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# Firing the Regional Can(n)on: Liberal Pluralism, Social Agency, and David Adams Richards's Miramichi Trilogy

Christopher Armstrong and Herb Wyile

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Article abstract

David Adams Richards's Miramichi trilogy (Nights Below Station Street, Evening Snow Will Bring Such Peace, and For Those Who Hunt the Wounded Down) resists certain forms of critical reception and ideological appropriation. It presents an opportunity to rethink the assumptions, biases, and missions of liberal pluralism and to reflect on the political effects of canon revision. This essay seeks to reassess both the assumptions of the framework in which Janice Kulyk Keefer, in Under Eastern Eyes (1987), slots Richards's work, and the ways in which his Miramichi trilogy diverges from - and stages resistance to - his critical reception and cononization, raising not just questions of region and cononicity but also of literacy and class.

# FIRING THE REGIONAL CAN(N)ON: LIBERAL PLURALISM, SOCIAL AGENCY, AND DAVID ADAMS RICHARDS'S MIRAMICHI TRILOGY

*Christopher Armstrong and Herb Wyile*

There is little doubt that since the 1960s, Western cultural hegemony has suffered a crisis of delegitimation, with thinkers as diverse as Jean-François Lyotard and Allan Bloom identifying (and respectively celebrating or lamenting) a loss of faith in the narratives of progress consolidated in the postwar era. A revisionary impulse, rooted in the protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s, fuelled a challenge to the presumed political neutrality of capitalism's and the state's mediation of social life, in the name of the realities of race, class, and gender. The politics of spatial divisions and cultural differences within nations, however, has received less emphasis, even in a country as preoccupied with geography and space as Canada, but the situation is starting to change. Historians in regions outside central Canada, for instance, have begun to challenge mainstream history and economic development, with historians in Atlantic Canada pointing out the ways in which the "misguided symmetries" (Forbes 114) of national policies have precluded the full participation of the region in the political and economic life of Canada. Literary critics in various parts of the country have joined such challenges in the field of history by addressing the regional imbalances that have existed historically in the canon as one of the major shortcomings of the way in which Canadian literature has been constituted. The most significant revisionist criticism to come out of Atlantic Canada thus far, Janice Kulyk Keefer's *Under Eastern Eyes* (1987), made a significant case in liberal pluralist terms for the inclusion of Maritime texts in the national literary canon, casting the Maritime writer as a marginalized, revisionist, regional representative. Yet insofar as Keefer

imposed a thematic scheme on Maritime literary production and took the reception of its writers as symptomatic of the suppressed political and class stakes of regional-national conflict, she has perhaps bounded the debate to which regional critics and writers will feel compelled to respond. The limitations of Keefer's pluralist arguments for the inclusion of Maritime writing in the canon of Canadian literature become especially clear when those arguments are applied to the recent work of perhaps the region's most prominent contemporary writer, David Adams Richards.

To be sure, Richards shares some of the concerns voiced in polemical and revisionist criticism from the Atlantic region. He has long complained about the neglect and misrepresentation of writers from the region on the part of what he takes to be a largely centralist Canadian literary establishment. Moreover, his work is situated in the tradition of the realist novel, and is therefore a powerful centrepiece for Keefer's contention that realist fiction continues to constitute the mainstream of Maritime literary production. Yet while Keefer's study and such revisionist works as E.R. Forbes's collection of historiographical essays, *Challenging the Regional Stereotype* (1989), share an interest in redressing negative images of the region, Richards's writing seems resistant to a redressing of these images in political terms. What follows seeks to reassess both the assumptions of the framework in which Keefer slots Richards's work, and the ways in which his recently completed Miramichi trilogy diverges from — and stages resistances to — his critical reception and canonization, raising not just questions of region and canonicity but of literacy and class as well.

