

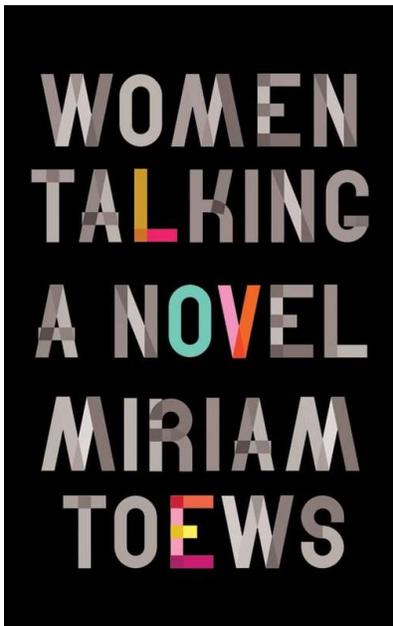
Secular Mennonites and the Violence of Pacifism

Miriam Toews at McMaster

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On February 25th of this violent year – just before the novel coronavirus and protests against police killings became definitive of 2020 – a far more peaceful event unfolded at McMaster University when Canadian author Miriam Toews spoke about her recent novel *Women Talking* in dialogue with three McMaster professors: event organizer, Grace Kehler (English & Cultural Studies), Petra Rethmann (Anthropology), and Travis Kroeker (Religious Studies).¹ The council chambers in Gilmour Hall were filled with interested students, professors, and Hamiltonian literati who were eager to hear Toews read from *Women Talking* and respond to questions about the novel's main motifs and tensions.



The room became very quiet when Toews began to read from page nineteen of *Women Talking*. She spoke quietly but deliberately, and emphasized the words ‘rule,’ ‘born,’ and ‘protection’ – each of which bear deep figural connections with the narrative. *Women Talking* is a novel about how men and women rule and are ruled, and it explores creative activity and the tension between

¹ Both Kehler and Kroeker have published articles on Miriam Toews' work. See: Grace Kehler, “Miriam Toews’s Parable of Infinite Becoming,” *Vision* 20.1 (2019), Grace Kehler, “Making Peace with Suicide: Reflections on Miriam Toews’s *All My Puny Sorrows*,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 35.3 (Fall, 2017), Grace Kehler, “Heeding the Wounded Storyteller: Toews’ *A Complicated Kindness*,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 34 (2016), Grace Kehler, “Representations of Melancholic Martyrdom in Canadian Mennonite Literature,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 29 (2011), and P. Travis Kroeker, “Scandalous Displacements: ‘Word’ and ‘Silent Light’ in Miriam Toews’ *Irma Voth*,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 36 (2018).

‘wild acts of female imagination’ and men’s protective and possessive desires. Toews’ novel dramatizes and responds to a crisis of sexual violence in a Bolivian Mennonite colony between 2005 and 2009 when men used animal anesthetic to subdue and rape colony women.² Toews’ introductory note to the novel suggests, however, that this violence may continue in this colony and others. Through the male narrator, August Epp, the novel dramatizes and recounts in literary form the minutes of meetings held by women who are trying to decide whether to leave the colony.

Below – in a way that I hope is in keeping with the peaceful and non-imposing disposition of Epp – I will narrate the McMaster event with reference to my notes and the transcripts provided to me by the three commentators (unattributed quotations are from the transcripts, and errors and misattributions remain my own). At the end I conclude with a brief reflection on the complex figure of the secular Mennonite in the drama of community violence.

The Violence in Pacifism

Following introductions, Grace Kehler began the event by addressing Miriam Toews, saying “I’ve been fascinated for many years by how your writing bears witness to the covert and explicit forms of violence that take place in purportedly non-violent settings and institutions: medicine and Mennonite community.” Kehler referred to Toews’ work as a kind of “public mourning and critique that refuses to lose sight of stories that are difficult to hear.” Kehler expressed admiration for how Toews’ novels address what Leigh Gilmore calls “historical and intimate trauma,” and what Arjun Appadurai calls an “ethics of possibility,”³ and she compared *Women Talking* with the controversial and highly acclaimed work of Rudy Wiebe in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*.⁴ For Kehler, these two novels similarly attend to “the violence that haunts purportedly pacifist Mennonite communities—and, in fact, to the violence of pacifism.”⁵

