

What I will not remember

from the cylinder of my days
is tossing earlier drafts of some poems
into the blue recycling bag on Thurs. night
wondering what will flip before me
at breath's precipice, and where
the unwanted poems will go,
imagining some desperate soul picking
through garbage bags, finding
and ingesting them, amused, enchanted
or disappointed they are not beer cans.

I will not remember the day
I rifled through my daughter's desk
owning the problem of her homework,
or the stir fry at the college cafeteria
with too much peanut-satay sauce
that set me choking over conversation
about a colleague in palliative care.

I will not remember the sun bathing my face
the day I lay stretched on the floral comforter,
snuggling back in for more sleep,
prickly light in my spine,
thinking myself lucky to be alive,
my family in the next room.

I will enter the trivial, forgotten moments,
wondering how poetry reconstructs memory
and walks with it, oriflamme,
through time's great gaps.

Don't Hanker to Be No Prophet: Guy Vanderhaeghe and the Bible

Although not a conventionally religious writer, Guy Vanderhaeghe in his fiction has often contemplated faith, a feature of his work that has gone relatively unremarked.¹ On first consideration, Vanderhaeghe would appear to have little patience for religion. David Arnason's assessment in 1986 remains in accord with the general position two decades later: the award-winning 1982 story collection *Man Descending*, wrote Arnason in *Essays on Saskatchewan Writing*, is "sophisticated, intelligent, and wryly comic," with a "bleak" informing vision (125). Dennis Cooley, writing more recently in the *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada*, emphasizes the "brutal," "treacherous," and "grotesque" elements of Vanderhaeghe's work (1161). Vanderhaeghe himself said to Alan Twigg in 1984 that "what's most innate in my nature is a kind of measured scepticism" (273). More and more frequently, he is discussed as a historical novelist (such are the references to him in the *Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature*), especially since his last two novels, *The Englishman's Boy* (1996) and *The Last Crossing* (2002) are deeply and provocatively involved with the representation of western Canadian history. The presenter of an Honorary Degree to Vanderhaeghe at the University of Saskatchewan in 1997 was particularly insistent on the accuracy of his work: "What he writes, in fact, is history, our history" ("90th Anniversary Convocation").

There is little in the admiring reviews of Vanderhaeghe over the years, or in the small number of critical analyses about him, to alter this impression of an essentially agnostic spirit. Yet he declared the Bible foremost in his list of intellectual influences in a 1984 interview with Morris Wolfe, and after

Wolfe said, “You yourself, I take it, are an agnostic,” Vanderhaeghe replied, “I call myself a Christian. Other Christians, however, may not agree with me. But I think I am a Christian of some kind—maybe an eccentric and anarchic one” (28). It is not impossible, of course, to be a believer and simultaneously to take a dim view of human life: one thinks of Dostoyevsky (who provides, however, fewer laughs than Vanderhaeghe). Vanderhaeghe has proven to be a difficult writer to summarize in part because he has several different manners, primarily his early comic prairie realism and, later, what has been considered by Martin Kuester and (with reservations) Herb Wylie to be “historiographic metafiction.” In relation to other prairie writers, he neither exemplifies the madcap postmodernism of Robert Kroetsch and David Carpenter, nor the demotic realism of Margaret Laurence and Sinclair Ross, although he has affinities with all of these.

To add religion to the mix may seem to complicate unnecessarily an already fragile understanding of Vanderhaeghe. It is not easy to identify him by using classic theories of the intersection of religion and literature. He is not overly interested in what Northrop Frye calls our society’s “mythological conditioning” (xviii) in Biblical stories. Frank Kermode’s description of modern fiction as suffused with crisis, aligned with an Apocalypse “immanent rather than imminent” (30), is an apt description of the world of *The Englishman’s Boy*. But for the most part Vanderhaeghe is less driven by cultural anxieties or mythological reconsiderations than individual inquiry. He is grappling with the subject of sorrow, and is driven to adopt a Biblical vocabulary of lament for that personal and ruminative quest.