A realist aesthetic is the linchpin of Keefer's revisionist argument. Her account of the marginalization of Maritime literature in the canon insists that the critical disrepute of this mode is at least partially to blame for its neglect (6). Moreover, her construction of the identity of the Maritime author insists on an active interest in the facts of disparity (6) and a realism that serves revisionist ends (12). A full chapter of Keefer's book is devoted to "Maritime realism," which, according to Keefer, reflects an "engagement with . . . social and economic realities," "one of the essential characteristics of Maritime writing" (12). Maritime realists are, furthermore, mediators of class divisions, providing "new strategies . . . to help us read the lives of the inarticulate and impoverished" (161) — in

brief, a speaking for those who cannot speak for themselves. The critic occupies an important position in this argument. For Keefer, what she calls (following A.D. Nuttall) transparent criticism names the interpreter of Maritime texts as the guarantor of the "mimetic authenticity" of the writer's fictional world. Taken together, critic and writer contest "canonical reality — that which is complacently and agreeably life-affirming" (162), an attitude, she suggests, that is "a long-standing literary tradition in the Maritimes, a tradition in which the facts of poverty and experience of impoverishment engage both author and text" (162).

Such a revisionist framework shares important features with the liberal pluralism that has energized the canon debate in North America over the last decade. John Guillory has recently argued that canon revision is based on an "imaginary politics," by which he means the critique and correction of stereotypical images of social groups (8). Imaginary politics, Guillory argues, while important and necessary, confuses the political and aesthetic meanings of the word "representation." First, revisionists construe "representation" in the canon as a means of reflecting the diversity of social "constituencies" in the nation at large (7); authors and texts are "representatives" of previously neglected or excluded groups. Second, the literary works revisionists seek to include in the canon are seen to be realistic reflections of the experience of the social groups from which their authors come (10). The reason for this conflation lies in the fact that, for revisionists, the author is more important as a social identity than as a genius, a paragon of literary excellence (10). Moreover, writes Guillory, the category of social identity "is too important politically to yield ground to theoretical arguments which might complicate the status of representation in literary texts, for the simple reason that the latter mode of representation is *standing in for* representation in the political sphere" (10-11).

But not only do revisionists conflate politics and aesthetics; they also neglect important institutional questions about the variable distribution of what Guillory calls "cultural capital" — "access to the means of literary production and consumption" (ix). He understands one such form of cultural capital as literacy, the ability to read and write as well as the acquisition of the means for appropriating literature in ways that confer cultural

literacy (ix, 18-19). Guillory contends that a consideration of access to literacy must precede and inform any discussion of active exclusion on the basis of identity or social experience, for writers differ not merely in terms of these identities or experiences but also according to class and education (viii, 18). Revisionists ultimately must take account of some crucial questions in their efforts to promote diversity: How is representation in the canon commensurate with representation in social and political life? How representative are the writers presumed to speak for certain constituencies? How does representation in the canon redress the experience of social and political marginalization? How representative are the writers presumed to speak for certain constituencies?

Such considerations are particularly relevant for Richards's writing and career. As Lennard Davis, for one, has argued, with the professionalizing of writing the novelist is "looked on as an expert, not just in fantasy or simply wordsmanship but in real life, the sum of communal knowledge, and knowledge of general philosophical and moral issues" (143); the way that Richards has been heralded as a voice for the marginalized, making the lives of the dispossessed and inarticulate available to and palatable for his readers through his sympathetic portraits, certainly demonstrates this effect. In other words, if Richards has gained recognition as a successful regional writer (almost an oxymoron in Canada, where to succeed is to graduate from being regional), it is the "regional" half of that label which has been emphasized in his career. This celebration of his "representation" of the region, his providing access to a marginal world, raises a number of problems, not the least of which is the difficulty of reconciling such a view with Richards's writing.