Citing Toews’ description of Wiebe’s scandalous title in an earlier article – that “pacifism and non-conflict, core tenets of the Mennonite faith, may in fact be sources of violence and conflict, all the more damaging because [they are] unacknowledged or denied”⁶ – Kehler posed her first question: “*Women Talking*, it seems to me, offers an explicitly reparative theological approach to pacifism as the women reclaim faith as their homeland. Could you talk further about the theological impetus of the novel and its reflections back to the Mennonite community at large on the urgency of overcoming quietude, which sometimes becomes a problematic substitute for active pacifism?”

Miriam Toews responded gracefully, saying “I like to think of myself as a pacifist,” while cautioning her listeners about the damage done by the Mennonite admonition to ‘turn the other cheek’ (Matthew 5:39). This emphasis on obedience and forgiveness, and the accompanying notion that tragedy is the will of God, Toews suggested, forbid a very important anger. Toews asked in return, rhetorically, “what does that do to the psyche? the body?”

² See Jean Friedman-Rudovsky, “The Ghost Rapes of Bolivia” *Vice*. December 22, 2013. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/4w7gqj/the-ghost-rapes-of-bolivia-000300-v20n8

³ See Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001), and Arjun Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* (London: Verso, 2015).

⁴ Rudy Wiebe, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1962).

⁵ See my article on this theme in Patrick Friesen’s work: “Violence and the Romance of Community: Darkness and Enlightenment in Patrick Friesen’s *The Shunning*,” *Literature & Theology* 33.4 (December 2019): 394-413.

⁶ Miriam Toews, “Peace Shall Destroy Many” *Granta*. Nov 23, 2016. <https://granta.com/peace-shall-destroy-many/>

Kehler’s response suggested that the discussion might be helped by turning to the relationship of “mutual witnessing” between the narrator of the novel August Epp and his friend Ona – a kind of witnessing that is mediated by laughter. Toews responded to this suggestion by reflecting on her connection with her own mother, and with others for whom “laughter becomes its own language.” Toews recalled, with a smile, that in her conversations with her mother laughter would often replace the conclusion, standing in for the answer or resolution that everyone knew but did not say. Toews considered this subversive humor to be a survival strategy that gave consolation, relief, and solidarity to women in Mennonite communities, and she also spoke of it as an art form defined by subtle decisions and judgments.

Kehler continued, sharing that she had been teaching *Women Talking* in her courses, and noting the curious turn of phrase featured in the “Note on the Novel” which describes its work as “an act of female imagination” that resists the accusation that the Bolivian Colony women imagined the rapes and sexual assaults committed by colony men. The note concludes: “*Women Talking* is both a reaction through fiction to these true-life events, and an act of female imagination.”⁷ Kehler’s question considered this act of imagination in the book while noting that the reader only hears directly from women who are considering leaving the colony because of the rapes, and not from those who have already decided to stay. Kehler asked: “Given that your work has often looked compassionately at both those who leave and those who stay (such as in *A Complicated Kindness*, *Irma Voth*, and *All My Puny Sorrows*) and that the actual women of the Manitoba Colony have remained, what led you to omit the voices and visions of those who cannot or will not relocate?”

Miriam Toews responded by speaking of her profound respect for those who stay within repressive pacifist communities, noting that there are ways to stay that are rebellious and subversive, while also saying that staying was not something that was possible for her. She reflected further on the three options of the novel – each illustrated by woodcut images on the inside covers of the Canadian hardcover edition of the book: stay (a horse), leave (the desert), and fight (a man and woman with knives). Toews said in her careful and deliberate voice: “each are difficult options with painful consequences.”



Secular Mennonites

Following Kehler’s questions, Petra Rethmann – whose book *Tundra Passages: Gender and History in the Russian Far East* explores problems of departure and arrival⁸ – picked up on these

⁷ Miriam Toews, *Women Talking* (Toronto: Knopf, 2018), note. See also Grace Kehler, “A Parable of Becoming Divine Women: Miriam Toews’ *Women Talking*” *Literature & Theology* (forthcoming 2020).

