

# WIEBE'S SENSE OF COMMUNITY

*Francis Mansbridge*

**M**OST CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN NOVELISTS are writing within an urban context. To be more precise, their concerns are generally those of our society in its more "highly developed" state — the problem of alienation, a sense of personal guilt, the search for basic values, the healing power of love — all are concerns which modern Canadian novelists explore, often with great skill and sensitivity. The nature of these concerns is often shaped by a vision of the world in which the traditional feelings of community have broken down; the individual finds himself in existential isolation, charting his own fate with no exterior guide on which he can rely, and no possibility of any return to a state in which the individual can strengthen himself on the values of those with whom he shares his life.

If not entirely opposed to this mainstream of the contemporary Canadian novel, Rudy Wiebe's interests are certainly divergent. Throughout Wiebe's work is a strong sense of community — a sense of man as part of a larger context, even though his protagonists often spend much of their time trying to establish their identity either within or in opposition to their community. His earlier work draws on his Mennonite background as a correlative through which to express this sense of community. Often, as in his first novel *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, the negative elements of repression exerted by the community are portrayed vividly. But even here the feeling emerges that the community is good and will, in some form or another, survive. It is logical that Wiebe should turn in his more recent writing to re-create the history of Big Bear and his times. Like the Mennonite society, the Indian society of this time possessed a strong sense of community, although, in Wiebe's version at least, a greater sense of the spiritual content of life. His novel *The Temptations of Big Bear* is the most detailed evocation of this society, but later writing has continued to reveal Wiebe's fascination with this time in such stories as "Games for Queen Victoria" in the March 1976 issue of *Saturday Night*.

A discussion of his first novel will serve to open up some of the central concerns of his work. Published when he was only twenty-eight, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* remains an unusual achievement, deserving far more than the condescending "promising" which is often the excuse for relegating first novels to the category of better dead than read.

*Peace Shall Destroy Many* describes the attempts of Wapiti, a Mennonite community in northern Saskatchewan, to isolate itself from the changing world of 1944. More particularly, it relates the growth of Thomas Wiens to manhood, and his consequent struggle for freedom in a community whose repressiveness allows little room for original thinking or acting. The formidable figure of Peter Block, (aptly named, for he blocks Thom's growth), is the major obstacle to Thom's achievement of independence. Block, the founder and unquestioned head of the community, is the autocratic father-figure whom Thom must confront to gain the power to release his own character.

The structure of the novel reveals considerable control in the hands of the young novelist. Oppositions between the old and the new, between youth and age, and between instinct and rationality, are effectively presented. Frequent changes of pace and the ability to express feelings associated with domestic scenes or bitter elemental conflicts help give the novel variety and interest. Wiebe's main problem in this novel appears to be assimilating a wide range of thoughts and ideas into a sufficiently refined form. The structure is sturdy, but roughhewn. There are too many passages, such as the long confrontation between Joseph Dueck and Peter Block in the first section, in which Wiebe indulges in long discussions of issues. While they have considerable merit these might have been presented more effectively either symbolically or through action.

Throughout much of Wiebe's work there exists a tension between the mystery of life and the rational; often they cannot comprehend one another. In this novel the tension between Peter Block and Thom Wiens is heightened by their differing attitudes toward the mystery that exists around them and within themselves. Peter Block's response to his instincts is stern Calvinist repression; he simply does not acknowledge the darker side of his nature. But the demons that lurk behind his religious exterior will not be stilled. He has killed a man in Russia, and threatens Louis Moosomin with castration for having had intercourse with Block's daughter. The instinctual fires also erupt in Elizabeth Block's affair with Louis Moosomin, in Thom Wiens' own sexual feelings towards the school teacher Razia Tanta-mount, and especially in the climax of the novel, in which Mennonite punches Mennonite, while Razia, straw clinging to her dress, is a bemused spectator.

In the course of the novel Thom Wiens realizes that there is more to this world than is dreamt of in the rigid, orthodox philosophy of Peter Block; there are aspects of his instinctual nature which he must recognize and accept. This recognition lies behind his acceptance of the half-breeds through teaching them Sunday

School. Conversely, Peter Block's rejection of the half-breeds is in keeping with his suppression of his instinctual nature. The half-breeds, because their instinctual nature is beyond the control of rationality, are feared and rejected by Peter Block and most of the Mennonite community.

