

Truth and History: Representing the Aura in *The Englishman's Boy*

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“The spirit of Shorty McAdoo is what we must capture.”

– Damon Ira Chance

GUY VANDERHAEGHE'S novel *The Englishman's Boy* is a story about storytelling, an historical novel about the telling of history. The novel is metafictional in its obsessive circling around the themes of truth, fiction, and representation, because the complex relationship between these elements is explored both by the characters within the novel and by the novelist himself. Three modes of representation — oral, visual, and written — tie together five interrelated stories that span eighty years. Moving between public and private histories, Vanderhaeghe explores three historical sites, describing the little-known Cypress Hills Massacre of 1873, the dynamics of the early 1920s Hollywood studio-system, and the personal reflections of a movie theatre manager in early 1950s Saskatoon. There is a clear temporal shift at almost every chapter which keeps the narrative in a state of permanent present even as it explores the complex relationship between these moments of private experience. Since the novel implies that the truth of any event is only to be found at the moment of its occurrence, the events of the novel gain a level of historical authority through this shifting present, an authority which characters within the work seek to replicate in their own representations of history. Because of its shifting present, the novel reassures the reader of its own reliability within the hermetic world of the text; simultaneously, however, through his exploration of the limitations of representation, Vanderhaeghe throws doubt on the possibility of ever adequately representing history.

The first narrative layer in the novel, unfolding in the year 1873, is the story of the Englishman's boy which is dispersed throughout the novel

and is read retroactively as the historical story that Shorty McAdoo, the washed-up cowboy and sometime film extra, recounts to Harry Vincent, the Hollywood scriptwriter. Harry's own story occurs on two temporal planes: the present of 1923, in which he is charged to find Shorty McAdoo, buy his story, and write the eccentric film mogul, Damon Ira Chance, a real American picture; and the present of the early 1950s, from which vantage point Harry looks back and reflects on his days in Hollywood. Chance's film version of Shorty's story, called *Besieged*, is the fourth narrative site. Although the reader of the novel does not learn all of the details of Chance's film, it is sufficient to know which events were altered in Chance's representation, as well as the attitude towards history that Chance brought to his filmmaking. Finally, there is Vanderhaeghe's own story, a merging of historical facts about 1920s Hollywood and the 1873 Cypress Hills massacre, and what Chance might call "intuitive" fiction. Vanderhaeghe's story builds on Harry's first-hand account, adding the frame narrative of the natives, Fine Man and Broken Horn, stealing the white men's horses and guiding them north to Canada.¹ Together these narrative sites, unfolding a seemingly endless "present," attempt to determine the truth in history and the relative authority of the three modes of representation that Vanderhaeghe explores in the novel. The dual narrative concerns of *The Englishman's Boy* may be classed as historical and representational: a search for historical truth and the representation of that truth. Vanderhaeghe suggests a hierarchy of authenticity that necessarily exists between the historical moment and the narrating of that history. In *The Englishman's Boy*, a theoretically objective history becomes a vulnerable story which can be told, retold, and refashioned.

In Vanderhaeghe's nuanced rendering of Harry's Hollywood experiences, Herb Wylie sees an awareness of the constructed nature of the historical record, but he suggests that the nineteenth-century sequences are, in contrast, "fairly unselfconscious and monoglossic" (37), despite the way in which they engage in an implicit dialogue with the conventions of the western (38). I agree with Wylie's assertion that the nineteenth-century sequences do not interrogate the issue of historical construction and fabrication; through Vanderhaeghe's use of omniscient narration in these sections (both in the Englishman's boy's story and in the frame tale of the Assiniboine warriors) the author asserts their "truth" within the novel's own system of historical reference. Wylie wonders "whether Vanderhaeghe intends his version to be taken as historically 'authentic' — true, in spirit and detail, to the historical record" (34); however, this issue is necessar-

ily complicated by the uneasy question of where to locate the “historical record.” The substance of Vanderhaeghe’s novel is engaged in demonstrating the subjective, provisional, and transitory nature of historical truth. In this sense, then, it should be theoretically impossible to locate a single moment of “authenticity” in the novel. The fact that it is not impossible, that the reader seems implicitly encouraged to trust the representation of history offered in the sections of omniscient narration, suggests 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.” Vanderhaeghe offers his version of a moment of conditional (because still personal) historical truth in order to demonstrate how it is later systematically undermined, distorted, and disavowed. Vanderhaeghe’s “contrapuntal narrative” (Wylie 29) underscores this movement between the event and its representation as it shifts between various layers of the past. 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. The presence of “truth” in one section thus draws attention to its absence in the other.

