

**"Hello, abattoir!":
Becoming Through Slaughter in Miriam Toews's *A Complicated Kindness***

Ella Soper

Volume 36, numéro 1, 2011

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl36_1art06

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (imprimé)

1718-7850 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Soper, E. (2011). "Hello, abattoir!": Becoming Through Slaughter in Miriam Toews's *A Complicated Kindness*. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 36(1), 86–99.

“Hello, abattoir!”:
Becoming Through Slaughter in
Miriam Toews’s *A Complicated Kindness*

ELLA SOPER

IN HER GILLER PRIZE-NOMINATED, Governor General’s Award-winning novel *A Complicated Kindness* (2004), Miriam Toews offers a quirky, poignant glimpse into Mennonite society from the perspective of Nomi Nickel, a deeply conflicted teenager left coping with the excommunication (and subsequent defection) of her mother and sister, caring for her father, and weighing her options for the future, among them a “career” at the local slaughterhouse, the ironically named Happy Family Farms. As the image designed by Kelly Hill for the Knopf edition of *A Complicated Kindness* implies, the economy of animal slaughter is perhaps the central symbol in this novel of adolescent *becoming*: the cover features a line drawing of an axe descending from the upper corner of the book toward an alert chicken whose gaze is fixed on the viewer. The novel’s title, then, might be said to refer not only to Nomi’s complicated feelings about East Village, the town she longs to abandon for New York City, but also to animal husbandry, an industry at the heart of traditional Mennonite society. In this article, I consider Toews’s portrayal of Happy Family Farms, arguing that it offers a visceral symbol of the foreclosure of Nomi’s adolescent potential; I argue that the “preordained ending” (2) awaiting Nomi at the slaughterhouse serves to comment in metanarrative fashion on the teleology of the *Bildungsroman* and the *Künstlerroman* in ways that suggest interesting parallels between Nomi’s coming of age and the broader phenomenon of cultural adaptation to rapidly changing social and economic realities.

Under the totalitarian rule of Nomi’s Uncle Hans, East Village, Manitoba is not content to peddle itself as just another stop on a tourist’s itinerary. Nomi’s critical gaze reveals that Hans sees such honour as financially hollow in comparison to the promises of wealth to be gained by the industrialization of traditional Mennonite farming. Through Nomi, Toews thus offers a rigorous critique of the ways in which East

Village resists its own cultural erasure by rebranding itself as a town open for business — in this case, factory farming. This business exists alongside a tourist industry that commodifies a nostalgia for pastoral “simplicity.” Both factory-farming and tourism are forms of husbandry in the administrative sense, if not also the agricultural: under Hans’s direction, the slaughterhouse and the pioneer village enlist youth in the service of an economy that is seen to reify the patriarchal ideology of Mennonism while “protecting” young people from the corrupting influences of the world at large. The anachronism of a lusty youth garrisoned within a culture resisting its own obsolescence offers I argue a provocative commentary on the process of coming of age in a town characterized as “not of this world” (2). Toews builds narrative suspense through her repeated allusions to the job awaiting Nomi on the meat-packing line; however, in her own laggardly fashion, Nomi defers the act of becoming that either taking or refusing this job would symbolize, offering instead her own answers to pressing questions “about Nomi and where’s Nomi going” (36). The result is an ironic commentary on the teleology of coming-of-age narratives.

Like the Canadian writers of feminist *Bildungsromane* (novels of formation) and *Künstlerromane* (novels depicting the growth of artists or writers) who came before her, Toews depicts the perils of a girl’s coming of age in a stifling small-town setting. As Laura Moss and Cynthia Sugars argue, *A Complicated Kindness* offers a “portrait of the artist as a young woman” (664); however, in her depiction of the fictional East Village, Toews outdoes even Margaret Laurence’s *Manawaka* and Alice Munro’s *Jubilee* in bodying forth the specific horrors awaiting Nomi if she permits herself to be determined by this repressive setting and the modalities of becoming it authorizes. The novel opens with Nomi musing about, among other issues such as the increasingly erratic behaviour of her father and the inexplicable disappearance of her family’s furniture, the completion of her high-school English assignment:

