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“Same Old Ed, . . . Uncommitted”: BMW Socialism and Post-Rogery in Guy Vanderhaeghe’s Early Fiction

ABSTRACT

In this paper I assess how Guy Vanderhaeghe’s early fiction criticizes the class-based and civil movements of post-1960s Saskatchewan through the recurring character of Ed. The protagonist of “Man Descending” and “Sam, Soren, and Ed” from *Man Descending*, the uncollected “He Scores! He Shoots!” and the novel *My Present Age*, Ed both condemns and epitomizes the contaminated and seductive gestures of the movements’ influences and enterprises. Vanderhaeghe deploys layers of social criticism: the first comments on the new urban progressive generation—the BMW socialists—while another manifests a counter-criticism that comments on those who challenge social progress, questioning their motives and the credibility of their critique. But what is a BMW socialist? A sociopolitical chameleon hiding behind pretense? Ed describes such a creature as a former “nay-sayer and boycotter” who “intended to dedicate his life to eternal servitude in a legal-aid clinic,” but then “affluence did him in” and now “his ass [is] cupped lovingly in the contoured leather seats of his BMW” (*Man Descending* 237–38). Vanderhaeghe’s early works criticize the contemporary middle class and progressivist movements of the second half of the twentieth century through this sociopolitical rogue—who in turn becomes a post-rogue. For Ed is ironically undercut by a counter-narrative that is often sub-textual, resulting in a fascinating appraisal of social ignorance, immobility, and unproductivity rather than of any specific ideology.

Keywords: Guy Vanderhaeghe, Saskatchewan, socialism, Slavoj Žižek, postmodernism.

Guy Vanderhaeghe's Ed is a knave to socialites and a sociopolitical rogue, what one of the author's early characters would call a "non-violent shit-disturber" (*Man Descending* 93)¹—although he is occasionally prone to violence as well. What he disturbs are the self-righteous values and discourses of a group that he labels "BMW socialist[s]" (241). But Ed is also a pathetic hypocrite, socially static and economically immobile. He is the epitome of politics, of the political putting-into-words, through his rants, tirades, and metanarratives. He is the truest embodiment of Vanderhaeghe's dual-layer commentary on progressivism—hyper critical and hypocritical—a culmination of character types, at once critic and criticized: hyperactive and interpassive. Ed is a post-rogue who feigns scoundrelism and in turn reveals the subterfuge of social commentary.

GUY VANDERHAEGHE, ROGUE SOCIAL REALIST

Born in Esterhazy, Saskatchewan in 1951, Vanderhaeghe grew up through decades of major social movements and political change in the prairies. In his interview with Nicola Faieta, "Guy Talk," he says: "there was one set of beliefs that I was raised with that was challenged by another set of beliefs through the 1960s and 1970s" (264). While Vanderhaeghe does not explicitly use the term, I label this set of beliefs as progressivism, which became popular when the "labour movement, organized farmers, women, students, Aboriginal people, Canadian and Quebec nationalists were on the upsurge from the mid-1960s" and "political culture was moving slightly left" (Brown, Roberts and Warnock 23), at least in urban centres. In response to this progressive shift, rural ideology moved from a paradigm of the old left—the co-operative views of the Douglas days and the Pool—to a new right—the populism that was "quickly replacing left agrarianism" (25). The "cooperative" nature of the CCF might be assumed to foster progressivist politics; however, through the early and mid-twentieth century "Marxism was tainted in the social-democratic lexicon because the communists had appropriated it, and equated it with the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'" (Penner 142).² The lingering conservatism of

¹ *MD* hereafter.

² This tainting has clearly persisted in Canadian literary studies as well. Robin Endres notes that "[w]ithin the confines of Canadian literary criticism there is little explicitly Marxist theory and analysis of works of Canadian literature" (110), and with the exception of James Doyle's *Progressive Heritage* and a few scattered articles, little has changed since Endres made that claim in 1978. For further evidence, one need only note the absolute absence of the CCF, NDP and agrarian socialism in general in David Carpenter's *The Literary History of Saskatchewan*.

the Canadian prairies is tied to the geography and social stasis of rurality, for as Munroe Eagles notes, “[g]eographic features often provide evocative and powerful anchors for group identity and symbols of group unity” (19). Wendy Griswold argues that if shared “common ground, which is typically geographic, political, and/or economic, gives rise to shared forms of cultural expression,” the “inverse is true as well; shared cultural features may encourage political or economic linkage” (13). Eagles elaborates how geographic features in fact often “serve as nothing more than a metaphor for the common features, shared history, or ways of life that define [a] region” (19). This anchoring of metaphorical identity and imagined community, what Eagles calls the “Sense of Place” (19), is central to the complex politics of Vanderhaeghe’s 20th-century Saskatchewan and has renewed relevance as populist politics return to the forefront, both in the Canadian prairies and the western world more generally. Mid-century rural Saskatchewan’s sense of place revolved around the region’s distinctiveness as rooted in the agrarian socialism that carried it through the Depression; it arose in response to what Doug Owram notes as “the disappearance of traditional mythologies and the impossibility of holding to earlier utopian promises of the West as agrarian Eden” (351). This “working-class identity” defines the economically caged as “minority communities” in Vanderhaeghe’s fiction (Kruk 9), which serves as “a local response to the international social and political situation of the 1960s and 1970s” (Zichy 42). It is this “part of Saskatchewan’s distinct political culture—the continuous vigor of major party sentiments” (Smith 41) and regionalist identification with the tenets of the CCF—that causes a schism between the old left of the ’30s and its new expression by the ’60s generation.

