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Article abstract

Vanderhaeghe's *The Englishman's Boy* engages with contemporary critical debate on racial discourse in literature. The thread of allusions to H.L. Mencken, whose anti-Semitic views were not publicly known at the time the novel is set but had become infamous by the time of its publication, brings the question of critical influence and responsibility to the fore. The echoing of Mencken's rhetorical style and ideas through characters like Harry Vincent, Damon Chance, and Rachel Gold serves as a barometer of personal morality by exploring the relationship between morality and the use or abuse of language in the telling of history. Vanderhaeghe's use of faith-based allusions raises the postmodern question of whether truth exists beneath the constructed stories of history. However, while acknowledging the complexity of historical truth, the novel ultimately suggests that all narrative is connected to real life, and that writers like Mencken should be held accountable for their words, whether spoken or omitted.

# The Jews on Mencken's Block and Guy Vanderhaeghe's *The Englishman's Boy*

SHARON HAMILTON

GUY VANDERHAEGHE'S HISTORICAL NOVEL *The Englishman's Boy* portrays the Cypress Hills massacre of 1873, in which a group of American "wolfers" attacked a band of Assiniboiné, and engages with the moral and philosophical issues resulting from how that history was recorded, half a century later, by the victors. Through the mechanism of interwoven timelines and the use of storytelling within the narrative structure, the novel adopts a postmodern approach to the history of the Cypress Hills massacre that demonstrates the relativity of differing historical accounts. Vanderhaeghe's nuanced approach to the issues involved when majority cultures record the history of First Nations peoples has been nicely explicated by the novel's critics (see, for example, articles by Herb Wyile and Daniela Janes). What has not been noted, however, are the moral questions the novel raises through intentional allusions to a *second* massacre: the Holocaust.

The Holocaust is not portrayed in the novel, and indeed the actions taking place in the 1920s sections of the novel (in which a film of the Cypress Hills massacre is being made) occur chronologically *before* the Second World War. But throughout the Hollywood sections of the novel, Vanderhaeghe provides strong intimations of the massacre to come. Because these references are linked to the activity of writing, they contribute to a particularly significant contemporary debate. That is, to what extent should writers, especially influential writers, be held accountable for the anti-Semitic sentiments in their work?

This debate is seen, for example, in continuing discussions concerning anti-Semitism in the literature and criticism of such writers as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Henry James. A particularly thoughtful contribution to this debate appeared recently in Bryan Cheyette's article "Neither Excuse nor Accuse: T.S. Eliot's Semitic Discourse" in which he suggests

that, compared even to twenty years ago, literary critics are much more attuned to questions of racial discourse in literature. As Cheyette explains, at a job interview in the 1980s, one of his interviewers said: "I might well be accused of being anti-Semitic, but don't you think that writing about Jews is rather narrow?" ("Neither Excuse" 431). Now, Cheyette argues, we "have a more historically grounded and nuanced understanding of the ways in which supposedly great literary and cultural achievements can be complicit with the worst of human behavior"(431). Such issues have been explored in such texts as *Between "Race" and Culture* (1996); *Modernity, Culture and "the Jew"* (1998); *The Temple of Culture* (2000); and in an excellent series of articles on T.S. Eliot's anti-Semitism in *Modernism/modernity* (2003). In *The Englishman's Boy*, Vanderhaeghe offers his own historically grounded contribution to this debate through recurrent allusions to the American literary and social critic H.L. Mencken.

When I first began my own work on *The Englishman's Boy*, I sent Vanderhaeghe a copy of a conference paper I had presented on his allusions to Mencken in the novel. He sent me a thoughtful letter in reply. In this letter he responded specifically to one of the issues now garnering academic attention, which is how to approach the question of racial discourse in literature. Vanderhaeghe wrote: "Years and years ago I first circled the problem of the 'social' responsibility of the writer when I did my M.A. on John Buchan, a man who was admirable in many ways, but whose work is interspersed with anti-Semitic references. I never did manage to resolve in my own mind [if] the work of art or philosophy is discredited as art or philosophy by the reprehensible opinions of the creator." Recognizing how Vanderhaeghe explores the fraught question of racial discourse in *The Englishman's Boy* requires the reader to situate the novel both within the historical moment it describes and — intriguingly — also within the historical moment in which it was written.