I’ve got a problem with endings. Mr. Quiring has told me that essays and stories generally come, organically, to a preordained ending that is quite out of the writer’s control. He says we will know it when it happens, the ending. I don’t know about that. I feel that there are so many to choose from. I’m already anticipating failure. That much I’ve learned to do. But then what the hell will it matter to me when I’m snapping tiny necks and chucking feathery corpses

onto a conveyor belt in a dimly lit cinder-block slaughterhouse on the edge of a town not of this world. Most of the kids from around here will end up working at Happy Family Farms, where local chickens go to meet their maker. I'm sixteen now, young to be on the verge of graduating from high school, and only months away from taking my place on the assembly line of death. (2)

In this metafictional novel, Nomi's existential dilemma results in the conflation of the completion of this English assignment (which, we learn at the end of the story, is in fact a version of the novel itself) and the act of becoming in which the *Künstlerroman* (like the *Bildungsroman*) is so heavily invested. That is to say, it is precisely Nomi's struggle against the "preordained ending" scripted for her at Happy Family Farms that defines the arc of her narrative.

In her depiction of Nomi's coming of age in East Village, Toews seems to be exploring the potential of the *Bildungsroman* through a profound and morally complicated consideration of the relationship between Mennonism and modernity. As Franco Moretti argues (citing the eighteenth-century forces that gave rise to it), the *Bildungsroman* is a literary form tailored to the ontology of youth in times of bewildering socio-economic change: "when status society starts to collapse, the countryside is abandoned for the city, and the world of work changes at an incredible and incessant pace . . . the socialization of 'old' youth becomes increasingly implausible: it becomes a problem, one that makes youth itself problematic" (4). Such forces of rapid modernization are at work in the world of Toews's novel, engendering in youth a profound identification with the sources and products of popular culture in spite of Mennonite prohibitions against "media, dancing, smoking, . . . movies, drinking, rock 'n' roll, having sex for fun, swimming, makeup, jewellery, playing pool, going to cities, and staying up past nine o'clock" (7). Mennonite culture likewise disallows the mobility of modernity (there are no bus stops or train depots in East Village), leaving Nomi exiled on a Main Street "bookended by two fields of dirt that never grow a crop" (63). Toews's portrait of the "problem" of youth in the eyes of the church elders and those of the young people themselves finds a decorous form in Nomi's narrative of becoming, which has its "triggering point" (202) in the antagonistic forces that are seen to foreclose the possibility of her artistic self-realization. Nomi might thus be said

to become in contradistinction to the example of the “pre-ordained ending” (2) inscribed for her at the slaughterhouse.

Nomi’s “problem with endings” (2) is symptomatic of her fundamental conflict with orthodox interpretations of the Mennonite faith, and the premium they place on foregoing present pleasure for the promised delights of the Rapture. “People here just can’t wait to die,” Nomi states in her characteristically sardonic manner: “It’s the main event. . . . We are supposed to be cheerfully yearning for death and in the meantime, until that blessed day, our lives are meant to be facsimiles of death or at least the dying process” (6-7). The East Village setting is rendered more perversely stifling for its absolute austerity; Nomi characterizes Mennonites as “the most embarrassing sub-sect of people to belong to if you’re a teenager” (6). “This town is so severe,” Nomi chafes,

And silent. It makes me crazy, the silence. I wonder if a person can die from it. There’s an invisible force that exerts a steady pressure on our words like a hand to an open, spurting wound. The town office building has a giant filing cabinet full of death certificates that say choked to death on his own anger or suffocated from unexpressed feelings of unhappiness. Silentium. The only thing you hear at night is semis barreling down the highway carting drugged animals off to be attacked with knives. (5-6)

The image of the drugged animals being transported to their imminent “attack” is potently evocative of the fate that is seen to await not only the animals themselves, but also the young people who are indoctrinated into a state of soporific compliance when they take their own places at the other end of the knife on “the assembly line of death” (2), a job that brutalizes them by virtue of the tedium of cruelty it requires.

