves! Whether Wiebe writes about a Canadian or about a specifically Mennonite heritage, there is always some dominant spatial, temporal, or spiritual movement going on: the Mennonites of *The Blue Mountains of China* (1970) and *Sweeter Than All the World* (2001) move from place to place and from continent to continent, seeking a place of refuge where they can live and work according to their traditions and convictions. In *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962), Wiebe's first novel, the limits of an isolated Canadian Mennonite Prairie community are staged. In *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973), the Chief's dilemma of accepting or refusing life in a reservation is the end of traditional Cree movement, whereas the continual travel of animals and humans alike in *A Discovery of Strangers* (1994) focus on movement as a necessity for survival in the Arctic. W. J. Keith's assertion in *Epic Fiction: The Art of Rudy Wiebe* that what tends to linger after reading Wiebe is a sense of "movement" is apt indeed (43).

However, geographic movement does not exhaust the complex kinetic reality of Wiebe's fiction. There is a sense of movement also where physical change is not as accentuated as in migration or travel. In the recently published *Of This Earth: A Mennonite Boyhood in the Boreal Forest* (2006), movement is encountered as a constituting factor of its narrator's subjectivity. The memoir gives us a beautifully crafted story of his childhood and early adolescence, but it encompasses much more than that. *Of This Earth* is a mnemonic trace enveloping not only a certain period of this remarkable writer's personal memory, but also what I will call the kinetic-kinaesthetic¹ directedness of his entire fiction. Well-known fictional scenes are reiterated in the memoir, yet they are not entirely familiar. Here, the resemblance to the fictional prototype swerves, as if the light is falling from a slightly different angle. Recognizable events from Wiebe's stories are given different focal points, or the narrative distance to central images may be in- or decreased. One such story is the frequently reiterated tale concerning book-shortage in the small prairie schoolhouse of his childhood. It was encountered first with Thom Wiens in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, and, more recently, as Adam Wiebe's teacher introduces him to the cupboard of books in *Sweeter Than All the World*. In *Of This Earth*, veteran Wiebe-readers can but share the narrator's consternation at the astonishing realization that no memories at all remain from his first year in school. "That year of begun language, reading, writing, numbers, reading, companions, spelling, traumas, anger, impatience, reading farther and farther ahead is an immense void bottomlessly gone" (118–19). Indeed, coming from a writer who has repeatedly described the immense impact that specific shelf/shelves/cupboard of books had for his continued life of letters, the loss of this particular memory seems unbelievable. Yet, *Of This Earth* reveals, the "residue" of that lost year has itself not vanished, and it is described without anxiety of any meaning the absence of images may have (119). Intriguingly, that residue comes to the Wiebe-narrator through different forms of movement: "like breathing. Words that splashed in my mouth walking home the daily miles from Speedwell School with the crescent moon in the sky opposite the westerly sun, waves of words singing in my head, knowing them by heart" (119). Other movement in the memoir is not residual, but is remembered "exactly" (119). The Boreal aspen poplars, "their countless fingers moved in a canopy of grey on blue: a blue ocean of continuous, circular rhythm... always and continuously moving. They creaked, they groaned, but in summer they would whisper as well. Or shiver. Something too immense to imagine was always breathing over them" (121–22).

Coaldale wind is both precise and endless, but also reversed in its movements: it “could run ice in summer with hailstone, or hot in the depths of winter to lick every flake of snow into mud when Old Man sent the ‘snow bitter wind’ . . . , his winter chinook” (387). In the childhood images of Wiebe, life and consciousness in the Boreal forest and on the prairie seem to be constituted by eternal movement.