Vanderhaeghe encounters religion in a variety of ways: references in the short stories are often caustic, while *The Englishman’s Boy* and *The Last Crossing* abound with ironic and violently parodic uses of Biblical ideas. Yet the contradictions and hypocrisies within the Judeo-Christian tradition are told not from the viewpoint of dissent—or at least not total dissent—but instead are presented by someone considering and reconsidering his engagement with, even responsibility for, the current state of faith. Two early and obvious indications of engagement with Christianity are the stories “Lazarus” and “No Man Could Bind Him,” re-tellings of Gospel accounts of Christ’s miracles. Found in the neglected collection of stories *The Trouble with Heroes* (a 1983 book that is probably Vanderhaeghe’s first collection, although it was released later than *Man Descending*), these two stories appear to discredit Christian faith, displaying believers as objects of ridicule, abandoned by their Saviour after the miracles are over. Both Lazarus and the miraculously

healed demoniac in the story of the Gadarene swine are presented as wandering, uncomprehending and alone, through a pointless-ever-after life (in the case of Lazarus, apparently an interminable living death). However, these stories are less discouraging than they seem, and I will return to them in greater detail.

Some of his better-known stories also comment on religious inquiry and uncertainty. A common characteristic of a Vanderhaeghe protagonist is a feeling of intense conflict between the capacity for reason and faith. He is a great proposer of questions; it is noteworthy how often his stories end with question marks. One of his key areas of questioning is: Have human beings lost their ability for real faith? And what is the cost if we have? In “Things as They Are?”—a crucial story for understanding Vanderhaeghe’s view of realism—the main character’s brandy-saturated inclination toward realism, or indeed cynicism, is shaken by an encounter with religious faith. He has a terrible vision in a church; he feels driven to account for an acquaintance’s rather grotesque but grim determination to offer himself to God through the monastic life. In “Drummer,” Billy Simpson’s physical admiration for the devout Nancy Williams leads him to attend Faith Baptist Church merely to look at her and raise his standing with her strict family. Eventually Billy becomes fascinated by Nancy’s joyous faith, shining in her face “all hot and happy-looking, exactly like it did when we were dancing together.” Vanderhaeghe finishes with one of his challenging questions: “What’s she dancing to? Who’s the drummer?” (112).

Other Vanderhaeghe short stories that touch on religion are less ambiguous in their intention. “How the Story Ends” plainly emphasizes a child’s horror at the sadism implicit in the Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac. “It’s stupid! It’s stupid! You’re stupid!” is Little Paul’s reaction to Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son (72). His great-uncle, Tollefson, tries to explain to the child the Bible’s lesson of obedience, but Little Paul is uncomprehending. When Tollefson explains that pigs on their farm must be slaughtered because God wants it, Little Paul reveals the depth of his confusion. “Is he hungry? Please, is that how the story ends?” (78). Not only does Little Paul conflate the potential butchering of Isaac and the farm’s pigs, he sees God as a voracious consumer who might even eat Little Paul. The child has unsuccessfully tried to pray to God about his fears: “I talk and talk but he doesn’t answer me what you got planned for me” (78). “Man on Horseback” offers another discouraging, although less hysterical, reading of religion. “In Christian art the horse is held to represent courage and generosity,” reads

the final paragraph. "In the catacombs it was, with the fish and the cross, a common symbol. No one is absolutely certain what its meaning was, although it is assumed it represents the swift, fleeting, and transitory character of life" (51). Here the metaphysical aspect of existence is ignored in favour of the finite and mortal.

The Englishman's Boy continues the negative depiction of Christianity, or rather the use of Christian elements is largely parodic. Vanderhaeghe unequivocally presents the posse of twelve, aggressors in the Cypress Hills Massacre, as an appalling inversion of the New Testament twelve. Religious utterance in the mouths of the posse members is almost entirely blasphemous. The leader, Hardwick, delights in the idea of killing Indians: " 'Happy is the man doing the Lord's work,' he said" (46). At first they are thirteen, "and thirteen being the number around the table at the Last Supper, there could be no worse luck," reports the narrator (52). When the wretched farmboy Hank is abandoned by the expedition, the thirteen become twelve, but instead of Hank being a Christ-figure, the sacrifice is of an unsympathetic idiot.