### Stupendous Critical Power

In 1920s America, no critic possessed greater fame than H.L. Mencken. In 1923 (the same year in which the second main narrative of *The Englishman's Boy* is set), F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote, "the vogue of books like mine depends almost entirely on the stupendous critical power at present wielded by H.L. Mencken" (167). In that decade alone Mencken col-

lected over forty scrapbooks of newspaper clippings referring to him (Nardini 2). The effect of Mencken's criticism on American culture abated after the 1920s, but it never fully left the American scene, even following his death. American cultural products continue to represent him as *the* iconographic American: independent, iconoclastic, free-thinking. To get a sense of Mencken's critical presence today, one need only consult almost any modern American journal (of the left or right) that considers itself a bastion of continuing critical influence. In a recent issue of the *New Yorker*, for example, Mencken was compared to Hunter S. Thompson (Menand 27), Mark Twain, and, even, Voltaire (Gopnik 81).

Mencken's "stupendous critical power," as Fitzgerald termed it, makes him the perfect figure through which to explore questions related to racial discourse and critical accountability. As Vanderhaeghe put it in his letter to me, "Mencken is a presence in the book, an 'irresponsible intellectual' whose prose and gusto and combativeness I can't help relishing." Understanding how *The Englishman's Boy* engages with the issue of the extent to which writers should be held accountable for the anti-Semitic sentiments in their work requires an appreciation of how Vanderhaeghe uses allusions to Mencken to explore the theme of critical influence and its corollary, critical responsibility. Vanderhaeghe links his allusions to Mencken, in ways both overt and subtle, to each of the novel's major characters. How these characters respond to Mencken, reveals, in each case, what attitude the character takes to the moral responsibilities writing entails.

Vanderhaeghe introduces Mencken into the novel as he introduces its hero, Harry Vincent, who provides the following description of his office: "There's not much to amuse me here, a desk, a typewriter, a coffee can full of pencils, a three-shelf bookcase holding Dreiser, Crane, Norris, London, and back numbers of *The Smart Set*, which my friend Rachel Gold browbeat me into subscribing to because it is edited by her idol, H.L. Mencken" (7). The primary significance of this allusion is in how it captures Vincent's passive attitude. As Vincent admits, he is reading Mencken's magazine because a fellow writer "browbeat" him into doing so (7). He exhibits little judgement or discernment on his own account. Indeed, as Vincent later records, "For a year and a half I have seconded all [Rachel's] motions in the writing department, and when she laid down the law about Mencken, Dreiser, and Norris, I seconded that too" (137). A few lines later, with reference to the anti-Semitic thug,

Denis Fitzsimmons, who works for the director Damon Chance, Vincent claims, "I don't really know why I defended Fitz" (137). By implication, his defense of Fitzsimmons's anti-Semitism is as unthinking as his appreciation of Mencken and Dreiser. As David Staines has argued, Vincent's actions are characterized by a "moral passivity"; he "remains woefully unwilling or unable to scrutinize his own complicity as the increasingly sinister chain of events unfolds around him" (1151).

Vincent's first act in this scene is relevant to the series of betrayals that follow: "I typed four names. *Damon Ira Chance. Denis Fitzsimmons. Rachel Gold. Shorty McAdoo*. I sat and stared at these names for some minutes, then I typed a fifth, my own. *Harry Vincent*" (5). In these sentences Vincent introduces himself into a list of names, and in so doing reveals the primary significance of his typing: the act of adding his own names to others is not only relational — our actions, including our writing, have the potential to affect other human beings — but individual. Personal responsibility, and all that it entails, thus appears in the seemingly innocuous form of the introduction to a cast of characters. And they are characters. The names "Chance," "Gold," "Shorty" sound like, and undoubtedly are, archetypes, just as Vincent, who is a sort of thin, vacillating Everyman, with two first names (a Tom, Dick, or, as it turns out, Harry) represents a type, not a real historical figure, which is why it is particularly disconcerting to find Mencken suddenly appearing in the text: not only his name but also, significantly, his prose style.

The novel's second, more subtle allusion to Mencken appears in the form of a speech recited by the novel's most obviously archetypal character: Damon, or daemon, Chance. Here is how Vanderhaeghe presents Chance's attack on censorship in the theatre: "Censorship for business reasons is another matter. And if we must have it, I would prefer the censor to be able to distinguish between the good and the bad. Mr. Hays does not set my mind at rest on that point. As owner of my own movie company, I did not expect to be dictated to by a small-town Hoosier whose aesthetics were formed by the Knights of Pythias, the Rotarians, the Kiwanis, the Moose and the Elks" (15-16). The list was one of Mencken's favorite rhetorical devices, and the Knights of Pythias, the Rotarians, the Kiwanis, the Moose, and the Elks were among his favourite targets. In addition, while Mencken did oppose censorship, and especially America's strongest pro-censorship proponent Anthony Comstock, he also

delighted in illustrating that the censors had no understanding of what they censored.