Then came the Waffle, the 1969 manifesto that rejected the “communist and Trotskyite infiltration” of the CCF (*Waffle Manifesto* 1) and demanded “an independent socialist Canada” led by a radicalized New Democratic Party charged with dissociating the nation from American corporate capitalism (8–9). Norman Penner notes: “As far as the communists in Canada were concerned, their fight against capitalism included the fight against social democracy” whereas the Wafflers “wanted a much greater emphasis on socialism” (vi–vii). This divide within the Canadian left clashed with the emerging right from the United Kingdom and United States, and in the early 1980s Grant Devine and his colleagues championed the provincial Tories with “no grand design of what they meant to do besides get rid of the ‘socialists’” (Brown, Roberts and Warnock 33). The Tories won the 1982 election, at least in part thanks to that platform, and “the new Tory government believed that it could declare Saskatchewan done with ‘socialism’ and ‘open for business’” (35). As Gerald Friesen writes, in the 1980s the “farmer’s replacement as the focus of prairie

social mythology was the business leader" (436); as an agrarian economist Devine embodied both the farmer and the businessman, intersecting the ideologies of the old left and the new right.

This was the political climate—a socioeconomic blizzard on the progressively balding prairie—in which Vanderhaeghe was writing and publishing his first novel, *My Present Age*, a social realist rogue narrative published in an era in which scholarly and literary writing were dominated by postmodern historiographic metafiction. The novel follows and is narrated by Ed, who is also the protagonist of the two concluding stories in Vanderhaeghe's Governor General's Award-winning first collection, *Man Descending*, and the uncollected "He Scores! He Shoots!" The clash between populism and progressivism and the class divisions that often parallel those ideological affiliations are recurring interests in Vanderhaeghe's regionalism, which often borders on social realist fiction. While this genre was out of fashion with the literati in the wake of authors like Kroetsch, Wiebe and Atwood, Vanderhaeghe's early works wandered the borderlands between genres thanks to Ed, a former graduate student turned social commentator and historical fiction author. Ed's historicist meta-text is simultaneously the guise under which Vanderhaeghe's early work received scholarly attention and the veil behind which those works were able to make their astute social commentary on contemporary prairie politics.

Vanderhaeghe acknowledges a "class component" in his 20th-century Saskatchewan-set writing, stating: "I certainly did not grow up in a middle-class environment, and having experienced what it means to do without, I think that my early work has this element of certain groups of people being voiceless" (Faieta 260–61). Laurie Kruk has also noted that Vanderhaeghe's early stories "explore the 'cages' of economic mobility through portraits of working-class men" (6). Vanderhaeghe's first two collections were published in the wake of "two imposing figures [who] emerged to champion neo-liberal ideology" internationally: Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan (Brown, Roberts and Warnock 32). The trends in rural politics throughout the mid-to-late-20th century and Vanderhaeghe's upbringing in the southern Saskatchewan town of Esterhazy provide context to understand the variety of politically inflected and socially critical voices in his early work. Throughout his career, starting with his master's degree in history, Vanderhaeghe has examined political dynamics and social reconstruction in Western Canada and the United States. I will assess how Vanderhaeghe criticizes these class-based and civil movements in post-1960s Saskatchewan through Ed, who both condemns and epitomizes the contaminated and seductive gestures of these influences and enterprises. Vanderhaeghe deploys layers of social criticism: the first comments on the

new urban progressive generation—the BMW socialists—while another manifests a counter-criticism that comments on those who challenge social progress, questioning their motives and the credibility of their critique. But what is a BMW socialist? A sociopolitical chameleon hiding behind pre-tense? Ed, describes such a creature as a former “nay-sayer and boycotter” who “intended to dedicate his life to eternal servitude in a legal-aid clinic,” but then “affluence did him in” and now “his ass [is] cupped lovingly in the contoured leather seats of his BMW” (*MD* 237–38). Vanderhaeghe’s early works criticize the contemporary middle class and progressivist movements of the second half of the 20th century through this sociopolitical rogue—who in turn becomes a post-rogue. For Ed is ironically undercut by a counter-narrative that is often sub-textual, resulting in a fascinating appraisal of social ignorance, immobility, and unproductivity rather than of any specific ideology.

