

Such a rejection, I believe, is based on a misconception of the author's idea of the hero figure and, consequently, may lead to an inadequate appreciation of Vanderhaeghe's achievements in his fiction.

An indication of this idea of the hero is given by the narrator of the first and title story in *The Trouble with Heroes* when he tearfully laments:

I'm sure there is no more opportunity for heroism. Our judges are too severe. Lawrence of Arabia, it is undisputably proved, was a liar. And if Mr. Lawrence could not pass scrutiny, what of me? Without a belief in the possibility of heroism and endurance, what is left?²

"What is left?" This question is one of the essential starting-points of Vanderhaeghe's fiction, leading it away from glorious heroes into the darker sides of people and events.

Partly because of Ed's reappearance in *My Present Age*, one might assume that the novel is a continuation of the stories rather than a qualitatively different work. *My Present Age* is radically different from Vanderhaeghe's previous writings, however. Not only because violence is one of the predominant features of Vanderhaeghe's writing, but mainly because it is central to the innovative metafictional technique Vanderhaeghe employs in his novel's characterization, examining his uses of violence is a good place to begin to appreciate the dissimilarities between the stories and the novel.

In interviews Vanderhaeghe has regularly linked his work with that of writers such as Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor from the American South. In the *Wascana Review* interview with Doris Hillis, he says that the Southern writers' reflecting an "oral tradition of story-telling that developed in rural communities" is what he notices also in his work.³ Besides his use of stories (in ways closely tied to his use of the grotesque), the other strong resemblance between Vanderhaeghe and these writers is their use of violence. In *Violence in Recent Southern Fiction*, Louise Gossett distinguishes between inner and outer forms of violence:

Psychological violence is relayed in states of mind and feelings. Physical violence is the consequence of force exerted by a character

² Guy Vanderhaeghe, *The Trouble with Heroes* (Ottawa: Borealis, 1983) 2.

³ Doris Hillis, "An Interview with Guy Vanderhaeghe," *Wascana Review* 1.19 (1984): 17-28.

against himself or against others, resulting in extreme acts like arson, rape, mutilation, suicide and murder. At times . . . the violent force is the power of nature threatening man in storms, floods and droughts, or in hostile land.⁴

Gossett notes also that "So interrelated are psychological and physical violence, of course, that one is generally the concomitant of the other" (x).

Another important affinity between Vanderhaeghe and these American writers is that violence in their work often appears in combination with the grotesque. "Both violence and grotesqueness," Gossett writes, "are dramatizations of disorder." The function of these extreme deviations from the normal, she continues, is to be "part of the acute criticism to which Western writers in the twentieth century have subjected their culture" (x). Thematically, the numerous stories and one novel Vanderhaeghe has published to date have violence in common: either violence smouldering just beneath the surface, or violence fully ignited.

John Moss's introductory essay in his study of *Sex and Violence in the Canadian Novel* clearly establishes the moral dimension to the literary portrayal of violence:

violence marks the struggle of life against death. It is this struggle, so wrongly seen as a negative impulse by some critics, in which the Canadian novelist discovers the moral dimensions of his universe.⁵

For Vanderhaeghe's characters, struggle, especially moral struggle, is central.

Ed's corpulence, one of the physically grotesque elements of *My Present Age*, symbolizes the disparity between appearance and essence: his mind is quick and agile, and he is starving for love and understanding. Not only Ed's physique, but his habits of fantasizing, joking and deception, make comparisons with Falstaff inevitable; yet Ed's bulk, his odyssey in search of Victoria—which shows wiliness rather than heroic bravery—and the authorial inventiveness in his creation suggest Gogol's Chichikov. References to T.S. Eliot, as well as Ed's questioning—with a satiric, deflationary undertone—mark Ed as

⁴ Louise Gossett, *Violence in Recent Southern Fiction* (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 1965) x.

