Miriam Toews's parable of infinite becoming

Grace Kehler

Hailing from the Mennonites of the Manitoba prairies, Miriam Toews has deservedly earned an international reputation for her incisive narrative witness to multiple forms of violence—especially those that transpire within Mennonite communities that derive from a long tradition of pacifism. In a 2016 article in *Granta*, she aligns herself with her novelistic forebear Rudy Wiebe, noting that, as the title of Wiebe's 1962 debut novel declared, "peace shall destroy many." She elaborates that "pacifism and non-conflict, core tenets of the Mennonite faith, may in fact be sources of [intra-communal] violence and conflict, all the more damaging because unacknowledged or denied."[1] For Wiebe and for Toews, pacifism gets perverted into devastation when its practitioners become fearful of theological inquiry into the difficulties of fostering peaceable relations in the everyday and foreclose on open conversations regarding the insidious creep of power even into intentionally alternate community. Overwhelming desires to maintain (impossible) levels of purity—along with the desire to possess peace rather than to consent to the lively *and* costly obligations it creates in the daily—inadvertently beget a culture that forcefully suppresses unwanted affects and dissenting voices precisely under the theological guise of non-conflict. Perhaps because Toews has explicitly spoken of herself as a "secular" Mennonite,[2] her novels, unlike Wiebe's, have not garnered substantial attention for their theological perspicacity. But, as I have written previously, her critiques of Mennonite power structures and church practices simultaneously call for a genuine, active pacifism to sup-

1 Miriam Toews, "Peace Shall Destroy Many," *Granta: The Magazine of New Writing*, 23 November 2016, granta.com.

2 See her recent interviews, including Ben MacPhee-Sigurdson, "Something to talk about," *Winnipeg Free Press*, 17 August 2018, https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/arts-and-life/entertainment/books/something-to-talk-about-491128111.html; Deborah Dundas, "Find out why Miriam Toews' new novel is going to have us all talking," *Toronto* Star, 17 August 2018, https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/2018/08/17/miriam-toews-novel-women-talking-is-bound-to-get-us-to-do-just-that.html.

plant fearful quietude.[3] Her cries against oppression are cries for lost—and possible—relations. Anger is not the opposite of love,[4] as she displays in her most recent novel, *Women Talking*, the text on which I reflect in this piece. With "LOVE" blazoned in multi-coloured letters on the front cover and "ANGER" on the back, in the pages between Toews not only audaciously imagines what it might look like if a group of violated, illiterate Mennonite women restored a feminist peace theology from below; she also draws on the tradition of biblical parables to model a fearless exploration of the horizons of human possibility when radically reoriented by the divine.[5]

The power of parables

In Paul Ricoeur's influential definition, parables function metaphorically and engage the "limit-experiences of human life": dwelling at the limits, parables not only treat the extremities of affect and experience but also surpass and transform what a given community or era prescribes as the limits of the real.[6] Indeed, as Ricoeur and other prominent critics, including Giorgio Agamben and John D. Crossan aver, parables do nothing less than pose the problem of recognizing and responding to messianic potentialities in the present—potentialities that show the "kingdom of heaven" in its earthly manifestations.[7] Accordingly, parables draw on hyperbole, paradox, scandal, and reversal—on extravagant narration and query—in order to invoke the newness and disorientation that accompanies divine

---

3 See Grace Kehler, "Heeding the Wounded Storyteller: Toews' *A Complicated Kindness*," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 34 (2016): 37–59; Kehler, "Making Peace with Suicide: Reflections on Toews' *All My Puny Sorrows*," *Conrad Grebel Review* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 338–47; Kehler, "Transformative Encounters: A Communal Reading of Miriam Toews' *Swing Low*," in *11 Encounters with Mennonite Fiction*, edited by Hildi Froese Tiessen (Winnipeg: Mennonite Literary Society, 2017), 158–76.

4 Beverly Harrison published a widely influential article on this topic. See Beverly Wildung Harrison, "The power of anger in the work of love," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 36 (1989): 41–57.

5 The preface to *Women Talking* by Lynn Henry, the publishing director of Knoff Canada, prompted me to consider the novel in terms of a parable, a comparison that has proven illuminating.

6 John Dominic Crossan, ed., *Paul Ricoeur on Biblical Hermeneutics*, Semeia 4, Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975), 34.

7 Crossan, ed., *Paul Ricoeur on Biblical Hermeneutics*, 32, 98, 155; Giorgio Agamben, *The Fire and the Tale*, translated by Lorenzo Chiesa (Stanford University Press, 2017), (19–32); and John D. Crossan, *The Power of Parable: How Fiction by Jesus Became Fiction about Jesus* (London: SPCK, 2012), 117–27.

eruptions in and interruptions of the quotidian. The parable, thus, is a "heuristic fiction" that has metaphoric power of redescribing human experience through the lens of the redemptive, the restorative.[8] Yet metaphor is not didactic or proscriptive; it is a quintessentially participatory form of communication. Metaphor creates the new, the previously unapprehended relations of things, and requires both active apprehension and translation into the daily. Drawing on metaphor, the parable functions evocatively, inviting its hearers or readers to stop fixating on the finitude of material life and to attend, instead, to "the divine, within us and among us" and hence to the infinite horizon of possible becomings.[9] Not only is this extravagant parabolic invitation addressed to all; in addition, as the Gospels demonstrate, it occurs in educationally peripheral places—such as fields and seaside—as opposed to the official institutions of religious instruction.