ED, A MAN DESCENDING ON BMW SOCIALISTS

I will discuss the Ed stories—“Man Descending,” “Sam, Soren and Ed,” “He Scores! He Shoots!” and *My Present Age*—in diegetic chronological order so as to trace Ed’s narrative evolution as a character and a critic from rogue to post-rogue.³ The rogue motif, within the English literary tradition, is first associated with the Early Modern period—the womanizers in John Donne’s poetry, the comedic and villainous knaves in Shakespeare’s drama. But the rogue categorizes a site of aporia, embodying the traditional figure of the Early Modern vagrant, but also a metaphorical representation of the upper class as cutpurses, particularly during and after the Industrial Revolution, as depicted in “The March of Roguery” by C. J. Grant (see fig. 1). This character-type frequently appears in the picaresque, a mode that has persisted into the postmodern era and regionalist texts with works such as Robert Kroetsch’s *The Studhorse Man*. In North America, the socially critical rogue is perhaps best embodied by Mark Twain’s Huck Finn. Notably, Sam Waters, the protagonist of Ed’s meta-textual western novel, *Cool, Clear Waters*, meets the legendary drifter in a passage recounted in *My Present Age* (220–23). In the way that Huck was used to critique the Old South, Ed—reflected in both the moralistic

³ While most literary critics ignore the uncompiled “He Scores! He Shoots!”—and at least one has called it “deservedly excluded” and “pathetically unconvincing” (Zichy 59–60 n. 12)—I will demonstrate its centrality to a reading of the recursive nature of Ed’s character across his narrative arc and the ways by which this recursion destabilizes previous readings of this character.

Sam Waters and the embittered middle-aged Huck—provides a voice that comments on a particular political climate. However, he also serves as a self-reflexive lens through which we may examine the pitfalls of social commentary and the dualism of roguery.

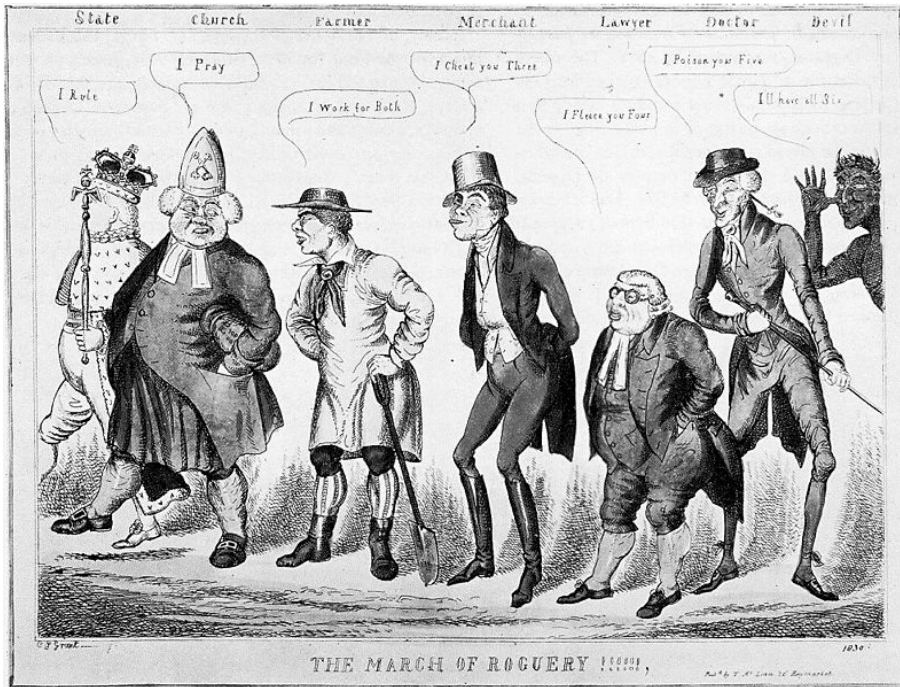


Fig. 1. C. J. Grant's "The March of Roguery." Source: Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

When we first meet Ed in "Man Descending," he is a "fat, lazy, emotional, unemployed intellectual" (Forceville 53) who requires scotch as a "social lubricant" and yet whose "grievous faults of character could be remedied" if he were to make any effort (Vanderhaeghe, *MD* 214–15). Thirty years old and living in the urban center of Saskatoon in the late 1970s, Ed is a seemingly ideal candidate to represent the new generation of progressive Saskatchewan. And as Stephen Dunning notes, "despite his vigorous ethical denunciation of his age, [Ed] also represents his culture" (31). However, the narrative's undermining of Ed—the commentary on his culture—is not a treatise against a particular milieu, but a commentary about the immobility within it. Ed's wife Victoria and her civil servant friends constantly harangue him about finding work (Vanderhaeghe, *MD* 219, 222) for he is a graduate school drop-out who cannot hold a job in an "adult extension program" at what he calls the local "College of Knowledge" (218–19). Ironically, Ed is

faulted by middle-class “leftists” for not partaking in capitalism, for failing to be indoctrinated into a system that masquerades as socialist under the guise of progressivism while it is decisively on its way toward the neo-liberal and Devine-lead Tories of the 1980s.