Hank's blind white horse similarly resonates with scriptural significance and then confounds it. Although the Englishman's boy, later identified as Shorty McAdoo, says to Hank, " 'That is one sorry-ass horse and you are one sorry-ass son of a bitch' " (76), the horse is insistently described in Revelation language as "the white horse" and occasionally as "the pale horse." The pale horse in Revelation 6 carries Death, and the rider on the white horse in that chapter has been variously interpreted, but can be associated with the Antichrist (Krodel 173-75, Ford 104-106). The white horse in Revelation 19, however, is definitely associated with the Messiah. Vanderhaeghe uses these contending symbols of good and evil interchangeably, although Hank's horse's blindness adds weight to the pathetic or ominous side of the equation.

In the nineteenth-century level of the novel, only the Englishman's boy and his ally Ed Grace stand outside the irreverence of this crew of perverse disciples. Earlier, Hank had invoked the example of the Good Samaritan and the Englishman's boy temporarily saved his life by goading Hank's old white horse mercilessly, to keep Hank from being abandoned in the wilderness. Vanderhaeghe's language here is overtly Biblical:

But the Englishman's boy did not leave off. He pursued horse and man across the wastes like a banishing Bible angel harrying the exile with fiery sword and implacable visage, a strange white-faced angel scrunched in a big derby hat and flapping coat, blade glittering in his upraised hand. (76)

This description combines tones of earnestness and irony; the Englishman's boy is linked with both the angelic and demonic riders in Revelation, both categories being associated with swords. However, the Englishman's boy explicitly rejects a heroic or virtuous identity. He is uneasy with the apocalyptic atmosphere surrounding the posse:

Out there in the belly of the night, the old blind white horse and whatever sat on its back were stirring, the shadows parting and closing convulsively in the effort to give birth to this presence, to push this dead-white and terrifying thing, inch by inch, into his mind.

This ain't no vision, he told himself, jerking his eyes up at the stars. Get yonder, second sight. Shake loose of me. I don't hanker to be no Jew prophet. Hear me? (125)

A more unambiguously heroic role is assigned to Ed Grace, one of the Canadian members of the posse and the only white to die in the massacre. Nicknamed Eagle, Ed Grace dies saving the unworthy posse. Although one is tempted to see his name in an overtly symbolic light, Grace was an actual historical character (Sharp 64). Grace's death is not the only potential religious martyrdom, as the Assiniboine warriors slaughtered by Hardwick's band and the Assiniboine girl raped and burned in the aftermath of the massacre are similarly presented as emblematic victims. The girl's innocence in particular is unconditional and striking.

In the novel's twentieth-century layer, the insane Hollywood director Damon Ira Chance signifies several different Judas and Jesus identifications. Chance claims explicitly that his hired researcher, Harry Vincent, must play a necessary Judas figure. This insistence assigns a Christ role, implicitly, to Shorty McAdoo, whose life story they have been appropriating and exploiting (297). But Chance himself becomes a satirical Christ in his own death scene. Shot by McAdoo's friend Wylie, Chance bleeds to death in the arms of Harry, a man who despises him. The scene is a *Pietà* mockery, complete with a canvas awning that "rips, shreds in the wind with a wrenching, desolate sound" in imitation of the veil of the temple, rent at the moment of Christ's death. Vincent watches as Chance dies, and the final words of the episode tell us that Chance's blood "spills down my arm, marking me" (323). Chance views himself as a martyr to art, but the reader knows that he is a racist, paranoid madman, even an antichrist figure.

Commentary on religion in *The Englishman's Boy* is difficult because Vanderhaeghe's symbolism is not only ironic but overabundant, with possible identifications doubled or redoubled. The several suggested symbolic

Christs can be seen to cancel each other out, and Chance's antichrist dominates. Judas figures are easier to identify; there are few heroes in Vanderhaeghe's fiction, and plenty of traitors and cowards. The one spiritual area that Vanderhaeghe leaves untroubled by irony in *The Englishman's Boy* is Native religion. The first and last chapters of the book feature the Assiniboine character Fine Man, whose reverence for his band's holy man, Strong Bull, is manifestly sincere. This reverence dominates the final pages of the book: it is significant that Fine Man is proudly leading a blue horse to his people, in answer to the swirling and self-defeating qualities of the pale and white horses of Christian scriptures.