Keefer's treatment of Richards in *Under Eastern Eyes* provides a good example of this privileging of world over text in assessments of Richards's work. But if Keefer bases her definition of Maritime realism on such a politics of the image and argues for a revaluing of the cultural capital of regional literature, Richards's recently completed trilogy, beginning with *Nights Below Station Street* (1988), is fundamentally at odds with such a revisionist politics. Not only does Richards refuse a mediation conceived in political terms, but his novels, in raising questions of access to literacy, of social power, and of self-reliance, appear to foreclose

the possibility of redressing what he takes to be a neglect of Maritime writers through a politics grounded in the affirmation of a marginalized identity. Keefer's account of Richards's writing concluded with his powerful 1981 novel *Lives of Short Duration*. A number of developments in Richards's work and career since then prompt a reassessment of her critical perspective on his work: an aesthetic shift in his narrative strategies, his entry into the national canon, and a strident defense of his writing and a repudiation of its reception and ideological appropriation. Richards's writing since *Lives of Short Duration* has been pared down; the style has shifted from what can be called a phenomenological realism to a prose which, as he puts it, allows both narrative analysis and subjectivity (Scherf 163). Furthermore, both inside and outside the region, Richards has achieved canonical status, predicated largely on the view of him as representative of the regional working class. Finally, Richards has challenged what he takes to be a liberal hegemony in the Canadian literary establishment, insisting that his work has been wrongly represented as regional and leftist. His vocal resistance to progressive social thought has been accompanied by an eschewal of the role of spokesman for the region; and didactic interpolations in his prose, echoing the voice of his recently published essays, have laid out the philosophical and moral assumptions of his vision.

The Miramichi trilogy reflects a shift from a largely phenomenological realism, one in which memory and perception are dominant narrative strategies, to a spare, analytical, discursive narrative prose. What is striking in this regard is the way in which the interest in a phenomenological bracketing, in order to evoke a subjective sense of time and place, has been transformed into a broad philosophical and ideological statement about the relationship of the individual to the social sphere. If an attitude of attentiveness to things, emotions, and memories in the context of immediate perception is characteristic of novels such as *Blood Ties* (1976) and *Lives of Short Duration*, the narrative discourse of the Miramichi trilogy is marked by a defensive and polemical tone. Moreover, Richards's construction of his protagonists in the trilogy — all of whom have been socially marginalized to some degree for having, to quote Richards's description of one of them, "qualities greater and lesser than the qualities it took to make

oneself socially acceptable" (*Wounded* 108) — is characterized by a curious combination of a disruption of causality and a certain sense of inevitability. It is said of Ivan Bastarache, the protagonist of *Evening Snow Will Bring Such Peace* (1990), for instance, that he "knew very well that, no matter his own part, he had become a scapegoat in some larger affair that he had no control over, until it ran its course" (161); the same might be said of the principals of all three novels. *Nights Below Station Street* focuses on the attempts of Joe Walsh, a chronically unemployed, reformed alcoholic, to achieve a certain social respectability and security for his family, while withstanding the condescension of fair-weather friends and acquaintances who feel they have achieved that respectability already. In *Evening Snow Will Bring Such Peace*, Ivan becomes a pariah in his community because he is reputed to have beaten up his girlfriend Cindi. While Ivan quietly watches over the people he cares for and suffers the hostility created by his alleged offence, the narrative describes a ripple effect, as developments within the community of family and friends outside of which he stands gain momentum, reverberate and ebb. The final volume of the trilogy, *For Those Who Hunt the Wounded Down* (1993), takes this pattern of social transgression and ostracism a step further. Jerry Bines is a convicted murderer (though some doubt is cast on the validity of the conviction) who has taken on an almost mythic status in his community. The novel centres on his return to the Miramichi and his inevitable demise at the hands of his nemesis, Gary Percy Rils. But just as significant is a series of encounters between Jerry and Vera Pillar, a feminist who treats Jerry as a case study of the effects of oppressive patriarchal relations. The endings of all three novels share a certain romanticism, as the protagonists prevail — if not survive — under circumstances that position them as the moral superiors of their critics: Joe, having been patronized by his neighbor Myhrra and her boyfriend Vye throughout *Nights Below Station Street*, saves Vye when he and Myhrra have a car accident during a blizzard just after their wedding, Joe "not knowing the processes of how this had all happened, only understanding that it was now irrevocable because it had" (225). In *Evening Snow*, Ivan, having reconciled with Cindi after she is abandoned by her supporters, dies after trying to save his father's horse from a forest fire which his father has deliber-

ately set; the novel ends with his epitaph, "Ivan Bastarache/A Man/1957-1979" (226). Jerry Bines dies at the conclusion of the trilogy trying to protect his family and others — including Vera and her brother Ralphie — from the malevolent Rils.