In his widely-read 1917 essay “Puritanism as a Literary Force,” Mencken argued that after Comstock had disposed of the traffic in “frankly pornographic books and pictures,” he turned to “Rabelais and the Decameron, and having driven these ancients under the book-counters, he pounced upon Zola, Balzac, and Daudet, and having disposed of these too, he began a *pogrom* which, in other hands, eventually brought down such astounding victims as Thomas Hardy’s ‘Jude the Obscure’ and Harold Frederic’s ‘The Damnation of Theron Ware’” (260). Chance’s speech indicates not only his awareness of Mencken’s prose style but also his understanding of what Mencken wrote about.

However, although Chance is clearly familiar with Mencken’s basic ideas and his manner of expressing them, he manipulates them to his own ends. Chance’s problem with censorship is not the suppression of artistic freedom, which was Mencken’s main concern, but with the *kind* of censorship that took place — as he says, censorship for “business reasons” — and he objects most strenuously to its impact upon him as “the owner of [his] own movie company” (15). Accordingly, although Chance is critical of censorship in this passage, it is important to note that his criticism is primarily owing to its effect on him as a movie mogul — he does not object to the idea of censorship *per se* nor to its stifling effect on artistic endeavour. He grants Vincent the notion that “there may be a philosophical justification for censorship. If we claim that Shakespeare and Milton improve the mind, then it is only fair to assume that inferior goods may damage it” (15). In such a view he would have found no ally in Mencken, who made it clear in numerous columns that although Americans tended to write ‘bosh,’ and to accept and enjoy such writing, that was their choice. He always defended the free play of ideas; in his first editorial for the *American Mercury*, he declared that in his magazine he wished to present “the whole gaudy, gorgeous American scene” and that there would be no “limitation upon the free play of opinion” (30). He loved to mock bad art, but he never would have suggested, as Chance does, that “inferior goods” should be banned.

In a similar vein, within a matter of a few pages, Chance again uses Mencken’s rhetorical style in expressing ideas which sound as if they belong to Mencken, but which prove to be an inaccurate approximation

of them, this time claiming that “the average American feels foolish when he enjoys a made-up story, feels sheepish, childish, a mooner, a dreamer. But entertain him with facts and you give him permission to enjoy himself without guilt. He needn’t feel swindled, or hoodwinked, a hick sold a bill of goods by a carnival barker” (19). Again, Mencken’s fondness for lists is evident as is his tendency to favour Americanisms — “hoodwinked,” “a hick,” “a bill of goods,” “a carnival barker” — and Chance uses this Menckenesque rhetoric to express the genuinely Menckonian belief that Americans distrusted the fine arts. In his 1920 *Smart Set* essay “Observations Upon the National Letters,” Mencken declared that “running through [American art] and characterizing the work of almost every man and woman producing it, there is an inescapable suggestion of the old Puritan suspicion of the fine arts as such — of the doctrine that they offer fit asylum for good citizens only when some ulterior and superior purpose is carried into them” (138).

But here again, Chance’s actual meaning does not quite correspond to Mencken’s thought. Mencken was convinced that Americans needed to feel art was didactic in order to appreciate it, which is not the same as Chance’s emphasis upon the need to please an audience. The distinction is an important one since Chance clothes the presentation of his ideas in Menckonian rhetoric, and is remarkably close to Mencken’s ideas, but he manipulates both rhetoric and ideas to his own ends, just as later, with tragic results, he will manipulate Vincent’s script to reflect his own racist ideology. To anyone aware of Mencken’s style and ideas, Chance’s early appropriation of Menckenesque rhetoric connotes important trends that will play themselves out through the rest of the novel.

In the next section of *The Englishman’s Boy* set in the 1920s, Menckonian rhetoric is employed again, but this time by a self-declared fan, Rachel Gold, who is Jewish. In this scene, where Vincent describes his first day in the writing department at Best Chance pictures, he notes that Rachel’s advice was “delivered in the Menckonian rhetoric she often affected when talking about the movie business and the Booboisie it catered to” (36). In this passage Rachel doesn’t just employ Mencken’s rhetorical style, as Chance had done, but also the single word which acted then, as now, like a fingerprint for Mencken, not just a word he favoured, but one which he invented: Booboisie. According to Mencken’s own definition, cited in the *OED*, Booboisie refers to “boobs as a class,” the boorishness of the bourgeoisie.