⁸ Petra Rethmann, *Tundra Passages: Gender and History in the Russian Far East* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000).

three options, pointing out that the women decide to leave, and then asking “but where are they going? Where can they go? Would it be possible for them to build up a new community? And, if so, would that be desirable?”

The question of community returns here in Rethmann’s first question, and it is deepened by her second question. Given that the narrator August Epp documents the meetings of the women who are deliberating about leaving, Rethmann asked Toews: “What will happen to August Epp who stays behind in Molotschna, especially if the returning men find out that he produced a document/script delineating the women’s deliberation? Could you imagine ensuing debates about – for lack of a better word – ‘alternative’ forms of masculinity?” This question from Rethmann about masculinist communities – leads further into her third question. Rethmann asked about Christian communities: “Is there still, in your estimation, a place for being Mennonite – or, by extension, Christian – today? And, if so, what could or would that place be? What would we need to imagine differently – if anything at all – to be just (kind, loving) in this world?”

In answer to this important question, Toews spoke of her mother, a radical feminist, a believer, and a member of a liberal Mennonite Church. Toews asked, rhetorically: “how could I not believe in the goodness of that?” Toews then referred to herself as a “secular Mennonite” and expressed frustration about those Mennonites who would tell her that she is not a Mennonite, saying with characteristic lightness: “I know what I think I am.”⁹



Two Mennonite women at the 1967 Mennonite World Conference in Amsterdam
Mennonite Church USA Archives¹⁰

⁹ For connected comments see Catherine Porter, “Miriam Toews’s Mennonite Conscience” *The New York Times*. March 28, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/28/books/miriam-toews-women-talking.html>

¹⁰ Source: <https://gameo.org/index.php?title=File:MWC-1967-Two-women-with-contrasting-dress.jpg>

Educating Against Violence

Before setting out his questions, Travis Kroeker reminisced briefly with Toews about their shared roots in Steinbach, Manitoba – also home to other Mennonite-related writers like Al Reimer and Patrick Friesen. Toews recalled looking out the window and seeing Travis's grandmother, and being struck by her long flowing hair! Poignant moments of connection like these – not all of which I can reproduce here – made Miriam Toews' visit to McMaster memorable and meaningful for those who were fortunate enough to attend.

Kroeker's questions picked up on resonances between *Women Talking* and the work of Saint Augustine (354-430 AD), beginning with the connection – perhaps more figural than intentional – between the names 'August Epp' and 'Augustine.' After drawing attention to how August Epp “plays with time (and eternity): the minutes, the days, the years—in true ‘Augustinian’ fashion”¹¹ Kroeker pointed to further allusive connections between the love of Augustine's life when he was a Manichean,¹² and August Epp's close relationship with Ona. These connections foregrounded Kroeker's first question: “in a world supposedly created by a good and loving God, in whose divine image human beings were supposedly created,¹³ ‘where is evil?’¹⁴” Kroeker points to the same question in the *Confessions* when Augustine searches for the origin of evil, wondering if he is searching for it in an evil way,¹⁵ and asked: “Where does all the violence come from, especially in a social body supposedly committed to the gospel of pacifism and love?”

Kroeker's questioning continued, focusing on the role of August Epp as an educator of men who himself does not measure up to the norms of other colony men. Like Rethmann, Kroeker pointed out that August Epp challenges the masculinities of the colony because of the ‘education’ afforded to him by the women whose meetings he records. But Kroeker also noticed that August Epp is, as he put it, “a student of the Enlightenment in England (echoes of Kant's famous essay ‘What is Enlightenment?’ — ‘Dare to think for yourself! [*sapere aude*].”¹⁶ Kroeker noted that Kantian freedom is a spiritual question that bears on public religious contestation about the “sacred meaning of human dignity,” and then stated appreciatively:

What I love about the novel is that this question of what it might mean to “educate for freedom” is not one left to “professional” theologians or politicians or priests or

¹¹ I am reminded here of the free translation of parts of the 1836 Mennonite hymnbook *Die Gemeinschaftliche Liedersammlung* by Amanda Jernigan in *Years, Months, and Days: Poems* (Windsor, ON: Biblioasis, 2018). I am grateful to James McDonald, owner of The Printed Word bookstore in Dundas, for showing me this book.

