

DIALOGIZING THE SCRIPTURES:
A BAKHTINIAN READING OF
RUDY WEIBE'S
PEACE SHALL DESTROY MANY

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Rudy Wiebe is one of Canada's foremost contemporary novelists, and an active member of a liberal branch of the Mennonite Brethren Church.

When the Mennonites migrated en mass from Russia to Canada in the 1870s and the 1920s, many sought to continue their tradition of living in closed communities as "a people apart." The more conservative Mennonite colonies put as much geographical distance as they could between themselves and the outside world. They established self-sufficient communal farming settlements on large tracts of land in the prairie provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, where they set up their own schools, financial institutions, and local government bodies. But the most effective barrier the Mennonites erected between themselves and the outside world was the barrier of language. In order to keep the secular world out of earshot, many Mennonite communities strenuously resisted assimilation into either of Canada's two major language groups - English or French. Instead, they used Low German in day-to-day affairs and High German in church matters, just as they had done during their hundred and fifty-year sojourn in Russia. Rudy Wiebe was typical of a generation of Mennonite children in that he spoke no English at all until he entered school in 1940 at six years of age, by which time the German-language Mennonite schools had been absorbed involuntarily into the Anglophone Canadian provincial school system.

Like other traditional Anabaptist groups, Canada's Mennonite church communities are extremely Bible-centred, and highly literalistic in their interpretation of the Scriptures. This literalism is underpinned by certain assumptions about language, assumptions which are sustained by the Mennonites' ability to live as "a people apart". By separating themselves from alien cultural influences, and by resisting change from within their own communities, conservative Mennonites

endeavoured to lock the Scriptures into a fixed ethno-historical context. By fixing the context in which they read the Scriptures, they effectively protected the authority and semantic stability of their received version of the Biblical text. The Mennonites' German Bible, for example, was shielded by the barrier of language from possible assault by voices issuing either from secular mainstream culture, or from the Francophone Catholic and Anglophone Protestant churches in Canada. In effect, the conservative Mennonites carried the Scriptures - or more precisely, a certain reading of them - down through history and across several national borders as if it were in a cocoon, cut off from alien cultural influence and historical change.

In Bakhtinian terms, these conservative, separatist Mennonite communities forced the Scriptures to function monologically, that is, as a single-voiced, unambiguous, internally consistent encoding of a unitary order of truth. To the extent that the closed Mennonite communities were able to fix the context in which the Scriptures could be read, they effectively stabilized the meaning of the text and caused its authority to seem axiomatic. They saw the Bible as issuing from a single centre of authorial control, and resolved the question of the text's manifest multivoicedness by ranking its parts into a hierarchy, with the voice of Jesus - especially the Sermon on the Mount - as supremely authoritative. For these closed Mennonite communities, the Bible was their "sole source of spiritual authority" (Smith 21); and they ensured that the Scriptures always said the same thing by interpreting them always in the same context.

But what happens to this monologized sacred text, and to the unitary truth encoded therein, when the cocoon of the closed, conservative society breaks open? What happens when the community can no longer live as "a people apart"? In one way or another, Rudy Wiebe has devoted his entire creative life to answering this question. Whether writing about Mennonites or Métis, Inuit or Native Indians, he is intrigued by that crucial moment when the boundaries of a closed community disappear, and a people hitherto united in voice, language, and religious vision find themselves suddenly exposed to the confusing plurality of authoritative alien voices which vie for dominance in the wider social world.

Wiebe opens Chapter One of his first novel *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962), with a symbolic breaching of the narrow horizon of a closed Mennonite community. In the spring of 1944, Thom Wiens ploughs his wheatfield in the isolated Mennonite farming settlement of Wapiti in Northern Saskatchewan. Suddenly, a group of Canadian

fighter planes comes roaring out from above the trees that encircle Thom's world. The planes pass low overhead, terrifying the plough horses and engulfing Thom's world in their noise. The planes are engaged in a training exercise. They pose no physical threat to Thom. What they signify, however, is that World War II has arrived. Thom can no longer dismiss the war as just another story on the radio, a far-away turmoil fought by other people somewhere else. The planes are tangible, irrefutable evidence that the war - world history - is here, for everyone, now. No one escapes it!¹