It is a boorishness Rachel accepts and believes in; she speaks with considerable distaste of what the American public demands from Hollywood films and, accordingly, also from its scriptwriters: “For anything prior to 1600, be it Babylon or Tudor England, crib the King James version of the Bible. This satisfies the nose-pickers in Chattanooga who can read, although sometimes they get confused and believe they’re conning the word of God, which can later lead to confusion in tent meetings” (36). As one of Mencken’s biographers, Vincent Fitzpatrick, has recorded, among Mencken’s many famous sayings perhaps the most frequently quoted is his assertion that “No one in the world, so far as I know — and I have searched the records for years, and employed agents to help me — has ever lost money by underestimating the intelligence of the plain people” (qtd. in “H.L. Mencken” 190). Gold clearly concurs. Her accurate representation of Mencken’s rhetoric and his ideas shows an approach to language, and to others, that differentiates her from both Chance, who manipulates language to his own ends, and from Harry, who simply reads what he is told.

The allusions to Mencken in the text clearly serve as a barometer of each character’s personal morality and show how that morality links to their approach toward language — to their use of words. But how do these allusions contribute to Vanderhaeghe’s broader interest in the intersection between the social responsibility of the writer and racial discourse? For an answer to that question, we must examine the historical context in which the novel was written.

### **Mencken’s Diary**

In 1981, a twenty-five year embargo mandated by Mencken ended, and his executors at the Enoch Pratt Free Library were finally able to read the sentiments he recorded in his private diary between 1930 and 1948. At the time, stipulations in a memo written by Mencken required the library to restrict access to those who had already established themselves as Mencken scholars (Fecher xiii). Anyone permitted to see the diary had to “swear solemnly in writing that they would not ‘copy, quote, attribute, or paraphrase the contents’” (xiii). “Out of the casual, knowing comments of these privileged few,” as the diary’s editor Charles Fecher records,



“there arose gradually the notion that the diary represented the ‘dark side’ of Mencken.” (xiii).

In 1986, Maryland’s Attorney General ruled that Mencken’s memo restricting access to the diary did not carry the force of a will (Nyren 22). This decision paved the way for the *Diary*’s publication in December 1989. The contents stunned a nation. In the diary, Mencken makes belittling references to “some Jews” who moved into his neighbourhood, to “Jewish intellectuals,” and to a “French Jewess” (xx). In a passage Fecher decided not to include in the *Diary*’s published version, he referred to two well-known Jewish businessmen as “dreadful kikes” (Fecher xx). Since Mencken’s anti-Semitism did not appear in his published writing during his lifetime, before the *Diary*’s publication such private sentiments were unknown. Headlines such as “Mencken on Trial” (*Commentary*); “The Ugly American” (*New Republic*); “Good Mencken, bad Mencken” (*New York Times Book Review*) and “Henry down at the heels” (*GQ*) filled the popular press.

Since *The Englishman’s Boy* was published in 1996, the reception history of Mencken’s *Diary* is part of the historical context for the writing of Vanderhaeghe’s novel, and the issue of Mencken’s anti-Semitism, which is never actually mentioned in the novel at all, is in fact a central consideration. When I raised this point with Guy Vanderhaeghe, he responded, “While certainly no expert on the man, Mencken *was* very much in my mind as were some of the newspaper column debates about him and his attitudes when I wrote the novel. I even remember at one point considering introducing an anachronism and alluding to his anti-Semitism but wisely (I think) refrained” (Letter) — and here is where Vanderhaeghe’s novel joins contemporary critical debate on racial discourse.

As Jonathan Freedman argues in *The Temple of Culture*, recent work in the field of Jewish Cultural Studies has made “immensely more complicated” the terms in which we think about “Jewishness in the modern world,” and especially “the much vexed questions of Jewish identity, assimilation, the conflict between religion and secularism, the nature of historical memory, and so on” (5). He notes that his particular project is to bring together “two broad currents of thought”— the ways in which we think about culture and the “odd things the Western imagination has done when it comes into contact with Jews” — in order to trace out “new patterns of complication” (6).

In effect, Vanderhaeghe's allusions to Mencken in *The Englishman's Boy* act exactly in this manner. By bringing Mencken into the novel, Vanderhaeghe brings together several broad currents of thought, including the historical representation of Jews and the period's strong anti-Semitism, in which Mencken was complicit. It should not come as a surprise that Vanderhaeghe uses Mencken as a means of presenting, and exploring, patterns of complication within the novel, as these sorts of contested issues clearly fascinate him. Note, for example, Vanderhaeghe's fondness for exploring cultural sites of confusion and indeterminacy such as homosexuality and gender-crossing in *The Last Crossing* and cultural reactions to infectious disease in "How the Story Ends." Mencken's anti-Semitism is an implied, but unstated, "pattern of complication" in the novel, which operates as a challenge to its postmodern structure.