Richards's resistance to the role of class mediator or regional spokesperson — as Keefer characterizes the role in *Under Eastern Eyes* — is accompanied by an insistent valorizing of 'life' over form, as instanced in his claim for the imaginative 'life' of his characters and in the central importance in his fiction of characterization and narrative conflict. However, as narrative theory has shown, texts cannot forego some form of mediation. While Richards has argued that his narrative strategies must be viewed as the pragmatic negotiation of his characters in their environments (Scherf 163), the narratorial interpolations that distinguish his recent novels nevertheless reveal a prescriptive universalism. Indeed, the aesthetic practice of the entire trilogy appears to be a kind of naturalism grounded in religious and moral terms. As Frank Davey's reading of *Nights Below Station Street* has shown, Richards's narrative discourse is set within a resolutely deterministic framework.

The narrative voices across the trilogy are predisposed to place under suspicion reason, causality, and larger complexes of social meaning, privileging instead spontaneity, chance, and unself-consciousness. In *Nights Below Station Street*, for instance, an important contrast is developed between the academic, reasoned concern of Vera and the unshakeable, spontaneous generosity of the Walshes, who find it difficult to achieve the kind of social respectability that Vera has acquired. Vera embodies a consistent theme in the trilogy: the questionable sincerity of those with an academic, liberal perspective — a theme sounded, for instance, when Adele's poverty is contrasted with the *faux* poverty of the university crowd (including Vera) with whom she tries to ingratiate herself:

> However, because Adele had been poor all of her life she had seen more of life by the age of sixteen than a lot of these people — or at least a lot of life some people coming from university had taken courses on and pretended to be dismayed about. It was becoming a cultural thing to be dismayed at the right times about the right things. Adele had

> seen and heard more of all of the things that were becoming sanctioned as the concerns of the day, but she always measured herself against these people, and always found herself lacking. (48)

In this conflict between un-self-conscious, independent action and collective, premeditated altruism, Richards sides with the Walshes, as his comments about the novel reveal: "Collective altruism is accepted as proper and right. . . . However Rita and Joe have been doing things for others all their lives with no recognition of their deeds as being altruistic" (qtd. in Hovey 20). "Spontaneous action always frees you," Richards argues; "determined action never does" (Scherf 160). Richards is right, of course, that everyday heroism is a subject worthy of literary representation and that those who are socially stigmatized (for whatever reason) deserve as well to be celebrated. Yet the idea that premeditated action, especially that of the socially respectable, is always a form of oppression needs to be questioned.

Such a philosophical world-view obviously discounts the possibility that "determined action" — which appears to include not only personal machination but also social reform and state planning — can be a force for good in society. In Richards's fictive world, voluntarist affirmations of social identity are the object of deep suspicion, even hostility. This suspicion is reflected particularly in the consistent disjunction between conscious intention and the act of speaking, most prominently in the case of Ivan's father Antony: "Again, Antony believed that everything he had said was true, when ten minutes ago, he hadn't known what it was he was going to say. But it seemed that every thing he said was for a reason, all of which would become clear" (40). This disjunction suggests that self-affirmation and premeditation are self-serving because meaning can never be grasped at the moment of utterance and is afterwards endorsed as if it were meant to be. Consequently, the characters receiving the most sympathetic treatment are those least able or least inclined to articulate their identities, their desires, their sense of what is right.

In contrast, the most striking feature of the resistance to the kind of voluntarist affirmations of social identity on which Keefer's pluralism is based is the way in which any kind of socialized agency is treated in the trilogy. The negotiation of the

