

What Would Sam Waters Do?

Guy Vanderhaeghe and Søren Kierkegaard

He takes a step towards me [Ed]. I find myself thinking very hard. The inevitable question arises. What would Sam Waters do in such a situation? I have a good idea what Sam would do, but I know equally well that I am incapable of imitation.
—Guy Vanderhaeghe, “Sam, Soren, and Ed”

Reflection is not the evil; but a reflective condition and the deadlock which it involves, by transforming the capacity for action into a means of escape from action, is both corrupt and dangerous, and leads in the end to a retrograde movement.
—Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*

Guy Vanderhaeghe is probably best known today as a regional, western Canadian writer with a strong bent towards historical fiction who, like his co-regionalists Robert Kroetsch and Rudy Wiebe, offers meticulously researched and darkly disturbing tales that challenge what were once comforting metanarratives of national expansion and consolidation. Witness *The Englishman's Boy* in which Shorty McAdoo finally recounts his story of the infamous Cypress Hill Massacre (1873), thereby discrediting a Hollywood producer's attempt to appropriate the event as nationalist propaganda. This authorial agenda, which here and elsewhere deconstructs European cultural pretensions, has led many to read Vanderhaeghe as a thoroughly secular, postmodern author in Jean-Francois Lyotard's sense of the word, namely one deeply suspicious of all metanarrative—including, of course, religious metanarrative (xxiv).¹ Sue Sorensen, however, proves an exception, showing in her recent essay that his fiction is deeply engaged with religious matters, which should not surprise given that Vanderhaeghe in an early interview not only identifies the Bible as his foremost influence, but also confesses to being a Christian, though he adds he may be “an eccentric and anarchic one” (28). Morris Wolfe, the interviewer (like many readers), simply assumes he is at most “agnostic” (Wolfe 28).

While Sorensen's article does a thorough job of pointing to the religious elements in much of his authorship, focusing particularly on *The Trouble with Heroes* (1983), *The Englishman's Boy* (1996) and *The Last Crossing* (2002), it effectively ignores what are arguably the most significant early works for such a study: "Man Descending" and "Sam, Soren and Ed" from *Man Descending* (1982) and *My Present Age* (1984).² This lacuna in both Sorensen's otherwise admirable article and in general readings of Vanderhaeghe's authorship probably results from most critics' relative unfamiliarity with Søren Kierkegaard, the nineteenth-century Danish existentialist and theologian who significantly informs these crucial early works.³

Vanderhaeghe provides numerous hermeneutical clues that Kierkegaard holds the philosophical key to the Ed stories. During an interview with Don Swaim, for example, he reveals that he based the character of Ed on Kierkegaard himself, given that both deliberately "set their face" against their cultures. Then there is the clear testimony of the texts themselves: titles, epigraphs, quotations, and allusions—all referencing Kierkegaard. These early stories also employ a rhetorical strategy in keeping with Kierkegaard who spoke through many alter egos and personae, a vital component of his trademark "indirect communication."⁴ Moreover, Vanderhaeghe's ingenious incorporation of Kierkegaard's existential stages (or spheres) within *My Present Age*,⁵ along with allusions to Kierkegaard's *The Present Age*, which accounts for the novel's title and one of its two epigraphs, provides a compelling interpretive framework within which to read Ed and his world.⁶

Indeed, the three Ed pieces self-consciously invite collective treatment, and witness to Vanderhaeghe's progressive exploration of a fascinating Kierkegaardian problematic. In the first story, for example, Ed twice describes himself as "a man descending" ("Man Descending" 192, 200). He uses a similar metaphor to convey his plight near the conclusion of *My Present Age* (232), thus bringing him full circle, and presumably, to the "bottom of [his] own graph" ("Man Descending" 193). The second piece, "Sam, Soren, and Ed," explores the source of Ed's "inertia," the achievements, the heights from which Ed slides, but it does more, making explicit what the first only hints at through the generic "Man" in its title. Then, the novel picks up and develops thoroughly the Kierkegaardian analysis of Ed's plight that remains merely nascent in the second story, while also tracing the origins of the dialectic between Ed and Sam Waters, his fictional alter ego and ethical yardstick.