It is not coincidental, therefore, that after a long hiatus in allusions to Mencken in *The Englishman's Boy*, his name reoccurs during the ethical debate between Rachel and Vincent during which she asks him, bluntly, whether or not Chance was a good man. In the course of this conversation Rachel explains what it is like to experience anti-Semitism: "Don't make light of it. My brothers got called Christ-killers and beaten up by Irish Catholic toughs often enough for me to be able to recognize it when I see it" (134). Later she adds, "Don't you get it, Harry? ... I'm warning what *might* happen. To me as much as to you" (135). Her specific warning is about the dangers of working with Chance, but in the context of their wider discussion regarding the treatment of Jews, it is not difficult to read into her warning of what might happen a reference to what did.

Within this context, Mencken is casually reintroduced in the course of an aside. Vincent thinks, "Although she always thinks herself in the right, she is never so certain that she doesn't value a loyal seconder. For a year and a half I have seconded all her motions in the writing department, and when she laid down the law about Mencken, Dreiser, and Norris, I seconded that too" (137). The reintroduction of Mencken's name into the text at this point may not be as casual as it seems. There is no question that Mencken, as with many other Americans, saw what might happen, and he saw it as early as the setting of this novel. In 1922, during a visit to visit relatives in Germany, Mencken wrote to a friend in Baltimore, "Every intelligent man looks for a catastrophe. If it comes, there will be a colossal massacre of Jews" (qtd. in Hobson 224). Mencken saw what might happen but, like many other writers, chose not to address

it. As his biographer Fred Hobson asks, "there is no doubt ... that Mencken was firmly and unequivocally against Hitler. But if so, the question Sunpapers readers had put to him between 1933 and 1938 was a valid one: why did he not speak out publicly?" (403). This question also appears, implicitly, in Vanderhaeghe's novel.

Mencken's anti-Semitism is representative of an uncomfortable reality in a novel that plays with the relativity of history. Vanderhaeghe's work clearly demonstrates his familiarity with those theories associated in particular with Foucault, that contend history is something constructed, a site of contested power relations, in which there is "no external position of certainty, no universal understanding that is beyond history and society" (Rabinow 4). In *The Englishman's Boy* the connection between history and storytelling is made on the first page through a quote from Donald Creighton: "History is the record of an encounter between character and circumstance ... the encounter between character and circumstance is essentially a story" (i). This historical relativity is built into the novel's structure, and it is reinforced by explicit illustration, as when the narrator records that "Shorty's story fared no better in the history books I consulted when I got back home to Canada. Searching them, I found a sentence here, a paragraph there. What I learned was little enough" (326).

However, as Daniela Janes notes in "Truth and History: Representing the Aura in *The Englishman's Boy*," although "there is a clear temporal shift at almost every chapter" that creates a "state of permanent present" through which Vanderhaeghe "throws doubt on the possibility of ever adequately representing history" (88), he also challenges this relativity. As Janes suggests, "the reader, like Harry, must believe in the authenticity of Shorty's narrative in order to recognize the outrage that Chance's revisioning of it represents" (90). In other words, the reader is "implicitly encouraged to trust the representation of history offered in the sections of omniscient narration" (90).

Vanderhaeghe creates this encouragement through the technique of shifting between "an omniscient (and, within the framework of his novel, an historically objective) third-person narrator ... and the subjective and highly self-aware voice of Harry Vincent, the first-person narrator who is attempting to make a coherent narrative of that historical moment" (Janes, 90). The reason for this technique, Janes suggests, is to indicate that "in every public history there exists a proliferation of unrecorded

private histories and that in such moments of private experience one may trace the essence of truth that has escaped the ‘historical record’” (90) — a theory that brings us to the Jews on Mencken’s block.

### The Jews on Mencken’s Block

One of the anti-Semitic sentiments in Mencken’s diary concerns his dismay at the fact that a house on his block was bought by “some Jews ... with various ratty tenants” (Fecher xx). One of the most affecting critical commentaries on the *Diary* was written after the composition of *The Englishman’s Boy* in response to this statement. Vanderhaeghe could not have read it before the novel’s composition. But it may, nevertheless, be taken as a synecdoche for something Vanderhaeghe understood and built into the structure of his novel — that is, the sense of betrayal that would have been felt by his fictional Rachel Gold if she had known Mencken’s private thoughts.

In his essay “H. L. Mencken and the Jews on His Block,” Alvin Levin explains “*We* were the Jews on Mencken’s block” (13). He was the grandson of Annie Asner, who lived next door to Mencken for twenty-five years. One of the inhabitants of her house was Levin’s Uncle Norton. Of Norton’s relationship to Mencken, Levin writes, “Uncle Norton, cynical, worldly-wise, sophisticated, worshipped the man. ... When I last visited my uncle, he showed me numerous books autographed by Mencken, several of which carried notes of thanks for Norton’s friendship. As I’ve said, curiouser and curiouser, those dark, unpublished prejudices” (14).