This breaching of the boundary of the closed social world involves Thom in a moral quandary. As a Mennonite, Thom is morally committed to a pacifist stance. But as a Canadian citizen, a member of a wider national community with its own laws, Thom is required to register for military service, to aid in the defence of the country that gave his people asylum. Wiebe's novel *Peace Shall Destroy Many* traces Thom's attempt to find an answer to this dilemma: should he respond to Canada's "call" to join the armed forces, or act in accordance with the Mennonites' long-respected Scriptural prohibition against involvement in violence? With the breaching of the closed social world, the secular authority of Canadian law clashes directly for the first time with the moral authority of the Scriptural text.

Thom has been taught to make moral choices by electing to follow the voice of Christ rather than the voices of men.² What confuses him most profoundly in this instance, however, is that he begins to "hear" the Scriptures differently. The opening of the closed community is crucial because it creates possibilities for the Scriptures to function dialogically rather than as monologue. With the arrival of Joseph Dueck, an "outsider" to the Wapiti church community, Thom's mind opens for the first time to the possibility of multiple readings of the Scriptural text. The "voice" of the Bible "doubles" as it were, leading Thom to the realization that what he thought were "the Scriptures" were really only one of many possible readings of a canonical text that has been mediated--translated, re-voiced--many times over throughout its history. The historicity of the Biblical text makes impossible any clear-cut choice between the voice of Christ and the voices of men: the words of Jesus are accessible only as mediated by other human voices. In *Peace Shall Destroy Many* the Biblical text becomes a site of struggle between Joseph Dueck's dialogizing "outsider's" reading of it, and the reading imposed by the tyrannical local church leader, Deacon Peter Block, whose voice has hitherto monopolized - and monologized - the Scriptures in Wapiti.

Throughout Wiebe's narrative in *Peace Shall Destroy Many* Block and Dueck are respectively identified with monologizing and dialogizing forces. Deacon Block acts consistently to force the Scriptures to function as monologue. To do so, he must force the Mennonite church community into a state of monovocality. As his name suggests, Block cements the separate Mennonite families and individuals of Wapiti into a single-voiced social monolith. He insists that they always speak with one voice - his! He ignores, speaks over, or physically removes any voice which does not say "amen" to his own. Church policy "originated almost exclusively with Block" (p.68), his "big voice covering" all (p.36).³

Deacon Block maintains his power over the Mennonites of Wapiti not only by shouting loudest, but also by intervening in their dialogue with God. Block appropriates the authority the Mennonite community accords the Bible by taking it upon himself to interpret the Scriptures to the congregation: "On every subject," we are told, Block "must place the only word in every man's mouth and they go home and re-chew it for their family" (p.218). Until the arrival of Joseph Dueck, Deacon Block monologizes the Bible by presuming himself the sole qualified mediator between the Mennonite community and their sacred text. Block's voice delivers the Scriptures to the community in a definitive, finalized, monologic form, rather than as a piece of contested textual territory the meaning of which must be socially negotiated through free and open dialogue between different readers.

Block also monologizes the Scriptures by limiting the extent to which non-Mennonites can enter into dialogue with the Mennonites' sacred text. Block attempts to preserve the language barrier which separates the Mennonites' German language version of the Bible from the English, French, Cree, and Russian speaking inhabitants of the Wapiti area. He thunders against the new minister, Joseph Dueck, for addressing an ethnically mixed audience of young people in the English language instead of in the High German traditionally reserved for religious matters. Dueck's choice of English (and Wiebe's as well, one might add) signifies that he places a higher priority on Christian outreach than on preserving the ethnocentricity of the Mennonites' religious beliefs. Dueck opens possibilities for religious dialogue between the Mennonites and their non-Mennonite neighbours by using a language that is common to both groups, rather than a language exclusive to "insiders."

As well as fending off voices that enter the Mennonite community from without, Block attempts to prevent changes in thought or belief

that arise from within the closed community across time. Block rigidly upholds the traditions of those he calls "the fathers" of the Mennonite church. He rejects any possibility that a younger generation might have a right to re-evaluate the inherited moral code. Block elevates cultural traditions to the status of eternal moral laws. Believing that the Mennonite "fathers found the right moral and spiritual action" (pp.202-3), he bluntly denies the cultural relativity and historical contingency of his own moral absolutes, and the Scriptural interpretations upon which they depend.