In the end, Ed emerges as a Kierkegaardian ironist, a man suspended between the aesthetic and ethical spheres, incapacitated by both physical

and moral cowardice. And despite his vigorous ethical denunciation of his age, he also represents his culture, for at root all such denunciation reveals itself as consciously suppressed self-loathing, a deliberate flight from self. In Ed, as it were, the culture's unconscious spiritual bankruptcy and despair have come to brief consciousness. But a Kierkegaardian reading also points toward a remedy in the elusive person of Bill Sadler, the placard-wielding, religious ethicist who alone escapes narrative censure, and with whom Ed longs to talk. Kierkegaard, however, repeatedly warns against the temptation of trying to establish a direct aesthetic relationship to religion, thereby (in his estimation) transforming what must be existentially appropriated into something that can be intellectually contemplated, and in turn, indefinitely deferring decision within reflection's interminable dialectic. By denying Ed the opportunity to interrogate this character, the novel thus opens an apophatic space, therein suggesting the possibility of recovery for both Ed and his present age.⁷

Man Descending

The first Ed story and title piece of Vanderhaeghe's collection, *Man Descending*, is relatively straightforward.⁸ It describes a disastrous New Year's Eve party, during which Ed confronts and fights his wife's lover. The story ends with Victoria rescuing him, but also announcing that their marriage is over. In the events leading up to the fight, we discover that while Ed is obnoxiously sociopathic and pathetically infantile, he is also extraordinarily amusing and bright—indeed, bright enough to theorize about his own proclivity for failure, a theorizing that also typifies his subsequent incarnations. As Charles Forceville notes, Ed's linguistic virtuosity, personal ideals, and psychological acumen (at least when attending to others) point to his extraordinary intelligence and partially account for his appeal (54-55). Vanderhaeghe's characters are driven by ideas, and Ed's undoubted intelligence thus allows Vanderhaeghe to overcome some of the limitations of first-person narration. Here Ed provides a general theory within which to understand individual descent:

[Every life] 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. . . .

[I sense] my feet are on the down slope. 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. (192-193)

While Ed's penetrating (often outrageous) humour and general linguistic eclat indicate the personal heights from which he descends, his pathological social ineptitude and failing marriage testify to the descent itself.

"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 1960's, but ultimately from the (romanticized) heights of mediaeval Christendom. Ed has degenerated markedly since the decisive party of the previous story. Having lost Victoria, he spends his unemployed weekdays enjoying the "passing scene," his "fat ass" pinched by the slats of a park bench (201). Without Victoria's maternal intervention, he has become increasingly unkempt, unmotivated, and unhealthy. Yet Vanderhaeghe would not have us write him off as simply an eccentric misfit. Ed implicitly numbers himself amongst the "truly representative figures of Western decadence" in the park, those indicators of "the mass of gluttony, lechery, sloth and violence which lurks below the surface of society" (201). While his lechery seems limited to mild voyeurism, to "eyeing the nymphets" (201), he qualifies immediately as paradigmatic glutton and sloth. His violence also soon manifests itself.⁹

Ed targets Benny, an old friend, for his most vitriolic verbal assaults. Yet no matter how abusive Ed becomes, the victim remains unsympathetic. According to Ed, "[during] the late sixties and early seventies Benny was a priapic, hairy activist," a "great nay-sayer and boycotter" who "walked around with a millennial light in his eyes. He intended to dedicate his life to eternal servitude in a legal-aid clinic. . . . He was a kind of moral standard . . ." (208):

But that evangelistic Benny is no more. He's dead. Affluence did him in. The hirsute, wild-eyed Benny is transmogrified. He is razor-cut and linen-suited. His ass cupped lovingly in the contoured leather seats of his BMW, he tools around town on the prowl for extra-marital snarf. (208)

That Benny has chosen to represent Victoria in her divorce proceedings does not account adequately for Ed's anger. 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, as he later admits in *My Present Age* (96).

Yet, if the sixties emerge as the "node," the heights from which Ed personally descends, the story also treats this era as merely the latest attempt to recover something Ed senses we have collectively lost, some elevation of the human spirit once encouraged and supported by traditions we have abandoned. As witnessed above, Ed renders Benny, the representative of this

revolutionary period, in heavily religious language, the same language he uses (again ironically) to portray the struggling YWCA runners whom Ed watches regularly from his bench, as we learn at the beginning of the story. For example, he describes them as the “sheep which comprise [his] fold,” and hails them as “Marys full of grace” (203) as they struggle down the “via dolorosa to health and beauty. . .” (202). That they belong to the YWCA, of course, also underscores the secularizing forces now driving the culture.

The story, however, shows no interest whatsoever in all that the term “organized religion” attempts to capture, from ecclesial structures to dogma. Rather, Ed implies that Christianity once encouraged significant action, providing a metanarrative that guaranteed moral guidance and transcendent meaning. Perhaps Ed saluted the medieval mind that embraced the metaphor of world as book. Ed’s desperate quest for authority does indicate that he longed for an *auctor* to write (right?) him, an ultimate guarantor of meaning. That he opts for an “ordeal” to win back Victoria, an opportunity to “face the scaly green dragon of Sloth and the basilisk of Irresponsibility,” as he puts it, displays in her words, the “positively medieval” bent of his mind (224). Ed thus intimates, albeit through ironic hyperbole, that Christendom once provided what Vanderhaeghe elsewhere refers to as “metaphysical support” for honourable behaviour, for a chivalric courage that we have lost today. And while Vanderhaeghe admits in the same interview that an oppressive chauvinism often attended such chivalry, he implies that it need not (Wylie “Making History” 49). This partially accounts for the pedigree of Sam Waters, the hero of Ed’s western, *Cool, Clear Waters*. A secularized knight errant in cowboy spurs, he ultimately derives from the same stock as the Jesuit martyr, Brebeuf, to whom Ed also likens himself (216).¹⁰