Ed fully embraces this sub-textual commentary on progressivism; he incorporates it into his narration and his interactions with the other guests at the New Year’s party he attends, drunkenly taking on the role of the knave and thus the dual role of critic and criticized. When Ed joins two civil servants in an argument over Chilean refugees, he claims: “I know nothing about politics, but then neither do any of the people I am arguing with. . . . In no time several people have denounced me as a neo-fascist” (223). Ed does not give himself enough credit here; he is aware of the hypocrisy inherent in the civil servants’ anti-individualism and phony—or at least self-aggrandizing—concern for disenfranchised Chileans. Ed is not ignorant of the politics at play. Rather, he is less entertained by those politics than by his heightened awareness of human nature and his ability to manipulate people based on their ignorance. Charles Forceville writes that “despite frequent misjudgements, [Ed] is capable of surprisingly perceptive and profound comments” (53). He quotes Vanderhaeghe himself, who said in an interview with Forceville that Ed is “capable of telling truths that more admirable people *cannot* tell” (54). Ed sees himself as “the watcher”—Vanderhaeghe’s original choice for the collection’s title (Hillis 24)—a voyeur of and commentator on social interactions, yet he is as much a chameleon as those he criticizes. “Ed is, on one level in the novel, the almost nameless witness, the chronicler of his ‘present age,’” but on the other hand, he “is incapable of dealing in any practical sense with what this ‘present age’ confronts him with” (Forceville 55). Ed’s paradoxical insight and obliviousness, combined with his unwillingness to change and his belief that he is “not capable” of finding a job, telling the truth, or treating his wife differently because he is “a man descending” (Vanderhaeghe, *MD* 226), allows him to be both disturber and pathetic fool, drifting between pariah and preacher, the embodiment of Vanderhaeghe’s commentary on progressivist politics.

Ed’s social roguery and simultaneously self-induced immobility are escalated in “Sam, Soren, and Ed.” The story opens with Ed’s observance of “the truly representative figures of Western decadence,” noting that he does not “presume to except [him]self from that company” but that he is also “not the only degenerate dotting the landscape” (Vanderhaeghe, *MD* 229–30). The narrative resumes the tone established in “Man Descending,” giving Ed a voice that at once condemns what he sees as the sins of modern, urban, life—a “mass of gluttony, lechery, sloth and violence” (229)—and implicates him as part of that life, when he “gnaw[s] a chicken leg” (229),

ogles frisky teenagers (230), harasses his now-estranged wife (233–35), and picks a fight with “Mr. Kung Fu” (235–36). In his refusal to acknowledge his own faults, Ed has become more pathetic in his immobility than in the previous story. He no longer wears the subtext of an anti-ideological Marxism as support: Victoria does not press him about finding work when they interact, and there is no philosophical vendetta to be had against a roomful of civil servants. Dunning notes that “Sam, Soren, and Ed” “not only elaborates upon Ed’s personal decline, but also locates it within a larger cultural descent, most immediately from the elevated idealism of the 1960s” (32). No longer able to critique progressivist ideals without implicating himself—for no matter how immobile he has made himself within this paradigm, he is inescapably representative of the same—he shifts his commentary from what he sees as failing institutions (i.e. the “College of Knowledge”) to a fallen ideologue: his former friend and estranged wife’s lawyer, Benny.

Ed tells us that “[d]uring the late sixties and early seventies Benny was a priapic, hairy activist . . . a great nay-sayer and boycotter . . . with a millennial light in his eyes” who “had nothing but contempt” for Ed’s “uncommitted ways.” Ed “loved him for it,” but then “affluence did him in . . . , Benny knocked up money and then, in a rare interlude of common sense, married it” (Vanderhaeghe, *MD* 237–38). Dunning writes that “Benny has betrayed more than personal loyalties: he has abandoned the idealism of a quintessentially idealistic generation, an idealism that Ed salutes and cherishes even though he could never make it his own” (32). To Ed, Benny is a scoundrel who has abandoned the noble leftist cause, yet “Ed was an outsider who could not assent to the self-righteously radical politics of his student days, . . . he felt guiltily inadequate about this and, . . . he ‘loved’ Benny for despising Ed’s ‘uncommitted ways’” (Zichy 53). But Benny also embodies the disillusionment of the ’60s, and in many ways serves as an allegory for provincial aspirations, particularly with regard to his education and the contrast between his university and post-university ideals. Ivan Avakumovic writes that the provincial universities in the prairies, “after a period of rapid expansion in the 1960s, discovered that the NDP when in power was less generous than many university socialists had expected” (255). Benny is the opportunistic Saskatchewan of the late ’70s—no longer a rogue in the sense of rejecting societal rules, but a member of “The March of Roguery” (Grant), a caricatured procession of cutpurse professions, including the lawyer. A leftist ideologue with a right-inclined wallet, Benny plunges headlong toward the Tory upset of 1982. As David Smith notes, the results of that election “revealed a latent weakness of governments committed to social-democratic ideals—which is that they appear, because of the goals they seek, to be insensitive to and distant from immediate

public concerns” (48–49). Ed, to be contrary, has adopted the Marxist subtext from “Man Descending,” idealising the “actual” left to which he had been “uncommitted” during his university years (Vanderhaeghe, *MD* 237), growing late into the role of the sociopolitical rogue. Unlike Benny, a radical in the late ’60s whose vigor faded like the Waffles’ did, Ed is representative of the average member of the new generation, who “joined cooperatives . . . but . . . did not respond to any trumpet call to build a new world order” (Fairbairn 165). It is only in the provincial left’s twilight that Ed’s potential for rejection of social conventions emerges. He does not oppose progressivism, but the phoniness of those who claim to practice it: the “BMW socialist[s]” (Vanderhaeghe, *MD* 241), in other words, those who have internalized an ideology which “hovers between ‘a system of beliefs characteristic of a certain class’ and ‘a system of illusory beliefs’” (Williams 66), concealing the disparity between classes and the hegemonic function of the “values and beliefs which a dominant class develops and propagates” (Williams 110). Ed attempts to completely remove himself from capitalism. He does not sell his labour for income and is not dependent on welfare or other governmental economic supports; he approaches what Gramsci called sub-proletariat. He resides in an in-between space of independence and outlaw. As Forceville notes, it is Ed’s “position as an outsider—emphasized by his unemployment—which allows him to stand back and comment on his society” (55), particularly its political and economic direction, in “Man Descending.” And yet, in “Sam, Soren, and Ed,” Ed uses his position to blackmail Benny for Victoria’s address. And as his socioeconomic situation declines, his commentary shifts to align more with his personal desires than a set of political beliefs.