East Village offers few other options for youth, none of them approximating Nomi’s fantasy of “one day hang[ing] out with Neil Young and Joni Mitchell and turn[ing] all [her] grief into hits” (177) or “wandering around [Greenwich village] with Lou Reed” (179). The town’s drug dealer, The Golden Comb, offers a rare example of what it might mean to resist the pressure to conform to Mennonite society, but his freedom is won at the expense of his service in the local meat-packing industry, and is further seen to be an entitlement of his sex. The Comb inspires an attitude like sublime awe in his peers: in his years at the slaughterhouse he “had learned how to catch four chickens in each hand by sticking their legs into the spaces between his fingers. He

could dislodge their brains from their brain stems with one quick violent shake of his hand and throw them on the conveyor belt so that they landed neatly in a row, all eight of them. He'd always had a crush on Tash" (102). The consonance between "crush" and "Tash" underscores the constrictive violence of his affection for Nomi's sister, suggesting something of the fate that Tash eluded when she skipped town. As this example suggests, it is understood (by Nomi's mother and Tash, if not by the young Nomi herself) that East Village is a particularly repressive place for girls and women, many of whom defect from the community; court shunning for their perceived offenses against the church; or kill themselves, as Sheridan's mother does because, Nomi muses cryptically, "she hadn't been aware of her options" (48).

If these "options" represent the career moves at Nomi's disposal, then her best friend Lydia exemplifies the punishment meted out for passive nonconformity. Nomi characterizes her friendship with Lydia as one based on fierce protectionism. "Or," she waffles, "it was a shared desperation. Or it was about recognizing the familiar flickering embers of each other's dying souls" (43). Lydia suffers from an undiagnosed illness, a sensitivity disorder of some kind. She exists in a state of continual sensory overstimulation: she "can't stand the way her socks clutch at her ankles or the way things like lights sometimes hum in her head" (40), and reports feeling "more and more like less and less" (40). The nurse at the local hospital, intent on finding a psychological explanation for Lydia's illness, encourages her to "C'mon, Get Normal" (86), assuring both Nomi and Lydia that the source of their problems is wanderlust, that they deserve to have "their wings clipped" (87). James Neufeld cites the example of the various characters in the novel who have "run afoul" of The Mouth (Nomi's Uncle Hans)'s "strict sense of moral rectitude and insatiable appetite for discipline" (101); Neufeld might more fittingly have written "run a fowl" (while Richler gets it right when he refers to the "coop of [Nomi's] hometown"). As the nurse's comment suggests, young girls are still considered chattel in the social economy of East Village; in the "normal" course of affairs, the girls' apprenticeships in the slaughterhouse would be followed by marriage proposals from young men from the community. In her illness, Lydia passively defies this script, and her sensitivity, like Nomi's acute perception, is seen to threaten this status quo.

Lydia's condition is reified through allusions to the poster that hangs above Nomi's bed, and which, as if with the weight of its own symbolism, becomes untacked and falls on her on more than one occasion. The poster is a reproduction of Andrew Wyeth's *Christina's World* (housed in the Museum of Modern Art — yet another reference to New York City, the place for which Nomi so desperately pines). The subject of the painting is Christina Olsen, a young neighbour of the artist's, who suffered from the polio-induced paralysis of the lower half of her body. Wyeth claims that he was inspired to paint her when he spied, from the window of his house, Christina dragging herself home across the field — an act that evoked in the artist something like an attitude of reverence for “her extraordinary conquest of a life which most people would consider hopeless” (Wyeth). As if to make the connection between the themes of the painting and Lydia's condition even clearer, Toews creates a scene in which Lydia decides to take a walk, only to collapse mid-stride, prompting her family to agree to electroshock therapy, effectively clipping her metaphorical wings once and for all. Nomi evidently finds Lydia's act of defiance redemptive; she defaces her poster with a magic marker so that Christina, through the medium of a cartoon-speech bubble, is seen to shout “FUCK YOUUUUUUUU!” (243) at the farmhouse in the distance.

While the “complicated kindness” of Nomi's feelings for East Village might be said to permit the golden-hued yet gritty realism of Wyeth's painting, the town itself is seen to grow ever more estranged from the agricultural past *Christina's World* invokes. Nomi suggests that East Village markets itself as an anachronistic utopia in an age of social alienation: “Here life is so refreshingly uncomplicated. The tourists are encouraged to buy a bag of unbleached flour at the windmill and to wander the dirt lanes of the museum village that . . . depict[s] the way we used to live” (64). However, the idyll of “simple living” (15) through the agriculture and animal husbandry traditionally practiced by Mennonites is belied by the fields lying in “perpetual fallow” (63) and by the town's two “main industries” — “the artificial village,” where Nomi volunteers as a butter churner (until, that is, she sets her bonnet on fire while enjoying a cigarette, requiring a tourist to dunk her head in a rain barrel), and “the chicken evisceration plant” (71), an epithet that speaks volumes about the dehumanizing life Nomi imagines herself leading there. The empty pastures, the museum, and the slaughterhouse

are powerful signifiers of a connection to the land that has largely been lost, despite the fact that Mennonite children are still taught that, as Nomi relates, “Farming is very important to us. And I’m talking very important” (52).