The world of this novel is brutal, the peace and compassion of the Christian message at a far remove, yet Vanderhaeghe is unwilling to let go of the Judeo-Christian story. The key implication of his use of religion in *The Englishman's Boy* is that the apocalyptic and violent sections of the Bible furnish a forceful language to expose the hidden barbarisms in Canadian history. Yet the passion that Vanderhaeghe invests in his flurry of religious allusions provides the sense that his irony here is more mournful than sardonic. Vanderhaeghe can imbue the prairie landscape with fearful Biblical resonance. The scene in chapter 3 where men on the deck of a stern-wheeler massacre a herd of buffalo trapped in the Missouri River is intensely infernal, as is the torching of Farwell's trading post at the climax of *The Englishman's Boy*. Timothy Findley's dust-jacket endorsement described Shorty McAdoo's story as a "journey into hell and back." This is less a metaphorical hell than a hell transplanted with startling accuracy into home territory.

Religion is even more to the forefront of *The Last Crossing*. A quixotic religious quest provides the motivating impetus for yet another frontier expedition, this one led by Charles and Addington Gaunt as they search for their missing brother, Simon. Simon has travelled from England to North America in the 1870s because he is obsessed with the Church of the Christian Israel, led by the Reverend Obadiah Witherspoon. They hold to a doctrine that "the Red Indians are descended from the Lost Tribes of Israel" (213). Witherspoon's mission, which may be regarded politely as misguided or more starkly as imperialist, is given as Vanderhaeghe's most obvious condemnation of religion in the novel, but there are others. The courageous Lucy Stoveall is bent on avenging the murder of her sister Madge because "I can't leave it to God. I don't see God hereabouts. There's only Lucy Stoveall" (233). The Doxology is used as an "English death chant" by a Cree/Scots halfbreed as he kills enemy Blackfoot (335). Especially ghastly is the

last line of the chapter where the villainous Addington Gaunt is killed in a bear hunt. Addington is the least Christ-like person in the book, but the narrator's final word on his death is "It is finished" (312). Most of these Biblical reverberations are in the same acerbic vein as the religious references in *The Englishman's Boy*, but an additional element in *The Last Crossing* makes its ultimate portrayal of the Judeo-Christian tradition less derisive.

This is the character of Custis Straw. The characters in *The Englishman's Boy* and *The Last Crossing* are aligned among three groups. In *The Englishman's Boy* these are the villains (Chance, Hardwick), the honest but weak protagonists (Vincent, McAdoo), and the courageous but anti-social wanderers (Grace). In *The Last Crossing*, Addington Gaunt is in the first category; Charles Gaunt in the second; Jerry Potts, the third. Custis Straw in *The Last Crossing* is unusual in that he moves out of the second category to become a new, larger kind of personality, and one of the major reasons, in my opinion, that *The Last Crossing* is a more satisfying novel than *The Englishman's Boy*. Custis has elements of the fool, and is capable of bravery when necessary, but most intriguingly, he ruminates constantly on religious issues. From Custis' shrewd point of view we see Madge's funeral, led by the inane Methodist preacher Mr. Clumb: "After he waded through the hymn, Clumb began to hop about, nimble as a flea, taking a bite from Holy Scripture wherever he landed" (69). Custis is not a non-believer, however. He ponders the lessons to be learned from "the Old Adam" (323) and, in a long passage, from the story of Moses (341). His meditations on the Bible combine scepticism and genuine agreement. He is a dogged reader of the Bible, attempting to bring both his mind and heart to bear on what he reads:

"The first time I read the Bible cover to cover, I was in an army hospital in Washington," I said. "I had a mind to make myself believe every single word was true. The second time I read it to satisfy myself it was all a lie. Now I read it to weigh both sides, and find some truth." (260)