Women Talking as feminist parable

Such extravagance of hope and the possibility of infinite, divine becoming courses through *Women Talking*, a feminist parable of women largely reduced to animalistic, instrumental functions of work and sexuality who come to radically redefine for themselves the manifestation God's presence within and among them. The novel offers a fictional response to historical events in the Bolivian, Old-Order Mennonite colony of Manitoba, from which eight men were charged with (and ultimately convicted of) repeated night-time anesthetizations and rapes of approximately 130 women and children over a four-year period (2005–2009).[10] Alternatively, Toews imagines two days of colloquy among a delegation of eight, fully alert colony women after the apprehended men have been charged but before they have been convicted. In the symbolically peripheral space of a hayloft, the women—functionally illiterate, cut off from larger society, and socio-legally subordinate to their male relatives—struggle to determine a

8 Crossan, ed., *Paul Ricoeur on Biblical Hermeneutics*, 85, 120.

9 Luce Irigaray, "Divine Women," in *Sexes and Genealogies*, translated by Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 60. Both scholars on the parables (Ricoeur and Crossan) and feminist theologians (Irigaray and Groz) draw on the image of infinite horizons.

10 The most comprehensive news coverage of the Bolivian crimes and their aftermath comes from Jean Friedman-Rudovsky, who initially wrote a piece for *Time* and then a more extended piece for *VICE*. Toews also mentions the historical crimes in the first section of *Women Talking* and in her *Granta* article.

course of action not only practical but also, as importantly, theological. Colony elders have admonished the women that they will forfeit salvation and the heavenly kingdom should they withhold forgiveness from their assailants—creating a punitive God that resembles the violent patriarchs of the colony. Tellingly, the initial conversations of the women move unevenly between anxious references to an otherwordly kingdom that they ultimately hope to attain and common stories of—and comparisons of themselves to—animal life.[11] Their discourse, however, acquires an increasingly parabolic inflection as it supercedes binaries (flesh and spirit, here and after) and explores the requirements of Christian faithfulness and love *in the present*, in the unresolved, inadequately addressed reality of extreme violence within a purportedly pacific community. One character, Salome, puts it bluntly: “We know that we are bruised and infected and pregnant and terrified and insane. . . . We know that if these attacks continue our faith will be threatened because we will become angry, murderous and unforgiving.”[12] At their limits, at their crucible, they come to know that the messianic kingdom of love, restoration, and forgiveness “requires the present tense.”[13] In the adroit phrasing of Giorgio Agamben, “Those who carry on maintaining the distinction between reality and parable have not understood the meaning of the parable. Becoming parable means comprehending that there is no longer any difference between the word of the Kingdom and the Kingdom, between discourse and reality.”[14]

At their limits, at their crucible, they come to know that the messianic kingdom of love, restoration, and forgiveness “requires the present tense.”

Becoming parable is, of course, no easy matter. Embracing the radical incarnational potential of the divine presence necessitates the bewildering work of reconceiving the finitudes and delimited horizons that tend to anchor a life. As Toews sees it, as do many feminist theologians, the embrace of the divine entails additional challenges for women (and other vulnerable peoples) situated in severely circumscribed or violent patriar-

11 Miriam Toews, *Women Talking* (New York: Knopf, 2018), 26, 28.

12 Toews, *Women Talking*, 119.

13 Agamben, *Fire and the Tale*, 23.

14 Agamben, *Fire and the Tale*, 30.

chal cultures.[15] That the colony women are talking frankly about sexual as well as theological violence within their peace community is already an extravagance, a scandal, and a paradox of the highest parabolic order since, as the women iterate, they have been voiceless, inculcated in obedience and submission, and prevented from reading, let alone interpreting, Scripture. They have been, in Luce Irigaray's words, "deprived of God" and offered only distorted models for their own becoming, models which make a mockery of Christian forgiveness and redemption.[16] Unlike Christ's, their psychosomatic sufferings do not function reparatively but rather serve to further shatter individuals and community alike as reparation gets conflated with imposed muteness and injunctions to forgetfulness. The eight talking women must, therefore, push past the trauma of annihilated subjectivity—of a subject position that cannot be heard—to forge a language from the scraps of theology permitted them, while subverting that very theology in order to redeem it and their faith as a "homeland."[17] "Forgiveness," "love," "peace"—these are terms they grapple with in order to turn them towards a wider hermeneutic and to new lived horizons via unknown roads.