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin presents the idea of the aura, that mystical, intangible, and unreproducible quality in a work of art that animates it and distinguishes it from other works and from reproductions of the original piece. In particular, the aura is characterized by a cult or ritual value. The art object’s aura is conceptually linked to its occasional use or ritual function; thus the aura is almost immediately historicized through its perpetual tie to a specific past event or historically recurring occasion. This concept of the aura provides a useful correlative for understanding both the role and the representation of history in *The Englishman’s Boy*. Here, the aura may be conceived of as unmediated history, a moment of historical truth that cannot be reproduced. Vanderhaeghe offers a formal distinction between “pure” history and mediated history through the simple shift between narrative voices: he moves between an omniscient (and, within the framework of his novel, an historically objective) third-person narrator in the segments leading up to and including the Cypress Hills massacre, 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. In the notion of the aura we may see a parallel to Van-derhaeghe’s depiction of an elusive, unreproducible historical truth. The private experience of Shorty McAdoo, the “Englishman’s Boy” of the title, is sought by Harry and Chance as an instance of authenticity, a

moment of pure history. The men believe that to capture his narrative is to capture the aura of an historical moment; similarly, they both believe that this historically authentic aura is something that can be represented on paper and on film. Shorty's aura becomes the object of the narrative: both the quest-object and the object of representation. Within the many layers of representation in the novel, the reader witnesses this moment of historical truth as it is recounted, interpreted, and reproduced in various forms. The reader is encouraged to think critically about the process of narrating history and the inevitable gap that looms between the historical moment and its representation.

This issue of representation and reproduction leads back to Benjamin's proposition that the aura is affected by the work's photographic or cinematographic reproduction. Benjamin posits that the aura is separated from the work through the act of mechanical reproduction; it adheres to the original and is conspicuously absent in the copy. This notion of a photographic or cinematographic "double," capable of infinite reproduction, is particularly relevant in *The Englishman's Boy*, where both the visual and the written representation of Shorty's story may be infinitely reproduced. In this case, however, it is not simply the aura of an image which must be represented, but the aura of a *narrative*. The snapshot history (of which the documentary photograph is capable) is insufficient to represent an historical narrative, for both narrative and history are teleological. The aura is intimately connected to the original time and space of the historical occurrence (a narrative parallel to the ritual or occasional use of art objects in Benjamin's proposition). In this sense, then, it can never be reproduced.

Shorty McAdoo, a vestige from a now absent historical moment, has a double relationship with the aura that inhabits him. He is both the symbolic original who possesses the historical aura, and he is also what Benjamin characterizes, in *The Arcades Project*, as the "trace" (447) of the historical moment:

The trace is the appearance of proximity, however remote the object that left it behind. Aura is the appearance of distance, however close the object that evokes it. In the trace we take possession of the object; in aura it takes possession of us. (Benjamin qtd. in Rolleston 17)

The narrative aura is Shorty's own historical experience; he possesses the elusive "truth" that Harry wants to capture and that Chance ultimately distorts. However, it is only Shorty himself, the historical "trace," that may be possessed. Thus Harry can listen to Shorty recount his own story,

but he is still once-removed from the moment of history itself; he can “possess” Shorty’s interpretation but not Shorty’s experience of a specific historical moment. Philip Rosen, building on Paul Ricoeur, writes that “the trace overlaps the existential and the empirical to produce an impossibility for a historicizing intentionality: a presence of the past.” Shorty is, in Rosen’s terms, “a preserved materiality from the past” (67). He is both a physical link to an always absent past and a psychic link to the permanently present past that exists within his own memory. He is the trace that has been left by the passage of time and he possesses the historically specific and unreproducible aura of first-person experience.