The Last Crossing finally accepts that Englishman Simon Gaunt is indeed a holy fool of some sort. He is tracked to a Crow tribe who have given him the status of a shaman. Simon declares himself dead to English ways and commits himself in love to a spiritual leader of the Crow, the woman Talks Different. As in *The Englishman's Boy*, Native spiritual beliefs are treated without irony.² Again, faith and derision mix in Vanderhaeghe's portrayal of religion, but *The Last Crossing* is more open to faith. Religion is central to the plot, and the style is less insistently parodic and ambiguous. Custis Straw's scriptural motto—"Now I read it to weigh both sides, and find some

truth”—suggests a creed that both Custis and his author have reflected on at some length, and find some satisfaction in. And the spiritual integrity of the lost brother, Simon Gaunt, a character with a “calm, quiet” (351) authority, is unprecedented in Vanderhaeghe’s fiction. Yet Simon has had to move outside Christianity to find this peace.

Will a return to Vanderhaeghe’s 1983 stories that focus unreservedly on the Christian story, “Lazarus and “No Man Could Bind Him,” resolve any of the uncertainties in his presentation of religion? “Lazarus” is the less complicated of the two stories. Vanderhaeghe, in a straightforward narrative with no anachronistic comments or postmodern techniques, somberly imagines the dilemma of Lazarus, still alive decades after being raised from the dead. His sisters, Mary and Martha, are dead. The Messiah is gone, and Lazarus is waiting to act as witness when he comes again. But, like the Cumaean Sybil and Tithonus in Greek myth, Lazarus has been granted eternal life without youth, and his existence is a misery. In the village of Bethany he is a forgotten man. There are rumours that he came back from the dead, “although that is scarcely credible” says a fellow villager (49). They consider him mad, when they consider him at all.

Life goes on as before, both bad and good. Bethany is “disorder, a jumble of houses, a tangle of streets.” In the landscape are no birds; “an occasional cypress scars the bright horizon.” Vanderhaeghe writes: “But here there is also life, and the streets are ripe with the bitter odours of domesticity” (43). The descriptive terms—“disorder,” “tangle,” “bitter,” “scar”—are bleak, and one of the key impressions left by the story is of dust and heat, as in Martin Scorsese’s film of *The Last Temptation of Christ*. But into the midst of Lazarus’ dusty agony comes a marriage caravan, and the story continually juxtaposes the vitality and colour of a marriage feast with Lazarus’ cruel living death.

Lazarus in the gospel of John is beloved by Jesus; the famous verse “Jesus wept” (John 11:35) refers to Christ’s grief when he hears of his friend’s death. But not much more about Lazarus’ character is available in the original story, except for some brief remarks that the chief priests are plotting not only to kill Jesus, but also Lazarus, whose living presence is such a threat to their authority (John 12: 9-11). Lazarus has exercised a fascination over writers both ancient and modern, with many of them wondering just what it is that Lazarus knows about death. In Robert Browning’s “Karshish,” for example, Lazarus comes across as a good but foolish man, with nothing momentous to say about his encounter with divinity. Karshish, an Arab physician, does

experience, however, a feeling of awe in contemplation of Lazarus. In “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” T. S. Eliot provides one of the most famous modern references to Lazarus. Prufrock believes that even if he were Lazarus, come to tell the secrets of the tomb, his society would not care to hear and would respond with: “That is not what I meant at all. / That is not it, at all.” Leslie M. Thompson in his 1978 survey of the Lazarus motif finds that in their handling of the story modern writers generally “stress the themes of despair, futility, isolation, alienation, cynicism, and fear of catastrophic destruction” (329).