While this shift at first appears to be oddly positive or at least beneficial, Ed’s apparent social progress is undermined by the subtext of his actions. His use of political commentary to extract information about Victoria allows him to confront her, resulting in the “positively medieval” challenge in which he intends to “giv[e] proof of his valour to his lady love” by competing in the upcoming River Run (Vanderhaeghe, *MD* 255–56)—a seemingly genuine attempt to play the knight or the Donnian courtly lover rather than the rogue. Ed’s shift from ideological to personal politics is further depicted in his attempts to write a “Big Book” (244). After deciding that the position of author was “socially unproductive enough” to appeal to him (243), Ed begins a novel on the “lost generation”—his generation, new progressives (244–45). But after that book and a second idea both die, Ed begins writing a western about Sam Waters, ironically drawing on him as an inspiration for masculinity. Once again Ed has failed at and fled from any radical political discourse in favour of personal interest. And while he parallels himself with Waters when training for the River Run, “his alter ego serves only to

underscore the gap between Ed's ethical ideality and his reality" (Dunning 34). Any personal progress made through Victoria's challenge is undercut by the fact that Ed chooses not to enter the race despite believing that he could have completed it (Vanderhaeghe, *MD* 261)—a delusional belief given that he was running less than half the length of the race during his practices. After romanticizing his training through the metanarrative of Sam's trial of manhood in the Old West, Ed doubles back on his ambitions, relinquishes his agency, and returns to his most comfortable position: the socially immobile and ironically hypocritical watcher. He fails at playing the political knave—falling into the base scoundrelism of personal manipulation—and fails at playing the courtly lover. His only retribution at the story's end is that he has finally "found [him]self a job" (261), brought back into the fold of capitalism through what must have been one of Benny's most boycotted businesses: Eaton's department store.

Vanderhaeghe's uncollected story, "He Scores! He Shoots!," takes place shortly after the events of "Sam, Soren and Ed" and depicts Ed as a bachelor slowly recovering from divorce. He remains socially critical, yet gradually discovers the empowerment of overcoming a life of irony and immobility. Ed holds his job as a salesperson in Eaton's china department, but employment has not relieved him from being mocked by his co-worker Carmichael, who constantly refers to him as the "*bull* in the china shop" (Vanderhaeghe, "He Scores! He Shoots!" 3). Ed continues to live a life of relative immobility and irony despite his return to the world of employment, depicted by his transparent claim that he is buying hockey equipment for a nephew to mask the shame of his lack of athleticism and his embarrassing "nom de hockey" from his adolescence (4–5). Also persistent is Ed's role as a judgemental watcher. He resumes his sly observations, this time hybridizing personal criticism with social commentary: he describes his colleague Sheila, "who belongs to a group of professional women . . . who foregather to ventilate their considerable grievances against society and the uppity cleaning ladies. These lively lasses refer to themselves *in toto* as The Collective. A name which always makes [Ed] think of Uncle Joe Stalin" (6). Word choice is revealing in this passage, as "professional women" suggests any woman working for a living but conveying a subtext of prostitution. Ed then distinguishes the category as "lawyers, civil servants, chartered accountants, social workers, teachers, 'communicators' etc." (6). In other words, they are middle-class women in unionized workplaces and crown corporations, or what Ed regards as feminist BMW socialists. While their "grievances against society" at first seem harmlessly, if not hypocritically leftist, akin to Victoria's civil servant friends, many members of The Collective could be found in a gender-swapped "March of Roguery" given their professions and their

condescension toward the working-class women in their employ. Finally, the reference to Stalin reflects the political disposition that characterized Ed in the previous stories. He still possesses the insight to comment on large-scale social ironies and the left's shortcomings, yet his own politics remain personally inflected, a site of irony.

Despite his duality as social rogue and pathetic fool, he does escape from one layer of his immobility over the course of the story: self-irony. Using several hockey-related plot devices, Ed takes Linda—one of the new members of The Collective—home with him and has adulterous sex with her after having his “resolve stiffened” by the fact that her last name matches his workplace’s bully’s (14). The next day, Ed is aware that “life is never as rich and rewarding . . . as we would like to imagine it” being that “there are seven Carmichaels listed in the directory” (14). However, the experience gives him the confidence to retort to his co-worker’s snide question of “How did the game go, big shooter? Did you score?” with the “cold, unflinching” response of “A hat trick” (15). Through this macho conclusion—which merits its own consideration within the discourse of masculinity in Vanderhaeghe’s *oeuvre*—Ed overcomes some of his social obstructions. His intercourse with Linda is a step away from the obsession with Victoria depicted in the other stories and his response to Carmichael measures his emergence from uncaring apathy. Most importantly, Ed is aware that his victory, like The Collective, is not all that it seems. His awareness of personal surroundings frees him from Carmichael’s criticism and prevents him from being undercut by his own narrative. From a more radically Marxist perspective, social mobility might make Ed more complicit in and subordinate to hegemony—the “domination [of] relations between social classes” (Williams 108)—and therefore arguably reduce his roguery. However, it frees him from the self-effacing irony of the pathetic fool. Ed’s transition indicates that sociopolitical rogues have the potential to free themselves of irony through awareness and agency. I argue that this balance of irony and agency, commentary and self-subversion, personal politics and party politics, which culminates in a critique of ignorance and apathy, is the primary political deployment of Vanderhaeghe’s early contemporary fiction. And as with all things spearheaded by Ed, this message is once again complicated by the addition of a final work related to that character.