This duality between instinct and rationality finds a natural expression through the use of the barn to symbolize instinctual nature, in contrast to the rational order with which the remainder of the Mennonite lives is generally characterized. Barns are traditionally the places in which or behind which instinctual things occur. And in *Peace Shall Destroy Many* it is in a barn that an enraged Peter Block threatens Louis Moosomin, and in a barn that the climax of the novel occurs, in which the repressed sex and violence of the young men finally finds some release. But it is in a barn also, we are reminded through the Christmas pageant just before the climactic scene, that Christ was born. Our instinctual natures have possibilities for good as well as evil.

THROUGH SUCH PARALLELS, Wiebe provides a suitable framework for the novel. But the prose in which he does so is often not as impressive. Wiebe is not a great prose stylist; he is living proof of the strange fact that a writer may be a considerable novelist while having a very indifferent command of the English language. One can admire the superb prose of such writers as Robertson Davies, John Updike, or Vladimir Nabokov, but the novel also has room for those such as Henry Miller or Frederick Grove — writers whose frequent awkwardness is tolerated by most readers. Perhaps we can feel a greater trust in their work, as glittering prose can dazzle the reader to the point at which he may feel he has been conned into accepting more than he had really wished. There is little danger of this in the work of Rudy Wiebe.

Wiebe's frequently awkward and ponderous style recalls that of Grove. Mordecai Richler has said of Grove that "the plain fact is he couldn't write very well." True, yet he is a formidable novelist, and so is Wiebe. But Wiebe's prose does have its difficult moments. Consider, for example, the following sentence from *Peace Shall Destroy Many*:

For him to have another person in the house, one who did not leave hurriedly but peeped into his neat cupboards and fingered the windowcurtains, a woman who had just been there as slowly he must have grown conscious of her whom, as he had laughingly put it, he had before merely considered as the "Moosomin-girl-who-gets-the-milk", the raging storm must suddenly have seemed a thrust into humanity.

Even in context, this sentence, with its tongue-twisting clusters of personal pronouns, is hardly a model of clarity.

Similarities in characterization exist between Grove and Wiebe. Each has an ability to create impressive pioneer figures, but a similar faltering when attempting more "modern" character types. While Razia Tantamount and Hank Unger, in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, are the least convincing characters in this novel, the Mennonite characters have a deeply realized vitality. And Wiebe is capable of a naturalness and humour with his characters, as in the scenes in the Wiens' household, that Grove rarely achieves.

Yet if Wiebe sometimes writes awkwardly, there are also happier times, as in the preludes to each of the four sections of which the novel is composed. They are both structurally and stylistically accomplished, and it is hard to imagine that the writer responsible for the sentence quoted earlier should also be capable of such evocative prose as the following:

The man said abruptly, pointing north, "See the geese — beyond the grain — there."

The boy stared, fascinated, high into the morning sunlight. The V of the wild geese wedged through the autumn sky, honking south over the prostrate field that waited ponderously ripe for harvest.

Each section is titled with a season of the year, and each prelude sets the mood for the actions that are to occur in that section, while suggesting what the general import of these actions will be.

Wiebe uses these preludes to both support the structure of the novel and illuminate some of its central concerns. The first prelude, to spring, describes two young boys playing hookey on a spring day. Though unnamed, the two are clearly presented as white and Indian; in the course of the novel it becomes clear that they are half-breed Jackie Labrett and Thom Wiens' younger brother Hal. Their warm, natural relationship indicates hope in the younger generation for inter-racial harmony that the older and most of the younger Mennonites cannot accept.

Jackie and Hal have skipped school to look for frogs' eggs; at the very end of the novel Hal says: "Wish it was spring so we could go lookin' for frogs' eggs again." When Thom and AnneMarie Lepp go riding to the Wapiti River on a moonlight night, they are fascinated by the frogs' singing. The frogs, and nature generally, embody a natural harmony that exerts a beneficial effect on those characters who are open to its influence.