¹² See his references to her as “the only one [*unam tamen*]” in Augustine, *Confessions*. Trans. Carolyn J.-B. Hammond. Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), IV, 2. pp. 134-135.

¹³ Kroeker is referring to Toews, *Women Talking*, 127. A note by narrator August Epp reads: “I am unsure myself what Agata thinks, although I assume she means the latter, that the women are created in God's image.”

¹⁴ Kroeker is referring to Toews, *Women Talking*, 213. The passage he refers to concerns the question “of shame and violence and unacknowledged sin and of the failure of the Mennonite experiment. Was that true? Could it be? Where is evil? In the world outside or the world inside?”

¹⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, VII, 5 (7). pp. 304-305. He says: “So I was searching for the origin of evil [*unde malum*], but searching in an evil way, and I did not perceive that there was evil in my very inquiry.” I observe that this sensitivity to the place of evil and potentially of violence within ways of conducting inquiry, is akin to historical and contemporary Mennonite pacifist epistemologies. For an exemplary historical expression see Edgar Metzler, *Let's Talk About Extremism*. Focal Pamphlet Series No. 12 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1968).

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” in *Practical Philosophy*. Ed. Mary J. Gregor (London: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

philosophers (that is, it is not a “private” matter!). The illiterate women demonstrate, not only dialectically but affectively, what it might mean to become “unshackled” from the “self-incurred tutelage” of the conventional cave of colonial thinking. Not only are they “undereducated” (in the conventional sense) they are also religiously formed by myths and hymns and scriptural sayings in their “tradition” and are able to find potent resources there for liberating their imagination around the “revolutionary” meaning of forgiveness, love and pacifism that might bring an end to the vicious cycles of religious and political violence. They are “amateurs” not “professionals” and speak the more powerfully for that!

Could you say more about this revolutionary “manifesto” for liberating our public imagination from more conventional models of education? I love that this novel is fully inside the complexity of a particular lived experience of sexual violence that is quite “remote” from our particular setting right here. And yet it speaks, I think, quite powerfully to our setting on these questions. That’s clear from the intense and widespread critical attention your novel has and is getting. Can you speak to how and why you think it does so, as an act of your particular (also “Mennonite”) female imagination?

To this layered question, Toews responded simply, referring to the ongoing struggle against patriarchy in the present – a struggle that is “writ small” in *Women Talking*. Toews said of the characters in the novel: “These women are dealing with the very same thing that women are dealing with everywhere.” And she noted that August Epp is a teacher who learns from women, from his mother; he is a witness, a listener. “We need men in our struggle” she said, matter-of-factly. And then, in a very tender moment, Toews pointed to the power of human imagination and shed a tear.



In the question period following the exchanges narrated above, Toews responded openly to questions from the audience, many of which were posed by students who spoke with clear knowledge of her work. Toews responded by suggesting that writing is a way to come to terms with life, and she reflected on the importance of asking rather than answering questions. Of religion she said that there are “points within it that are genuine” which reflect an “essential human longing.” And in the final minutes of the presentation, McMaster psychiatrist Dr. Catharine Munn shared tenderly of how Miriam Toews’ writing had helped her in keeping her patients alive.

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With this account before us as readers rather than direct witnesses – while considering all of the complexities of voice and authorship that come with a written account of a spoken event ‘in the

flesh’ – I want to turn from narration to commentary and pick out just one theme from the many rich stories and ideas that the event featured. The notion that there are ‘secular Mennonites’ is interesting and important not only for sociologically inclined scholars who are interested in the retention of the Mennonite name and identity by those who have left churches and no longer confess faith in doctrinal ways, but also for those who are concerned with the intersectionalities and ambiguities of identity and with the violence that can grow in tightly-knit religious communities.

Secular Mennonites?

