Unsettling the West: Nation and Genre in Guy Vanderhaeghe's *The Englishman's Boy*

ALISON CALDER

IN SOME WAYS Guy Vanderhaeghe's novel *The Englishman's Boy* plays to North American stereotypes. Harry Vincent, the innocent Canadian, discovers the authentic West beneath the hype, but is eventually overpowered by the most American of characters, the obsessed, megalomaniac film director, Damon Ira Chance. But Vanderhaeghe complicates this straightforward national allegory by emphasizing the shifting nature of Harry's position, as he becomes first Chance's collaborator, then his opponent, and finally tries to flee him altogether. In this paper I read Vanderhaeghe's novel as a critique of Canadian-American relations, focussing on the ways Vanderhaeghe represents power, like truth, as relational. Harry, the Canadian adrift in Hollywood, is both victim and victimizer, vulnerable to Chance's manipulations while complicit with Chance in stealing and revising Shorty's story. His power is a function of context, a function made clear by his alternate use and disavowal of his Canadian identity. Analogously, Vanderhaeghe's use of the Western genre to structure *The Englishman's Boy* takes advantage of the ideologies the novel explictly deplores: like Harry, the novel collaborates with the enemy even as it works against it. The result in both cases is a set of conflicted and complicated power relations, dependent on context and reflecting the entanglements of settler/colonizer histories. Neither character nor genre can be said to be completely guilty, but neither can be said to be completely innocent either.

I. Flight to Canada

Harry Vincent begins *The Englishman's Boy* as a representative Canadian: called "Little Truth Seeker" by his friend Rachel, his decency and authenticity stand in contrast to the artifice and corruption symbolized by the movie mogul Damon Ira Chance. Such a representation is not uncom-

mon, of course. The forty-ninth parallel is often depicted as a Medicine Line, a place of safety for those fleeing north, escaping the violence and degradation of America. This equation of Canada and freedom achieves its most famous form in the narratives of escaping slaves, who followed the North Star and took the underground railroad to Canada, but it also finds expression far earlier, as waves of immigrants left the poverty and oppression of the Old Country to discover freedom and opportunity in the new, open land. In the nineteenth century the border also signified sanctuary for Native tribes fleeing persecution by the United States Army, and more recently it provided refuge for other Americans fleeing the army — draft dodgers during the Vietnam War. In this vision, Canada functions as the ideal refuge. In the West, the symbol of this safety and freedom is the Mountie, who exists in relation to the American figure of the Sheriff, and who points to the status of the Canadian West as being essentially different from the American West just across the border. As Daniel Francis writes, "The story of how they [the Mounties] drove out the American whiskey peddlers and pacified the West is familiar to every school child" (29). Corruption comes from without; the Mounties hold the line.

It is this "different" Canadian West that Shorty wants to reach when Harry first finds him. Shorty figures Canada as a fundamentally free space: seeking an escape from a place where "rich men keep putting all us dogs on the leash," Shorty tells Harry that "They got some space there" in Canada (80). But as escaping slaves, impoverished immigrants, destitute Native tribes, and disillusioned draft dodgers discovered, this free Canadian space exists only as an ideal. In the 1870s the Canadian side of the forty-ninth parallel was, as Wallace Stegner writes, the "literally lawless West" (74). *The Englishman's Boy* makes this lawlessness clear: when the party of wolfers crosses the Milk River to retrieve Hardwick's stolen horses, the text tells us that "they were now beyond the reach of the Choteau County sheriff, the United States Marshalls, the army, or Indian agents. On the Canadian side of the line there were no meddlesome lawmen of any stripe whatsoever" (165). The Canadian "space" Shorty described earlier to Harry appears not as a marker of civilization, but rather as one of anarchy, becoming a space filled with the horror of the story of the Englishman's boy. The kind of freedom this space offers is signalled in the description of lawmen as "meddlesome"; clearly, something unsavoury is intended, and Canadian space allows the freedom to do that deed.

The text additionally qualifies the idea of Shorty's flight to Canada because, when Shorty tells Harry about the time he did spend in Canada, he emphasizes that it made him "go Indian" — that is to say, he goes mad.