Levin notes the awe with which all the tenants viewed their famous neighbour, remarking that even his grandmother “whose English was still a little broken, joined in telling me that he was a great man” (13). During that time none of the inhabitants knew what Mencken had been saying about them in his diary. Levin’s reaction upon reading the diary was to feel, as he writes, “anguish, outrage, and sadness” (13), concluding, “I try to rationalize the bigotry revealed in his diary by denying it was prejudice. Sign of the times. Prejudices underlay the thinking of some of the most liberal-minded. But I *can’t* rationalize it — and I wonder if all the accolades he received in his lifetime should not have included one for acting” (15).

Levin’s emotions should sound familiar since they are built into the

texture of *The Englishman's Boy*. His reaction reveals the pain of betrayal, a pain that is particularly intense when it results from the actions of someone you trust and admire. In his emotional reaction to the diary's contents Levin indicates what Rachel Gold would have felt for "her idol" (7) if the timespan of the novel were imaginatively extended into the war years as Mencken — a famous man well known and respected for the power of his pen — not only stood by and said nothing, but privately condemned those who were most vulnerable. As Levin reveals, the problem with idols is that they can disappoint or betray those who worship them. That Vanderhaeghe likely had such reactions to the *Diary's* contents in mind is indicated by his fascination with this theme, particularly in his aptly titled short-story collection *The Trouble with Heroes*.

Ultimately, understanding why Vanderhaeghe makes recurrent allusion to Mencken in *The Englishman's Boy* depends upon the incidents in the novel that challenge postmodern assertions regarding the nature of historical truth. In one of the novel's climactic moments, Chance suggests changing the way the murder of the aboriginal girl is portrayed. Instead of leaving her alive in a building set on fire by one of the wolfers, as Shorty asserts was how it happened, Chance wishes to transform this event into a scene in which she sets fire to the building herself and becomes "a sort of Indian Samson" (251). Vincent's response is key: "But the girl didn't set fire to the post" (252).

At the beginning of the text, Vanderhaeghe described history as "story," "the encounter between character and circumstance," but here "story" reverberates sharply against fact. Chance tells a story, a myth, the story of Samson. There is a certain psychological truth to myth. But Vincent is appalled and realizes, reluctantly, that in this case he stubbornly clings to what can't be left out of the telling, something which he can only describe as fact. Did it really happen, or didn't it? Despite the very postmodern ideas about history embedded in the structure of the novel, there's no room for evasion here. Is it true, or not?

In this text, if the answer is yes, a series of moral obligations ensues. History is story, but not one without restrictions on its proper telling. Accordingly, when Chance goes ahead and makes a film in which the girl is portrayed as the cause of her own death, he is eventually hounded and physically attacked by Shorty because he didn't "do right" by the girl (278). Vincent responds with a curt, "It's a little late for you to be developing a conscience about her, isn't it?" (278); and the idea of "conscience"

is added to the notion of history as it is portrayed in the text. But what does conscience have to do with story, or with fact? Although Vincent tells Shorty that it is too late to develop a conscience, a few pages later he records, "I didn't want to speak to either of them. But now, cornered by my conscience, I ride a streetcar to her pink stucco apartment building" (308). Vincent's newly acquired sense of right and wrong reverberates with an earlier conversation with Rachel about Chance in which she, like his conscience, had attempted to corner him into a definite moral judgement. She had asked, "And what about Chance? What's he? Good man or bad man?" (133).

The directness of this question points to one of the most radical technical elements in this novel, its ability to reconcile and juxtapose a postmodern concept of history that acknowledges the constructedness of the past, and the relativity of differing historical accounts, with strongly worded moral questions. In passages such as the above we are removed from Foucault's negation of any universal understanding beyond history and society and confronted with a radical counter-suggestion: what if there is a universal understanding beyond history and society? What if there are moral parameters to the universe, the kind of parameters indicated by our very notion of a human conscience? What if, in fact, we live in a moral universe?

As Vanderhaeghe wrote in his letter to me, "It seems naïve to me to assume that historians (or any of us) can transcend our own muddle, but equally wrong-headed to throw up our hands and suggest that everything is 'fiction' and one assertion about the past is as good or valuable as another." This line of thinking is very much in accord with the complex debates being waged about how exactly to address questions of racial discourse in history and literature. As Bryan Cheyette notes in his introduction to *Between "Race" and Culture*, "unresolved identification or differentiation with the Jewish Other" takes on "radically differing cultural and political forms" (4). In Vanderhaeghe's novel, that form is intensely moral. He uses faith-based references, many taken from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, to underline the fact that humans live in a moral universe and that human actions have theological dimensions.