The Englishman’s Boy carries the Benjaminian correlative beyond the preoccupation with the aura into the concern with modes of representation and reproduction. Shorty, Chance, and Harry correspond with the three modes of representation explored in the novel: oral, visual, and written. In their ethical wrestling with one another, the three main characters raise issues of agency and authenticity. Indeed, the novel asserts a hierarchy of authenticity, even as the three characters vie for narrative authority. Shorty McAdoo is the vessel of narrative and historical authenticity. It is his story that is sought and his oral retelling which the novel proposes as the most faithful representation. Like an original artwork, Shorty possesses the historically-specific aura that Harry, the Hollywood scenarist, and Chance, the reclusive, grandiloquent producer, chase. This aura is something that must be captured: first to acquire it from Shorty and then to represent it, capturing Shorty’s oral tale in the written form of the transcriptions and screenplay, then in the visual form of the film, and finally in the written form of the novel (both the older Harry’s written account and *The Englishman’s Boy* itself). The reproduction of the authentic narrative in this novel is mediated through the three tellers of the tale; each incarnation of the story represents a version always further removed from the aura itself. Even Shorty’s oral account, theoretically the most authentic of the three, represents a mediation of the aura through the very act of its transmission. Vanderhaeghe suggests that historical representation, no matter how well-intentioned, is always a distillation of personalities, facts, and feelings from their original context: the historical details, separated from the specificity of their own time and place, become prey to a new imaginative force as the narrator of history calls upon fancy and invention to supply the missing quintessence of the historical moment.

Oral Representation

The Englishman's Boy offers Shorty's oral retelling of the story of Cypress Hills as the most authentic representation of the aura of pure history. However, Shorty, the angry loner whose chest is tight with secrets, becomes the unwitting tool of both Harry and Chance as they stake ownership over his memories. Shorty exists at the margins of society, and his social vulnerability is paralleled with his vulnerability as a storyteller. For Shorty the past is not simply a story suitable for page and screen, but a recollection of a moment of pure and painful personal history. In his dual function as historical "trace" and "aura," Shorty implies both the presence of the past and its simultaneous distance. For Harry Vincent, Shorty himself becomes the direct path to distant history.

Harry begins his quest for Shorty with "a face and a name" (Van-der-haeghe 32); what Harry is missing is Shorty's story, the aural/oral historical account that Chance demands. While the account that the reader of the text receives is a mediated one (for both Harry, as auditor/transcriber, and Vanderhaeghe, as author, are themselves inscribed in it), the essence of orality is continuously evoked. The oral representation is depicted as simultaneously powerful and vulnerable. Its force lies in its quality of truth, because the reader, like Harry himself, implicitly trusts that the story is a true one. Shorty's narrative derives strength from the auditor's faith in its factual authenticity and in the power of the truth to convert. Harry, who initially takes the assignment because of the substantial money Chance offers him, reaches a point *as auditor* when Shorty's story becomes not merely an historical account but a lived experience. Harry begins his quest for Shorty intent on capturing this aura of authenticity; however, the aura captures and consumes Harry-as-listener. The spoken language is evocative, and stirs a desire in the auditor for the absent aura:

The wind moves outside, dark and elemental, like the life I imagine the man before me has lived. For an instant, I hungrily grasp at the wilderness McAdoo holds clutched inside him, not for Chance's sake, but because of my need.

"Tell me," I whisper. (150-51)

This moment evokes both the secret space within Shorty where the aura resides, as well as the auditor's need to partake of that space.

While Vanderhaeghe presents orality as the most unmediated form of historical narration, he also convincingly suggests that it results in the

most vulnerable representation. Like the Benjaminian aura or the historical moment, the oral narrative is fixed to its own time and space. Vanderhaeghe uses the fluidity of the oral representation to evoke an awareness of narrative mutability; he uses the situational nature of the oral evocation to remind the reader of the instability of every historical perspective.