The growing divide between Mennonite nostalgia and Mennonite reality is symbolized by, on one hand, the history interpreters at the pioneer museum, who ritually slaughter animals for the edification of tourists (285), and, on the other, the ersatz “meat” that Nomi’s mom, a distracted housewife at best, prepares for her family: “She was a whiz with Klick,” Nomi recalls, “that canned meat that looks like crushed human flesh and comes with a built-on key you twist around to open the tin” (11). As this image, with its visceral imbrication of human and animal destiny as so much “meat” within the economy of East Village, suggests, the slaughterhouse figures in Nomi’s cosmology as the end of her promise as an individual. Her recollection of the years before her mother left are likewise imbued with the slaughter of animals: one of Nomi’s recurring childhood memories is of a botched chicken beheading by a terrified eight-year-old boy, clearly riven by his concern for the chicken in question and his desire to impress his father, “doing his best to nurture the killer in his son” (3). When the father finally makes a clean business of the job, Nomi recalls that the chicken’s blood “created a splattery painting in the snow,” prompting her mother to gasp and say, “look, Nomi, it’s a Jackson Pollock. Oh, it’s beautiful” (3). In this passage, we note a pronounced distinction between the aestheticism of Nomi’s mother and the pragmatism of the boy’s father. However, both “lessons” are quite lost on the youth of East Village, stranded as they are between generations and worlds: the appreciation of Pollock’s art has no more and no less place in the cosmology of East Village than does the family farm rendered either obsolete by the factory farm or wholly symbolic by the pioneer village. This shift in economic use suggests that, just as rapid socio-economic change renders youth itself a problem in the conventional *Bildungsroman*, so too do the forces of modernity render the notion of cultural authenticity problematic in *A Complicated Kindness*. Happy Family Farms (its name invoking the common branding practice that distances both producer and consumer from the material conditions of industrial farming) signifies, then, a simulacrum of the pastoral and domestic harmony a nostalgic view of the matter would suggest it displaced.

This is not exactly to suggest that Toews, through Nomi's character, delineates with something like compassion (if not nostalgia) the decline of East Village, of Mennonite villages like it, and of other family-farming communities more broadly. As the title of the novel suggests, this is and is not the case. Indeed, although we might imagine that Nomi has a feeling of "complicated kindness" toward Mennonism, she remains stubbornly unsentimental in her assignation of blame for the perversion of the faith by fundamentalist adherents such as her Uncle Hans. To Nomi's discerning eye, the religion and economy of the town are fundamentally imbricated with the business of the factory farm and with the commodification of the nostalgia occasioned by its displacement of the family farm: "The Mouth is the grand vizier. . . . Everything in this town, the school, the church, the museum, the chicken plant, is connected to everything else, like the sewers of Paris. There's no separation of Church and State, just of reality and understanding, and The Mouth is behind the wheel of it all" (243). This lesson in the Byzantine politics of what we might consider the Mennonite equivalent of the powerful American Beef Trust of the early twentieth century, is further underscored by the butcher, who informs Nomi, intent on buying her father a roast (she loses it on her way home), that roasts are simple to prepare: "You put them in before you go to church and when you come home they're done" (209).

It is not coincidental, then, that Nomi notes the construction of a second abattoir in East Village, bulwarked behind a "twenty-foot wall of concrete cinder blocks [that] every day . . . got higher and higher" (170): the expansion of the town's industrial farm industry consolidates its economic and ideological power even as this merger is seen, through the lens of Nomi's critique, to undercut its religious ethos. Anthropological theory maintains that food production has a unique capacity for organizing social and political ideologies in this manner. As Kendall Thu observes, "the ways food is gathered, grown, and distributed fundamentally shape human societies"; "as the food system becomes more centralized, so too do political, economic, and even religious systems" (9). Thu cites the example of the Latter Day Saints community near Milford, Utah, that owns Circle4Farms, "possibly the largest hog operation in the world" (21), as a case in point. It is an example likely not lost on Toews. This is not to suggest that Mormonism and Mennonism are the same but rather to note the analogy between Toews's portrayal of the union