social realm is fraught with misrepresentation, is suspect or false — almost always valued negatively in Richards's narrative discourse, as the description of Antony's grumbling indicates: "Ivan had noticed that Antony had gotten into what Ivan called 'The World War Two Factor,' and he would occasionally blame his lot in life on the fact that there was a bias against him because he was French" (*Evening Snow* 23). The Acadian carnival Vera and her husband Nevin attend in *Nights Below Station Street* punctures their expectations of a warm, inclusive and authentic experience, and is explicitly questioned by the narrator: "People seemed to want to prove how uninhibited their culture was. And when people tell you that they are not restrained or inhibited, and have authenticity, they are also suggesting that you are restrained and inhibited and lack that which is authentic" (159). Such affirmations of identity and particularly the motivation of characters advocating progressive causes tend to be viewed skeptically, either by the narrator, by Richards's protagonists, or by other socially marginalized characters such as Adele Walsh or the curmudgeonly Dr. Hennessey, who serves as something of a touchstone throughout the trilogy. Hennessey is constructed as being kind and sympathetic beneath a gruff and confrontational posture, and his belligerent yet contradictory opposition to progressive causes (generally seen as anachronistic by those he opposes) often mirrors the perspective of Richards's narrators. At one point in *Evening Snow*, as Ivan is being publicly blasted for his alleged brutality, Hennessey defends him and questions the integrity of Ivan's accusers: "There's lots of ways people hide bigotry from them selves. . . . Today's way is progressive concern" (166). As Davey observes of Hennessey, "his conservatism is constructed as resting on more profound moral concerns than do the liberalisms he opposes" (25). While there is little question that altruism can harbour a mixture of motives, the crucial question is the representative validity of such observations as Hennessey's; indeed, the issue extends beyond the overt didactic interpolations in the trilogy to the larger question of characterization as well — particularly that of Richards's ostensibly progressive antagonists.

The majority of the antagonists in the novels have achieved a certain level of social respectability — enough, certainly, so that they are acutely conscious of others' lack of it — and come across as

self-aggrandizing, hypocritical, calculating, yet insecure. Myhrra, in *Nights Below Station Street*, and Cindi's fair-weather friend Ruby Madgill, in *Evening Snow*, for instance, devote themselves to helping others (Ruby in a fairly *ad hoc* fashion and Myhrra by volunteering at the hospital), but their motivation is constructed as *self*-concern rather than *genuine* concern for others. Ruby's actions in particular are generated by a desire for power, attention, and titillation, including her counselling Cindi to have an abortion:

> It was not inherent in Ruby to forgo anything that was new or irreverent—and this is primarily what attracted her to abortion. What umbrellaed her concern was not so much that it would be right, but that it would be rebellious and gain attention. Like everything else Ruby did. (133-34)

The observations of the narrators direct the reader in interpreting the significance of the action, particularly where the motives of the socially empowered are concerned. At the apex of Cindi's celebrity as a social cause in *Evening Snow*, for instance, the narrator observes that the people who "rushed in and out of [Cindi's] life . . . had no idea that they partook in humiliating her. In fact, if they had been told this, they would deny it with that tumultuous anger that liberal thinkers often mistake for concern over human rights" (48). Throughout the trilogy, premeditated social concern is consistently portrayed as compromised, contradictory, and whimsical.

In the final volume of the trilogy, *For Those Who Hunt the Wounded Down*, the confrontation of the socially empowered and the socially marginalized assumes centre stage, with a parallel being drawn between the sociological feminism of Vera and the physical menace of Gary Percy Rils, who stalks Jerry Bines like a hunter throughout the latter stages of the novel; the sense of merciless pursuit suggested by the title is clearly intended to implicate Vera as well. Vera fixes on Jerry as the focus of her book on violence and patriarchy, because of his notoriety on the river and because of local stories depicting his relationship with his father as abusive; to be sure, rather than being interested in him as an individual, she wants to fit his history into a pre-determined scheme:

> He was going to be one of the many people she would write about, but she felt that he would be at the centre of a long history of "maleness" and "patriarchy," which is how she described it, to her friends and devotees.