The language of the text repeatedly invokes the act of speaking, building up layers of signification that extend beyond what is said or, indeed, left unsaid. Speech is conceived of as bold, forthright, honest; silence is akin to betrayal. For example, when Chance explains the racist conceptions behind his film ambitions, Harry thinks, "Say something. . . . But I don't. And this is the thing that frightens me most" (254). Silence is thus contributor and conspirator; to lose one's voice is a sign of weakness and a loss of narrative control. Shorty has the notion that his story was bought from him and that likewise he should be able to buy his narrative back: "I spent but little of the money. I want to buy my life back" (277). He conceives of his narrative, in its new forms, as existing outside of himself. Shorty's subsequent actions suggest that he believes that something sacred has passed between himself and Harry, and from Harry to Chance. Later in the novel, after Chance's film begins production, Shorty's lone friend, Wylie, angrily insists to Harry: "Somebody got to talk to him. He's Shorty McAdoo" (289). Shorty also characterizes his attempts to see Chance as having "a word" (320). Shorty's final confrontation with Chance, an attempt at a symbolic recuperation, acts as a rejection of both reproduction and rationalizing, scientific historicism. When Shorty confronts Chance after the first screening of *Besieged*, he says to Chance, Wylie, and the crowd of listeners, "I come for my say. That's all — a say" (321). Harry, too, adopts the language of orality; when he tries to explain himself to Shorty he frames it in terms of speech: "Come on. Hear me out" (276). The idea of "having a word" is a fundamental part of the novel's privileging of oral representation. The speech act allows the individual to represent his or her own history; having "a say" is the opportunity to correct the historical record. However, the oral communication is vulnerable and transitive; at the moment of its utterance, the oral representation has already disappeared. Thus the "record" itself is a nebulous and impermanent one. The oral representation, like the historical moment, disappears at the instant of its occurrence. Oral communication is the representational parallel to history itself; any pretense of permanence is eliminated as the passage of time elides both the historical moment and the oral narrative.

Vanderhaeghe associates Shorty McAdoo with the natives through their common use of oral storytelling, and shows that both the historical winner and the historical loser of the Cypress Hills Massacre are losing control over the representation, and consequently the narrative, of their own histories. The oral subject in both Shorty's account and the natives' account is history itself. Shorty, the guilty victor, seems to crave the chance to tell his story, yet also longs for the erasing hand of time to silence memory and tongue. Shorty is highly skeptical of other modes of representation. When Harry begs him for stories of wild Indians, Shorty replies:

Hell, I wouldn't waste no wild Indian on you.... Those wild Indians the army used to jail for scampering off the reservation, directly they was locked up, they shrivelled and died. Wild Indian got to run free. I'd guess you lock a wild Indian up between the covers of a book, same thing is going to befall him. He's going to die. (145)

Shorty has a deep-seated distrust of representations, both filmed and written. His experience has taught him that both contain misrepresentations of reality and, for the public ignorant of the truth, these films and books create representations of histories and cultures that are fundamentally misleading. Shorty explains that:

Indian is a way of thinking. Lots of them Eastern boys riding at the studios *play* at cowboys and Indians. They learned Indians reading those boys' books — maybe same kind of book you asking me to help you write — books tell you how to do sign language, show you how to chip an arrowhead with a deer horn, make a war bonnet out of turkey feathers. Books don't make an Indian. It's country makes an Indian. (151)

“Books don't make an Indian” because books fail to accurately represent their subject and can never capture the elusive aura which is tied to the historical moment itself. Since Shorty is presented as a sympathetic parallel to the natives, the reader may understand that locking Shorty McAdoo up in the pages of a book is likewise consigning him to die. Vanderhaeghe suggests that books and films do not present a viable alternative to oral storytelling because the site of authority shifts away from the speaker who has experienced the historical event and who is both the trace of history and the vessel of the residual aura. Orality is associated with the immediacy of the historical moment; in Vanderhaeghe's scheme, the written and visual representations signify the mediation of time and distance upon the moment of pure history.

Visual Representation

Damon Ira Chance is a collector of images and, like the Benjaminian collector, he “retains some traces of the fetishist . . . who, by owning the work of art, shares in its ritual power” (“Work of Art” 244). Through his attempt to “capture” Shorty’s story and by later denying Shorty his “say,” Chance becomes both the symbolic and actual opposite to oral representation in the novel. It is perhaps significant that Chance’s film, the visual representation of Shorty’s story and the site of narrative and historical distortion, is a *silent* production; thus speech is replaced by image. If oral representation is characterized in the novel as the most truthful mode of representing an historical narrative, film provides a less clearly defined perspective on truth and representation. Chance enthuses about film’s potential as a pseudo-documentary mode; by manipulating the rhetoric of the image, Chance proposes converting America’s immigrant population into national patriots. He relies on the popular conception that cinema records reality without constructing it. The film image may be a direct mirror of a reality; however, film has the potential to artfully construct the reality being represented. Because of its very illusory nature, film is conceptualized in the novel as a potential tool in the creation of a propagandistic national history. Film records a specific reality which acts as a substitute (and sometimes an alternative) to another reality; film is thus both a document and, simultaneously, a forgery of reality.