In the review of *The Englishman's Boy* that appeared in *Quill & Quire*, Michael McGowan argued that "though never didactic, *The Englishman's Boy* delivers an excellent history lesson" (66). The fact that McGowan didn't find the novel didactic is a testament to Vanderhaeghe's

skill as a stylist since in some sections of the novel faith-based allusions appear on almost every page. In the twenty-five pages from 36 to 60, for example, we find references to the "King James version" (36); "Amazing Grace" (41); "the Bible" (43); "church bell" (43); "God's guess" (44); "swear to Christ" (45); "Lord's work" (46); "Wages of sin is death, boy" (49); "Last Supper" (52), and "Lord God" (58). We might have expected such allusions since, after the publication of *Man Descending*, in an interview Vanderhaeghe noted, "I was particularly gratified when certain reviewers dwelt on the moral nature of the book and the biblical themes which are implicit or explicit.... I actually planned these" (Hillis 21). That Vanderhaeghe manages to make all these references without seeming didactic is, I believe, owing to the technique of having his characters negate their references to God even as they make them. So, on the first page of the novel, the red-haired wolfer, who will later prove one of the most evil characters in the novel, says, "Say goodnight to Jesus" (1). The wolfers laugh. Morality, from the start, is a joke.

Another example of this sort of faith-based interjection into the narrative occurs on our introduction to Harry Vincent. In his opening scene, he looks casually out of his window onto the studio lot. The scene described is extremely similar to the first scene in Nathanael West's great cynical portrayal of Hollywood, *The Day of the Locust*, written when he was a Hollywood screenwriter in 1939. In West's scene, Hollywood hack writer Tod Hackett is staring out of his window at the end of the day: "An army of cavalry and foot was passing. It moved like a mob; its lines broken, as though fleeing from some terrible defeat" (1). Vanderhaeghe provides a similar description for his opening Hollywood scene: "History is calling it a day. Roman legionaries tramp the street accompanied by Joseph and Mary, while a hired nurse in cap and uniform totes the Baby Jesus. Ladies-in-waiting from the court of the Virgin Queen trail the holy family, tits clenched flat under Elizabethan bodices sheer as the face of a cliff" (5). Although Vanderhaeghe is clearly alluding to West's earlier portrayal of a similar scene, it is important to note that his procession, unlike West's, is headed quite specifically by the members of the Holy family according to Christian tradition.

I do not believe Vanderhaeghe privileges one religious tradition over another in the novel. He does not "solve" the "confusion or indeterminacy" common to portrayals of the "Jewish Other" (Cheyette, *Between* 4) through references to Christ. Rather, he uses religious allusions to high-



light a moral standard, the idea — common to all religious traditions — that human actions matter and that they have moral dimensions. It helps to remember that Vanderhaeghe himself speaks broadly on this issue. For example, in interview with Andrew Garrod, he indicated his general interest in faith issues: “I’ve always been interested in the dilemma of faith and doubt — existentialism, for want of a better word — that leap of faith we all make at some point in our lives to carry us over the chasm” (281). As well, it is useful to recall that in *The Englishman’s Boy* (which begins with an Assiniboine prayer) as in his most recent novel, *The Last Crossing*, Vanderhaeghe’s religious allusions are expansive and inclusive, encompassing the spiritual traditions of Jewish, Christian, and First Nations peoples. The function of such faith-based allusions in the text is indicated through Vanderhaeghe’s use of a recurrent emotional motif: people in pain and, more particularly, in tears. Crying comes up again and again as a central motif. Vincent remembers his father crying after he beat his mother (32); Shorty’s former landlord remembers him sitting by the radio crying (57); Vincent cries when he discusses his past with Rachel (174); the Englishman’s boy cries after Grace’s death (284), and so forth. The point of all this crying, I suspect, relates back to the idea of history as something relative, a construct, something not subject to any sort of moral absolute, or “universal understanding.” Vanderhaeghe does not deny the constructedness of our view of the past; the structure of his multi-strand narrative supports the idea of the relativity of historical truth, but at the same time he does not deny the reality of concrete fact. Events take place and people are hurt by them: history is much more than an intellectual abstraction.

*The Englishman’s Boy* — like all Westerns — is a novel about Justice. Vanderhaeghe’s use of a genre that provokes moral questions should not come as too much of a surprise, since he has a self-confessed fascination with philosophy and, in his words, “even theology” (Garrod 280). In his survey of Vanderhaeghe’s fiction up to and including *My Present Age* (1984), Tom Gerry argues that “for Vanderhaeghe’s characters, struggle, especially moral struggle, is central” (201). As we see in *The Englishman’s Boy*, as well as *The Last Crossing*<sup>1</sup> and, for example, the short stories in which Vanderhaeghe reimagines biblical narratives (“Lazarus,” “The Prodigal,” “No Man Could Bind Him,” and “How the Story Ends”), he offers no facile answers, but uses faith-based allusions to ask whether beneath the relativity of human language and recorded history there is truth.