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ED, A POST-ROGUE AVOIDING THE PRESENT AGE

When we revisit Ed for the last time in *My Present Age*, he has quit his job at Eaton’s, although, as Dunning notes, he does so “rather than wait to be fired because of his rudeness to customers” (36), a rudeness brought on,

in classical terms, by his “alienation of labour” (Endres 87). Ed is living in an apartment in near-sub-proletariat condition—quickly approaching the vagrancy of his meta-textual persona, Sam Waters, and his childhood icon, Huck Finn—a recursion of his situation at the beginning of “Sam, Soren, and Ed.” He is haunted by The Beast, a right-wing radio talk show host, and McMurtry, the senior citizen living in the apartment directly below his. The Beast roars at Ed and his ilk through McMurtry’s cranked speakers, and one day, at the novel’s opening, the old man himself roars at/about Ed through the call line. After McMurtry’s complaint about “bums,” The Beast proclaims that there are “just too many unemployment benefits and welfare rip-off artists” who are committing “fraud, . . . just a highfalutin name for stealing” (Vanderhaeghe, *MPA* 10). McMurtry is clearly opposed to progressivist sentiments, and The Beast serves as a mouthpiece for the incoming new right, exploiting the parallels between previous rural politics and contemporary urban ones. Both characters align Ed with the rogue, not in the sociopolitical sense, but in the image of the Early Modern cutpurse. Yet, rather than returning to his judgement of capitalism in “Sam, Soren, and Ed,” Ed attempts to clarify and justify his living situation: “I have phoned the open-line show to explain to him [The Beast/McMurtry] that I receive neither unemployment insurance nor welfare, but live on the capital I raised from cashing in my life insurance policy” (13). While he is perfectly content as a social outlaw, he resists being categorized as their kind of rogue. Driven to remove himself from the socioeconomic system, rather than serve as an outlier who moves against the current from within, he does not sell his labour for profit, but rejects all financial support. By cashing in his life insurance policy, Ed embodies the Marxist notion of life under capitalism—trading your years for money—and brings to light what Robin Mathews calls the “false consciousness of a colonial dependency in a bourgeois, capitalist, imperial system” (146). Ed’s repudiation of social and economic convention illuminates the “drugged, dragooned, down-trodden, dominated, and nearly drowned” state of the lower class (Mathews 146), and anticipates his total rejection of politics and interpassivity—his transcendence to post-roguery—that occurs at the novel’s conclusion. However, his behaviour in this scene and his avoidance of social support also suggest a fear of being (what he would perceive as) pitied by the middle class, the civil servants he derided in “Man Descending.” The irony is that Ed is (even if largely by his own doing) legitimately in need of welfare; he is in an economic position for which the activists of his university days would have rallied.

Dunning argues that “Vanderhaeghe resolves the ambiguity surrounding the authenticity of Ed’s reformation in the previous story [“Sam, Soren, and Ed”], for he has visibly declined, beginning the novel in worse shape than ever” (36). However, this reading ignores

the intermediate events of “He Scores! He Shoots!” Ed has not simply transitioned from a position of potential growth and maturity to his former immobility; he has returned abruptly to the role of the pathetic fool, to the ironic narrator devoid of agency, a role he shed at the end of the uncollected story. This gap in the canonical Ed narrative, this trace of a missing part of the story between *Man Descending* and *My Present Age*, haunts the genealogy of Ed’s characterization as much as it does Dunning’s reading. While *My Present Age* may be read as an independent work, a cohesive reading of Ed’s character, such as Dunning’s, Zichy’s, or my own diegetically chronological reading, is troubled by the disparity between the narrative’s chronology and that of the texts’ production. “Man Descending” was the first Ed piece to be published, appearing in *Aurora* in 1978, followed by “He Scores! He Shoots!” in *Matrix* in 1981, then “Sam, Soren, and Ed” later that year, while *My Present Age* first appeared in its full-length form in 1984 (Horava). It is likely that the uncollected story was written before Vanderhaeghe considered a novel featuring Ed, resulting in the disconnections within the character’s developmental arc. Furthermore, the lack of a significant gap between the publication of the second and third Ed story suggests that Vanderhaeghe was wrestling with how much closure to give the character. The fact that “Sam, Soren, and Ed” appears in *Man Descending* and “He Scores! He Shoots!” does not, canonizes Ed’s ambiguity and allows him to languish in the “gap” leading up to *My Present Age*. Only when all the published Ed works are considered within their diegetic chronology does this characterization collapse. We end up with recursions of the “same old Ed” (Vanderhaeghe, *MD* 239), each embodying their present age while being critical of its politics, each having the potential to rise or fall within their situation, each needing to escape the irony of their narration, each struggling with the fact that they are always already depictions of a man descending.