In filming a western, Chance is working within the longest running narrative film tradition in Hollywood; in his representation of history, Chance is also working within a long-running Hollywood tradition:

Hollywood purchased the rights to works of western biography or history and turned them into fictional films. In most cases, the studios just wanted the titles, and once in their possession, the books were dropped and fictional stories substituted. Often the historical facts themselves disappeared under a barrage of fanciful concoctions that whitewashed or distorted events by romanticizing them beyond all recognition. (Hitt 297)

This type of cinema is the “mass-produced narrativization of the trace” (Rosen 87). The film may capture the external shell of the historical narrative (the trace itself, or the outline of the story) but cannot capture the essence of the absent aura. The historical film can never act as a document that recovers the past; rather, like the re-enacted true story and the docudrama, the historical film is a representation rather than a reality.

Nevertheless, Chance depends on the documentary quality of film to promote his vision of history.

In *Film Language*, Christian Metz notes,

Films give us the feeling that we are witnessing an almost real spectacle to a much greater extent ... than does a novel, a play, or a figurative painting. Films release a mechanism of affective and perceptual *participation* in the spectator... They speak to us with the accents of true evidence, using the argument that "It is so." (4)

Chance relies on the "It is so" quality of film to construct his nationalist epic. While he surely knows that "It is not so," he feels that art has an obligation to "improve" upon history. Thus he manufactures motivations and distorts characters to create an image of what history might have been. Dana Polan, writing on Sergei Eisenstein, notes that "The artist intercedes to give direction to the initial directionlessness of actuality. Art makes Nature productive" (43). This is clearly Chance's project as well: to make "Nature productive" of a certain discursive agenda, to cure "actuality" of its own "directionlessness." By substituting his own political agenda for the seeming randomness of the real historical moment, he asserts the power of the corrupt historian upon the fragile document of history.

Recalling the idealism of early Hollywood, Harry observes that D.W. Griffith, the most successful narrative filmmaker of the period,

was an obsessive eccentric and one of his obsessions was history. He employed a large staff to research his period dramas and dunned archaeologists and historians for blurbs to advertise the "accuracy" of his movies. But his obsession with history went further. He argued that the motion-picture camera would end conflicting interpretations of the past. Eventually all significant events would be recorded by movie cameras and film would offer irrefutable proof as to what had really happened. Vast public archives of documentary movies would make history democratic; by viewing the evidence, citizens could check the facts, know the truth for themselves. (Vanderhaeghe17)

Despite its documentary potential, the essence of cinema is a constructed reality. The film presents a depiction of one level of reality (what the camera itself records), while simultaneously implying another. The documentary potential that Griffith envisioned is compromised by the constructed, illusory nature of the recording itself. Indeed, Chance demonstrates a different interpretation of Griffith's historical mania and its effects:

It was pure genius on [Griffith's] part to advertise [*The Birth of a Nation*] as fact. Americans are a practical people, they like facts.... You mark my words, Harry, there'll come a day when the public won't swallow any of our stories unless they believe them to be real. Everybody wants the real thing, or thinks they do.... Facts are the bread America wants to eat. The poetry of facts is the poetry of the American soul. (19)

In the same paragraph Chance qualifies the importance of fact by adding that “of course ... the facts in picture-making must be shaped by intuition” (19). The moving image, although a visual illusion, is fundamentally linked to action and reaction. The image of reality encourages a suspension of disbelief and narrative discrimination in the audience; it also encourages a *reaction*. Fredric Jameson writes that “the visual is *essentially* pornographic, which is to say that it has its end in rapt, mindless fascination” (1). The notion of film as action (or incitement to action) combines with Jameson's idea of the film as passive spectacle to create an image of a reactionary, yet fundamentally passive viewer who may be manipulated by the screen image.