Canadian space appears here as destructive, since it allows "the Indian" in Shorty's head to take over:

> I'd soured on folks, wanted shut of them, but lonesome country breeds lonesomeness. I sung every song I knew trying to drive out the Indian talking in my head. Every day I heard him plainer and plainer. The country done it to me. The sky was Indian sky, the wind was Indian wind, every last thing I laid my eyes on was cut to fit an Indian. (152)

As a result, he goes mad. Naked, unarmed, and confronted by three Blackfoot warriors, Shorty begins capering in the mud, imitating a pig. Unable to find his gun, which is lost in the mud, he gives himself up for dead, but apparently he has amused the warriors long enough that they do not kill him. When he regains consciousness, he is alone, and he says, "When candle-lighting come, I turned south and tramped for the border" (156). Here we see a reversal of the flight-to-Canada trajectory. Canadian "space," instead of being liberating, is a threatening and lawless space in which the rational world (which Shorty figures as the White world) vanishes and is instead replaced by what he sees as the irrational Indian world. Though Shorty compares his pig experience to a Native dream-quest, remarking that "them old-timey, genuine Indians used to go off solitary in the wilderness so's to find their creature spirit" (157), his own spirit quest is not a positive one, and he flees south to the United States and "civilization." This kind of Canadian experience, which Shorty constructs as the land conquering the white man, rather than the other way around, neatly reverses the triumphant narratives of western homesteaders. It is also, of course, not what Chance seeks for his movie. He writes to Harry: "A picture about a lunatic lost on the plains is not what I had in mind. Press him about the Indian wars" (157).

By the novel's end, escape to Canada becomes a possibility spoken of only elegiacally, a possibility held onto only by the witless character Wylie. As he wails to Harry just before shooting Chance, "If you'd only just talked to him. We would been in Canada now. We would been in Canada … happy" (322). Harry reports that Shorty disappears after Chance's death, and predicts that he is "Making for the Medicine Line. I like to believe he crossed it one last time" (324). But by this point in the novel, the healing power of the Medicine Line is only illusory. There is a flight to Canada at the end of *The Englishman's Boy*, but it isn't the happy expedition anticipated by Shorty and Wylie at the novel's outset. Harry too makes for the Medicine Line but, as he concludes, "the past

cannot be so easily dismissed" (326), as the shadows of history fall across national boundaries. Defeated and degraded by his Hollywood experience, Harry returns with his institutionalized mother to a diminished life in Saskatoon. He flees what he sees as a corrupt Hollywood for what he hopes will be a more meaningful existence in his native Canada. But Harry's flight to Canada only emphasizes the inadequacy of the national boundary as a signal of difference: Harry's employment as a projectionist in Saskatoon consists of showing to others the Hollywood movies and the Hollywood values that he himself sought to escape. He may no longer be in the movie-making business, but Vanderhaeghe doesn't let him off the hook: Harry is unwilling or unable to extricate himself from Hollywood completely. The difference between Canadian and American space is of degree only, and there is no line to defend.

II. Developing a Conscience

In its depictions of Harry's struggles in Hollywood, the novel exposes some of the underpinnings of both national and personal identity. Harry exploits the invisibility of his Canadianness: unlike the Indians, whose race is immediately apparent, or even Rachel Gold, whose name signifies her Jewish identity, Harry can choose whether or not to reveal himself as a Canadian. Vanderhaeghe constructs Harry's national identity as performance, as a role that Harry can very consciously put on or take off. Thus, his Canadian-ness endows him with some power, albeit in a very restricted scope. Though he is vulnerable to exploitation by Chance, he can also exploit Chance by concealing his identity and performing Americanness. Chance invites Harry to work with him to make "pictures rooted in American history and American experience" (16), complaining that the number of "foreigners" making supposedly American films has led to what he sees as the degradation of the industry. Chance intends that Harry will work with him to correct this degradation and to produce a picture to stir the American soul. Harry writes: "I feel some guilt that I have not confessed to Chance that he is seeking help for making the great American film from a Canadian. But there is the question of money. And I have found that Americans, by and large, recognize no distinction between us. Why should I?" (111). Motivated by financial considerations, Harry exploits the invisibility of his nationality and becomes "American." Harry's agency, his willingness to assume the American role when it is advantageous, makes it impossible to read *The Englishman's Boy* as a simple critique of American cultural imperialism. Harry is vulnerable to exploi-