⁵ John Moss, *Sex and Violence in the Canadian Novel: The Ancestral Present* (Toronto: McClelland, 1977) 27.

a Prufrock figure. On graduating, he works in a library, teaches a course in creative writing, writes a Western novel with a hero who is everything Ed would like to be, and is caught up in fantasies about Huckleberry Finn. Ed is, through and through, a literary character, and, as such, he is the focal point of the novel's use of the grotesque.

In *The Haunted Wilderness: The Gothic and Grotesque in Canadian Fiction*, Margot Northey defines the grotesque as

a mode of writing rather than a condition or attribute of nature: the grotesque emphasizes incongruity, disorder, deformity, and arises from the juxtaposition or clash of the ideal with the real, the psychic with the physical, or the concrete with the symbolic.⁶

As I will detail further, Ed's character is the setting for these types of clash. (The term "clash" is significant in its suggestion of the violence of the process.) Northey reiterates the grotesque's emphasis on disorder, saying that it reacts "against the conventional ordering of reality, seeking in strange ways a truth beyond the accepted surface of life" (8).

Gossett explains the connection between the grotesque and violence in terms similar to Northey's:

Both violence and grotesqueness are dramatizations of disorder. And just as the negative implies the positive—grief, joy and evil, good—disorder argues order Affected by theories of evolution and psychoanalysis and faced by the threats of automation, the totalitarian state, and nuclear annihilation, the thinking man has questioned both his humanity and his being. He has been torn between feeling either that his culture has failed him or that he has failed his culture. He does not ask for the recovery of the old order but for the rediscovery of order itself. (x)

The project of rediscovering order itself is at the core of Vanderhaeghe's art, as revealed by his uses of violence and the grotesque, and, on the formal level, by his uses of story.

Wesley Harder's thoughts about the impossibility of heroism in "The Trouble with Heroes" bother him so much that he

⁶ Margot Northey, *The Haunted Wilderness: The Gothic and Grotesque in Canadian Fiction* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1976) 7.

cannot sleep. "Imagine this," he thinks at three in the morning, picturing himself "a one-armed man, jay-bird naked man sobbing uncontrollably as he stares into the night, the blue light of streetlamps splintered by tears." This deformed man's recollections of the incident during the second world war by which he lost his arm, and then his voyage back to Canada, form the main part of the story. The ship's passengers—amputees nicknamed "gimps" and burn victims, nicknamed "fries"—make up what Harder calls "a collection of human wrecks that defied imagination." In this gruesomely grotesque setting, Harder is confronted with a dilemma more vexed than many in Morley Callaghan's stories when a fry asks him for advice about wearing a rubber nose to disguise the "two dark holes trained on [Harder] like pistol barrels." The fry's wife will be meeting him in Halifax. "Very particular my wife about how I look. . . . Wear the fucking nose or not? Is she gonna laugh if I do and puke if I don't?"⁷ The story ends with Harder on deck, tears in his eyes, as Halifax comes into view; this recalls to the reader the opening scene, which is later in time, with the same man in tears. The physical violence of the story inheres in the grotesque situations recalled (losing the arm, the horrendous voyage), while its psychological violence is manifest in the dilemma posed to Harder by the burn victim and in Harder's state of mind as he suffers through telling "The Trouble with Heroes."

This story is typical of the stories in *The Trouble with Heroes*: violence inheres in the settings or in the characters' pasts; only "The King Is Dead" and "Parker's Dog" present overt violence, and it is directed towards dogs. Nevertheless, the simmering frustrations in "No Man Could Bind Him," "The Prodigal," and "Lazarus," and the unassimilated violence of past wars in "The Trouble With Heroes" and "Cafe Society" are integral to the effects of these stories. In addition, all the stories feature grotesque elements as part of their strategies in suggesting, rather than explicitly depicting, violent actions.