Vanderhaeghe is situated somewhere between Browning’s generally positive reading of the tale and the more widespread modern insistence on Lazarus’ anguish. And although Vanderhaeghe’s fiction is often very funny, he does not use the Lazarus story for humour, as does James Joyce, for example, in *Ulysses*: “Come forth, Lazarus! And he came fifth and lost the job” (107). In Vanderhaeghe’s extrapolation of the Gospel story, Lazarus is a scholar, and the only pleasures that remain to him in his isolation are his studies. Villagers speculate that “too many letters, too many words, addled his brain” (49). A large part of the story is taken up with Lazarus’ internal debate about the reason for his immortality. He believes he is tempted by a demon who needles him with many unanswerable questions. Why has he been chosen for eternal life? Because the Messiah will need a witness when he comes? But isn’t it presumptuous to think that the Messiah needs anything? Is he being tested to see if, in his suffering, he will turn against God? What if all of humanity is doomed because he, Lazarus, fails as a witness? Vanderhaeghe is primarily interested in the conflict raging between the character’s faith and his ability to reason. Both elements are central to his personality. Yet Lazarus cannot reconcile them.

The initial impression given by this effective and moving little story is sadness and futility. Although Vanderhaeghe does not state this fact, the meaning of the name “Lazarus” is “God is my help,” underscoring the irony of Lazarus’ suffering. The story’s penultimate paragraph reads: “Tomorrow of course, he will be tired, hungry, and sore. He will plead for strength to play the demon’s role and doubt if he can endure.” The keynotes sounded are doubt, pain, exhaustion. Altering that pessimism, however, is the story’s final line: “But now in this night, he is sure it is not a bad thing to be still, to be silent, and to wait” (50).

“Not a bad thing.” This resolution is far from joyful, but it is not without hope. It is useful to place “Lazarus” next to “No Man Could Bind Him,” a

longer story that considers the man possessed by a legion of devils in Mark 5 and Luke 8, because the tiny, ambivalent convictions of “Lazarus” are somehow bolstered by the equally tiny, ambivalent convictions of the other. Joint exegesis of this sort may seem odd, but Vanderhaeghe often writes paired stories—there are two Billy Simpson stories, two about Ed the exuberant loser, and two about Charlie, the boy in “The Watcher.” While “Lazarus and “No Man Could Bind Him” are not paired in precisely the same way, their Gospel origins and thematic concerns are closely related.

In “No Man Could Bind Him” reason and faith again conflict, and this time the tension is more extensively considered. Here reason is associated with Greek culture, while faith is a Jewish attribute. Both cultures come in for their share of ridicule. Reason is admirable and seductive, but it belongs to the Greek rulers and they are too removed, too cerebral. Jewish faith looks more humane yet is revealed to be comparatively stupid, lonely, perhaps pointless. (Interestingly Vanderhaeghe has no interest in the Romans and leaves them out of this equation altogether.) The passion that Vanderhaeghe, born in Esterhazy, Saskatchewan, invests in the account of this classical conflict is perplexing, unless one recognizes that these historical tales are told not only for their own sake (and they are), but also to cast light on present matters—just as *The Englishman’s Boy* and *The Last Crossing* intend to provoke debate both about frontier history and about attitudes toward Americans and aboriginals in the present day. His characters are tragically thwarted, in the past and present. Vanderhaeghe presents faith as necessary for the poor and the lost—the central cast of his fiction, in fact—but he wonders if the present world is too inhospitable a place for ancient religious beliefs to flourish. The religious instinct in his Biblical stories is bodily, natural, warm (although also foolish). The protagonists are too “Greek”—too cerebral, too cynical, too much like twentieth- and twenty-first-century people. They distance themselves from the comfort that faith might offer.

The notion that propels “No Man Could Bind Him” is to delineate not only the troubling aftermath of Christ’s miracle healing of the man possessed by demons who lived among the tombs in Gadara, but also to create a back story for him. What exists in the Gospels of Mark and Luke is already intriguing. (An account in Matthew 8, which Vanderhaeghe ignores, features two demoniacs.) Asked his name by Jesus in both accounts, the possessed man answers similarly in each: “My name is Legion; for we are many.’ He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country” (Mark 5:9-10

NRSV; see also Luke 8:30-31). In a few lines, we find out more about this individual sufferer than is usual in the New Testament. The demoniac has superhuman strength, and both worships Jesus immediately and demands that Jesus not torment him. Once Jesus expels the demons and has them enter thousands of pigs, which throw themselves into the sea, the dispossessed man attaches himself in gratitude to Jesus, begging to stay with him. The healed, sane man inspires even more fear than the insane one formerly did; the people also fear Jesus after this miracle and ask him to depart. The Gospel story demonstrates that the sane individual and the insane multitude of demons co-exist, in full and conscious struggle (the demoniac both roars at Jesus and worships him; *he* begged Jesus not to send *them*). A contemporary understanding of the miracle, perhaps one underpinned by Jungian ideas, would see Jesus not so much expelling evil as creating unity for the man. After all this, however, Jesus does not give him shelter from the world's miseries but sends him out to attest to God's mercy.