> She felt that she too would become famous with this book, at least in a small way amongst a certain group. (23)

Richards's narrative discourse is resolutely overdetermined in its characterization of her as calculating and self-aggrandizing; Vera's project is framed as entirely self-serving. Here, a sociological vocabulary is constructed as an instance of middle-class, educated violence against the verbally unsophisticated Bines:

> But since [Bines] never mentioned the word "love," Vera took this to mean that his family didn't love — and that love was replaced by the violence of a domineering father. Which proved her case in a way about the things she at this moment believed — that the idea of love comes with being able to articulate love, which to Vera was part of the prominent lexicon of progressive thought. (170-71)

During the interviews she conducts with Jerry, she exhibits a lack of sympathy and concern for him, and almost wilfully misconstrues Jerry and his history in order to use him to demonstrate conclusions she has already reached. Her sociological discourse shares in the obsessive determinism that Richards embeds in all thought, utterance, and action, while embodying an oppressive form of intellectual violence to the less verbally sophisticated. Jerry, for instance, assumes that Vera's interest in him is genuine, and when he attempts to kiss her, after the interviews have been finished, she repudiates him to her friends as brutal — "but she felt she had to say this, and it was what others would expect her to say" (185). At the end of the novel, after Jerry is stabbed to death by Gary Percy Rils, Adele, Jerry's cousin, sees Vera's book on Jerry, *The Victims of Patriarchy (and Its Inevitable Social Results)*, in a bookstore, and her reaction clearly equates Vera's treatment of Jerry with Rils's: "She saw Vera's book on a shelf near the door and glanced at it, but she never bought it. Something about it made her think of it as wounding someone in the heart, hunting someone who was wounded down" (224). Vera's academic, progressive liberalism is consistently constructed as ruthless and hypocritical and her character is clearly intended to serve as an ironic foil to the erstwhile "criminal" Jerry.

While such social tensions are evident in Richards's work prior to the trilogy, the presentation of these tensions in the trilogy is much more explicitly managed and mediated. The narratorial

intrusions in the three novels serve to anticipate and forestall such readings of Richards's protagonists as Vera's and to shift the focus to the ostensible contradictions and oppressiveness of progressive social reform and middle-class intellectual sophistication. Indeed, such inclinations are present to the extent that the cinematic scene of Jerry's battle to the death with Rils in *For Those Who Hunt the Wounded Down* finishes with this lyrical touch:

> The air was still, and darkness coming, and music played, complementing the way classical music does complement the idea of parkas and toques and hands that have been battered most of their lives by work. Does complement the mills and the frost into the earth rather than the sophisticates who would snigger at a failed colleague in a room. (208)

That Richards's lyrical prose, a distinctive feature of his writing, flows in such a key sequence into a withering image of middle-class pettiness and malice is indicative of the centrality of his concerns with social power — not just in the novel but in the whole trilogy. The resulting didacticism of the trilogy, combined with its traditional realist aesthetic, closes the reader out of the narrative, a problematical effect when viewed in relation to current postmodern interests in the reader's creative role in the construction of the text. Having experienced the perils of reader response, at least in the form of critics' characterizations of his work and his fictive world, Richards may well have felt it more important to underline his message than to grant his readers the freedom to respond to that world without such narratorial directives; he has observed, for instance, that the portrait of Vera in *For Those Who Hunt the Wounded Down* is "the product of interviews with people who think that because these people in my books slap their children or hit their wives, they're incapable of love" (qtd. in Ross A13). A provocative statement, but the assumption seems to be that only middle class reviewers would hold such opinions and that forgiveness for social violence or the possibility of love is conceivable only in the terms of Richards's moral vision.

The opposition between the forces of social reform — embodied in the trilogy in the likes of Myhrra, Ruby Madgill and particularly Vera Pillar — and Richards's socially ostracized protagonists demonstrates the inapplicability to Richards's later writing of the model of transparent realism described in *Under Eastern Eyes*.