Spring brings the awakening of Thom's consciousness; with summer comes continued growth. The prelude to this section shows Hal and Thom lying in bed while a prairie thunderstorm rages outside. The lightning's vivid flashes are described "as a revelation," while the thunder is like "long walls breaking" — perhaps the walls between Wapiti and the outside world. The association of the electrical storm with the mysterious, spiritual side of life is understood by the Indians, and by Hal's and Thom's mother. Thom at first counters Hal's feeling

that thunder is God speaking with the standard scientific explanation of thunder. But he agrees finally with his young brother that the Indians are after all more right with their less scientific explanations of nature's phenomena.

The second section shows Thom arriving at a greater awareness of the past and of the Indians' way of life. In the second section the skull of a wood-buffalo, unearthed by ploughing, becomes a symbol of the past, encouraging Thom's awareness of the country in which he is living. Thom also recalls a visit to Herman Paetkau, who has married a half-breed girl. While there, she tells Thom tales of her Indian past: "Hearing her tell of Big Bear, Louis Riel, Wandering Spirit, Thom glimpsed the vast past of Canada regarding which he was as ignorant as if it had never been: of people who had lived and acted as nobly as they knew and died without fear." Looking ahead, this is also an interesting commentary on things to come for Rudy Wiebe.

The prelude to the third part, Autumn 1944, again shows Hal and Thom talking. Thom is now referred to simply as "the man," an indication of the maturity he has acquired. An owl calls, and Hal mentions that he heard an owl the night before. According to Indian legend, hearing an owl means there will be a death in the family. Elizabeth Block's death occurs in this section — while not in Thom's immediate family, she is in the extended Mennonite family, and her death affects him deeply. But balancing this omen of death, a V of wild geese flies overhead on the way to a warmer climate. The birds suggest a combination of rational order with instinctual power, as well as the possibility of escape.

The prelude to the fourth section plunges the reader into the depths of a bitter Saskatchewan winter. Mention of individual characters is passed over in favour of the creation of an ominous atmosphere created by a blizzard followed by a cold spell:

The trough-heaters, under prodding pokers, plumed smoke into the air; without them each pail of water had spread solid in the trough. Every breath drew a knife-wound down the throat. No one thought of the howling blizzard now. The men, dumping hay in mangers and heaping straw under the bellies of their stock, knew that the silent malignancy was far more deadly.

The "silent malignancy" reaches vital organs in this final section, as the powerful drives which the Mennonite community has repressed will finally be denied no longer.

Threats to the Mennonite community come most obviously from the half-breeds, but even more dangerously from the new school teacher, Razia Tanta-mount. Pretty and competent, she is able to adapt herself superficially to Mennonite ways, while remaining a self-seeking opportunist totally devoid of any community sense. At Elizabeth's funeral her face is "like a death's-head." Her association with death is enforced in the final scene of the novel when she gets together with Hank Unger, who has shot down twenty-seven Germans.

While the bulk of the novel is more realistic in its approach than the more symbolic preludes, symbolic passages enrich the texture of the novel. Imagery of light and darkness is particularly important. As Joseph speaks toward the close of the first section, bringing intellectual light to the assembled Mennonites, a lamp is brought in. As conservative Peter Block and Progressive Joseph Dueck argue, a moth flutters around the lamp. At the end of the section, the moth, having "dared all for the light," burns itself to death. Throughout the novel light and fire are associated with both intellectual enlightenment and destruction; the fate of the moth indicates the possible destiny of those who seek enlightenment. Later, scraps of the Promethean legend float through Thom's mind, indicating Thom's role as bringer of light and fire to the Mennonite community, and also his possible fate.

The light and fire imagery receives greater expansion at the end of the third section, which closes with Thom's spiritual crisis, presented through a huge forest fire that both purifies and destroys Wapiti:

He heard a pop! Before his eyes an enormous spark arched through the air to fall at his feet on the tower. He could not stir while he stared in fascination as the glowing spark spread wider and wider its black circle to leap into flame with a tearing sound. Then the fire surrounded him on the tower he had thought limbless, and he could only grip the peeled-poplar rail blistering in the heat as the holocaust caught him. As his heart balked in terror, he was wiped away.

While the fire wipes out the barriers between Wapiti and the outside world, Thom is shaken by the intimation that his new freedom may involve his own destruction. The references to fire in this passage recall the Holy Ghost, whose evangelical associations are antithetical to the insularity of the Mennonite community, but in accordance with Thom's efforts to bring Christianity to the half-breeds.