The latent violence of Vanderhaeghe's *The Trouble With Heroes* suggests that some ideal is being tested—in Moss's terms, the potential violence is part of the struggle to discover the moral dimensions of the universe. In fact, most of the stories do reveal, if often obliquely, the very boundary which violence puts into perspective. For example, Wesley Harder's desire for conventional heroism—"Wasn't I a hero in khaki?" he wonders—is shattered by the farcical conditions of his losing his arm and by the immeasurably profound suffering of the burn

⁷ *The Trouble with Heroes* 2-7.

victim he encounters on the ship; in "The King is Dead," (reported) television images of President Kennedy's assassination are juxtaposed to a shabby arena break-in and the beating to death of an old man's dog; and in "Cafe Society," Gabrielle Dumont's violent, heroic past is seen as irrelevant to the business sense of the small-time Parisian promoter who could, if he wished, hire the struggling Dumont.

In the *Man Descending* stories, the general pattern of the violence is different from that in *The Trouble With Heroes*. While the sense of inherent violence just verging on expression persists, violence erupts into the physical realm repeatedly and often in *Man Descending*. For example, "How the Story Ends" juxtaposes, in a seven-year-old's mind, the story of Abraham's nearly slaughtering Isaac with the imminent butchering of pigs to which, like pets, the boy has become attached; "What I Learned from Caesar" concerns a Belgian immigrant's shame at losing his job, which causes him to attack the town clerk; "Going to Russia" presents the perspective of a high school teacher incarcerated in a mental hospital for indecent exposure; "The Expatriates' Party" centres on a protagonist who resigns his job after angrily breaking the jaw of one of his high school students, and who finds that London, where he visits his son, so fills him with anxiety that "outside Harrod's he had sworn viciously and even taken a kick at a man who had stepped on his foot."⁸

Whereas in *The Trouble With Heroes*, then, violence inheres in the various situations but rarely is expressed directly, in *Man Descending* violent actions are central to most of the stories' effects. In common, though, in both collections, the violence is physical. The dead man Legion, in "No Man Could Bind Him," led an exceedingly violent life, as did Gabrielle Dumont prior to the incident portrayed in "Cafe Society," for instance. Certainly, as Gossett's observation quoted earlier would lead one to expect, the physical violence is often concomitant with psychological violence. The tormented old man in "Dancing Bear" suffers largely from being haunted by images from his past. In other stories, violence becomes the release from mental anguish. But again, in all the stories, violence exists or did exist on the physical level. The move made by *My Present Age* is to detach the most damaging violence from the physical dimension.

Suggesting Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man*, Vanderhaeghe's title *Man Descending* refers to the life-view of Ed: everyone's life, he reflects,

⁸ Guy Vanderhaeghe, *Man Descending* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1982) 160.

could be graphed: an ascent that rises to a peak, pauses at a particular node, and then descends. Only the gradient changes in any particular case. . . . We all ripen. We are all bound by the same ineluctable law, the same mathematical certainty. (192-93)

At thirty, Ed is utterly terrified by this "revelation," as he calls it:

I know now that I have begun the inevitable descent, the leisurely glissade which will finally topple me at the bottom of my own graph. A man descending is propelled by inertia; the only initiative left him is whether or not he decides to enjoy the passing scene. (193)

Ed's analysis, reminiscent of many deterministic nineteenth-century theories (such as Darwinism), provides a further foundation for *My Present Age* and is reiterated by the novel's first epigraph, from Kierkegaard's *The Present Age* (1846):

But the present generation, wearied by its chimerical efforts, relapses into complete indolence. Its condition is that of a man who has only fallen asleep towards morning: first of all come great dreams, then a feeling of laziness, and finally a witty or clever excuse for remaining in bed.⁹

This epigraph introduces, by the phrase "witty or clever excuse," the key element of Ed's character: imagination. The second epigraph underscores the fact that imagination, particularly of the literary type, is to play a large role in the descent of Ed:

No mistaking them for people of these parts, even if I hadn't remembered their faces. Both of them are obvious dwellers in the valley of the shadow of books.¹⁰

My Present Age, then, announces through these epigraphs its metafictional ironies. It is to be a book about stories, not about a traditional hero. It is to be a book about the inertia of descent, not about action. Thirdly, the epigraphs predict, *My Present Age* is to be about society, not about one individual.