In opposition to Deacon Block, Joseph Dueck, argues that even if the church fathers had found a morally correct mode of living in nineteenth century Russia, their code of behaviour was right and good in that context only. Under different socio-political circumstances, and in other historical contexts, the same actions might not be right at all. Dueck contends that the moral significance of any given course of action must be re-evaluated over and over in each new context in which it is practised. No action is right or wrong in itself. It can only be judged within its particular context.

The Second World War poses a seemingly unprecedented moral dilemma for the Mennonite community. Strict pacifists, Mennonites have traditionally avoided participating in war at all costs. In the past, in the Russian Mennonite farming villages, "right was right and wrong was wrong. Any situation could be quickly placed into one or the other category" (p.21). But in Canada in 1944, "the circumstances are more involved" (p.47), both in a legal and a moral sense.⁴ Canadian law requires each adult male of military age in Wapiti to choose one of three options: to take up arms against Canada's enemies, to join the Restricted Medical Corps, or to avoid any form of participation by proclaiming their conscientious objection. Deacon Block and his son, Pete, mechanically invoke the ways of the fathers, but abuse the Mennonite ideal of pacifism by using it as a convenient excuse to stay safely at home on the farm to reap the considerable financial rewards of growing food under favourable wartime market conditions. The Blocks refuse to concede to the effect of context on the meaning of a given action; that is, they refuse to acknowledge the historicity or the dialogicity of the act-as-sign.

As Deacon Block advocates a monologic theory of the significance of actions, Joseph Dueck proposes a dialogic model. Dueck urges the Mennonite community to accept that times have changed, and that time-honoured actions no longer necessarily mean what they once meant. He points out that the church community no longer enjoys

exclusive control over the meaning of its time-honoured actions: "outsiders"--the Canadian government--now claim a right to interpret and judge the Mennonites' desire to avoid involvement in the war.

Joseph Dueck causes Thom and other young people in the community of Wapiti to understand that even the most sincere conscientious objectors find themselves participating in the war involuntarily. The option of not participating no longer exists, as one of Thom's friends explains when she says

It was fine to say, "We can have nothing to do with war" when ... wars were skirmishes on the next quarter and the king who led his troops to a day's victory won. Then it was possible--[not to join in. But] the whole world is now in it. We can't avoid it. Father raises pigs because the price is high: some men charged up the Normandy beaches last Tuesday with our bacon in their stomachs (p.47).

Joseph Dueck pushes this argument to its moral conclusion: "Given a war situation, we Mennonites can practise our belief in Canada only because other Canadians are kind enough to fight for our right to our belief. The godless man then dies for the belief of the Christian! (p.60). As Thom vacillates over whether or not he should exempt himself from the Canadian war effort, Wiebe explores what might be called the diachronic dialogicity of action. An unprecedented historical situation - the Second World War -makes ambivalent the morality of the Mennonites' traditional refusal to fight, which previously had been only right. The action itself does not change, but its meaning becomes subject to reinterpretation or revoicing in each new socio-historical context.

Under Joseph Dueck's influence, the Mennonites of Wapiti begin to understand that they must contend at once with the shock of the new and with the shock of the socially "other." The Second World War brings a powerful, invasive "other" - the Canadian government - into the Mennonites' sequestered lives, an "other" which claims an equal, if not superior right to confer meaning on their actions. As the legal authority of the state comes into direct conflict with the moral authority of the Bible, the act of "non-participation" fits into two completely separate systems of meaning, each recognized as supremely authoritative by the society which propounds it. What the state condemns as treachery, the church praises as pacifism. As the Mennonites begin to engage with socially alien interpretations of their way of life, their tradition of "not participating" in wars acquires the ambiguity and ambivalence of a non-verbal pun. "Non-participation," in short, becomes a dialogized sign.