One of the saving graces for this atemporal, recurring character is that the Ed from the novel, like all others before him, “provides more than a parable on modern life: he also analyzes the forces at work in his culture” (Dunning 36). This analytic approach is particularly evident when Ed shouts “Free Balzac!” in front of a downtown legal office and comments: “It is a sign of the present age that no one joined in. . . . Fourteen years ago someone would have” (Vanderhaeghe, *MPA* 102). Ed again blends personal and social politics; his protest is not for the liberation of an individual, but for a collection of his books that his estranged wife Victoria refuses to relinquish in their divorce proceedings. And yet, his social disruption reveals an astute commentary: the ignorance shown in response to his shouts is indicative of ever-declining progressivist engagement, now a mere relic of the ’60s and ’70s as the province winds up for Devine’s Tories

(who have already won the election by the time Vanderhaeghe is writing the novel). Ed recursively embodies both the roles of critic and criticized, cunning rogue and foolish knave. For example, after providing extensive commentary on Marsha's bourgeois father, Ed happily accepts her offer of his favorite drink, the gentleman's drink, Scotch (78), yet claims he "never went in for that heightened-awareness crap" in university (79). Ed distances himself from the leftist paradigms that he idealized in "Sam, Soren, and Ed," even though he continues to judge people by those standards.

Perhaps Ed's, and by extension Vanderhaeghe's, strongest socioeconomic commentary in *My Present Age* is found in Bill, Marsha's ex-husband, who has converted to an extremist Christian subset or what Ed calls "an unpopular lunacy," in contrast to the progressivist "atheist's liberalism" (33–34) that the couple previously practiced. As in Donne's knave poems, religion, sanity, and social politics are interwoven and contrasted, encapsulated within a single character. This parody culminates when "Marsha's Pop offered to write a thousand-dollar cheque and donate it to the Waffle branch of the NDP if Bill would get his hair cut and be married in the United Church" but now "it seems that Bill's political expediency is having unforeseen consequences" (85). This scene is thick with political ironies. The Waffle emerged in 1969, more than a decade before the novel's setting of Saskatoon's rightward shifting-politics, and while it "stood as the embodiment of the left" in Saskatchewan, it "precipitated its own demise by abandoning the NDP in 1973" (Avakumovic 265–66). Like Ed, who at first attempts to impose his social insights on those around him, the Wafflers "tended to lecture. Unfortunately for them, the NDP was not a captive audience of undergraduates who had to put up with what was being said to them" (Avakumovic 237), just as the conservatives and BMW socialists surrounding Bill and Ed remain relatively unchanged by their counter-cultural practices. Ironically, it is the coerced wedding that allows Bill to find his own faith and lunacy or, as Ed sees it, to recognize that "[h]e was always crazy" and that his choice of a particular religious "lunacy" is in accordance with his "fundamental nature" (Vanderhaeghe, *MPA* 33–34). Bill is the reductionist's equivalent of Ed, suggesting that little sanity can be found in the decline of the present age and the mirrored descent of one's own life. Ed claims that Bill is the "ultimate simplifier" (34), and Dunning applies Kierkegaardian philosophy to read both men as ethicists, claiming that everyone else falls into the "aesthetic sphere" and that they "could be regarded as another version of Benny" (37). However, this approach—lumping characters into a philosophical binary—collapses when they are considered through the lens of class. Benny, as we remember, is a "BMW socialist," while Stanley Rubacek, Ed's obsessive student, hopes to get rich by writing a best-seller: an over-wrought redemption

novel that he transparently tries to pass off as creative non-fiction. Both characters are similarly situated as aesthetes according to Dunning, and both are practicing capitalists; however, they are distinguished by their socioeconomic status, and as a result, interact differently with Ed, who himself disrupts the Kierkegaardian binary of aesthete/ethicist.

While Ed utterly rejects Benny for succumbing to affluence and joining “The March of Roguery,” he tolerates Rubacek. The middle-aged writing student does not show “any sign of ethical seriousness” (Dunning 37), but his presence allows Ed to distance himself from roguery—at least in his own eyes—and resume his allegedly chivalric quest for Victoria, thereby straying from the path of simplifier. For example, Rubacek takes shifts on watch and provides Ed with (unwanted yet necessary) company while Ed stakes out Victoria’s potential hide-out motels. Dunning writes that “Kierkegaard identifies this boundary condition as irony” (38), the very condition from which Ed was emerging in “He Scores! He Shoots!” For Dunning, “both reflective aesthetes and ironists escape real self-knowledge, aesthetes by abandoning themselves to speculation and fantasy, ironists by pointing their fingers” (38). This is the culmination of the canonical Ed—the Ed of the collected works, the chivalric knight who believes he can complete the River Run but never does, the knave who blames socialites for social decline, and the narrator ironically undermined by his own narration. Vanderhaeghe thus explores “the dialectic between Ed and his age” (Dunning 38) in which, despite his frequent criticisms, “Ed represents rather than rebukes his culture,” a culture lost between ethics and aesthetics, witnessing “the price of bringing ideals into connection with reality” (40–41). However, as with the stories, the character and the novel’s politics shift at its conclusion, inviting us to rethink our response to the modern condition, its political climate, and our notion of sociopolitical roguery.