tation because of the financial pressures his mother's illness puts on him, but in a sense he can choose whether to be vulnerable, in a way not available to other, more visibly vulnerable parties like Indians or Jews. His Canadian identity serves double duty: he can conceal it in order to collaborate with Chance, but he can also use it to distance himself from that collaboration, as seen in his flight to Canada. He is Chance's victim, but in a compromised sense.

Later in the novel Rachel accuses Harry of hiding behind an "English façade." He corrects her, insisting that he is "not English." It is Rachel who supplies the national descriptor: "All right, Canadian" (178). Indeed, Harry sees "Canadian" as a descriptor empty of meaningful content because, in his view, Canada lacks the kind of poetic, mythic coherence that Chance wants to create for America in his film. Later in their conversation, Harry tells Rachel that "Canada isn't a country at all, it's simply geography…. Half the English Canadians wish they were *really* English, and the other half wish they were Americans. If you're going to be anything, you have to choose." And, as he tells Rachel, "I chose this place" (181). Harry thus describes the erasure of any Canadian space: if there is a Canada, it is only a kind of absence, existing as a vacuum between English and American. To be Canadian is to desire to be other. In the face of this perceived vacuum, Harry constructs himself as an American, a choice that allows him to work with Chance and to pursue Shorty's story on Chance's behalf. He becomes "Canadian" again, I suggest, only when it becomes convenient to do so, only when he wishes to withdraw from Chance's project. But such a withdrawal is impossible: Harry *is* implicated in Chance's movie, and though he may try to take the moral, "Canadian" high ground, he remains complicit with Chance's corrupt vision. Ironically, Chance, whose vision is seriously flawed throughout the book, is the character who most clearly sees Harry's role. When Harry finally demands that Chance remove his name from the film credits, Chance refuses:

> "Harry," he says, "you can't deny your responsibility, pretend you had no hand in this. Even Judas played a part in Christ's teaching…. And then the way you played McAdoo, discreetly, delicately, so he hardly realized the hook was in his mouth — well, Fitz couldn't have done it and neither could I. I have no doubt that I have you to thank for McAdoo…. But when you said you didn't have the talent to write my scenario, you were right. I didn't know that you were right — I only felt betrayed. But your betrayal gave me the resolve to finish what you started. Put another way: Could Christ have endured the cross with

> out Judas' face hung in the sky before him?… You may wash your hands of me, Harry, but not your part in my picture. That is for the record." (297-98)

J.L. Granatstein writes in *Yankee Go Home?* that "Canadians recognize that they are being Americanized, fret about the process (while grasping eagerly for the rewards), and readily blame the Americans for foisting Americanization upon them" (7). Harry displays all of these characteristics, enjoying the rewards of working with Chance at the same time as he feels increasingly uneasy about the collaboration. He describes watching the ice break up on the South Saskatchewan River, telling Rachel that "maybe I understand that my memory is the truest picture of my country, bystanders huddled on a riverbank, cheering as the world sweeps by" (181). The novel traces Harry's decision to reject the role of Canadian bystander: he joins Chance's enterprise because he wants to make things happen. But, when the ultimate goal of Chance's enterprise becomes clear, Harry wants once again to become a spectator, retreating back across the border to Canada, a supposedly safe, innocent space. His narrative ends with him heading home from his projectionist's job, standing once more on the riverbank. But, as Harry's story reveals, though he is a "bystander," his protestations of innocence hardly ring true. I argue that this novel can be read as a political allegory of Canadian-American relations: publicly, Canada condemns the United States for its many imperial exercises; privately, Canada's political and economic relationship with the United States facilitates this American imperialism. This is not a relationship of equals, and it is obvious that Canada is the more vulnerable. Still, like Harry, Canada is not without agency, and so must accept responsibility for the bargains it strikes and the collaborations it is willing to enjoy or endure. *The Englishman's Boy* lets neither individual nor nation off the hook. There is no moral high ground for Harry, the wannabe American: he cannot cooperate with the Americans when it suits him and then claim that he didn't understand the consequences.