Saying that, though, Henry Kreisel’s long prevailing assertion that all “discussion of the literature produced in the Canadian West must of necessity begin with the impact of the landscape upon the mind” cannot contain the Wiebean enterprise (6). Although he was raised partly on the prairie, there is not much in Wiebe’s writing that suggests landscape in general, or prairie in particular, constitutes the human being. In the memoir, the aspens are part of the landscape, but it is the “continuous” motion that is significant for subjectivity rather than the trees or the land per se. Delving deep into Alberta literature, Joy Anne Fehr in “Re-Writing Alberta” suggests a way to look at Prairie literature different from the environmentalist principle long popular in literary criticism.² Taking the history of Alberta Prairie writing and Deborah Keahey’s discussions of Prairie literature and movement into account, Fehr interestingly asserts that rather than landscape as such, “movement appears as a key feature” of both Prairie and Alberta literature (32). Resisting fixed notions of space, Keahey’s *Making it Home: Place in Canadian Prairie Literature* emphasizes the dynamic movements found in literature itself, rather than the assumption that landscape determines human response. In her exposition, Fehr returns to Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier hypothesis, which concerns the process of the frontier and its impact on the American character and culture, but allows the environmentalist notion to merge with Keahey’s notion of “home” as a centre of gravity, both pushing away and pulling characters towards it, as well as with Homi Bhaba’s conceptions of minority cultures and otherness. Keahey’s discussions of Prairie literature reveal many shifting concepts concerning “homeplace,” and a “desire for movement” instead of the stable image of home one could expect from a consciousness determined by landscape. At the same time, Bhaba’s theorizations on otherness and on different stages of movement “within the in-between” of postcolonial liminal space bears resemblance to the descriptions of the instabilities of Canadian Prairie home place as discussed by Keahey (qtd. in Fehr 31).

To be sure, such movement between home places is central to the two other contemporary giants of Alberta literature, Robert Kroetsch and

Aritha van Herk. In a 2001 conversation with van Herk, Kroetsch appoints “restlessness” as a defining feature of Western Canadian writing. “I think in the West there was a sense of using up space and moving on.... And that has conditioned us as writers.”³ Keahey similarly conditions van Herk’s and Kroetsch’s writing in terms of continual dislocations (126), of moving to and from; or, as in the case of van Herk, *from* rather than *to*. Characters in van Herk seem always to be infected by impatient continuation. Arachne Manteia, peddler of women’s undergarments in *No Fixed Address* (1986), is kept on the road by the impossibility of remaining or indeed experiencing home. Equally fidgety even by the bare notion of presence, the protagonist of *Restlessness* (1998) seeks the final destination – death, from which there is no return ticket. The referential function or ‘pointing’ of language sets the mind of both writer and reader along a particular trajectory” (128). This restless aiming as dislocated *betweenness* can itself be discussed in terms of space. Bhaba’s conceptualization of movement “within the in-between” is, although bearing a sense of “proximity,” still a spatial motion between two positions (qtd. in Fehr 31). As will be shown however, this is not the way movement as kinetic-kinaesthetic directedness manifests itself in Wiebe.

Edmund Husserl’s differentiation between distance as *Abstand* and distance as *Entfernung*, conceptualized in the important collection of texts called *Thing and Space* (117–18), will help us elucidate this important distinction further. The former is an objective or subjective distance between one thing and another in the world of measurable spatiality (A to B). It marks a perceivable interval between two phenomena appearing simultaneously “in” objective space (193–94). *Abstand* is the distancing interval or extension between two points given mathematically. The separation is an extensive appearing that *itself* is something tangible, a knowable unit of space. In contrast, *Entfernung* is not a distancing interval. The interval van Herk’s suicidal narrator has withdrawn into is a transitional movement, the space between a point of departure and a ditto terminus, in short, an extensional hiatus where not much momentum can be found. Intriguingly, while the protagonist of Wiebe’s *Sweeter Than All the World* inhabits that same interval, gaps of restlessness are not constitutive factors of Wiebe’s Mennonite fiction as such. Instead, there is in Wiebe’s fiction a kinetic reality torn between distance as a separating interval and distance as a remote intimacy materializing as an elision of the span between “moving from” and “moving to.” With respect to its evident theological pertinence for Wiebe’s Mennonite fiction, dealing with *Sweeter Than All the World* and its preoccupation with Mennonite origins

also demand an accentuated concern with the phenomenon of theological directedness and regeneration understood as movement.