Guy Vanderhaeghe picks up, once again, on the discord within the individual. In "No Man Could Bind Him" he decides that the possessed man was as a child a "barbarous" Jewish outcast adopted by a Greek family in Decapolis (21) and given the incongruous name of Stephen ("crown" or "garland"). The pull between his Jewish birth and his Greek upbringing creates too much tension for him, and he becomes mad. Once healed by Jesus, Stephen dutifully stands at the city gates, telling of his release. But Vanderhaeghe then moves on past the death of Stephen, telling this whole story through the viewpoint of Stephen's adoptive Greek brother, actually the more important character in the story. The narrator tries to trace an understanding of Stephen's encounter with Jesus, believed to be a commonplace magician. The story begins and ends with the Greek foster brother hauling Stephen's rotting corpse back to Gadara, to honour his last request. The positive aspects of this act of brotherly loyalty are countered by grotesque or downbeat descriptions; the second sentence, for instance, provides a vivid illustration of a sailor, "the surly Galilean with the nasty nest of boils on his neck" (19).

The multiple personalities of the possessed man are given a sociological and political basis in Vanderhaeghe's story: Stephen is not so much mad or mentally ill (a common modern interpretation of New Testament possession) as caught between cultures. For Stephen, the Greeks "need no Messiah to drive out the oppressor" (29) because they constitute a ruling class. Greek erudition is a mistake: "Greeks put too many things in books and then

consider matters settled by arranging the alphabet,” he says. But Stephen’s Jewish roots, on the other hand, merely provide him with guilt: “[W]ithout the government of God the stars would fall down. I knew I was a bad Jew because I did not keep the Law. But I knew there was Law” (30). Even the Greek foster brother feels the tension between Greek and Jewish, between reason and emotion: “A man like myself, a man who lives in the light of reason, knows that sometimes sanity is a course we choose and lucidity an acquired taste that runs counter to our nature. I wanted to see this man who had surrendered to impulse” (24). Although the narrator lives his life “with studious care and a just regard for sensibility” (27), he is not happy, and he is fascinated by Stephen and his master, “the magician Jesus of Nazareth” (35). He notes that “in the presence of great holiness or madness man recognizes his limitations” (25).

At the story’s conclusion, as in “Lazarus,” one runs up against unbelief, heat and filth, a landscape without mercy: “The sweat burned my eyes as I blinked at the blank blue sky. Some bird of prey spun high above me, turning lazily on rising currents of air.” The final sentence is one of Vanderhaeghe’s trademark questions: “What would my brother have felt if it had been given him to know that master and disciple were destined to take their leave of the world together—at Passover?” (35) Also as in “Lazarus,” Christian confidence appears to be undermined: the sky is blank, nature is represented by a predator, the Jewish magician who preached eternal life has just died. Yet once again Vanderhaeghe in the last paragraphs scatters a few scraps of hope. Looking at the bird of prey, the Greek narrator relates that “from where I stood I could not detect the wind’s rush through his pinions, nor fathom the force that suspended him above the grip of the earth. Nevertheless the invisible bore him up” (35). Combined with the surprising fact of the narrator’s loyalty to his “barbarous” foster brother, this invisible force acts as a leavening agent within the story’s pessimism, holding out the possibility of illumination. The Greek does not grasp the significance of Jesus, but the deliverance of Stephen from madness is told sincerely. Vanderhaeghe sketches a gritty agnostic reality peopled by characters whose alienation and corruption are repeatedly underscored. Yet they long for the warmth of a faith that Vanderhaeghe will not label illusory.