When Harry returns to Canada from Hollywood, he checks Shorty's story against narratives in history books:

> For a brief time the Cypress Hills Massacre had its day in the sun; members of Parliament rose in the house, hotly denouncing the wolfers as American cutthroats, thieves, and renegades. Nobody seemed to mention that among them were Canadian cutthroats too.
>
> Those few paragraphs always pointed to one result of the massacre. The Canadian government formed the North West Mounted Police,

> sent it on a long, red-jacketed march into a vast territory, establishing claim to it. A mythic act of possession. (326)

Here, the text draws our attention to the separation of national mythology from national reality. Members of Parliament rise to condemn the Americans, displacing the violence and hatred inherent in the Massacre onto the Other, away from the Canadians themselves. The Canadian West is defined against the American West: the Americans are "cutthroats, thieves, and renegades" who must be civilized through the imposition of Canadian law and order. Of course, this definition is based on a false dichotomy. The moment of national definition, as the text depicts it, thus becomes not so much a defense of the border as a creation of it. Harry points out that this pretense of defense becomes the excuse for Canada's own nation-building exercise, the establishment and deployment of the North West Mounted Police. This act of empire can thus be explained as being for the good of the Indians — they are being protected from the "Americans." That "Americans" exists as a manufactured category is not made obvious in Parliamentary debate. The violence of empire is displaced onto an American other, and the myth of the peaceful Canadian West is reinforced. Daniel Francis succinctly summarizes this idealized West: "This is what marks Canadians as different than Americans. South of the border they waged genocidal war against their Native population. In Canada, we sent the Mounted Police to befriend and protect the Indians" (34). Vanderhaeghe's novel counters this myth of benevolence, emphasizing that the moral high ground occupied by the politicians in Ottawa is really moral quicksand, a situation echoing Harry's own claims of innocence, as the opportunistic politicking recalls Harry's earlier statement that "there is the question of money." The difference between nation and individual in *The Englishman's Boy* may be that Harry develops a conscience, even though he is ultimately unable to extricate himself from the situation he has helped to create. When Shorty tells Harry that he wants his story back, that he, Shorty, had no right to "sell" the Indian girl to him, Harry retorts, "It's a little late for you to be developing a conscience about her, isn't it?" (278). I wonder if this isn't the fundamental question of the text itself.

III. Framing Nations

I began this article by writing about two nations, but I realized along the way that I should be thinking about at least three. My consideration of the forty-ninth parallel as a permeable national boundary elides the ways

in which the Assiniboine sections of the text complicate any simple understanding of what a border is. Tribal boundaries, of course, transcend the forty-ninth parallel, as the concept of "nation" is seen from a different, older perspective. Thomas King's short story "Borders" is instructive: a young boy and his mother are stopped at the Canadian-American border, en route from Alberta to Utah. When asked their citizenship, the mother replies "Blackfoot." Her refusal to accept the categories of "American" or "Canadian" means that they can neither enter the United States nor re-enter Canada, and the two spend several days and nights in the shop of the duty-free parking lot until the arrival of a TV crew prompts the American border guards to admit them. My emphasis on the forty-ninth parallel has had the same effect, stranding the novel's First Nations characters in an invisible borderland.