The same dialogic principle can be applied to linguistic signification. All words -including texts of the Scriptures - are generated and interpreted under specific historical and cultural circumstances, in contexts which determine perceptions of meaning and authority as much as do the words of the text itself. Prevent contextual variation, as did the conservative Mennonite communities, and one stabilizes meaning and preserves perceptions of textual authority. But what happens to the meaning and authority of the Scriptures if one allows that each reading (or voicing) is unique because conditioned by unprecedented historical and cultural contingencies attaching to the interpretive context? Potentially, God's Word could dissolve into a cacophony of conflicting relative truths and moral laws.

In *Peace Shall Destroy Many* Thom is convinced that "the teachings of Christ, rightly applied" (p.87) offer the solution to all moral problems; the Bible carries these "teachings" down through history. But strictly speaking, each reading or voicing of the Bible is historically unprecedented, unique, different. The text is never voiced or read the same way twice. And if the Bible can be re-interpreted in each context of re-reading - by reinflecting its words, ranking its parts into new hierarchies, and annexing it into new historical and discursive contexts - how may Thom or anyone else know whether or not they apply Jesus' teachings "rightly"? Taken to its furthest extreme, the dialogic principle distributes semantic authority equally between all readers, and indeed between all "voicings" of the Biblical text. A dialogic model of the Scriptures would uphold all readings as equally authoritative and semantically "right." What happens, though, to the notion of Scriptural truth in the face of a theory of language that renders all readings or voicings of a text equally valid, and all absolute truths culturally and historically contingent? What happens to long-term theological surety if the received scriptural text is acknowledged as subject to past, present, and future (mis)appropriation? In the face of question such as these, Thom yearns to undo the long history of human mediations of Jesus' voice, to go back to the distant past, and recover the lost original meaning of Jesus' words: "Christ's teachings stood clear in the Scriptures," he maintains, "could he but scrape them bare of all their acquired meanings and see them as those first disciples had done, their feet in the dust of Galilee" (p.237).

So in *Peace Shall Destroy Many* Wiebe positions his young protagonist in a space between two equally unacceptable theories of textuality: between, on the one hand, Deacon Block's naive, monologic, fundamentalist, politically oppressive model of the Scriptures, in which

the voice of one dogmatic man stands presumptuously for the voice of God; and, on the other hand, Joseph Dueck's more democratic, dialogic model of the Scriptures which views the text as a site where voices enter into dialogue to negotiate meaning, but which decentres semantic authority to so great an extent that truth and certainty threaten to dissipate into a spiritually disabling relativity. As Thom searches for "the path of God's revelation" (p.237), he finds the polyphonic "void of splintered dogmas" (p.235) no less repugnant than "one man's misguided interpretation of tradition" (p.237).

Now, across the course of his career so far, novel by novel, beginning with *Peace Shall Destroy Many* Rudy Wiebe has articulated this theoretical dilemma in increasingly complex ways. In fact, when his novels are viewed in chronological order, they form a series of experiments in which Wiebe progressively compounds the dialogicity of his own texts to see just how far he can go without relinquishing his position at the centre of authorial control. In other words, what we see in Wiebe's writing - not simply at the thematic level I've been discussing so far but also in his narrative and linguistic strategies - is an increasing tension between dialogizing and monologizing mechanisms. It is as if Wiebe's writing were itself subject to a law of textual dynamics which demanded that every dialogizing action has an equal and opposite monologizing reaction.

In *Peace Shall Destroy Many* the Mennonite community experiences a dialogization of the Scriptures due to an entry of alien voices into their hitherto closed community. As a novelist, Wiebe dialogizes the Scriptures in a converse manner: by taking the sacred Word out of the closed Mennonite church community to disseminate it across heteroglossic or multivoiced social space. In a Mennonite Brethren Herald editorial Wiebe wrote in 1963, he asserts that "the written word is still the most effective means of spreading the gospel."⁵ He makes this point in the context of a broader argument for more active proselytizing in the English language on the part of the Mennonite Brethren Church. Recognizing that the Mennonites' message must compete against, and enter into dialogue with "thousands of voices clamouring for people's attention" (Herald 3), Wiebe sees a particular need to effect evangelical outreach using discursive forms which do not repel, intimidate, or bore the unconverted.