of Church and State in East Village and this real-world example of how shrewd agribusiness representatives were able to engage the Mormon church at the expense of the well-being of the Milford community (which, as Thu explains, came to fear legal action no less than religious sanction for expressions of dissatisfaction with the new state of affairs). Ironically, as Nomi's mother teaches her girls, the repressive Mennonite ideology that gives rise to the centralization of such intensive farming in East Village has its roots in a narrative of oppression that continues to represent weakness through the signifier of the farm animal: in the context of a discussion about the Mennonite diaspora, Nomi's mother tells the girls that "we could have stayed in Russia and had our barns set on fire and our stomachs torn out. In war . . . the oddballs are first on the chopping block" (121-22). Toews thus prompts us to think of the ways in which a religion like Mennonism, when under forces of cultural erasure, might adapt a garrison mentality, becoming ever more militant in the exegesis of its founding principles.

Toews's narrative garners much of its force from Nomi's ability to imagine life on the meat-production line, in a "dimly lit cinder-block slaughterhouse on the edge of a town not of this world" (2). It is a "pre-ordained ending" (2) that she lacks the conviction to avert; it is likewise an occupation she cannot imagine quitting. In the meantime, its material presence takes on a life of its own in the form of the winds that blow through town, some bearing "warm sweet promises" (321) and news from elsewhere, others bearing more ominous tidings. "On hot nights when the wind is right," Nomi observes, "the smell of blood and feathers tucks us in like an evil parent. There are no bars or visible exits" (71). The phrase "There are no . . . visible exits" (71) is uncannily evocative of the notorious 1991 fire at the Imperial Foods chicken processing plant in Hamlet, North Carolina, in which twenty-five non-unionized workers — many of them women — died when their escape was prevented by locked fire exits. It is an incident immortalized in a drawing entitled *Poultry Packing Fire* (1991) by artist Sue Coe and featured in her "slaughterhouse journals," published under the title *Dead Meat* (1995). The text for Coe's illustration briefly relates the story in documentary style:

Sep. 3, 1991, North Carolina, Imperial Foods Products Poultry Plant. 25 workers, mostly women, were killed when fire broke out. The exit doors were locked as the boss feared chickens might be

stolen. Witnesses heard screams as people tried to force the doors open. Workers' bodies were piled up against the doorways. There were 86 injuries. The non union wage was \$11,000 a year. (42)

Coe's drawing features a drama playing out on the level of the non-human animals and workers alike: in the upper half of the scene, a conveyor belt bearing the bodies of dead and dying chickens stretches the length of the ceiling into the distance of the factory, where flames can be discerned. Above and below the chickens hang limp and plucked; in the middle hang those with their throats freshly slit, their splayed wings suggesting the paroxysms of their deaths. In the lower half of the drawing, women — many of them women of colour — proceed alone and in pairs toward a man in a blood-smeared apron, who assists them to the fire door. The tableau at the locked exit suggests the desperation of the workers' final moments: the bodies of two women, apparently overcome by smoke, lie at the feet of two more women, one beating the palms of her hands against the door, the other on her knees, hands clasped in prayer. In the slaughterhouse, then, Toews finds a fitting metaphor for the crisis of Nomi's adolescence, one made more resonant by the allusion (however oblique) to the Imperial Foods plant fire, though it is not clear that Nomi knows of this incident (Toews presumably does). The narrative of Nomi's becoming is, thus, always figured as relative to the "preordained ending" (2) awaiting her at Happy Family Farms and the tragedy (suggested by this allusion) that that ending would represent for her.

Though she struggles in school, Nomi applies herself to the study of Mennonite and popular culture; cultural literacy is, therefore, revealed to be a critical skill in terms of her self-realization. The metatextual qualities of the novel suggest that Nomi matures not only through shoring up the fragments of her personal history, according to the "Proustian supposition that the self [as constructed through the *Bildungsroman*] is created from recollection and reconstruction of memory — a remembrance of things past" (Braendlin 19), but also through the process of teaching herself to break the inscrutable codes of adult discourse in a culture that inhibits candid speech. Margaret Steffler argues persuasively that this process is fraught with anxiety for Nomi, who is more comfortable deferring action than she is taking it: "Both the sudden and the gradual vanishings that empty Nomi's world leave behind fragments of those who have disappeared. . . . Nomi struggles with these

fragments, hesitating to put them together in case they provide more of the story than she wants to hear or endings that she cannot bear to confront" (127). Foremost among these endings is the "hateful question of where [her mother] might be if not somewhere in the world," a question she blocks with "drugs and imagination" (72).