⁹ As quoted in Guy Vanderhaeghe, *My Present Age* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1984) np.

¹⁰ George Gissing, *New Grub Street*, as quoted in *My Present Age*, np.

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. . . if the characters in a story can be readers or spectators, then we, their readers or spectators, can be fictitious.

—Jorge Luis Borges, *Other Inquisitions*

The search for order in *My Present Age* is also based on grotesqueness and violence, but grotesqueness and violence on the structural level. Humour, for example, is used in the novel primarily to create grotesqueness. Set against the depressing, the sordid, the violent realities of situations, the contrasting humour is most often black.

But the predominant formal figure in the construction of *My Present Age* is metalepsis. In *Narrative Discourse*, Gerard Genette defines this term as "taking hold of (telling) by changing levels."¹¹ Originally used by Quintilian to denote the rhetorical device of substituting or changing the sense of words, "metalepsis" derives etymologically, according to the OED, from the Greek *meta*—"above or beyond"—and *lambdnein*—"take." Genette cites as examples of metalepsis the transitions from one narrative level to another which occur when the narrator of a work steps back from or out of the narrative into another universe of reference, as when Sterne entreats "the intervention of the reader, whom he beseeched to close the door or help Mr. Shandy get back to his bed" (234). The type of metalepsis which Vanderhaeghe employs so effectively in *My Present Age* is what Genette calls "the Robbe-Grillet type of narrative" with its "characters escaped from a painting, a book, a press clipping, a photograph, a dream, a memory, a fantasy, etc." (235-36).

In modifying metalepsis from a rhetorical device to a method for revealing his narrator's structuring of his thoughts and actions, Vanderhaeghe depicts Ed, the narrator of *My Present Age*, as habitually thinking and acting, to varying degrees, among a number of story levels. Essentially, Ed blurs, in Genette's words, the "shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells" (236). Ed's heroic struggle is to try to sort out and be consistent about the sundry fictions which make up his life. However, he most often shifts or substitutes levels instead of finding coherence within the appropriate context, so that he ends with a

¹¹ Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin (New York: Cornell UP, 1980) 235.

violently disturbing sense of disintegration, an inability to understand the wholeness of his experience.

"The Beast destroyed my brief peace" is the opening sentence of *My Present Age* (1). With these six words Ed conjures the grotesque ("The Beast"), a violent action ("destroyed"), and the violent state of war. It turns out that he is referring to a talk-show host whose program Ed hears because the deaf old man in the apartment downstairs plays his radio at such a high volume. Ed invents The Beast's biography based on the sound of his voice. Having created a few insulting details, Ed continues:

My fantasies lean toward strangulation. I have broken into The Beast's studio. He is alone. . . .

We grapple. My righteous thumbs embed themselves in his Adam's apple.

'Aarrgh! Aarrgh!' cries The Beast, tearing at my swelling forearms with his fingernails. *Homo horribilis* is being strangled on air, live.

(13)

Very often Ed's fantasies lean toward violence.

Ed's feud with his downstairs neighbor, McMurtry, is only mildly violent on the physical plane: the old man scrapes the side of Ed's car, Ed snaps off McMurtry's aerial; both play mutually offensive music aggressively loudly so McMurtry bangs on his ceiling (Ed's floor) with a broom handle, and Ed retaliates by slamming a shot-put onto the floor. The truly severe violence between the two, however, is a metalepsis. Consistent with the highly indirect nature of the communication between Ed and his neighbour (and most other people), one morning Ed hears McMurtry on "Brickbats and Bouquets," The Beast's radio show. McMurtry is complaining bitterly about a fat-rear-ended guy upstairs from him on Unemployment: Ed. Ed calls McMurtry's action a "vendetta" and "persecution"; he experiences "an anxiety attack" just thinking about The Beast and McMurtry:

I'm sweating, my breathing is rapid and shallow, my heart is bumping my breastbone. . . .