Chance is depicted as a counterfeiter of history. He exploits and distorts Shorty's narrative to satisfy his own malign political and artistic agenda. The extent of this appropriation is clear at the premiere of *Besieged* when Chance proclaims that “Shorty McAdoo is dead and this man [that is, Shorty himself] is an imposter” (320). Benjamin writes that “The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity” (“Work of Art” 220). Chance's representation of history replaces both the historical truth and the living trace; his symbolic erasure of the original eliminates the question of where to locate authenticity. By eliminating the historical trace, Chance bridges over the chasm that exists between an historical event and its contemporary representation. He effectively denies the limitations of the present by denying Shorty McAdoo.

Jameson observes that “‘Realism’ is ... a peculiarly unstable concept owing to its simultaneous, yet incompatible, aesthetic and epistemological claims, as the two terms of the slogan, ‘representation of reality,’ suggest” (158). However, Chance seems to avoid the question of realism altogether. He never asserts that he wants to make an historically factual film; rather he expresses his need to craft an “intuitive” film. He maintains that “art is elastic not rigid” (Vanderhaeghe 227) and he tells Harry that *Besieged* “is about psychological truth, poetic truth. Poetic truth is not journalism” (252). In this way Chance elides the ethical and representational issues of narrating history. Benjamin observes that film's “social signifi-

cance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage. This phenomenon is most palpable in the great historical films” (“Work of Art” 221). This idea of a liquidation of history is inscribed in Chance’s philosophies of representation, memory, and history. He tells Harry that “if Griffith wrote history in lightning, the time has now come to *rewrite* history in lightning.” Chance seeks to “erase completely those sentimental flowers of memory” (Vanderhaeghe 297) that immigrants bring with them; thus Chance’s “history” moves beyond re-visioning to encompass both erasure and re-creation.

Written Representation

Harry Vincent seeks to capture Shorty McAdoo’s essence in the tangible form of text. Harry, as both auditor/transcriber and narrator/writer, tries to fix the historical Shorty(s) through a piecing together of two separate histories: the history of Shorty’s youthful experiences and the story of Harry’s own experiences with Shorty, the old man. While Chance accuses Harry of “[assembling] the facts like a stock boy stacking cans on a shelf,” the fact that Harry wrote it “*exactly* as McAdoo described it” (250) implies that Harry is faithful to the original, although we are given to understand that his transcriptions nevertheless fail to capture the elusive aura of personal experience. The written text, theoretically representing the universal and the stable, stands in opposition to the personal and fleeting moment of oral testimony; it acts as the permanent historical record, and, as a conventional history, fails to acknowledge its own very constructed nature.

Shorty’s oral account is mediated by its transmission through the written text and the source of authority shifts from Shorty, who speaks the account, to Harry, who transcribes it. Harry, as he transcribes Shorty’s account, is self-consciously engaging in the production of an historical record; he is less self-aware that he is also documenting his own personal historical narrative. Benjamin notes that “even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (“Work of Art” 220). Harry’s true narrative is ultimately the story of his own experience with Shorty; although he cannot reproduce the aura of Shorty’s narrative, he has participated in the creation of a new historically specific aura. As Harry recalls of one meeting with Shorty, “the feel of the night was its meaning” (Vanderhaeghe 158). This “feel” suggests the ineffable and insubstantial essence of the aura of that night,

a moment in Harry's own history that is lost as soon as it has been experienced. However, for Harry, as for Shorty, "the past cannot be so easily dismissed" (326). Harry, like Shorty, lives under the shadow of the past. He reflects that

Chance believed character didn't count for much in history. But, looking at the river, I remind myself the map of the river is not the river itself. That hidden in it are deep, mysterious, submerged, and unpredictable currents. The characters of all those wolfers, Canadian and American, cast longer shadows than I had any inkling of that endless night in which McAdoo made his confession, crouched on a cot in a desolate bunkhouse, an old man reliving his pain and guilt thousands of miles from an obscure dot on the Saskatchewan prairie. (326)

Through Harry's ritual experience with Shorty, that long strange night of Shorty's confession, he discovers himself the unreproducible nature of private experience. The Harry of the early 1950s, who reflects thirty years into his own past, is himself an historical trace in the shifting present of the novel.