The main protagonist in Rudy Wiebe's *Sweeter Than All the World*, the wealthy Edmonton physician Adam Wiebe, experiences a sense of existential angst. He identifies his experienced position in terms of an ethno-theological predicament: the "problem" of "being a semi-demi-secular Lowgerman Mennonite in a massively Nothing society" (170). The sentence calls attention to many things. It highlights a hyphenated sense of postmodernity. It addresses a fall from religion, which is also a distancing of the speaking subject from both Mennonite history and Mennonite tradition. Moreover, it addresses a wound afflicting this particular Mennonite. This wound may be reviewed in terms of what Ihab Hassan has called "the colonial complex," in other words a specific wound, and a specific slit in that wound through which the universe is exclusively viewed (338). For while Adam, as an enlightened individual situated in postmodern society wants to reject all that which so to speak is Mennonite-essential: religion, the traditional way of living, et cetera, from what could be called a postcolonial, or ethnic perspective, he simultaneously wants to embrace his religiously afflicted tradition and history. The dilemma materializes in the feeling of loss and positionlessness inherent in his formulation of the "problem." In this essay, I want to address not the hyphenated, postmodern, cultural and political space that is often said to determine Wiebe's writing, but a primal directedness, the phenomenological intentionality that is fundamental to the Wiebean Mennonite as the force constituting her or him. To broach that problematic, I will foreground the phenomenon of movement.

In alternating chapters of *Sweeter Than All the World*, glimpses of Mennonite history and of Adam Wiebe's ancestors are provided. In those parts, situated in Europe, under and after the time of the Reformation, loss and displacement do not only come to givenness as wound or complex, but also as narrated fact. From the sixteenth century onwards, Mennonites have moved from country to country, from continent to continent, suffering severe hardships and persecution. *The Blue Mountains of China* thoroughly describes the last hundred years of that history of migration. Yet, what is curious in the midst of loss and displacement in the sixteenth century is that with these Mennonite-refugees no feeling of position-loss is present. On the contrary, there is an all-encompassing feeling of being intentionally

directed towards *something*. The Mennonites are driven not by an urge within themselves – by any Mennonite subjectivity – but by a sense of God as immanent reality.

Migratory movements are an issue for the early Mennonites as well as for a contemporary Mennonite like Adam, who, while no immigrant himself, was born on a tiny farmstead in Canada to immigrant parents. However, these differently directed Mennonites move differently, and their migratory movements come to presentation on two separate strata of the text. The first one, the geophysical, kinetic stratum, has already been mentioned. Here, migration takes place in a schematic A-to-B movement, in which the Mennonite is the *moving being*, travelling, as Adam Wiebe does, from Edmonton to Prague in order to visit the grave of Franz Kafka. The restlessness described by Kroetsch and van Herk is understood in terms of this interval. The second stratum is the condition of possibility for Mennonite migration as such. It is the theological stratum of “being moved,” or being impelled by the Holy Spirit.

I want to elucidate the workings of these different strata of geophysical and theological movement by means of Husserl’s phenomenological distinction between self-movement and being-moved (134). A body can move kinetically, physically, but it can also *be* moved kinaesthetically. Kinaesthesia is the perception of, or the sensation of movement, the feeling of being touched rather than the touching per se. In a penetrating investigation of the nature of movement and self-movement, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone extends the Husserlian project of understanding movement as a *constituting* source of time and space. “The crucial role of kinesthetic experience to the experience or sense of a spatio-temporal dynamic strongly suggests how the constitution of space and time have their genesis in self-movement, and why the consciousness of animate forms... is in the most fundamental sense just such a spatio-temporal dynamic” (146). With Husserl, she stresses how, broadly speaking, movement is the primal kinetic-kinaesthetic core of life, “the very source of our being in the world” (148). “Everything cognitive,” Sheets-Johnstone argues, “leads back” to movement: “Insofar as our primal animatedness is the bedrock of... kinetically- and kinesthetically-rooted conceptual understandings, our primal animatedness is, to borrow (and singularize) a phrase from Husserl, ‘the mother of all cognition’” (137). Species-specific acts of movement that we “simply ‘do’ in coming into the world.... happen to us before *we* make them happen,” that is, before any cognitive comprehension has made a self-conscious movement-decision (137). In a more determinate

sense, however, movement is an activity that comprehends itself as aiming, that closes an interval. This difference is highlighted in the eighteenth-century philosophic writings of James Beattie: “Action implies motion; but there may be motion, as in a clock, where, *properly* speaking, there is no agent. Many motions necessary to life are continually going on in the human body; as those of the heart, lungs, and arteries: but there [sic] are not human actions, because man is not the cause of them” (194).