Unlike a sermon or a religious treatise, the novel is a genre which does not preach only to the converted. Nor does it address a specialized readership of theologians. Its utility for Wiebe lies in its capacity to scatter the Word into the territory of "others," the wider,

more diverse audience not addressed by traditional forms of religious literature. Wiebe's novels transmit portions of the Scriptures into an unforeseeable variety of discursive, historical, and cultural contexts, where the meaning and authority of the text become open to negotiation. The usual social, linguistic, institutional, and ritualistic boundaries insulating the sacred Word from "other" words disappears. By their very existence, as well as through the stories they tell, Wiebe's novels liberate the Bible from what Bakhtin calls "the dungeon of a single context" (1981, 247) into a space where it may potentially engage dialogically with the manifold voices that speak in the wider social world.

So Wiebe finds himself facing the same theoretical dilemma as his character, Thom Wiens, does in the novel *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. Wiebe does not want to preach to his readers, to behave like a Deacon Block, hoarding all authority to himself so he can more forcefully impose his overt message on his audience. Novelists who do that sort of thing succeed only in inspiring readerly impulses to throw the novel in the fire and never buy another by that author. Wiebe is very aware of the politics of address, the variety of power relationships that can exist between speakers or writers and their audiences. He therefore avoids the practice of verbal coercion. Yet to some extent, Wiebe's intentions as a novelist are not only exploratory but also rhetorical and perhaps even didactic. He therefore he finds himself in something of a theoretical quandary: the dialogizing mechanisms he activates in his own texts, and the dialogizing influences he exerts on the Scriptures by disseminating them into alien territory, run counter to his rhetorical purposes (which are implicitly monologizing). The political question Wiebe faces as an evangelical writer is this: how can a non-coercive novelist disseminate his reading of the Scriptures into heteroglossic space without letting the meaning he articulates become lost in a diversity of readers' voicings of his novel?

In the six major novels Wiebe has published so far,⁶ (which are not all about Mennonites, by the way) he has experimented with various narrative techniques and modes of refracting his authorial voice in an effort to negotiate a path between a politically coercive monologism that is intellectually naive, and a more democratic dialogism that threatens the textual foundation of religious certainty. Time doesn't permit me to discuss Wiebe's strategies in detail, however, one point deserves particular emphasis: although Wiebe's novels disseminate the Scriptures into a diversity of contexts in heteroglossic space, there is a sense in which he still fixes their context and hence stabilizes their

meaning, not by locking them into an ethno-historical cocoon as the conservative Mennonites did, but by setting them in a fixed immediate verbal context. Wiebe's novels disseminate the sacred Word wrapped up in other words. As a consequence, readers of Wiebe's novels engage dialogically with the words of the Scriptures only as those words are mediated by the larger utterance which is the text of Wiebe's novel.

In what is perhaps Wiebe's best-known and most widely acclaimed novel, *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973), there is a wonderful image which makes concrete the idea of what Wiebe is trying to do. Big Bear was a leader of the Plains Cree People in the 1870s and 80s. His leadership was based not on physical prowess but on his voice and his powers as a religious visionary. Everywhere he went, Big Bear carried a "sacred bundle" called Chief's Son's Hand, a tanned bear's paw wrapped up in many layers of cloth, and consulted whenever he needed divine guidance from the Great Bear Spirit. When Big Bear wished to consult Chief's Son's Hand, he would ritually unwrap the bundle, opening up the pieces of cloth layer by layer, until the sacred bear's paw at the centre of the bundle was revealed. In similar manner, Wiebe ritualizes his readers' approach to the Scriptural word. By wrapping it up in a bundle of other words which must be negotiated before and after, he controls his readers' orientation to the Scriptural word. Wiebe's novels may be viewed as word-bundles. Each one forms a protective framing context for certain Scriptural words, a context designed to shape readers' perceptions of their meaning and their authority.

But in the context of the theoretical questions I've been addressing today, the image of Big Bear's sacred bundle has more profound ramifications. Each time Big Bear consulted Chief's Son's Hand, he would place a new piece of cloth around the sacred bear's paw, not on the outside of the bundle, but on the inside, immediately around the paw itself. As Wiebe found out when he tracked Big Bear's Sacred Bundle down in a museum in New York, the outside wrappings - the oldest - were faded and worn, but as one unwrapped the concentric layers of cloth, they became progressively brighter and newer looking, with the most radiant being of course right next to the paw itself. The cloth wrappings around the paw formed a type of historical record of Big Bear's past consultations of this sacred object. Each time Big Bear unwrapped Chief's Son's Hand, each time a new situation arose in which he needed guidance, he would have to handle, but ultimately put aside, all these layers of cloth to get to the sacred object at the centre.