Among Mennonite churchgoers, attitudes toward Toews’ work are mixed, and some have responded with skepticism about the events that the novel dramatizes. It seems that the accusations of wild imagination to which *Women Talking* responds continue.¹⁷ At the same time, Mennonite identity-policing continues. For example, when I proposed a review of a work of literary criticism on queer Mennonite writing to a Mennonite publication, the editor responded dismissively: “I personally bristle at the idea that ‘Mennonite literature’ includes anyone who can trace their ancestry to a Mennonite family and so claim to be an ethnic Mennonite.” What accounts for the desire to decide whether queer authors (who, like Jan Braun, might identify as ethnic *and* religious Mennonites) or self-identified secular Mennonites like Miriam Toews are really Mennonite?

When Miriam Toews identifies as a secular Mennonite and pushes back against those who would police her use of the term – and I use ‘police’ here very intentionally – she does something with Mennonite identity that I think is very important. Surely Toews does not consider herself to be normatively secularist (anti-religious), for she says many appreciative things about religion and the religious people whose values she admires.¹⁸ So, her use of the term ‘secular’ must mean something else than what the term has popularly come to connote. It seems to me, and here I risk imposing my own voice on her self-understanding, that a ‘secular Mennonite’ is a person for whom the cultures, values, and identities of Mennonites are important in a way that cannot be captured by either straightforward acceptance *or* rejection of theological statements or institutions.¹⁹

This more open and ambiguous way of holding a Mennonite identity appeals to me because it seems much more in keeping with the history of Anabaptist radicalism and dissent – a history that contemporary Mennonites continue to use as an identity resource. The sixteenth century Anabaptist ‘Radical Reformation’ was a heterogeneous movement of nonconformist, antipapal, and anticlerical groups who rejected infant baptism and insisted on more severe and more urgent reforms than their magisterial counterparts who followed Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin. Although it may seem counterintuitive to look back to the very religious sixteenth century Anabaptists for the purpose of building up a secular Mennonite identity today, there are reasons to pause before assuming that our ideas about religion apply to groups who existed 500 years ago. Our present distinction between religion and secularity, which is often code for the

¹⁷ See the comic by Jonathan Dyck, “Mennonites Talking about Miriam Toews” *The Walrus*. July 8, 2019. <https://thewalrus.ca/mennonites-talking-about-miriam-toews/>

¹⁸ Consider her appreciative and critical identity statement “I identify as a Mennonite – these are my people.” in the interview with Ben MacPhee-Sigurdson “Something to talk about” *Winnipeg Free Press*, August 17, 2018. <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/arts-and-life/entertainment/books/something-to-talk-about-491128111.html>

¹⁹ For an excellent collection of Mennonite identity statements see *Why I am a Mennonite: Essays on Mennonite Identity*. Ed. Harry Loewen (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988).

division between Christianity and atheism, is very different from the medieval distinctions between the sacred and profane that the Anabaptists would have been familiar with. In Anabaptist groups who were influenced by German mysticism, for example, the “gospel of all creatures” (*das Evangelium aller Kreaturen*) was a term that referred to the presence of a mysterious and divine order in the world, but without dividing the world into religious and secular domains.²⁰ Later, in the seventeenth century Dutch Republic, Mennonites became involved with artistic, cultural, and humanitarian movements while socializing with diverse groups like the Collegiants and engaging with philosophers like Descartes and Spinoza.²¹

The history of Anabaptists and Mennonites has never been capturable by simple distinctions between religion and secularity. Just as there were Anabaptist ideas that do not fit into our present categories of religion and secularity, there are also modern and postmodern Mennonite identities that do not neatly conform to straightforward acceptance or rejection of religion. Because the division between religion and secularity cannot capture the richness and depth of many Anabaptist and Mennonite identities, I think that a fruitful approach for those who are interested in secular Mennonite identities would be to reframe the category of the secular in more generous terms by emphasizing its openness, ambiguity, and concern for the world. The figure of the secular Mennonite ought to serve as a challenge to dualistic thinking of all kinds.

Indeed, Anabaptist radicalism often has been called a ‘third way’ that both negates and includes Catholicism and Protestantism, and contemporary Mennonite theologies also try to choose a path apart from passivity and violent action. That said, contemporary Mennonite identity seems to have lost much of this radical and critical refusal of false dilemmas. How can the heirs of the most radical wing of the sixteenth century Reformation, sometimes called the ‘Left Wing of the Reformation,’²² be so given to conservative desires to hold and withhold their identity? In a world that is so clearly in need of more subtle, rich, and generous ways of holding identity and resisting violence, is the Mennonite peace witness (and Anabaptist nonconformity) – which far exceeds theological capture – not ideally situated to contribute to the pursuit of a better and more just world?