For Wiebean Mennonites, movement, understood theologically, *constitutes* consciousness and regeneration. Sheets-Johnstone points out that primal movement “*forms the I that moves before the I that moves forms movement*” (138). In Mennonite religious life, analogously, something that is not a human agent is at the root of existence as a force already moving it. It comes to givenness as regeneration, but also, in Adam Wiebe’s predicament, as persecution. Here I utilize this phenomenological finding to explicate the status of the Mennonite as a literary figure in Wiebe’s fiction.

Within the agrarian communities of, for example, *The Blue Mountains of China*, displacement is materialized *less* as migration than as an eternal de-positioning of non-nomadic farmers. For those Mennonites, and for Frieda Friesen in particular, the pull towards the Creator has affective priority over all other movement. Truly non-itinerant at heart, Wiebean Mennonites laconically assert that they “moved more than most” (13). However, no felt starting point ever appears, nor any conception of a teleological journey’s end. Such an end is for the Mennonite eschatological – that is, theologically directed towards an ideal paradisiac end of movement. Instead, Mennonite migration comes to givenness as a multiple infinity of displacements where movement lacks extensionality altogether. Between one displacement and the next in Wiebe, there is not primarily a “between,” a liminal space, but the kinaesthetic nothingness of movement as such. I would suggest that there is movement rather than a distancing interval.

In reviewing the Mennonite novels, and especially their foregrounding of language, one cannot conveniently overlook the circumstance that, for Christian fundamentalists, movement dwells in the Word itself. In *Sweeter Than All the World*, Trijntjen Pieters, the sixteenth-century narrator of the third chapter of *Sweeter Than All the World*, “Flour and Yeast,” tells us of how her mother Weynken remembered:

when a priest named Ulrich Zwingli began teaching in Zurich far away. He taught that, according to the Scriptures, the Pope himself had no more power to forgive sins than any true Christian

believer did. She heard that Melchior Hoffman was travelling across Europe saying the Holy Spirit was poured out on every living person, you must listen to God's Word in the Bible and you would feel the Spirit *move* in your heart, all men and women too, it made no difference! She heard the New Testament read aloud, first in Martin Luther's German translation, and then the reader translated it on the spot into Dutch. (34; emphasis added)

The decisive word here is *move*. When Mennonites move between continents, deserts, prairies, steppes, and grasslands the ultimate underlying factor is not the politico-theological intolerance driving them from land to land but the sense of God as prime mover and source of regeneration. The basic Mennonite movement-affect is not theirs, in that it is not felt to be instigated by any activity originating in them. That movement chiefly lies in the Word means, theologically speaking, that it is not primarily viewed as a property of human life. Protestant fundamentalists are by definition open to *the movement that is in the Word itself* (Klassen 24-25). Its momentum comes to expression as already given as such, as already "poured out" on women and men alike (34).

Because movement as primal directedness is felt to be centred in the Word rather than in the human ego or religious cogito, the Mennonite refugee is largely passive vis-à-vis the movement s/he is drawn, or "being moved," into. When harassed Mennonites *move*, the intrinsically different versions of submission – the submission to the movement of the Word's call and the submission to authority – cannot be visually externally distinguished from each other. Through flight, submission to the regenerating movement of the Spirit, furnished in free access to the written and printed Word, has taken on the appearance of subjection to ecclesiastical and secular authority. In the Mennonite predicament, these two quite different forms of movement have phenomenally (though not phenomenologically) become indistinguishable, and movement is thus made intriguingly ambiguous. Through hardships, regenerative movement has come to assume the external form of expulsion from Europe instigated by Catholic, Lutheran, or Calvinistic rulers. In the last analysis, the movement into exile does not have its source in theo-political force ("recant from heresy, or die") or in submission to worldly authority ("let us move on: this governor does not want Mennonites to live here"), but in Mennonite ideology – in the refutation of secular society as ultimate authority over human life. Since this refutation goes hand in hand with quietism, the tension between movement in the most theologically

radical sense (being moved by the Spirit) and geographic world-movement is obscured.