As the title of the story indicates, Sam Waters figures largely in the puzzle that is Ed. He attributes Sam to some “strange vein” (221) in his psyche that he tapped “in that sad time after the failure of the second Big Book” (220), but he confesses that he does not know where Sam originates. Later, in *My Present Age*, Ed discovers that Sam emerged from his mental breakdown, proving to be a character in the “message” Ed delivered in his madness.

Sam emerges into Ed’s consciousness several times in the story, near the beginning when Ed is physically threatened by Mr. Kung Fu after Ed grabs Victoria; again when Victoria bites his thumb, neither breaking the skin nor discolouring the nail; and then near the end, when Ed begins his training for his ordeal, the River Run. In the first instance, he notes that Sam would have handled the contretemps in a “more efficient, more *masculine* manner” (207);

in the second, he compares his sufferings to Sam's, letting out an "exquisitely pitiful moan" (216); and in the third, he spins a story in which Sam is fleeing naked from Shoshone braves, and becomes involved in his fantasy to the point that he begins weaving down the road, causing cars to honk at him. But whereas Sam sprints for his life across the desert, oblivious to the cactus thorns embedded in his feet, and then eludes his pursuers by plunging into an icy river, Ed arrives home "coughing and retching" having run a "considerable way. . . . Perhaps as far as a mile" (228). The bathos is unmistakable.

Thus, because Sam provides Ed with a "yardstick against which [to measure his] conduct" (222), his alter ego serves only to underscore the gap between Ed's ethical ideality and his reality, usually comically—as the above examples suggest. Beneath this comedy, however, lies the tragedy. Ed recognizes that this figure of "awesome substantiality" "says something unflattering about his admirer" (222). But he may not realize that his fascination with Sam debilitates rather than inspires him. He knows that Sam is everything he is not, but would like to be (207, 222-23). Paradoxically, by hiding imaginatively within Sam, he confirms himself in his despair, a despair arising from the conviction that what he desires most will be denied him, that he can only *be* Sam in his fantasies. Too perceptive to remain blind to his despair, and too weak and frightened to face it, he instead treats himself as a jest. But the suffering from which he turns cannot be remedied by humour, and when the laughter dissipates, the pain of his imprisonment remains, causing Ed to lash out at the "visible excreta" of his life, punching a bathroom mirror with his fist and shattering plates (226). Indeed, this dynamic finds itself worked out formally in the movement within many chapters of the novel that follows: intense comedy giving way unexpectedly to tragedy, often leaving Ed in tears and the reader strangely moved.

Whereas Sam emphasizes the gap between Ed's ideals and his reality, Soren provides existential courage. Ed, for example, first adverts to Kierkegaard, the "old humpbacked cigar-puffing Dane," immediately after he begins to accept responsibility for his life and to consider the suffering that his condition entails: "[But] those dirty dishes are mine. It is *my* filth in the bathroom. And I am living this crazy goddamn life stuck in neutral. All this is my mess, not Victoria's" (226). Elsewhere, he cites a passage from Kierkegaard's *Journals* that a former philosophy professor would quote whenever his students "malingered or bitched about the work load": "There is nothing everyone is so afraid of as being told how vastly much he is capable of. . . . You would be furious with him who told you so, and only call that person

your friend who bolsters you in saying: 'No, this I cannot bear, this is beyond my strength, etc.'" (226). This entry complements another passage from the *Journals* that Ed tells us he will use as an epigraph for *Cool, Clear Waters*, his Western about Sam (and with which Vanderhaeghe ends the story):

What ability there is in an individual may be measured by the yardstick of how far there is between his *understanding* and his *will*. What a person can *understand* he must also be able to force himself to *will*. Between understanding and willing is where excuses and evasions have their being. (230)

The ending of the story, however, may leave readers deeply puzzled. On the one hand, Ed shows signs of existential maturity. He has secured a job selling china at Eatons, and has trained diligently for the River Run. On the other, he hyperbolizes his suffering at the hands of his customers, these "blue-haired hags" who drive him to think of Kierkegaard, amazed at his "capacity to absorb abuse" (229). And he offers unconvincing excuses for not participating in the Run, his medieval ordeal and chance to recover Victoria. Is this conscious or unconscious duplicity?