Vanderhaeghe also depicts the natives moving between oral histories and written histories. Indeed, Strong Bull's pictures are closer to the written mode than the visual mode despite their ideographic — thus symbolic or doubly representational — character. The natives, oral storytellers like Shorty McAdoo, recognize that to preserve their own history they must find new modes of passing down information. Recognizing the vulnerability of oral representation, Strong Bull attempts to "capture" the aura of his people's history in drawings. He tells Fine Man:

Everything changes. Perhaps these beings [horses, elk, buffalo] will pass out of this world the way they came into it.... You and I have seen these beings, but what if our grandchildren have no knowledge of them? I do not want the grandchildren to be frightened when they pass into the Mystery World and encounter beings which may be strange to them.... And I have thought of something else.... If the grandchildren do not recognize these beings, perhaps they will not recognize us either.... That is why I draw the pictures so the grandchildren will recognize us. (331)

So saying, Strong Bull passes a book to Fine Man in which he has drawn images of the people and their rituals. This book acts as a personal record of a present which Strong Bull fears will soon slip into the past. It is interesting that in a novel that privileges oral storytelling for its immediacy and

poignancy, books should ultimately be relied upon as a record which can withstand the passage of time. However, Vanderhaeghe's endorsement of the text-as-record is a guarded one, for he notes that Strong Bull intends to leave the book to Fine Man after his death since Fine Man is the only one who can interpret the meaning of the pictures. Thus interpretation, with all of its inherent problems of bias and motive, is inscribed in Vanderhaeghe's presentation of history; the message, surely, is that history is not neutral.

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Chance and Harry are both cast in the role of historian in the text, seeking a moment of historical truth that will unlock a heretofore unknown page of American history. However, the two men have different views of the role that the truth, once discovered, will play. James Rolleston, in an essay on Benjamin, wonders, "how can the historian claim access to truth, even provisional truth? Do not the ceaseless production and proliferation of linguistic, hence irresistible, meanings simply submerge all possibility of a stabilized perspective?" (15). This perception implies the proliferation of histories within a single history, and is an issue that the novel explores through the very question of representation. The narrative of the Englishman's boy (although the fictional creation of the author) is intended as the objective and historically "true" centre of the novel. Nevertheless, we see history breaking off into potential alternate accounts. For example, the twelve men at Cypress Hill and the young native girl would not have the same narrative to tell, even though they had participated in the same historical event; thus the narrative aura is specific and individual. These potentials arising around the same historical event reveal that history is not determinate or fixed. While the aura may be fixed to its object (here the man or woman who experiences and registers the significance of the historical moment), the event-as-history is a construct of hindsight, a fashioning of the past into a cohesive narrative of foundation and destruction. Shorty himself recognizes that his narrative rights extend only to his own life and actions, not to those of another. His keenest sense of narrative betrayal arises from the misrepresentation of the Assiniboine girl in Chance's film, or rather, from his guilty awareness that in telling his story he has unwittingly sacrificed the girl a second time. Reinhold Kramer notes that Harry's efforts to preserve the circumstances of the native girl's death from Chance's malevolent revisioning mark him as "a figure for historical authenticity, a figure who remembers real events that have been edited out and left on the cutting room floor" (10). Harry's

desire to “save” the girl from Chance’s desecration and to erase his own connection with Chance’s film, however, prove fruitless. Chance tells him, “You may wash your hands of me, Harry, but not your part in my picture. That is for the record” (Vanderhaeghe 297-98).