This stratum of regeneration-movement is quite distinct from the stratum of territorial-extensional movement. The tension between the two strata is of primary constructional importance in the text. Body-movement is in the last analysis other than religious movement. Even the most physically immobile person may share the movement that is accomplished by the Word. Without physically moving an inch, anyone could be moved by the Word. But in the shadow of such movement-differences, confusion materializes, for us and for the Wiebean Mennonites. While the regenerated Mennonite moves in the attempt at sustaining a way of life that seems somehow “truer” than the non-Mennonite alternative, somewhere along the line, for some people, the Mennonite fashion of moving around as such becomes a kinetic-kinesthetic substitute for being moved by God. The different phenomenological movements become complexly intertwined. A being-moved that for the believer is theologically necessary – regeneration – turns into a being-moved that is theologically unnecessary: namely, travel. Travel-movement could of course also be viewed theologically, as exodus within a covenant,⁴ but even then, it contains an extensional element that is distinguishable from the movement of regeneration and grace. Faith is not reducible to migration.

The longer the temporal-spatial journeys of the Mennonite-refugees become, the greater is the likelihood that being-on-the-road becomes a simulacrum of regeneration, faith, and devotion. Being-moved turns into a sacred phenomenon in itself, and in the hands of the implied Mennonite writer, it gradually emerges as an object of worship and veneration. Displacement becomes a cult. In a strange substantiation, the event of being-moved by the Spirit has become the habit of moving about on the earth as pious refugee, and there is a slight but significant sense that moving-always-as-refugee has settled down into being an idol, a travel talisman, that progressively replaces regeneration. A refuge-romanticism, an idealization of pain and position-loss, almost presents itself as a means to salvation. By such slippage, the way of the Mennonite turns into a tourism-spirituality: we are not regenerated to be moved; we move, and that *per se* is regeneration.

If this line of suspicion is pursued to the final analysis, one might even argue that Adam Wiebe, the nomadic postmodern male narrator has fallen victim to a theological backsliding or a religious slippage. In the polyphony of the text's voices, those who seem to have lost religion altogether

– e.g., Adam Wiebe, or, which will be shown presently, his father-in-law, Bud Lyons – at the same time as they have been in total abstention from any trace of inner regeneration, have nurtured a pseudo-theological sense of noble exodus. These descendants of truly non-itinerant, non-nomadic, farmers devote themselves to a self-reflective vagabondage that has the appearance but not the reality of an authentic devotion to God.

Sweeter Than All the World simultaneously exhibits and conceals the structural discrepancy between religious and geographical movement. The text encourages us to understand – but also to forget – the difference between conversion and displacement, between being regenerated and feeling persecuted. Yet for Protestants giving priority to faith over merit, the hardships of wandering in themselves can obviously never themselves furnish justification. In a bedside talk of Abraham Loewen and his eponymous grandfather, being-on-the-road in terms of a sense of regeneration, and in terms of a sense of being persecuted have been mixed up. The meeting between the two Abrahams takes place during a few hours in an Idaho hospital, in 1941. In this hospital, the elderly Abraham Loewen's bodily extensionality is severely diminished by a stroke. Confined to his bed, the old man's "mind wanders" far beyond the parameters of that confinement (180). During the talk and silences of their brief meeting, the status of the phenomenon of being-on-the-road comes to the fore.

Being-on-the-road implies a certain aimlessness, an absence of predetermined goal. Yet the aimlessness does not lack directedness. Although there is no *particular* aim, there is a generalised sense of moving-towards. Restricted to a hospital bed, immovable but for his face, right arm, and leg, Abraham Loewen "wanders" in a wandering without wandering-aim (180). His eyes "sink" into a "distant bemusement" as he recalls the event of somehow surviving a dangerous Mennonite migration into Turkistan (181).⁵ The "wilderness" into which old Abraham Loewen had "moved" as a boy is still with him as the permanentized sense of being stranded in an idealization of suffering (181).