Ed confesses to being "overcome with stark anxiety" (219) when confronted by his failures, and this anxiety suggests that he intentionally blinds himself. According to Kierkegaard, anxiety increases as we become aware of our freedom, of the terrifying possibilities open to the self and the responsibility this entails. We became dizzy with freedom, and often paralyzed with sympathetic-antipathetic dread.¹¹ Thus anxiety reveals its paradoxical dialectic: Ed can only blind himself to something he sees, only flee from freedom through freedom.

This helps to explain the irony of his identification with Kierkegaard. True, Kierkegaard had "much the same effect on people" as Ed (214), but with one important difference: while the Dane offended others in his struggle to *become* himself, Ed offends in his struggle to *avoid* becoming himself. Moreover, Ed's allusion to Kierkegaard's relationship with Regina (214) is ludicrous. Kierkegaard broke with Regina to save her from himself; Ed pursues Victoria to burden her with himself. Thus, as the title suggests, Ed ultimately uses Kierkegaard like he uses Sam, as more material for his personal fantasies, as one more way to avoid his own reality. He begins the story watching others training for the River Run, and he ends the story watching others participate in the Run. Kierkegaard may be "slowly supplanting Sam Waters as [his] guide through life's pitfalls" (229), but Ed's self-deception has merely deepened. He has not simply come full circle at the end of the story: rather he has slid further down the spiralling loops of his personal graph.

My Present Age

At one point in “Sam, Soren, and Ed,” Ed confesses, “Sometimes I feel entirely disassociated from what I do. It’s a malady of the modern age” (211). *My Present Age* provides not only a much more detailed study of Ed’s pathology, but also a framework within which to understand both his malady and the malady of the age. The novel’s two epigraphs¹² from the 1984 edition help to establish this framework:

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.

—Soren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age* (1846)

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.

—George Gissing, *New Grub Street* (1891)

As in the previous story, Vanderhaeghe immediately establishes Ed as representative of his age, for the opening of the novel finds him in bed, spending yet another “luxurious” morning, “rereading *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Shane*, *Kidnapped* or *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*” (*My Present Age* 1). We learn that he quit his job at Eatons (rather than wait to be fired because of his rudeness to customers) when his father cashed in an insurance policy and gave Ed the money, encouraged by his signs of growing maturity. Here Vanderhaeghe resolves the ambiguity surrounding the authenticity of Ed’s reformation in the previous story, for he has visibly declined, beginning the novel in worse shape than ever.

Yet Ed provides more than a parable on modern life: he also analyzes the forces at work in his culture. Using a distinctly Kierkegaardian paradigm, Ed divides his contemporaries into complicators and simplifiers. Complicators, of whom Benny provides the best example, find “safety in numbers, people, things. It doesn’t matter. [They take] pleasure in possessions” (33). Ed expands: “The thing is, Benny believes in data and sensation. He believes that his perplexity is a result of not having enough information, and his lust the result of too few women. Hence his belief in one more feature-length article in *Time* or one more bimbo” (34).

Ed cites Bill Sadler, one of the key figures in the novel, as the “ultimate” simplifier:

The very antithesis of your bet-hedging, quibbling complicator, Sadler wants Truth with a capital T. He always did. And when he signed on with the

Independent Pre-Millennial Church of God's First Chosen, or whatever they call themselves, he didn't go making his membership contingent on a bunch of mental reservations. No sir. He understood that being one of God's First Chosen isn't easy. He swallowed it whole. I kind of admire that. (32)

Ed's categories of complicator and simplifier correspond closely to Kierkegaard's aesthetic and ethico-religious stages or spheres of existence.¹³ Those in the aesthetic stage avoid making existentially significant decisions by immersing themselves in sensuality (their categories being pleasure and pain) or by thinking about life (their categories being the interesting and the boring), depending upon their location within the aesthetic stage, whether near the immediate or the reflective pole.¹⁴ That Vanderhaeghe chooses a lawyer to represent the aesthetic over against the ethical is telling, for it suggests that at some point in our history the ethical and the legal parted company, an indictment he drives home by having Benny insist upon the distinction between ethics and law in his dispute with Ed over the Balzac collection, which Victoria had purchased for Ed just before their breakup and with which Ed refuses to part, because he sees it as a symbol of her love for him, an interpretation that she vigorously denies (96).

Ethicists conversely choose decisively, that is, they have decided they will make decisions that count absolutely, decisions between good and evil in which they will define themselves unequivocally. According to Kierkegaard, by deciding to decide, they make the first absolute choice for good. Or, one might say that they have chosen to take responsibility for themselves, not as they might like themselves to be, but as they are, warts, failures and all, which helps to explain why Kierkegaard sometimes refers to choosing oneself as a form of repentance and why this choice necessarily entails suffering. Essentially, then, ethicists have consolidated themselves in time, chosen themselves as definite, concrete ethical beings.