WHILE SUCH SYMBOLIC SCENES enrich the texture of the novel, Wiebe's main achievements are in those standbys of the novelist's trade, narrative and character. Peter Block is his greatest success. Although Block has murdered a man before coming to Canada, is responsible for the unhappiness and eventual death of his daughter Elizabeth, is a hypocrite and bigot, Wiebe manages to gain most readers' sympathy for him. Block's chequered background and subsequent mental anguish are revealed in considerable detail; we see him as a driven man, motivated by his efforts to create a society in which his son may find the mental peace he has been denied. His ultimate failure adds to the pathos of his situation.

With little opposition from within his own family, Thom's rebellion naturally focuses on authoritarian Peter Block. The fact that Thom's chief mentor, Joseph Dueck, leaves Wapiti to join the army's Restricted Medical Corps isolates Thom,

shining the spotlight clearly on his own development. This growth is viewed largely in intellectual (but not abstract) terms. A romantic attraction exists between AnneMarie Lepp and Thom, but development of this relationship is foregone in favour of Thom's definition of his relationship with Peter Block and the community.

As Thom grows stronger, Peter Block's grip on his people and on himself begins to weaken. Block is shaken, although unable to cry, when he finds that his daughter Elizabeth was the instigator in her brief illicit relationship with half-breed Louis Moosomin. He is even more deeply shaken when Thom loses his temper in a subsequent argument with Block, bitterly criticizing him for his treatment of his children. But the third and mortal blow comes at the climax of the novel when his son Pete, who is in love with Razia, flattens his rival Hank Unger. Pete's justification, "Pa, you have to do what you think right," is a rejection of the non-violence and mindless obedience his father had sought in order to perpetuate his own ideals:

The Deacon bowed his scarred grey head to his hands, and the men of Wapiti community, Métis and Mennonite, standing in an old barn, heard the sobs of a great strong man, suddenly bereft and broken. They heard, terrified.

Rudy Wiebe's later novels are generally more accomplished as works of art, but *Peace Shall Destroy Many* has an unusual appeal. While he was born a Mennonite, it is neither possible nor relevant to know the extent to which this novel might be based on recollections of his early life. It is relevant, though, that the novel has a burning urgency not shared by his later works to the same extent. *Peace Shall Destroy Many* is a rough work. The style is often awkward, the characterization uneven, and the didactic elements often obtrusive. But it is borne onward by a rare driving passion. Wiebe conveys the feeling that he cares very much about his characters and what happens to them.

As a form which from its origins has been closely associated with the middle class, the novel has always had the old puritan problem of "how to live" closer to its heart than has any other literary genre. Yet an intense moralistic concern, as expressed in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, became less fashionable by mid-century, as novelists tended to veil their concern beneath layers of coolness and sophistication. Perhaps Wiebe's stronger sense of community enables him to keep the problem of "how to live" closer to the forefront of his work. One has only to think of Wiebe in conjunction with such novelists as Matt Cohen or Margaret Atwood, who are only a few years younger than he, for the difference in their viewpoint to be apparent. Cohen and Atwood are products of an urban consciousness in which detachment and restraint are not only valued but perhaps also necessary for survival. Wiebe, on the other hand, is not afraid of committing himself — not even at the risk of appearing a fool. And sometimes the results are, indeed, strange, as in

his second novel *First and Vital Candle*. But this ability to let go can also create an impressive splendour which shines through in such accomplishments as *The Temptations of Big Bear* or *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. His willingness to try the unusual makes him one of the most individual novelists writing in Canada today.

## TROPICAL FLOWERS

*Irving Layton*

Beyond the window  
pussytail and neighbouring cereus  
O lovely Cinderella among flowers!  
And the heart-shaped anthurium, deep red.

Sweet-scented frangipani, Turk's fez  
Napoleon's button, blue petrea, golden trumpet  
the spectacular poinsettia  
flaming in the distance, tiger's claw  
and the passion flower  
haloed stand-in for my brother Jesus.

Bloom, flowers, and blaze  
with bright persistence. Tendril by tendril  
ignite the encircling air  
and by your rooted sprightliness disgrace  
the shivering decadents  
too frail for the squalls and windstorms  
of this world, the quaggy  
sentimentalists with planned utopias  
in their sick livers.

*St. Lucia*  
*December 18, 1977*