Abraham Loewen's secularized grandson also drifts, but his roving is born out of a firm decision *not* to wander with the Mennonites. "Mennonites move all the time.' I have heard this from him forever; it is what I got away from by *removing myself*" (181; emphasis added). Feeling alienated from his grandfather's unabated belief, he attempts to eliminate himself from his Mennonite background by eradicating "Abraham Loewen" and becoming "Bud Lyons" (183). In a double removal, in a getting away by removing

himself, he is doing exactly what he intended not to do: he “wanders.” Perplexingly, what for Abraham the elder is a sense of being moved by God, is to his grandson nothing but hypocritical, moralistic displacement. Afraid that the hardships of the disastrous Asian wandering may have clouded his grandfather’s mind into celebrating suffering rather than God, Abraham justifies his own removal by means of feeling persecuted. The getting away in this passage is not only a change of address, but also an affective getting away from his grandparents, and from that which is Mennonite in general. Abraham’s striving to protect himself from feeling persecuted amounts to a transformation of that effort into feeling regenerated – “saved” from Mennonite affinity.

However, no matter how fiercely decisive the removal is experienced to be, it is evident that the intended partition failed. Bud’s reaction to well-known sayings is instinctive and violent: “Abruptly it sounded so much like what I once hated, and still hate, that I jerk away from him rigid as half a log, I’m outta here!” (183). The final move of consciously willing *not* to be Abraham Loewen is affectively and kinaesthetically impossible to effectuate. Kinesthetically, neither the removing-motion, nor the getting-away-movement will ever come to an end, and the intention to leave the Mennonites forever cements the bond he wishes to dissolve.

I have described a backsliding occurring in the text, from accentuation of regeneration as a feature of Mennonite life to an un-sought for form of Mennonite ethnicity as a phenomenon coinciding with the intricacies of Mennonite migration. Adam Wiebe’s ethno-theological complex, the double and conflicting feeling of being that “semi-demi-secular Low-German Mennonite” amounts to a conflict between a feeling of ethnic belonging and theological doctrine which beforehand disintegrates any such movement.

Perhaps coincidentally, the strange void brought about by the theological slip may be hinted at in old Abraham Loewen’s Samarkand story of the lily feet. As old Abraham and his sister, during the tragic Epp-trek already mentioned, encounter a Chinese girl selling silk, the ancient Chinese necessity for female beauty is suddenly revealed. Their horror at finding that the Chinese girl’s feet were practically missing is perfectly understandable, as is the implied critique against such means of female suppression, yet the scene reverberates with additional implications – namely with the sense that the event of being deprived of one’s feet is especially traumatic for the Mennonite whose faith has taken on the permanent form of walking.

Susannah's hand was holding the Chinese girl's foot. But there was no foot. Below her folded knee, at her ankle, her leg ended in layers of wound cloth coiled and tied tight around a square stub. I couldn't understand: where was her foot? I looked at her face: her eyes were stretched shut now in a tight line clenched across her face, a slit where pain shrieked, where it would never be let out. (192)

If the neo-normative means of salvation for the Mennonite feeling-persecuted is suffering through wandering, the Chinese girl, by lacking feet to walk with, is beyond salvation. From the point of view of the slipped Mennonite, the physical-existential suffering of the Chinese girl has neither meaning nor support, since her suffering – unlike the suffering on the road – seems unlikely to reap any divine reward. Because the foot is missing, it leads nowhere, *walks* nowhere, and lacks the perambulatory virtuousness of the Mennonite in search of salvation.

As has been shown, in *Sweeter Than All the World* certain characters slip from a celebration of the Word into a celebration of Mennonite travel-suffering, where the suffering of God gives way to the suffering of the worshipper. This move seems justified according to its own ability to remember itself not primarily as movement of the Word, but as movement of suffering, of feet treading alien deserts.