With the exception of Bill Sadler, the fictional Sam Waters, and Ed, all of the major characters in the book fall into the aesthetic sphere: "Hideous" Marsha, Bill's estranged wife, lives for pleasure, and not particularly refined pleasures at that, since Ed identifies her as a fast-food heiress. Victoria is every bit as much an aesthete as her friend, though her tastes are more cultured. Stanley Rubacek is interested only in commercial literary success, turning his mendacious tale of incarceration into a saleable commodity. And none of the minor characters shows any sign of ethical seriousness either. Everyone, aside from Bill and Ed, could be regarded as another version of Benny.

Ed, however, does not achieve the status of simplifier, even though he claims to seek it (34). Rather he remains suspended somewhere between the two spheres, caught, as it were, between Benny and Bill. Kierkegaard identifies this boundary condition as irony, a state resembling the reflective pole of the aesthetic stage, but with some important differences. The movement from the reflective pole to irony requires a shift in emphasis or perspective. Where the reflective aesthete focuses upon his own ideality to the exclusion of historical actuality (or perhaps uses reality merely as material for abstraction and fantasy), the ironist attends to the disparity between the two, to the failure of reality to measure up to his ideality. Kierkegaard describes the effect of this upon the ironist: “[the] whole of existence [becomes] alien to the ironic subject. . . . [He] in turn [becomes] estranged from existence, and . . . because actuality [loses] its validity for him, so he, too, is to a certain extent no longer [historically] actual” (*The Concept of Irony* 276).

So, both reflective aesthetes and ironists escape real self-knowledge, aesthetes by abandoning themselves to speculation and fantasy, ironists by pointing their fingers at others. Ed, of course, does some of both, but his biting wit, keen sense of betrayal at the hands of his friends, and characteristic sociopathy all identify Ed as principally an ironist, as does his acute awareness of the gap between his ideals (embodied in his alter ego Sam) and his reality.

Vanderhaeghe’s focus in the novel, however, is not simply on Ed *qua* individual, or even on Ed *as* representative individual. As the title of the novel suggests, he is exploring the dialectic between Ed and his age. And to understand this dialectic, we must consider Kierkegaard’s text, *The Present Age*. Granted, one might immediately object that the two cultures—mid-nineteenth century Denmark and late twentieth-century Canada—are too radically different to enable a useful comparison. Above all, the Denmark Kierkegaard addressed was thoroughly Christian (at least in its own estimation), while Ed’s culture is decidedly post-Christian, to judge by the prevailing aesthetic consciousness. How then can allusion to Kierkegaard’s text critiquing a different culture prove pertinent?

One general response might be that Vanderhaeghe’s Canada simply occupies a further place along the historical trajectory that Kierkegaard identifies. And, indeed, Kierkegaard attacks a number of forces within his culture that also characterize Ed’s age, most of which can be captured by the process of levelling, driven in large part by an envious, incapacitating reflection.

By levelling, Kierkegaard adverts to a cultural ethos that deeply resents—and therefore refuses to acknowledge—significant aesthetic and moral differences

among people.¹⁵ While, in a previous age, people might openly envy or even banish the great, recognizing the rebuke and call of greatness, Kierkegaard's society simply denies these distinctions (*The Present Age* 50). One strategy is to invoke the category of "The Public" to suppress those who are truly exceptional, thus providing numerical ballast for opinions/positions that have no intrinsic qualitative merit, a tactic of the Press that Kierkegaard particularly loathed and to which he was subjected (58-64). Kierkegaard here identifies one of the prominent features of modernity, namely the displacement of qualitative by quantitative discourse, which Margaret Atwood also deplors in her dystopian novel, *Oryx and Crake*. More significantly, however, the Public is an abstraction in which individuals lose their concrete identity and thus their personal responsibility (*The Present Age* 52-54). As Kierkegaard puts it elsewhere, "The Crowd is untruth" ("On the Dedication to 'That Single Individual'"). Thus both objectivity and subjectivity become compromised.

Kierkegaard identifies reflection as the major levelling force in his age. He claims that it is not evil in itself, but becomes so when it produces a deadlock, thereby "transforming the capacity for action into a means of escape from action" (*The Present Age* 68). As he argues elsewhere in his critique of the Hegelian System, the dialectic of reflection is internally interminable. To move from reflection to action requires passionate choice, but this is particularly difficult in an age governed by "passionless envy," a "ressentiment" that denies "that eminent distinction really is distinction. Neither does it understand itself by recognizing distinction negatively (as in the case of ostracism [of the great]) but wants to drag it down, wants to belittle it so that it really ceases to distinguished" (*The Present Age* 51).

While he identifies levelling forces as demonic (*The Present Age* 54, 82), he notes that they make possible a positive spiritual movement, in which every individual (stripped of mediating persons—the great, the saintly, the exceptional) now stands equally before God, and may leap over "the sharp scythe of the leveler" into the "arms of God"—if he or she can find the courage (*The Present Age* 82; cf. 37, 56, 58). Similarly, he argues that "[man's] only salvation lies in the reality of religion for each individual" (56).