Richards's critique of progressive thought, particularly as represented by Vera, is consistently overdetermined in the interventions of the narrative voice of the three novels. As a result, the trilogy often appears to be a didactic exercise, a set of modern morality tales about the dangers of progressive political correctness — to be sure, a practice that is at odds with Richards's valorizing of "life." In this respect the trilogy is ripe for a deconstructive reading, as Richards's critique of such sociological determinism as Vera's and his privileging of spontaneity and unreflective notions of identity are themselves thoroughly deterministic. To be fair, however, while the moral conflicts in the trilogy are cut and dried, they are not thoroughly programmatic to the point of melodrama (though they come dangerously close), as Richards's antagonists are, at least part of the time, treated sympathetically and do not function as the caricatures that it is easy to make them out to be. Vera and Ruby are the targets of satire not because of what they stand for or who they are, but because of the *way* they stand for various causes — that is, the self-conscious, self-serving, self-aggrandizing nature of their participation in the social realm. Nonetheless, the effect is to cast the reform identities of feminism and middle-class progressivism as inherently pernicious or suspect forces in social life. Without a doubt, the trilogy reflects a decline in the subtlety of characterization and narrative conflict in Richards's work (the gentle giant Joe Walsh, for instance, at times seems almost a cliché next to, say, the irrepressible Little Simon Terri of *Lives of Short Duration*).

The overt mediation of the Miramichi trilogy, however, does not prevent it from raising the same kinds of important questions as his previous fiction. That the trilogy is intended to have certain ideological implications is undeniable, for surely Richards's narrative commentary could as easily observe that his representations of feminist thought, social reform, or middle class hypocrisy are not themselves representative. But to reduce his work to ideology would be to neglect the institutional, aesthetic, and historical forces that have at least in part prompted his stance, and an assessment of his Miramichi trilogy needs to take those forces into account. Richards's trilogy seems almost deliberately out of step with prevailing social thought and literary taste; his work reflects the concerns of traditional formal realism — "character, action,

morality, representation of reality" (Hutcheon 11) — and in a literary environment increasingly characterized by postmodern innovations that disrupt those concerns in various ways, allowing Richards the actuality of his fictional world may be too big a concession, particularly because of the overt editorializing and didacticism of the trilogy. Unsurprisingly, numerous critics, Donna Pennee and Frank Davey in particular, have faulted Richards for the lack of self-consciousness of his narrative discourse and the somewhat contradictory construction of characters in that discourse. Furthermore, Richards's universalism is likely to prove equally unpalatable for contemporary critics suspicious of totalizing cultural constructions. But it can be argued that Richards's adherence to a realism privileging spontaneity and lack of self-consciousness, as well as his universalist position, are in part determined by his reception as a regional writer. He has maintained, for instance, that critics react negatively to his celebration of self-sacrifice and spontaneity, since "that's not the sort of standard progressive social milieu that we're in . . . , and I think it bothers them and they say 'this guy must be a Maritime regionalist because his people think so differently'" (Scherf 160). Like Faulkner before him, Richards insists that the relations of power he explores are valid everywhere, and the universalism that Richards champions is in some ways consistent with calls of philosophers such as Richard Rorty who advocate a new sentimentalism as a means of overcoming social divisions and indifference. What a liberal advocate such as Rorty and a writer such as Richards share is an interest in promoting "the ability to see more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation" (Rorty 192). But a universalist stance might also have been forced on Richards by critics who have dismissed the "regional" world with which he is engaged, for instance because, as Richards argues, ". . . if you are read as a Newfoundland writer first, or a New Brunswick writer first, instead of just a writer, there is an implied idea that you are trying to cozy up to your 'superiors' by exposing the hinterland where you live" (Vaughan 16), or because they assume that certain negative social characteristics are particular to the world about which Richards writes:

> The fellow who interviewed me was talking about violence in my work, which is fine, but ninety percent of my novels show that people, most people, treat others with humanity and dignity no matter what the situation. . . . I said "Look, you know, I've seen as much boot-licking malice in the common room of the English department as I ever saw on the streets of Newcastle," and the only thing I'm sorry about is that I mentioned Newcastle: I should have said "in a tavern." (Scherf 158)

An increasingly significant element in Richards's writing, in other words, is a relatively overt response to his critical reception, manifested in his fiction, which reflects the influence of considerations of region and class in assessments of his work.