Earlier in his career, Guy Vanderhaeghe published two poems on Biblical themes. “The Doctrine of Water,” in the Winter 1981-1982 *Dalhousie Review*, focuses on John the Baptist. *Queen’s Quarterly* in Autumn

1981 published “There is No Accounting for Taste,” Vanderhaeghe’s version of the Old Testament story of Jacob. Both poems are skillful, exuding Vanderhaeghe’s signature physicality. The Jacob poem is full of palpable rockiness, echoing the notion that Jacob is the sort to pillow his head on a rock. There are “granitic visions of stony-faced cherubim”; sleep is “flinty.” The poem is bemused by God’s preference for a thief and a fierce wrestler, and a vivid stanza depicts the clash of God and man, full of “anxious pinions crackling” and “contending sinews.” Twice the poet repeats the idea found in the title: if Jacob is favoured by God, “there is no accounting for Yahweh’s taste.”

There is less comedy and more heartache in “The Doctrine of Water.” As in the other poem, the intense actuality of a hard world is invoked:

Begotten of age and dryness
 John grew to be a granular man,
 A lover of deserts and crackling locust meat;
 Hard white stars and blue, blue nights;
 Fever, thorns, potsherds, and prophecy.

This environment is a harsh challenge that John the Baptist rises to, and then some. With maniacal devotion, he shouts out “the doctrine of water” until he can no longer speak. When it is revealed that “cousin Yeshua” is the Messiah and the Baptist is not, John is “full of grief” and weeps “mere prophet’s tears.”

Each poem insists on the human qualities of these Biblical personalities, rather than the divine. Each provides a wry twist, a wink at sanctimony. But the feeling that the poems evoke, like the stories “Lazarus” and “No Man Could Bind Him,” is ultimately one of respectful contention. Vanderhaeghe is engaged with these Christian and Jewish stories not as an unbeliever, but as someone who seeks a fuller understanding of God’s purpose. Throughout the overtly Biblical stories and poems, the reader encounters the same fallen and sinful world that Vanderhaeghe’s secular fiction presents—a world where goodness is weak and intelligence in short supply (yet both are present), where treachery and cruelty are commonplace. Despite the problems with creation, God still loves it, and the raising of Lazarus, the healing of the Gadarene demoniac, the favouring of Jacob, and the sending of the Baptist’s “cousin Yeshua” testify to God’s love, however problematic these signs may be. That the miracles are misunderstood, for example by the villagers who are baffled by Lazarus, indicates the vast problems with the human world, not necessarily flaws in the miracles themselves.

But Vanderhaeghe keeps his distance when contemplating God's love of the world, as if asking what God really sees in it. Or rather, while Vanderhaeghe does revel in the vitality of a good joke or in the particularity of a horse's strength (he is a wonderful writer about horses and other animals), he is less than enthusiastic about the world's human inhabitants. However, the more one considers his fiction over the past 20 years, the more it emerges that Guy Vanderhaeghe does care about God. The questions at the end of many of the stories indicate a spiritual hunger, a reluctance to give into the rational self's insistence that faith is foolish. This inclination is complicated by an adamantly unsentimental disposition that shies away from expounding on the mysteries of Christ's love, potentially too maudlin.

Sorrow is another thing. Vanderhaeghe is becoming one of our great delineators of sorrow. In *The Last Crossing*, when Custis Straw is asked "And what in the Good Book have you decided is absolutely and indisputably true?" he answers, "That verse that says 'Jesus wept'" (260). We are returned to the story of Lazarus, and the love of Jesus for his friend. For the most part, Guy Vanderhaeghe finds the world to be an unforgiving place, and he prefers to undermine religious platitudes, exposing the ironies, potential or real, beneath the ancient stories of faith. Yet ultimately the simple reality that "Jesus wept" makes a profound impression on him.

NOTES

- 1 Nicholas von Maltzahn is a rare exception; he has noted a strain of "Christian existentialism" in Vanderhaeghe's early work (141).
- 2 Vanderhaeghe's presentation of Native religion is not sustained enough to compare it satisfactorily with his often caustic attitude toward the Judeo-Christian story. But his admiration for the former could be described as surprisingly Romantic.

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