Ed's narrative stance as ironist protects the novel from didacticism, viewing religious life tragically from underneath (as it were), but all other forms of life comically from above. And because aesthetics dominates the novel, so does comedy. But Vanderhaeghe still preserves the heart of Kierkegaard's critique, reifying the levelling process in the character of Tom Rollins, "The Beast," whom Ed vilifies in the opening words of the novel, alluding directly

to the Antichrist of the Apocalypse. As radio talk host of “A Piece of Your Mind,” Rollins combines the powers of the Press and public opinion that Kierkegaard despised. Moreover, at the incitement of McMurtry (Ed’s downstairs neighbour), he publicly and unjustly persecutes Ed, talking about him on the radio. In one show, he reads a letter entitled “Dear Aggrieved,” rebuking Ed for not contributing to society, in which Rollins sees himself as a shining light, one of the tallest trees in the social forest, as he puts it (154). The letter itself is a mish-mash of populist political cliché, which of course, “struck a chord in the greater public” (155). One grade seven teacher, who required her class to listen to the show because it was “contemporary issues oriented,” ordered a hundred copies (155-56). Vanderhaeghe simply allows The Beast’s vitriolic drivel to testify against him, contrasting it with Ed’s linguistic precision and originality. Similarly, Ed mocks the related shift towards quantitative discourse: first, in reference to the “visual chaos” of the city, in which “the golden arches of the House of Mcdonald” with its boast of “4.6 billion burgers sold” figure largely (99-100); and second, in his conversation with the cretinous Rubacek about “intelligent quotient” (133), in which Ed refuses to play the numbers game, defining genius instead as “the infinite capacity for taking pains” (134).

More significantly, the whole novel revolves around an issue at the heart of *The Present Age*: the flight from reality (with its painful self knowledge and demands for decisive action) into fantastic reflection. And here Ed represents rather than rebukes his culture, though undoubtedly from a position of greater consciousness.¹⁶ Ironically, however, Ed’s flight from self closely resembles a quest for self, a resemblance that may trick some readers into misconstruing the ending of the work.

Ed’s “message” holds the key. We discover that he penned it during a mental breakdown several years before the period of his life covered by the short stories and the novel. While shock treatment may have erased it from his conscious memory, it simply drove it deeper “into hiding,” as Ed puts it (*My Present Age* 209). When he finally finds the courage to read the message, to allow it, in his words, to “witness” to him, he discovers the origins of Sam Waters (*My Present Age* 208). This “crazy manuscript” (205) takes as its epigraph the concluding words of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*:

If I’d a’ knowed what a trouble it was to make a book I wouldn’t a’ tackled it, and ain’t a-going to no more. But I reckon I got to light out for the territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she’s going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can’t stand it. I been there before. (*My Present Age* 206)

The message itself tells a deceptively simple tale. Sam wanders into a saloon in a Kansas railhead town and encounters a drunk “not above thirty-five” (211)—close enough to Ed’s age—who burdens Sam with his life’s story. The “juicehead” turns out to be Huck Finn, his spirit having been broken in a Yankee jail after being captured at Vicksburg. The friend (clearly Tom Sawyer) who persuaded him to fight for the Southern cause, took “a Yankee minie ball plumb dead center in the head” during this battle, after “a-ridin’ back ’n forth in the enemy fire, his hair a-blowin’ ever’ which way, a-wavin’ his sword and a-singin’ out ‘Give Us Liberty or Give Us Death’” (*My Present Age* 212).

The message is not hard to decipher, particularly within the context of Kierkegaard’s analysis. Ed identifies closely with both Sam and Huck. Sam, as we have seen, embodies Ed’s ideals, symbolizes everything Ed wishes he were but believes he cannot be. His relationship with Huck, however, is subtler. Huck’s *Adventures* figures as one of the escapist books Ed confesses to rereading in the opening paragraphs of the novel, which (given the novel’s second epigraph) identifies him as a “[dweller] in the valley of the shadow of books.” Since his childhood, Ed has used this book to “light torches against the mind’s blackness” (*My Present Age* 51). At night, rather than face what he refers to elsewhere as “the stink of [his] own loneliness” (“Man Descending” 226), he imagines gliding down the Mississippi on a raft with Jim. Such escapist fantasies, of course, ultimately ensure his solipsism, confirm him in a self-reflexive universe, where paradoxically, true escape becomes progressively more difficult, where death masquerades as life.