At the end of the novel, Ed retreats from both personal and social politics, from knavish personal critiques and self-perceived knightly pursuits. He tells us: “When the bank opens I’m withdrawing all the money I have left in my account. I’m not even going back to the apartment for my clothes and the rest of my things . . . I’m running away” (Vanderhaeghe, *MPA* 248). He has seemingly become a true vagrant; in the final scene he has “disappeared” to a “new, simpler life” (249). We might read this as Ed’s final descent into the role of the fool, since “beneath his ironic disillusionment with society lies a deeper disillusionment with himself for failing to live up to his ideals” (Dunning 41). Indeed, Zichy argues that Ed’s “uncommitted ways” (Vanderhaeghe, *MD* 237) lead him to his “final position,” which is “the only relation to society he can muster” because “[w]hen Ed claims that in not running in the marathon he is following

the model of Kierkegaard rather than Sam Waters, . . . he has gotten Kierkegaard's message exactly wrong" (54). But these readings fail to account for the entirety of Ed's narrative—the former omits "He Scores! He Shoots!" and the latter engages predominantly with *Man Descending*. As a result of these omissions, arguments that Ed is an emblematic character do not consider Ed and his narratives' recursive nature, or the significant departure from that trend which occurs at the end of *My Present Age*.

Ed's retreat from roguery, from ridiculing the dominant narrative and idealizing the leftist political underdog, into seeming passivity, is in fact one of his most active expressions of agency and commitment to politics. At Marsha's brother's wedding shortly before Ed's disappearance, he gives an inebriated speech about the dysfunctions of marriage: his last swing at being a non-violent shit-disturber. Someone from the audience yells at him to "[s]it down and shut up!" (Vanderhaeghe, *MPA* 247), and this is what he does, on the scale of his entire life, in a very *Bartleby*-esque style. He would prefer not to be found, prefer not to engage with the people or politics of his past (250). His vanishment is not a forfeiture, but a rejection of all social convention, dominant and emergent, sanctioned and counter-cultural. It is a self-removal from the politics of language, for the novel, driven by Ed's narration, and therefore his very diegetic existence, depends on his continued expression through language. And through this dis-integration, Ed transcends roguery to become post-rogue, for he has abandoned the social structures that permit "The March of Roguery," as well as his position as an outlaw commenting thereon through his attempt to abandon discourse. The post-rogue is outlaw to all politics, including the politics of putting-into-words, existing outside of both the dominant culture and the critiquing yet undermined counter-culture.

Slavoj Žižek writes that "in much of today's progressive politics, the danger is not passivity, but pseudo-activity, the urge to be active and to participate." For most of his narrative, Ed is driven by an urge to play politics, to be the villain in a recurring game that always, sometimes inexplicably, returns to the start with each new episode. At the outset of each subsequent text, Ed returns, or, more accurately, is returned—sometimes by his own hand, but always by Vanderhaeghe's scriptor's—to a state of social immobility and of liminality between critic and fool. Ed's inability to *be* active, to subvert systems of power and enact change, is caused by his near-perpetual self-irony, his self-critical narrative voice, and the undermining metanarrative of the stories in which he finds himself. He is always limited by his duality—as rogue and fool—and the duality of roguery—the outlaw who challenges social convention versus the scoundrels who establish and exploit it. Only in "He Scores! He Shoots!" does Ed *become* active rather than remaining trapped in a *becoming*

active, achieved by overcoming his irony and coming to terms with his disillusionment. Žižek claims that “the truly difficult thing is to step back and withdraw from it [the urge to participate],” which Ed does achieve at the end of *My Present Age*. He finds himself in a time where civil servants, lawyers, academics and writers interpassively save the world—talking about Chilean refugees but doing nothing for them, forming a women’s collective that excludes and looks down on other women, fabricating creative “non-fiction” rather than living a life. Ed himself defers most of his action to his western novel’s protagonist, Sam Waters, and even his composition of the book is interpassive: his “process of creation [is] . . . a case of automatic handwriting” (Vanderhaeghe, *MPA* 69). This “interpassive mode,” ingrained in our present age, keeps us “active all the time to make sure that nothing will really change” (Žižek). As an ideological mode of being, therefore, “the first truly critical step is to withdraw into passivity and refuse to participate” (Žižek). In response to Saskatchewan’s political cacophony in the early ‘80s—the new right, overlapping with remnants of the old left, both at odds with progressivist BMW socialists who were too pseudo-active to prevent the decline of socialism—Ed finally can do nothing but remove himself from discourse. By doing so he “clears the ground for true activity” (Žižek). The Ed texts circle around agency, commentary, and roguery, but they do not always demand activity.

Vanderhaeghe’s contemporary short stories culminate in a message against apathy and irony, and *My Present Age* concludes with a warning against unproductivity, against over-speaking and under-hearing, against the roaring of The Beast’s voice, which opens the novel, destroying our “brief peace” (1). Ed, as a post-rogue, transcends the motif’s dualism to ultimately reject the progressivist stagnancy of interpassivity and the ideological constructs of contemporary social convention.

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