The polemical qualities of the Miramichi trilogy place Richards in a delicate, if interesting, position. Richards's resistance to contemporary literary and sociological discourses, those of liberal progressive thought in the institution and in the nation at large, should not be confused with the postmodern interest in keeping aesthetic and political questions in literary texts open, although the postmodern condition may be the opportunity of such resistance working in the name of a regressive politics. Rather, Richards's trilogy appears set on revaluing the keywords of a largely discredited humanism — dignity, self-reliance, self-sacrifice, and moral action — an apparently regressive project which puts Richards in danger of being lumped in with the contemporary neo-conservatives clamoring for the dismantling of the welfare state and generating a backlash against a demonized, progressive political correctness. Indeed, there's a certain validity to such a charge, but at the same time, it is possible to look at Richards's reinvestment of those keywords of conservative thought more positively: as an attempt to value the lives of the ostracized outside of the framework of a regionalized, pluralist state, in non-voluntarist, unreflective, and essentialist terms. The prevailing tendencies, however, have been either to celebrate Richards's work precisely within this very framework or to be skeptical of Richards's unreflective polemicism. Donna Pennee, for instance, sees Richards's resistance to socialized notions of agency and identity as constituting a claim to an authentic, regional, social realism and that

> The obverse is that there are inauthenticities perpetrated by the ivory tower . . . and by self-conscious fictions, too. . . . But

> stepping out of the tower and onto the banks of the Miramichi does not, as Richards seems to think, guarantee authenticity. *All* discourse is enculturated — the academic and the socially real. And if it is authentic moral discourse that Richards's fictions seek, who is to say where that can be found? (44)

While Pennee effectively summarizes some of the central paradoxes of Richards's fiction and of his reputation as a writer, her recognition that all discourse is enculturated and therefore neither natural nor authentic does not invalidate Richards's criticisms of progressive notions of socialized agency. There is still something to be said for Richards's underlining of sincerity and integrity (as embodied in his protagonists) as necessarily non-voluntarist and unreflective, and for his critique of socialized agency as compromised by its self-consciousness, since voluntarist notions of agency and reflective notions of identity tend to privilege a more literate, self-conscious sensibility, implying that the more self-aware you are, the more identity you have. For Richards, whose protagonists have integrity rather than self-esteem, are not usually verbally sophisticated, and are self-conscious only at times and usually not in empowering ways, such notions are not particularly palatable.

Richards's career and the resistances of the Miramichi trilogy to certain forms of critical reception and ideological appropriation present an opportunity to rethink the assumptions, biases, and omissions of liberal pluralism and to reflect on the political effects of canon revision. Furthermore, they illustrate how the identity of writers and their aesthetic practices exist in complex relation to the constituencies they are presumed to "represent." It is tempting for critics, as Donna Pennee's review illustrates, to write Richards off as a traditional realist and politically incorrect to boot. But to react in such a fashion to the turn Richards's writing has taken towards a more combative, didactic humanism is to exaggerate the conservative characteristics of the trilogy, and also to obscure some very telling dynamics in it, particularly the effects of the cultural politics of a regionalized, redistributive welfare state on the construction of a literary reputation and on the work of a writer. Critical endorsement of Richards's work has come largely from within the discourse of a politics of the image, grounded in a liberal humanist desire for inclusiveness, welcoming Richards as a

voice for the regional marginalized — a gesture which often effects that marginalization at the same time that it seeks to redress it; the title of a typical piece on Richards in the *Globe and Mail*, "Voice for an unseen humanity" (Ross A12), provides a good example, as it begs the question "unseen by whom?" Richards, in contrast, resists accepting region as a mark of exclusion and ironically almost demonizes the kind of inclusive, sociological discourse in which he is heralded as a regional representative. On the other hand, Richards's didactic universalism and the valorization of "life" and realist aesthetics need to be challenged in ways that go beyond the claims of simple mediation articulated in Janice Kulyk Keefer's account of Maritime realism. Moreover, Richards dissents from a political project of redressing negative images of the region on the grounds that the affirmation of social identity is a largely middle class imposition, one that does violence to the lives of his characters. While it is hard not to lament the direction Richards's writing has taken — that is, the increasing tendency of the Miramichi trilogy towards didacticism and closure — it is important to recognize that development as in part a response to the way Richards has been positioned in a cultural economy stratified particularly in terms of region and class, and to recognize the important questions about literacy, individual responsibility, and social power which Richards's writing continues to raise.

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