Nomi's discursive code breaking leads her to deduce that the bibliographically named Mr. Quiring had an affair with her mother that ended in Trudie's excommunication when she threatened to leave him; the English assignment that Nomi addresses to Mr. Quiring confronts him with this knowledge. This act of inscription figures as the culminating assignment in Nomi's formal education in the codified discourse of her culture; it also signifies a momentous gesture in terms of her own self-realization. Earlier in the novel, Nomi seems to be forever on the bewildered end of the conversation, attempting to decipher the semiotics of adult gestures and syntax. Her confusion provokes Tash to nickname her "Swivelhead": "All I did back then it seems was look from Trudie to Ray [her father] to Tash back to Trudie to Ray to Tash and on and on trying desperately to understand what it was they were talking about, what the words coming out of their mouths meant" (23). Nomi applies herself with similar determination to the interpretation of works of Mennonite "propaganda" (18) and popular culture: items two and seven on her list of "ways to improve" her personality include reading "books by philosophers," in addition to "Jung, Adler, Freud," and "Listen[ing] to The Jam" (133). She concludes that the two films featured at the local cinema — *Hazel's People* and *Menno's Reins* — relate "simplistic tales about a group of shy farmers overcoming world pressure to be normal and starting up their own whacked-out communities in harsh climates" (18). (What she cannot make out so easily is why The Mouth didn't close down the theatre along with the local bar, the bus depot, the pool hall, and the swimming pool.) Fashion advice likewise suggests a philosophical challenge for Nomi, who grapples with the existential meaning of the newspaper's declaration that "Summer, 1982, is the season of the nautical stripe" (133).

If these worlds of official adult discourse pose interpretive challenges for Nomi, the idiom of her peers is revealed to be no less cryptic, as symbolized by the note torn clean down the middle that Nomi finds in a field:

I'm sittin in I want to get drunk but I have no flo'? kid here at S.H. that name's Andrew. I ugly but the point are bitching that guys. So one day you with some sexy off, ha ha. Well shit face, me and Sherise ways I guess I'm just my sister for a while if you forgot my pants hope you won't ght you should ditch you could do so much She always a bitch, you don't do what erv, walking around She's gonna trap your thing!! I'm just biz, I'm your gurl here or not. I'll always playboy. Your gurl!! (131).

The nonsensical qualities of “your gurl’s” narrative provoke in Nomi something like derision for the awkward mishmash of poor grammar and imported street idiom, but the letter also resonates profoundly with Nomi’s lack of faith in her own powers of articulation and meaning-making. She concludes, “I knew exactly what your gurl was talking about because I also only ever said half of what I meant and only half of that made any sense, which is, I admit, a generous appraisal of my communication skills” (131).

Like many first-generation children of non-English speaking parents, Nomi struggles to translate the language of her parents’ generation (Plautdietsch) into an idiom that has any bearing on her own experience. Nomi never learns to exploit the slippage between cultures and languages that comes so naturally to the hybridized youth culture fluent in the polyphonic murmurs and longings of the city celebrated in works by other contemporary Canadian writers such as Dionne Brand. Instead, Nomi longs in isolation for the sense of community born of a shared mortification at the anachronistic ways of her elders and a shared sense of complicated nostalgia for her culture. It is an isolation potentially symbolized by Nomi’s inability to connect with other disaffected youth through graffiti and other transgressive acts of artistry: as Steffler argues, “although Nomi longs to return a spray-painted message on a train car ‘Nomi from Nowhere says hello’ to the ‘disenfranchised kids from Detroit or St. Louis’ . . . she cannot do so because, of course, the train does not stop in East Village” (134). In the absence of such a shared idiom, Nomi finds herself forever translating the joke, failing to transcend the feeling that she remains the butt of it. “When you’re a Mennonite,” she explains, “you can’t even yearn properly for the world because the world turns that yearning into comedy” (179).