Returning to the memoir and to the notion of Prairie movement, one recognizes that in Wiebe's powerful writing about childhood, family, community, and landscape, there is hardship but no suffering on the road. Although the Wiebes – like the fictional Mennonites – moved around a bit, wandering is not itself an issue in *Of This Earth*: Wiebe is truly “home” in the memoir. But of what does “home” consist? One can see the Speedwell homesteads in Saskatchewan; the temporary home with relatives in Vancouver; the new house on the Alberta Prairie – but the sense of “being home” is itself not *at* home in those places. The homesteads are described seemingly from a distancing interval, as if by a spectator rather than by a participator. The idea of a geographic *home place* that is “singular and locatable – pinpointable – in space” clearly does not suffice for Wiebe's sense of home (Keahey 3).

In fact, much of the memoir is mediated through something, notably family photographs and diaries kept by Wiebe's sisters. Inevitably then, *Abstand* appears between the narrator's struggles with those “facts” and what

he can actually remember. If there is a danger of any slippage in *Of This Earth*, it concerns a fall from authentic memory to what the “accidentally retained” pictures allows the narrator to create memories around (333). One such preserved photograph shows a team of horses and a sled, as well as Rudy and his older brother dressed for church. On the back of the photo, the words “*abgenommen den 28 März 1947*” are written (334). “I cannot doubt my mother’s handwriting,” the Wiebe-narrator says, but “where were Dan and I going in our Sunday clothes on a winter Friday morning?” (335). In the background of another photo is Dan’s car: an “absolute uniqueness in our Speedwell life” (333). Yet the narrator cannot recollect any of the times he must have ridden in it.

What he never doubts, however, are words, story, and presence; in moments of doubtless textual immediacy, memory suddenly comes alive. Those instances are not about any “home place.” Just as Keahey argues concerning the Prairie literature, so *home* is in Wiebe found less in “place” than in writing. The sense of “being home” is found in the parts where the struggle to remember and to communicate gives way to the movement of story. As the narrator abandons his spectator position and weaves word into the memories, the memoir too dares to abandon its pretence to truth and become story. In one of the earliest memories presented, the children are in a tent because the house is being cleansed from lice by smoke. The oldest sister is telling the little ones a fairy tale. The breathing movement of the aspens, “too immense to imagine” (122), is again emphasised and the narrative nudges us to remember the Word and the home, which are not at all “other,” but always intimately remote in the Wiebean oeuvre. The moment is kinetic as well as kinaesthetic: “The poplar leaves shiver like fear in the wind, their branches groan above us in the moonlight. And *it comes to me now* that Helen and I, and Liz as well, yes, we are in a tent under the trees in the hollow behind our log house” (43). The event, says the narrator, is “as sharp a memory as I have of our first homestead: ducklings, a fox, the tent in the hollow under poplars, our house sealed thick with poison gas, the bush vermin my mother detested: Waunztje” (48). Yet the fact of the children and the story under the trees is not a distant memory in the narrator’s mind, but something that is near. It “comes” to the narrator and to the reader alike, and although the workings of memory are “fathomless to the looking eye,” it is indeed “touchable by words” (387).

NOTES

1. Kinaesthesia is the perception or the sensation of movement, the sense of “muscular effort that accompanies a voluntary motion of the body” – as well as the “sense or faculty by which such sensations are perceived” (*OED* 2nd ed., s.v. “kinaesthesia”).
2. Fehr discusses the writings of Edward McCourt, Laurence Ricou, Dick Harrison, and Henry Kreisel as environmentalist criticism.
3. Sellery 30–31.
4. Movement of course defines radical discipleship: “spreading the Word.” In his book *The Politics of Jesus*, Mennonite theologian J. H. Yoder sees Jesus as having called his disciples to radical social reform, rather than to an apolitical life. Yoder argued for movement rather than stagnation: “The community of disciples must be constantly ‘on the road’ in search of ‘restitutions’” that will come in forms that are simultaneously unexpected and familiar (133).
5. In the 1880s, a group of some six hundred Mennonites followed the millennialist Claus Epp on a journey east. They experienced severe hardships. Many died, especially children; others returned to the Ukraine, or, aided by Mennonites in America, went to the US (Dyck 181).

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