The Englishman's Boy is obviously a Western, though a Western with a twist. Herb Wyile compares the novel favourably with the 1990 film *Dances with Wolves*, and Reinhold Kramer puts it in the context of earlier Western films like *Rio Grande*. Such comparisons highlight how *The Englishman's Boy* both respects and subverts generic conventions. But one of the most significant things Vanderhaeghe does formally to fulfill his revisionist project I would call not a subversion per se, but rather a supplement: the bracketing of Shorty's and Harry's tales with the story of the Assiniboine warriors. I argue that this frame is more properly a supplement to the text because the genre *cannot* include it; it must of necessity remain outside, a parallel text but not an interpolated one. As Wyile explains, Shorty's story occupies a priviliged ontological status in the novel. Although his tale deflates the mythic idea of the heroic American West, this book is still very much a Western. The film I would compare it to is Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*, an anti-western Western that still manages to use most of the conventions it openly protests against, giving us the heroic gunfighter without the glamour. As Blake Allmendinger points out, "Clint Eastwood kills people, but this time he's sorry" (12). The main narratives of *The Englishman's Boy*, Harry's and Shorty's, use the Western in much the same way, merging in a final, ironic shootout. The reader, engrossed in the individual struggles of the Englishman's boy and of Harry, rediscovers with surprise the story of Fine Man's return to the Assiniboine camp with the blue horse: the Aboriginal presence has been allowed to become a background to the protagonists' stories. The Indians become invisible again.

Conventions of the genre demand that the concerns of the white male protagonist be central. John Cawelti points out that this pattern is com-

mon, writing that "Even in Westerns quite sympathetic to the Indian … the focus of the action usually shifts from the Indians themselves to the dilemmas their situation poses for the white hero and heroine" (65). While Shorty himself sees the story of the abducted Indian girl as central to his narrative, in *The Englishman's Boy* her death seems to function more as a narrative tool, as a means of further developing the character of the Englishman's boy and as a means of conveying the utter immorality of Chance's vision. The girl is an element of the narrative, but it is not her story. Ultimately, the main narratives provide a limited revisioning of the West: the content is different than a classic Western, but the point of view from which the story is told is the same.

The placement of the Assiniboine narratives, which are literally on the borders of the text, highlights their own borderline status and calls attention to the limitations of the main narratives. Even the style is different: the lyrical sections about the Assiniboine warriors emphasize the stylized Westernness of the rest. I read these sections as self-consciously adjunct — not as a touchy-feely New Age attempt at political correctness or oneness with The Native, but as a deliberate creative strategy designed to point to the absences in the narrative that even Shorty's story leaves out. These sections may be firmly bracketed off from the rest of the text, but reading them leads the reader to reinterpret the text as a whole. The surprise the reader feels at re-encountering the Assiniboine characters serves as a sharp reminder of how easily the main narratives allow these characters to be forgotten. And, I think, it also reminds the reader of how easily he or she has forgotten these characters, a recognition that may provoke a distinct sense of unease as the reader realizes that he or she may be implicated in this situation as well. In some senses, the reader has been brought into a compromised position analogous to Harry's: as readers, we too desire an exciting conclusion, the Indian wars. As Kramer writes, "what would an antiwar film be without the mesmerizing choreography of battle? … Who wouldn't want to dress up with six-guns and say 'pardner'?" (13).

Framing the main narratives in this way calls attention to the conventions of the Western, and how those conventions are implicated in the structures that *The Englishman's Boy* critiques. The central narrative may be an anti-colonial Western, but the Western itself participates in the narrative of colonialism (and I would argue that it is impossible to have a narrative that is both a Western and postcolonial). Wyile writes that Shorty's and Harry's stories are "contained" by the Assiniboine frame (33), but I would argue that containment is an inadequate metaphor for their relation. The Assiniboine sections exist alongside the main narratives,

connected but occupying a separate space. This connection is retrospective: at the book's end, the reader looks back and (hopefully) rereads the white Western narratives through the Assiniboine frame. Structurally, then, the text alters its own ontological system, which in the main narratives has privileged Shorty's story. The extra-generic frame points to the potential inadequacy of Shorty's story as a model for the "truth" of the west, not by destroying the validity of Shorty's tale, but rather by supplementing it with the knowledge that the white male perspective is, as always, incomplete. Though, as Wyile writes, "the Assiniboine get the last word" (47), neither narrative is, ultimately, the final word, just as neither is, ultimately, invalid. While they are radically different, each has its own integrity. There are other possible truths. Like Harry, who is implicated in the distortion of Shorty's past, *The Englishman's Boy* implicates itself in the distortion of the past, as the Assiniboine narratives bring into play that which must remain outside the conventions of a Western narrative.

