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Rewriting the Break Event: Mennonites and Migration in Canadian Literature by Robert Zacharias

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**The Promises and Perils of Communal,
Place-based Narratives: Writing Mennonite
Experiences of Diaspora**

***Rewriting the Break Event: Mennonites
and Migration in Canadian Literature* by**

ROBERT ZACHARIAS

U of Manitoba P, 2013 \$31.95

Reviewed by **JENNY KERBER**

Diaspora studies have formed a major current of scholarly conversation over the last decade or so, as critics have considered definitions of diasporic communities, the extent to which diaspora overlaps with cosmopolitanism, and the ways in which diasporas complicate the publication, circulation, and teaching of national literatures. Robert Zacharias' *Rewriting the Break Event* approaches questions of diaspora from a somewhat unconventional angle, considering how Russian Mennonite literature in Canada fits into these debates. In its study of what might be called a "white diaspora," *Rewriting the Break Event* fits alongside Jennifer Bowering Delisle's recent work on Newfoundland diasporic writing, for both texts ask readers to contemplate whiteness as a racialized category in Canada, and to consider in turn how the fraught relationship between race and ethnicity affects the interpretation of narratives of intra-national and transnational migration.

From the outset, Zacharias makes clear that his focus is not on Mennonite literature writ large, but on Russian Mennonite novels by Canadian authors. His rationale for this choice is two-fold. First, he argues that Russian Mennonite writers in Canada have repeatedly returned to a signal "break event"—namely, the traumatic dissolution of the prosperous Mennonite

Commonwealth in Ukraine established under Catherine the Great—in ways that have made this history central to the larger field of Mennonite literature. Second, he notes that scholars have also repeatedly emphasized the role of Russian experience in the 1920s in their discussions about the "birth" of Mennonite literature in Canada. Key to the efforts to carve out a place for Mennonite writing in Canada in the 1970s and 80s was the idea that Mennonites needed a central story upon which to solidify an "imagined community." The Russian Mennonite story of "order→chaos→flight" not only provided such a narrative arc, but also proved to be a good fit with the institutionalization of difference in Canadian literary studies, since it presented readers with a form of ethnicity that was relatively non-threatening even as it satisfied a desire for the exotic. As Zacharias notes, one of the major consequences of the absorption of Russian Mennonite identity into the national frame under the rubric of multiculturalism has been that Mennonite literature's moral or religious dimensions have been downplayed. This is an intriguing point, for my own sense is that this trend continues in part because of a certain level of discomfort among Canadian literary critics when it comes to discussing matters of religious faith. What might the field be missing, however, when a commitment to secularism becomes the unquestioned critical orthodoxy? What might we stand to learn from a more sustained engagement with certain literatures at the level of the religious claims they make? In the chapters that follow the book's introduction, Zacharias attempts to show how the literature of Russian Mennonite authors in Canada puts forward a picture of identity—specifically one re-produced through

narratives of trauma and migration—that is more complicated than state-sanctioned models of ethnicity usually allow.

Although I knew quite a bit about Mennonite history upon starting this book, its first chapter taught me a good deal more about the layered politics of Mennonite experience in Russia under Catherine the Great and onward through the Russian Revolution. Zacharias explains how the happy portrait of life in Russia prior to the break event that characterizes so many Canadian Russian Mennonite novels risks downplaying the political complexities of Mennonite settlement in imperial Russia, wherein Mennonites were often favoured at the expense of their impoverished Russian and Ukrainian neighbours. This narrative also overlooks the stories of the *majority* of those Russian Mennonites who remained behind in Russia in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. This kind of historical nuance is especially valuable given the current political turmoil in places like Ukraine and Crimea, wherein claims to territory are often based on romantic narratives of the past. Further, Zacharias notes that the Russian Mennonite narrative arc which posits Canada as a refuge is at times disturbingly quiet about the fact that Canada's position as a safe haven was also predicated on the positing of the Canadian landscape as "empty" and ripe for Mennonite agricultural settlement.

The book then moves on to consider two texts that re-write the break event of Russian Mennonite history, Janice L. Dick's *Out of the Storm* (2004) and Al Reimer's classic *My Harp is Turned to Mourning* (1985), exploring their overt engagement with religious-theological ideas. In particular, Zacharias shows how Reimer's text functions on two narrative levels, the first within a horizontal, linear sense of

historical time, and the second according to a vertical, theological sense of time in which the Biblical story illumines and complicates the literary rendering of historical events. The third chapter will be of particular interest to CanLit scholars, since it explores the consequences of making ethnicity the main category around which Mennonite writing is organized in Canada. The way in which Canadian critical discourse has made "ethnic Russian Mennonites" a synonym for Mennonite Canadian literature, for example, has obscured Mennonite writing that comes from *outside* the Russian Mennonite tradition (and indeed, one could argue that Zacharias' book risks perpetuating this trend). In some cases, the construction of a Russian Mennonite literary tradition in Canada has also promoted troubling myths of cultural purity that presume a certain form of pastoral attachment to the land. As Zacharias rightly notes, such myths have proven especially attractive to readers who no longer have direct access agricultural livelihoods. In this discussion I read an implicit call for critics to further tease out the strains of an enduring cultural narrative that posits Mennonites as more ecologically wholesome in their agricultural and craft practices than the Canadian "mainstream." What particular investments reside in such a narrative, both within Mennonite communities and beyond, and what are the consequences of questioning it?

The book's fourth chapter delves into theories of trauma in a reading of Sandra Birdsell's *The Rüsslander* (2001). The novel, Zacharias argues, offers a warning against reading personal experiences of trauma as "transhistorical markers of communal identity." Instead, it asserts the value of preserving the irresolvable tension between individual remembrances of trauma and communal narratives of it. The

final chapter takes a more ambitious approach to considering literary form, viewing Rudy Wiebe's challenging 1970 novel *The Blue Mountains of China* as a departure from a tendency to root Mennonite identity in a particular geography and shared communal past. This is the most exciting chapter from the perspective of diaspora studies, since it considers the Russian Mennonite diaspora as something that cannot be reduced either to a single geographical site or a homogeneous perspective. Drawing on Deleuze, Zacharias argues that if a communal identity for Mennonites is to be found at all, it is produced through differences that emerge via narrative repetition. Put more simply, there is no "Mennonite identity" or culture that exists prior to its repeated and often divergent tellings.

While this conclusion treads rather familiar post-structuralist ground, what is more original and interesting, to my mind, is the direction in which Zacharias briefly ventures near the end of the book: he returns to religion, suggesting that for the Mennonite community, spiritual renewal might be found *not* through fixed

attachments to place or particular social structures, or in the outer trappings of ethnicity such as food and craft traditions, but rather through a willingness to be diminished in the model of Jesus, and to exercise a form of faith that remains vulnerable to waves of difference and change. This more radical notion of an Anabaptist community of discipleship then has the potential for opening up how we think about who is a "Mennonite," what constitutes "Mennonite literature," and what might constitute a Mennonite environmental ethic once the pastoral ideal is stripped away. These ideas might serve as a starting point for a future study, resulting in a more profound unsettling of Mennonite identity in Canada and beyond. Overall, however, this is a well-researched first book that will especially appeal to scholars of North American Mennonite literature, and Zacharias has begun to pave the way for further considerations of Anabaptism's contemporary global reach.

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