The message indicates that Ed had long since discovered the danger, for Huck therein testifies to the price of running away, of habitually lighting out for the territory. Moreover, Ed, in the clarity of madness, exposes the existential cowardice motivating such flight. Tom Sawyer’s death particularly devastates Huck because he witnesses the price of bringing ideals into connection with reality, of moving from reflection to decisive action. Ed’s message renders Huck as a disgusting, pimping drunk whom Sam first pities and finally rejects. Here Ed effectively passes judgement on himself, proving that beneath his ironic disillusionment with society lies a deeper disillusionment with himself for failing to live up to his ideals.

Ed’s announcement in the penultimate chapter of the novel that he is “running away” (*My Present Age* 235) signals that he will not heed his own message. Although he claims to have achieved “a new, simpler life” (236), he merely approaches the simplicity of madness. As in the time before his first breakdown, he cannot sleep. And when he closes his eyes, “strange

things begin to happen”: “A big man, gentle on bootless feet, [moves] slowly through the room soft, soft. . . . The kitchen light strikes his naked black feet” (238-39). Thus, in some sense consciously, he repeats his solipsistic tragedy, flies from himself further into himself.¹⁷

According to Kierkegaard, an individual can only escape the self-reflexive madness of the present age by attaining “the inwardness of religion,” “the religious courage which springs from his individual religious isolation” (*The Present Age* 48, 54). Only one character in the novel actualizes this possibility: Bill Sadler. As Kierkegaard might have predicted, almost everyone writes him off as a placard-wielding religious lunatic—everyone except Ed, who consistently defends him. And although this defence may be motivated somewhat by perversity, Ed unquestionably admires him and recognizes that Bill has found something crucial that he himself lacks. While Ed’s one attempt to speak to Bill comes to nothing, the attempt itself is significant (206-08). That Vanderhaeghe preserves the veil of mystery surrounding Bill indicates he understands well Kierkegaard’s notion of indirect communication. Were he to allow Ed, and hence the reader, access to his consciousness, this would merely help establish an aesthetic relationship to something that transcends the aesthetic, and hence muddle the existential distinctions that the novel establishes. To remain a viable existential alternative, he must remain apart.

Thus, Kierkegaard proves invaluable in reading Vanderhaeghe’s early Ed stories, which is not to say that the Kierkegaardian agenda of these works establishes their literary merit. Indeed, that they remain in print and perennially popular with students and others unfamiliar with this agenda suggests they work very well simply as engaging narratives.¹⁸ Recognition of the works’ existential depth, however, should increase awareness of the seriousness and complexity of Vanderhaeghe’s enterprise, for it was not Ed’s comic potential alone that repeatedly drew Vanderhaeghe back to this outrageous misfit. Rather, he recognized that Ed’s pathological eccentricity could provide crucial insight into contemporary culture, and perhaps even point negatively—through his own failure—towards viable forms of personal and cultural recovery. In light of these early works, much of the puzzlement over Vanderhaeghe’s subsequent preoccupation with ethics, with doing the honourable thing in the face of social opprobrium and even physical threat, vanishes. It was there from the beginning.

NOTES

- 1 Such readings are perhaps understandable given Vanderhaeghe's occasionally grim parody of religion, for example in Hardwick's comment, "Happy is the man doing the Lord's work," as he contemplates the slaughtering of Indians (*The Englishman's Boy* 46). For highly nuanced treatments of Vanderhaeghe's historical fiction that avoid placing it baldly on one side or the other of the ideological postmodern (postcolonial) divide, see Herb Wyle's recent articles.
- 2 I will refer to these three works collectively as the Ed stories.
- 3 The only exception to this is Nicholas von Maltzahn, who notes that Kierkegaardian concerns become "the major theme" in *My Present Age*, but his analysis is limited to noting that Ed emerges as "a character engaged in a typically existential struggle to move from the aesthetic to the ethical realm . . ." (142).
- 4 One of best summaries of Kierkegaard's indirect approach to his own authorship is Louis Mackay's classic, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet*.
- 5 Readers unfamiliar with Kierkegaard's stages may consult my brief discussion on 12ff.
- 6 Vanderhaeghe reveals that he had read a great deal of Kierkegaard (both the pseudonymous and edifying works) before writing the Ed stories: *The Journals* (several abridged versions), *The Diary of a Seducer, Either/Or* (both volumes), *The Present Age*, *Works of Love, Fear and Trembling* and *The Sickness Unto Death*. He adds that "there may have been others . . ." ("Re-An Inquiry").
- 7 Although *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* provides Kierkegaard's most thorough argument against confusing the existential spheres, *The Present Age*, by critiquing a culture that confuses reflection with action, addresses precisely the same concern.
- 8 Vanderhaeghe did publish an Ed story before this, "He Scores! He Shoots!," but he considered it "too slight" to bother including in *Man Descending* ("Re-An Inquiry").
- 9 See Tom Gerry's article, which is especially interesting in its exploration of violence in these stories.
- 10 Near the end of the novel, Ed likens himself to a crusading knight (231).
- 11 See Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety* 41-46.
- 12 I note that the most recent editions of the novel omit the epigraphs.
- 13 See Reidar Thomte's *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Religion*, and Mark Taylor's *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship: A Study of Time and the Self*, for accessible treatments of Kierkegaard's stages. Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* provides the most useful single analysis of the forces at work in Vanderhaeghe's novel, for it confines itself to an exploration of the aesthetic and ethico-religious stages, and insists that everyone must choose absolutely between them. Interestingly, when Ed explains his theory of complicators and simplifiers to Victoria, he refers to "Big-decision time" (30).
- 14 See Mark Taylor 128-130.
- 15 See Charles Taylor's, *A Secular Age*, "Part I: The Work of Reform," for an extensive treatment of the forces that destabilized and eventually levelled the hierarchical medieval worldview. Ironically, some of these arose not just from Protestantism, but also from Counter Reformation attempts to *raise* the general level of sanctity within the general population to that previously demanded only of the ecclesial elite (85).
- 16 In *Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard identifies all positions other than faith as forms of despair, the "higher" ones paradoxically being demonic. An increase in consciousness without faith thus represents a greater perdition, but conversely the opportunity for