Harry and Chance represent two distinct attitudes towards history and authenticity which correspond with the potentially positive and negative powers of the aura. While the original art object represents a sought-after degree of authenticity, the very fetishization of authenticity (the cult of the aura) aestheticizes politics and may lead to the exploitation of either the original artwork or the audience of the reproduction. Harry, the “truth-seeker” (132), and Chance, the truth-distorter, both seek the “aura,” the historical narrative of Shorty McAdoo, but ultimately their quests serve different purposes. This returns us to Benjamin’s conception of the positive and negative potentials of the aura: Harry’s pursuit of the aura shifts from the pragmatic to the nostalgic; his final pained self-awareness suggests a respect for the elusive nature of historical truth. Chance’s pursuit of the aura represents the exploitive potential of fetishized authenticity in his desire to craft an American motion picture that will control and convert new immigrants. The motivation of the transcriber ceases to be an issue, however, for the aura is absent in both Chance’s misguided production and in Harry’s well-meaning transcriptions. Shorty’s ultimately unreproducible narrative aura continues as the site of historical authority in the novel, while Vanderhaeghe implicitly asserts that the absence of the aura is inevitable. Ultimately, the aura is both a longed-for essence (analogous to the modern craving for authenticity which Chance intuits in his audience) as well as an unknowable absence, for, as Benjamin scholars have noted, the concept of the aura works dialectically and, in one sense, only its absence can be known or felt. The aura of truth, therefore, becomes a *lack* in any historical representation; representation becomes merely an attempt to recapture a truth which absents itself as soon as the historical moment has passed. Through Vanderhaeghe’s dissection of the reliability and authority of modes of historical representation, he problematizes the telling of history; however, the novelist simultaneously complicates his own representational authority in a novel which is both informed by history and part of the creation or revisioning of that history.

In *The Englishman’s Boy*, Vanderhaeghe turns a work of historical fiction into a meditation on truth, history, and representation. The novel’s treatment of these themes ultimately encompasses the three modes of representation which are seemingly in conflict in the narrative. While

Vanderhaeghe clearly marks the oral telling as a privileged but vulnerable form, his own written text seems to assert the permanence and theoretic reliability of the transcribed account.² While the three modes of representation vie for narrative and historical authority *within* the novel, the novel itself represents a merging of the three: its structure is filmic, based on a montage of shifting historical “presents”; its tone is oral, dominated by conversation and the telling and re-telling of stories; and its obvious form is that of layered written texts. It seems that the novel itself becomes something of a Benjaminian “transcription” which privileges and authenticates the stories it captures. One of Benjamin’s goals in the never-completed *Arcades Project* was to piece together a history of nineteenth-century Paris through citation and transcription. He sought to assemble an authentic history using the technique of “literary montage” (*Arcades Project* 460). The concept of historical “quotation” is

crucial to Benjamin’s understanding of dialectic.... Past languages produce an immense variety of texts: the silent texts of buildings and urban planning, the minimal verbal formalizations of public regulations, and the slightly more elaborate descriptive style of documents and reports, with their implicit value judgments. From the historian’s perspective, all these languages, though distinct from one another, are clearly interwoven. (Rolleston 16)

Benjamin observes of his planned writing of this history that “I needn’t say anything. Merely show” (*Arcades Project* 460). Through this approach to historical writing, what Benjamin calls “the rags, the refuse” (460), the inanimate and silent detritus of history, are given a powerful narrative agency. Vanderhaeghe applies a comparable technique in his writing of historical fiction as he attempts to assemble, in a piecemeal fashion, a representative kind of history. He weaves together discrete historical quotations: Chance’s rhapsodizing on the potential of film; bits of narrative that Shorty recounts in the present of 1923; the full and unvarnished story of the Englishman’s boy; the natives’ concerns about the effect of time on memory; Harry’s own experiences in Hollywood and his later reflections on history and representation. As in *The Arcades Project*, historicism becomes a dream of authenticity woven out of quotation. The transcriber of the text attempts to remove himself — or at least his own interpretive mechanisms — and allows the voices of history to narrate their own story.

NOTES

¹ Alison Calder observes that the “borderline status” of the narratives of the Assiniboine warriors is “a deliberate creative strategy designed to point to the absences” (104) in the main narrative. The appearance of these scenes on the periphery of the texts reminds the reader of the voiceless presence of the natives in the background of Shorty’s story.

² It is interesting to note that in his “Acknowledgements,” Vanderhaeghe states that “excerpts from this novel, in a slightly different form, appeared on CBC Radio’s ‘Ambience,’” so the novel’s own earlier form was oral. Since *The Englishman’s Boy* is now being adapted for film, it will ultimately range across oral, written, and filmic representations, as does Shorty’s story.

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