God, The Beast is slowly driving me crazy. He has sat in judgment on me and pronounced me guilty. There is no appeal from his terrible court. Just ask me how that loser, K, felt in *The Trial*. (11)

Ed's shock at hearing McMurtry's story about him hits him physically, violently as a brickbat. Even more troublingly, Ed be-

comes a villain in a radio show, a fictional type with the reality of Kafka's protagonist.

Vanderhaeghe's fiction includes extra-textual stories in a number of ways. From *The Trouble with Heroes*, "No Man Could Bind Him," "Lazarus," and "The Prodigal" rely on Biblical incidents, while "The Trouble with Heroes," "The King is Dead," and "Cafe Society" rely on historically-grounded narratives. "Parker's Dog," the last story in *The Trouble with Heroes*, is like most of the *Man Descending* stories. Instead of enlarging upon or using the patterns of well-known episodes, the *Man Descending* stories incorporate many types of fictions as elements of the narrative. Whereas, for example, "The Prodigal" describes a son's return to his father, paralleling the Bible's "prodigal son" parable (Luke 15), and "No Man Could Bind Him" retells the story of Legion (Mark 5, Luke 8) from his brother's point of view (both from *The Trouble with Heroes*), in "How the Story Ends" (*Man Descending*) a visiting great uncle reads to a little boy the story of Abraham's preparations to sacrifice Isaac. The Bible story haunts the boy and deeply confuses him when it is time to butcher the family's pigs; it is God's will to slaughter the pigs, the boy's great uncle assures him; the boy implores, "Is he hungry? Please, is that how the story ends?" (68). In "The Expatriates' Party" (*Man Descending*), Joe, who had been sustained by British poetry during his teaching career on the Canadian prairies, is visiting England, where he finds all over London graffiti such as "Punk Rule OK" and where he himself writes on a wall, Blake's "Albion's coast is sick, silent . . ." (169).

To summarize, then, the stories in *The Trouble with Heroes* depend on external texts such as the Bible or history for their shapes. In *Man Descending*, by contrast, the external texts are embedded as elements within the fictions. This structural change parallels the plot shift from the unexplained violence of *The Trouble with Heroes*, often represented by grotesqueness, to the overt violence of *Man Descending*; from violence as the foundation of the characters' disordered worlds—the way the external stories are fundamental in *The Trouble with Heroes*—to violence as language and action—the way the external texts of *Man Descending* provide elements of the characterization. In *My Present Age*, the metafictional aspect is the locus of much of the violence, a perspective which multiplies the novel's violent impact in comparison with the stories'. The grotesqueness and violence—"dramatizations of disorder," as Gossett terms them—seek out profoundly the possibility for real peace. (Again, the novel's first sentence: "The Beast destroyed my brief peace.")

In structurally and psychologically violent luxations, Ed constantly slips from one to the other of the stories that he tells himself and other people in *My Present Age*, to the extent that he, as well as the reader (can) easily mix up levels of Ed's mind. His journey, a parallel on the physical level to the narrative metalepsis, is a series of missed communications, the germinal one being his disastrous lunch with Victoria. Their blocked communication, along with Victoria's being impregnated by another man, is the presiding symbol of *My Present Age*, a work with wide-ranging social implications, and it is the seed of the plot, the situation that Ed strives to rectify.

Ed is usually the victim of the metalepses, whether he does the shifting of levels mentally or whether someone else, engrossed in a "story" altogether different from Ed's, abruptly changes levels physically. An instance of the latter is Ed's drunkenly making a speech at a wedding which he is attending as his friend Marsha's escort. Ed outlines from his own experience the pitfalls of marriage to be avoided by the newlyweds, Marsha's brother and his wife, and then, with the best of intentions and at considerable length, he reviews Marsha's failed marriage, much to the outrage of the assembled guests, mainly Marsha's family. When he has to conclude rather hastily because of the escalating brouhaha in the room, Ed, nevertheless, is "a little surprised there is no applause."¹² Two of Marsha's brothers drag Ed out to the hotel corridor and beat him up.