This questioning of genre also participates in a larger national critique, I argue, because of the significance of the Western story to American national mythology. Critics ranging from Frederick Jackson Turner and Leslie Fiedler to Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood have seen the frontier as the defining paradigm of American culture. The vehicle for that particular national mythology of manifest destiny is the Western. As Cawelti writes, "surely no twentieth-century American needs to have the Western's importance as a cultural form demonstrated to him" (29). I have already pointed to the ways *The Englishman's Boy* emphasizes the inadequacy of the Canadian national story — that we are a kinder, gentler nation than the one to the south of us. In critiquing the Western, *The Englishman's Boy* also suggests the inadequacy of the traditional frontier story and of the American national myth. Chance wants to make a Western — and look how that turns out, riddled with racism and anti-Semitism. Even *The Englishman's Boy* provides an argument against the Western, as Vanderhaeghe has to supplement it with extra-generic content. Richard Slotkin argues in *Gunfighter Nation* that the myth of the frontier organizes almost all aspects of American culture. Central to this myth, he writes, is the concept of the "savage war": the idea that two races can never coexist peacefully and that the utter subjugation of one is the only response. This savage war provides the violence that revitalizes a weak European culture and creates a vigorous American nation. Participation in the savage war requires what Slotkin calls "the logic of massacre," which holds that because non-whites are savages, they will brutalize whites; thus, the only proper white response is brutality. Because the sav-

ages ostensibly seek to exterminate whites totally, they must be controlled by any means possible. Rape, torture, and murder are thus justified. In this ideology, white violence is seen as a response to savagery, rather than as a savage act in itself. We see this paradigm played out in Chance's insistence that the Indian girl must start the fire that ends his movie. In Shorty's tale, it is Hardwick who torches the fort and leaves the girl inside to burn. Such an action cannot support the "poetic truth" that Chance desires to film:

> "What the picture must convey, Harry, is the psychology of the defeated. And what is this psychology? A diseased resentment. The sick hate the healthy. The defeated hate the victor. The inferior *always* resent the superior. They sicken with resentment, they brood, fantasize revenge, plot. They attempt to turn everything on its head; try to impose feelings of guilt on the healthy and the strong." (251)

The ideological conditions for the perpetuation of the savage war are therefore fulfilled: in Chance's film the savage girl is destroyed by her resentment of those who have mastered her. The savage war is won by whites: violence has provided the cultural regeneration that Chance seeks. The novel's rejection of this ideology is made explicit not only in the content of Shorty's story but also in the condemnation Rachel offers of Georges Sorel's philosophy. To inspire Harry, Chance has given him a copy of Sorel's *Réflexions sur la violence*, which asserts Sorel's belief in the importance of the myth of the general strike to the French working class. Rachel, one of the more reliable voices in the novel, reads the French text for Harry, and offers this comment on Sorel's thesis: "[the myth is] there to motivate people, provide the impetus for violent action. Because violence is the only means of invigorating a degenerate society. Your friend gave you an indecent book to read, Harry" (270). Ultimately, *The Englishman's Boy* asks the reader to recognize this indecency as well.

When Harry gives Chance his version of Shorty's story, Chance insists that he rewrite it, saying, "Change the girl. The enemy is never human" (256). It is ultimately this displacement that Harry objects to, this insistence on dividing people into "us" and "them" and projecting onto "them" all of the negative qualities that we cannot admit in ourselves. The wolfers' violence, in Chance's version, becomes the girl's violence; their savagery makes her a savage. Such displacements permit the enactment of atrocities. Harry tries to escape these atrocities through a flight to Canada, but such an escape is impossible: victimizer as well as victim, he cannot flee himself. *The Englishman's Boy* presents to the reader

a compromised hero, even as it recognizes its own compromised position. This compromise does not negate the novel's value: as Kramer writes, such a position is "only self-defeating if we expect that a Canadian text ought to find its way into a purely benign world culture or to present an entirely innocent criticism of empire" (9). Vanderhaeghe makes it clear that such innocence is neither possible nor desirable. In its exploration of North American settler-colonizer history, *The Englishman's Boy* reminds us that there are degrees of victimization and exploitation, and that we cannot evade responsibility for our individual and national choices.

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