At the beginning of his collection of Anabaptist identities *Profiles of the Radical Reformers*, historian Hans-Jürgen Goertz quotes the utopian philosopher Ernst Bloch’ poetic account of the Anabaptists: “Despite their suffering, their fear and trembling, in all these souls there glows the spark from beyond, and it ignites the tarrying kingdom.”²³ This spark today is manifest not by those who anxiously police the proper use of the Mennonite name or identity, but by those, like Toews, who create living and breathing works through which Mennonite identities can become more enriched and more secular. The secularity that I refer to is not an anti-religious fervor, and it is not an a-religious shell hollowed out of any spiritual content. Instead, I take the term ‘secular Mennonite’ to mean a concern for and orientation toward the

²⁰ See my essay “The Gospel of All Creatures: An Anabaptist Natural Theology for Mennonite Political Theology,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 37 (2019): 353-368.

²¹ See my essay “Postsecular History: Contemporary Continental Philosophy of Religion and the Seventeenth Century Dutch Collegiant Movement,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 46.3 (2017): 406-432.

²² For new work on the category-problems of radicalism in the ‘Radical Reformation’ see Michael Driedger, “Against ‘the Radical Reformation’: On the Continuity between Early Modern Heresy-Making and Modern Historiography,” *Radicalism and Dissent in the World of Protestant Reform*. Ed. Bridget Heal and Anorthe Kremers (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 139-161., and Astrid von Schlachta, *Täufer: Von der Reformation ins 21. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto Verlag, 2020), 11-13.

²³ Hans-Jürgen Goertz, “Introduction” in *Profiles of Radical Reformers* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1982), 9.

world that cannot be reduced to simple affirmations or rejections of religious institutions or concepts.

Miriam Toews works against the violent trappings of romanticized communities – from their coercive uses of soft power to their patriarchal impositions – when she quietly but unapologetically speaks of herself as a secular Mennonite. Her work is confessional because it confesses, public and world-facing rather than world-denying, and secular in the best sense – and in all of this it is no less Mennonite. This secular Mennonite identity disrupts violent ways of creating and maintaining Mennonite identities by appeal to racialized structures or making compulsory the assent to propositional truth-claims. Resonating with many thinkers who consider themselves to be ‘postsecular’ and with a hidden tradition of Mennonite humanism that dates back to the 1950s,²⁴ Miriam Toews witnesses to a secular Mennonite identity wherein the values of peace and justice become life-affirming without being death-denying. Rather than the anxious and possessive desire to preserve and conserve identity or life at all costs – a way of holding identity that ultimately ‘keeps’ it rather than sets it free – Toews work and her secular Mennonite identity perform a public service of mourning for the violence of ostensibly pacifist traditions without fleeing from those traditions in ways that deny the persistent return of the past in the present.



“This circle of skulls and bones appeared as a colophon in the 1742 edition of *Golden Apples in Silver Bowls*, published as the second edition in Basel, Switzerland. Inside the circle is a quotation from Sirach 14:18, and apocryphal book of the Bible — “Mensch, du muss sterben/Man, you must die.” It illustrates that all persons, regardless of rank, must die on earth; each skull has a name indicating a station in life: pope, emperor, king, prince, count, baron, noble, citizen, farmer, rich (person), poor (person), old (person), young (person).”²⁵

²⁴ Elsewhere I call this a ‘secular Mennonite social Critique.’ See my chapter, “Secular Mennonite Social Critique: Pluralism, Interdisciplinarity, and Mennonite Studies” in *Liberation and Responsibility: Anabaptism and Cultural Engagement*. Ed. Lauren Friesen and Dennis Koehn (forthcoming).

²⁵ *Golden Apples in Silver Bowls*. Translated by Elizabeth Bender and Leonard Gross. Edited by Leonard Gross (Lancaster, PA: Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society, 1999), 161.