Ed's own literal fiction in *My Present Age* is a book he has written, he says, mainly to demonstrate to Victoria that he is capable of finishing something that he starts. The novel *Cool, Clear Waters* tells about Sam Waters, Ed's alter-ego, "a plainsman, a buffalo hunter, a wind-drinker, a free man, before he became the sheriff of Constitution" (67). Sam feels suffocated by towns but has decided to clean up Constitution: "no town smelled worse than Constitution, because Constitution stank with the worst smell of all—hypocrisy" (16). Hypocrisy, the acting of a part, is itself a form of metalepsis, and so it is fitting that this vice is strongly opposed by the metaleptically-disposed Ed's ideal hero.

One episode of *Cool, Clear Waters* finds the hero drinking beer in an almost deserted bar one morning when a barfly tells Sam his story. It turns out the drunk is none other than Huck Finn. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* makes many signif-

¹² *My Present Age* 234.

icant appearances in *My Present Age*—usually, as in this instance, involving a metalepsis.

Since he was a child, Ed informs the reader, he has “had to light torches against the mind’s blackness. My choice was *Huck Finn*” (52). In bed, Ed has always talked to himself, speaking both Huck’s and Jim’s parts, as they bob along on the Mississippi. “A little conversation before sleep is a comforting thing,” Ed reflects, having just enacted one. He then takes a painful metaleptic leap to his longing for Victoria:

As Huck notes at one point in the relating of his *Adventures*, ‘There warn’t no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped and smothery, but a raft don’t.’

‘No, a raft don’t. And experience has taught me it rides the dark a good deal easier and lighter when it carries two.’ (53)

When he finally locates Victoria, Ed barges into her motel room (on the pretense that he is her boyfriend), and experiences a “piercing sensation, a feeling that on entering this room I have entered my past” (225). The violence of this metalepsis, then, also has physical repercussions. While Victoria is repeatedly calling Ed a liar, he fantasizes (catching sight of his parka-hooded reflection in a mirror) that he is a monk from the Middle Ages. A stray in her false fabrication of how Ed found her (“Anthony wouldn’t come, so Marsha sent you” [227]), and lost in her own grieving, in a metaleptic shift like Ed’s at the outset in the Cafe Nice, Victoria becomes enraged by Ed’s denials and erupts into violence, injuring Ed in the groin and cutting his head—apt wounds for marital strife. Suffering emotionally and physically, Victoria and Ed lie on the bed, side by side. Ed thinks of them as “effigies of a medieval couple carved on a cathedral tomb” (231). The metalepsis here explicitly signifies the doom of their marriage. The next chapter depicts the fiasco at Marsha’s brother’s wedding; and it ends with Ed’s words echoing Huck Finn’s: “I’m running away” (235).

The final chapter of the novel reveals Ed in another world altogether; as he puts it, “I needed a clean break with the past. Things got out of hand. . . . I disappeared” (236). Although he still listens to The Beast and McMurtry on the radio, he no longer reciprocates their antagonism. Holed up in a basement apartment, Ed is waiting for Victoria to find him. Their communication lines, indirect at best because of the characters’ metaleptic shiftings of level and missing each other, are now almost entirely severed. It is simply a fantasy that Victoria is looking for Ed. The ending of the book shows Ed descending yet further into his

fictions, violently rebuffed by the realities he has sought during his quest for the restoration of his peace, and still subject to the psychological violence of the metaleptic shifting of levels. Lost in the house of mirroring fictions which Borges' words in *Other Inquisitions* and the lines from McKay's poem suggest, Ed imagines that Huck's Jim is with him in his suite, comforting him so that he can at last fall asleep—a complex metalepsis that leaves the reader gasping at the painful and sharply realized pessimism of *My Present Age*.

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