In the Christian scriptures, Christ asserts that he came into the world to witness to the truth (John 18:37); in contrast, it is Pontius Pilate who uses the argument that truth is relative as a means of condemning Christ, whose innocence he acknowledges. It is no coincidence that Chance, the most demonic character in *The Englishman's Boy*, is very much at home with Pilate's logic: "You may wash your hands of me, Harry, but not your part in my picture. That is for the record" (297-98). This novel responds to the relativity of Pilate's question "what is truth?" (John 18:38) by suggesting that however constructed history, and novels, may be, the written word, like all human actions, is ultimately measured against something real.

Christians have long referred to sins of commission and omission — sins that result, respectively, from the things we do and the things we neglect to do. As St. Augustine wrote, and Vanderhaeghe's characters tend to demonstrate, "Whoever, therefore, thinks that he understands the divine Scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build the double love of God and of our neighbor does not understand it at all" (30). Truth expresses itself in love. Vanderhaeghe's cowboy novel has that theology at its very heart, especially Christ's central injunction: "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34). As Vanderhaeghe has said in interview, "We talked about the question of faith and doubt, and I think that in most stories there is that germ of love out of which both faith and doubt grow. I look on them as love stories. Not many people have ever seen them that way, certainly — in fact, the reaction is usually the opposite" (Garrod 282).

One of the many articles written in response to the publication of Mencken's *Diary* was titled, "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?" This statement provides an apt summary of the moral and ethical questions raised by Vanderhaeghe in *The Englishman's Boy* through his allusions to Mencken. Scotty, who is the most humane wolfer in the novel, declares in a line adapted from Cardinal Newman, "My mother was fond of saying that the definition of a gentleman is one who never inflicts pain" (114). This line, repeated twice in the novel, stands as its moral touchstone (114, 300). Both in what he wrote and in what he didn't write, Mencken fails the basic code of human decency as it is advanced in this novel.

It is a particular triumph of Vanderhaeghe's art that a novel that accepts and acknowledges the complexity of historical truth also manages to incorporate a rather straightforward moral dictum: don't cause pain; or, "love thy neighbour as thyself" (Lev. 19:18). Chance argues that "Details are how most people read the world, the simple letters of

their idiotic alphabet” (230), and in this he is correct. It is in the details that Vanderhaeghe adds philosophical and theological depth to his main narrative. In this novel, Vanderhaeghe’s exploration of the social responsibility of the writer relies almost entirely upon what’s *not* said — a huge absence, a silence. Appropriately, in deference to an event that silenced so many voices, the novel presents its readers with gaps, absences, implications, and foreshadowings. To what extent should influential writers be held accountable for the anti-Semitic sentiments in their work? In the novel, the implied rejoinder to that question is that of Mencken’s biographer: if Mencken guessed what might happen in Europe, why did he not speak out publicly? (Hobson 403). This novel suggests that writers can, and should, be accountable for their words to the extent that those words cause pain — even when that pain results from what they failed to say.

## AUTHOR’S NOTE

Quotations from the writings of H.L. Mencken used by permission of the Enoch Pratt Free Library, Baltimore, in accordance with the terms of Mr. Mencken’s bequest.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Vanderhaeghe’s interest in moral questions, especially as they are explored in the Judeo-Christian scriptures, is even more overt in *The Last Crossing* which, with its obvious nod to Tennyson’s “Crossing the Bar,” is a book about death and life’s ultimate meaning. In several beautiful set-pieces on death, the novel asks, “Does what we do in life matter?”; “Can we reconcile the pain and suffering in the world with the idea of a loving, all-powerful God?”; and “Are there eternal ramifications to what we do?” Perhaps two of the most impressive of these reflective sections are Custis Straw’s dream of the Civil War dead (55-56) and Madge’s funeral (67-80).

As in *The Englishman’s Boy*, in *The Last Crossing* Vanderhaeghe uses allusions to construct a complex moral framework within which the relativity of historical narratives is measured against ethical standards of goodness and purity. Simon, for example, is equated with Christ-like attributes both through his symbolic resurrection (after he is presumed dead in a winter storm) and through Vanderhaeghe’s allusion to him as someone who gathers lost lambs (6). Madge, for her part, is an innocent child, her Christ-like goodness underlined by the proximity with which Custis refers to Christ upon first seeing her body: “Jesus Christ Almighty. Poor little Marjorie Dray” (42). And Custis, who acts as a true neighbour throughout, is a flawed character who, nevertheless, shows a moral propensity to act on the scriptural passages he reads.

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