For me, the image of Big Bear's sacred bundle, with the newest cloth at the centre and the oldest on the outside, addresses the problem of the historicity of the Scriptures in an intriguing way. Wiebe suggests that over time, each new reading or revoicing of the Scriptures is like that last layer of cloth, the bright one at the centre, right next to the sacred bear's paw. This model runs contrary to our usual assumption that because each new reading follows chronologically after its predecessors, it is "further away" from the historical original context in which Jesus uttered the words recorded in the Gospels. In *Peace Shall Destroy Many* Thom Wiens wishes he could undo the historicity of the Scriptures. He believes that "Christ's teaching stood clear in the Scriptures" (p.237), but he finds them obscured by other peoples' readings, smothered by all the human voices that mediate Christ's words. For Thom, the prospect of the "tradition" - past readings, the layers of cloth - forms a daunting barrier between himself and the "true" meaning of the Scriptural words which was clear, he imagines, in the originary context of their utterance. But in the image of Big Bear's sacred bundle, where each new reading of the sacred object is literally closer to originary sign, successive readings of the Gospels are envisaged as moving progressively closer to the meaning of Jesus' words in their original context, rather than further away from that meaning. Each unwrapping of the sacred bundle, each new rereading or revoicing of the Bible, is an attempt to fulfil Thom Wiens' wish in *Peace Shall Destroy Many* to dehistoricize the Scriptures, and to "scrape [Jesus' teachings] bare of all their acquired meanings and see them as those first disciples had done, their feet in the dust of Galilee" (p.237).

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NOTES

1. Wiebe describes his own experience of suddenly expanded social horizons to Shirley Neuman in "Unearthing Language: An Interview with Rudy Wiebe and Robert Kroetsch," in *Δ Voice in the Land: Essays By and About Rudy Wiebe* (ed) W.J. Keith (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1981) p.232.
2. Mennonite church leaders were at that time invariably male.

3. All page numbers cited parenthetically refer to *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962) (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972 ed).
4. In the First World War all Mennonites living in Canada were automatically exempted from military service under the terms of the Mennonites' original immigration agreement with the Dominion Government. But those who entered

Canada between 1923 and 1930, in the second great migration from Russia, were admitted on the understanding that they were legally obliged to participate like any other Canadian citizens in the defence of their adopted country. Wiebe establishes that the Mennonites of Wapiti came to Canada in the second wave of migration. For a more detailed analysis of the complexities of the "Russländer" Mennonites' legal and moral position, see E.K. Francis, In Search of Utopia: The Mennonites in Manitoba (Altona, Manitoba: D.W. Friesen, 1955) pp.232-42.

5. See Wiebe's "Church Prospect 1963: Writing," in The Mennonite Brethren Herald (11 January 1963), p.3.

6. Peace Shall Destroy Many (1962), First and Vital Candle (1966), The Blue Mountains of China (1970), The Temptations of Big Bear (1973), The Scorched-Wood People (1977) and My Lovely Enemy (1983).

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3. S. Neuman, "Unearthing Language: An Interview with Rudy Wiebe and Robert Kroetsch" in A Voice in the Land: Essays By and About Rudy Wiebe (ed) W.J. Keith (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1981), pp.226-47.

4. C.H. Smith, The Story of the Mennonites 4th ed revised and enlarged by C. Krahn (Newton, Kansas: Mennonite Publications Office, 1957).

5. R. Wiebe, Peace Shall Destroy

Many (1962) (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972).

6. R. Wiebe, "Church Prospect 1963: Writing" an editorial in the Mennonite Brethren Herald, 11 January, 1963, p.3.

7. R. Wiebe, The Temptations of Big Bear (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973).

8. R. Wiebe, "Bear Spirit in a Strange Land" in A Voice in the Land: Essays By and About Rudy Wiebe Op.Cit. pp.143-49.