That Nomi narrates a *Künstlerroman* that decodes for a readership largely unfamiliar with Mennonite culture the language and customs

of her people offers yet another metatextual wrinkle in the narrative — one that is seen to reference Toews's own experience growing up in Steinbach. However, Nomi's deferral of action at the end of the novel complicates any such overly simplistic autobiographical reading. In keeping with what we might deem her Hamlet complex, Nomi eschews action for the passivity of being acted upon; through increasingly desperate acts of rebellion, she courts her own excommunication — a fate that does not require her, as leaving would, to abandon her father — instead of taking a more definitive role in the inscription of her own ending. Resisting the conventional narrative of leave-taking, Toews likewise resists the conventional ending of the *Künstlerroman* and the emphasis it shares with the *Bildungsroman* on the teleology of *having become* (i.e., an artist, an adult). Ever distrustful of endings and “anybody who knows when they occur” (105), Nomi reveals at the conclusion of the narrative that she is still making herself up as she goes along; critically, she hasn't left East Village yet. “That sounds good, right?” she asks in what figures as a metatextual afterword, “Truthfully, this story ends with me still sitting on the floor of my room wondering who I'll become if I leave this town” (324).

The grading of Nomi's narrative is deferred; Mr. Quiring declares the assignment “INCOMPLETE” (319). Toews thus embraces what Moretti characterizes as the transformation principle of the *Bildungsroman*, “which privileges the ongoing potentiality of youth and the open-ended plots that narratives of youth initiate” over the teleology of the more common classification principle, “which valorizes conclusions in which maturity is achieved” (Moffat 87). This ongoing deferral and negotiation of becoming is connoted by the wistful, past-tense subjunctive mood Nomi invokes in entitling her assignment “For the way things could have been” (319). In an attempt to reconstruct the process by which “stories unfold” (320), Nomi invites readers to choose their preferred ending to her narrative on her behalf. True to the dynamic structure of the novel itself, Nomi thus rejects the closure of *having become* for the more episodic process of *becoming*. In this manner, Toews posits that becoming is an ongoing act of self-inscription relative, for those who lack the strength “to live without some kind of faith” or those “strong enough to make a stand and change an entire system or

overthrow a church” (317), to the actions of others. Toews thus reveals the modern world to be a bewildering place fraught with moral peril and creative license. In this respect, Toews gets the psychology of adolescence — with its disempowerment and defiance, no less than its desire for belonging — absolutely right.

WORKS CITED

- Brand, Dionne. *What We All Long For*. Toronto: Vintage, 2005. Print.
- Braendlin, Bonnie Hoover. “Alther, Atwood, Ballantyne, and Gray: Secular Salvation in the Contemporary Feminist *Bildungsroman*.” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 4.1 (1979): 18-22. Web. 9 Mar. 2010.
- Coe, Sue. *Dead Meat*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1995. Print.
- Moffat, Alex. “Memory and the Crisis of Self-Begetting in Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*.” *Pacific Coast Philology* 39 (2004): 86-101. JSTOR. Web. 11 Mar. 2010.
- Moretti, Franco. *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. London: Verso, 1987. Print.
- Moss, Laura and Cynthia Sugars. *Canadian Literature in English: Texts and Contexts*. Vol. 2. Toronto: Pearson, 2009. Print.
- Neufeld, James. “A Complicated Contract: Young Rebels of Literature and Dance.” *Queen’s Quarterly* 112.1 (2005): 99-106. Expanded Academic ASAP. Web. 10 Mar. 2010.
- Richler, Noah. “Fictional Bounty.” Rev. of *A Complicated Kindness*, by Miriam Toews. *Toronto Star*. 2 May 2004: D13. ProQuest. Web. 11 Mar. 2010.
- Steffler, Margaret. “Fragments and Absences: Language and Loss in Miriam Toews’s *A Complicated Kindness*.” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 43.3 (2009): 124-45; 246. Literature Online. Web. 18 Feb. 2010.
- Thu, Kendall. “Industrial Agriculture, Democracy, and the Future.” *Beyond Factory Farming: Corporate Hog Farms and the Threat to Public Health, the Environment, and Rural Communities*. Ed. Alexander M. Ervin, Cathy Holtslander, and Darrin Qualman. *Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives*. 2003. Web. 16 Feb. 2010.
- Toews, Miriam. *A Complicated Kindness: A Novel*. Toronto: Knopf, 2004. Print.
- Wyeth, Andrew. *Christina’s World*. 1948. Tempera on gessoed panel. Museum of Mod. Art, New York. MoMA. Web. 10 Mar. 2010.