As Toews sees it, the embrace of the divine entails additional challenges for women (and other vulnerable peoples) situated in severely circumscribed or violent patriarchal cultures.

Toews underscores the challenges of begetting the yet-unrealized messianic through the women's recurrently stated worry that they "don't have a map of any place."[18] This is a literal problem for the women, who eventually conclude that departing the colony offers the only means of assuming guardianship of their own souls and that of their children. As germanely, the non-existent map (which they've not been taught to de-

15 Carol Penner and Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite supply important discussions of sexual and theological violence in peace communities, including the violence of a theology that seeks to silence already shattered subjects by imposing forgiveness on them and that fails to offer genuine reparation. See Carol Penner, "Mennonite Silences and Feminist Voices: Peace Theology and Violence against Women" (PhD diss, Toronto School of Theology, 1999); Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, *Women's Bodies as Battlefield: Christian Theology and the Global War on Women* (Berlin: Springer, 2016).

16 Irigaray, "Divine Women," 64.

17 Toews, *Women Talking*, 151.

18 Toews, *Women Talking*, 52.

cipher, in any case) also references two distinct theological precedents: historical Mennonite leave-takings for the preservation of a faith community and the parable with its emphasis on significant life departures from the ostensible "security of home" as it applies in politics, life, and faith.[19] As Agata, one of the eldest women sums up, "We're embarking on a journey. We're initiating a change that we have interpreted . . . as being God's will and a testament to our faith, and the responsibilities and natural instincts as mothers and as human beings with souls. We must believe in it."[20] With as much truth, Agata might have said, "We're embarking on a parable." The necessary soul-making journey is implausible by any rational standards, and yet this is precisely what becoming parable means: it enacts the paradox of the more-than-human taking human form and movement. In *Women Talking*, it entails the implausibility of women who have been stranded between animality and humanity discerning the urgency of becoming "God for [themselves] so that [they] can be divine for the other."[21] A feminist parable, theirs is a leave-taking, informed by the infinite horizon of the Godhead, that daringly reworks the metaphorical story of prodigality.

The journey of the biblical prodigal son away from home might be understood as a squandering of kinship ties in order to indulge in excessive acts of self-gratification that falsely promise sovereignty. As Toews reenvisions the tale, the prodigal is no singular youth but rather a plurality of community men whose unrestrained, self-enslaving lusts have devastated kin and deformed what was meant to be a pacifist community into a place of violent licentiousness and the abjection of the defenceless. The novel as well as historical reports of the Manitoba Bolivia colony divulge that entire households were sprayed with an anesthetic meant for veterinary use on cows and that women and children awakened to pain, nausea, vaginal pain, blood, smeared manure, rope burns, and ripped clothing.[22] Accused of "wild female imagination," suspected of adultery, and charged with Satanic ghost rapes (presumably for their sins), they were, to say the least,

---

19 Crossan, *Power of Parable*, 47.

20 Toews, *Women Talking*, 164.

21 Irigaray, "Divine Women," 71.

22 Toews, *Women Talking*, 4, 19, 57. See also Jean Friedman-Rudovsky, "The Ghost Rapes of Bolivia," *VICE*, 22 December 2013, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/4w7gqj/the-ghost-rapes-of-bolivia-000300-v20n8/.

stigmatized.[23] Given such horrific abandonment of a peace practice, the women's leave-taking of the colony signals a paradoxical and parabolic act of *returning* to lived faith as a homeland. Leaving and returning, loss and restoration, human and divine—these meet at the limits of the fathomable to create new horizons of gendered and communal becoming. Moving extravagantly, implausibly beyond the terrors of patriarchal power dynamics, the women accept responsibility for incarnating a God of love and healing, a God of, in, and among the feminine. They discern that though they are bruised, terrified, infected, and insane, they must enact the messianic for themselves and for their children. And, in true parabolic form, this enactment involves the mundane: the packing of food, the readying of children, and the slow movement by horse and buggy into the unknown world.

The events recounted in *Women Talking*, of course, did not happen in the Bolivian Mennonite colony. Rather, the novel, like biblical parables, provocatively redefines the possible when hope replaces fearful subordination to a violent patriarchy and to a punitive God created in its image. Toews, echoing feminist theologians, envisions women who acquire the courage to become divine, to undertake a reparative passage to an unknown horizon, beckoned by a forgiving, loving, incarnate God.

Toews envisions women who acquire the courage to become divine, to undertake a reparative passage to an unknown horizon, beckoned by a forgiving, loving, incarnate God.

About the author

Grace Kehler is associate professor of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. Her work on the Victorians' vexed relations with the physical and the evolutionary provides a lively complement to her recent explorations of the affective and traumatic dimensions of Manitoba Mennonite writing. Recent publications include articles on Toews' *All My Puny Sorrows*, *Swing Low*, and *A Complicated Kindness*.

23 Toews, *Women Talking*, 57–58.