remedy, for (according to Kierkegaard) despair cannot be rooted out until it becomes fully conscious.

- 17 That Ed remains trapped by his own reflection is suggested metaphorically by the fact that in both stories and in the novel, he locks himself in bathrooms and stares at himself in the mirror.
- 18 Students in my Canadian literature classes frequently cite these works as their course favorites.

WORKS CITED

- Atwood, Margaret. *Oryx and Crake*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2003.
- Forceville, Charles. "My Present Age and the 'Ed' Stories: The Role of Language and Story-Telling in Guy Vanderhaeghe's Fiction." *External and Detached: Dutch Essays on Contemporary Canadian Literature*. Eds. Forceville, August J. Fry, and Peter J. De Voogd. Canada Cahiers 4. Amsterdam: Free UP, 1988. 53-61.
- Gerry, Tom. "Violence and Narrative Metalepsis in Guy Vanderhaeghe's Fiction." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 12 (1987): 199-211.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*. Ed and Trans. Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980.
- . The Concept of Irony. Trans. Lee M. Capel. London: Collins, 1966.
- . *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie. First Princeton Paperback ed. 1941; rpt. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1974.
- . *Either/Or* Vol. I. Trans. David F. Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson. Revised Howard A. Johnson. 1944; rpt. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971.
- . *Either/Or* Vol. II. Trans. Walter Lowrie. Revised Howard A. Johnson. 1944; rpt. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1974.
- . "On the Dedication to 'That Single Individual.'" Trans. Charles K. Bellinger. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. May 26, 2008.
<<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/kierkegaard/untruth/files/untruth.html>>
- . *The Present Age*. Trans. Alexander Dru. Harper Torchbook ed. New York: Harper and Row, 1962.
- . *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*. Ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983.
- Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 1984.
- Mackay, Louis. *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet*. Philadelphia: U of Penn. P, 1971.
- Sorenson, Sue. "Don't Hanker to Be No Prophet: Guy Vanderhaeghe and the Bible." *Canadian Literature* 191 (Winter 2006): 32-46.
- Swaim, Don. "Audio Interview with Guy Vanderhaeghe." CBS Radio, New York, 1985.
<<http://wiredforbooks.org/guyvanderhaeghe/>>
- Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007.
- Taylor, Mark. *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship: A Study of Time and the Self*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1975.
- Thomte, Reidar. *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Religion*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1948.
- Van Maltzahn, Nicholas. "Guy Vanderhaeghe." *Profiles in Canadian Literature*. Ed. Jeffrey M. Heath. Vol. 8. Toronto: Dundurn, 1991. 139-146.

- Vanderhaeghe, Guy. *The Englishman's Boy*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1996.
- "He Scores! He Shoots." *Matrix* 13 (1981): 3-15.
 - *The Last Crossing*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2002.
 - "Man Descending." *Man Descending*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1982. 187-200.
 - *My Present Age*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1984.
 - "Re-An Inquiry." Email to author. May 16, 2008.
 - "Sam, Soren, and Ed." *Man Descending*. 201-230.
 - *The Trouble with Heroes*. Ottawa: Borealis, 1983.
- Wolfe, Morris. Interview with Guy Vanderhaeghe. *Books in Canada* 13,1 (February 1984): 27-29.
- Wylie, Herb. "Dances with Wolfers: Choreographing History in *The Englishman's Boy*." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 67 (Spring 1999): 23-52.
- "Doing the Honourable Thing: Guy Vanderhaeghe's *The Last Crossing*." *Canadian Literature* 185 (Summer 2005): 59-74.
 - "Making History." Interview with Guy Vanderhaeghe. *Speaking in the Past Tense: Canadian Novelists on Writing Historical Fiction*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2007. 25-51.

