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Re-Reading David Adams Richards: Ironies of Allegory in *Mercy among the Children*

JACK ROBINSON

DAVID ADAMS RICHARDS has long been misrepresented as a grim and didactic moralist. In 1987, in her groundbreaking study of Maritime fiction, *Under Eastern Eyes*, Janice Kulyk Keefer made a judgment that has stuck, describing his fictional world as one that presents “an intolerably dreary, foreclosed reality” (170). Commenting on the contrived use of coincidence in *Bay of Love and Sorrows*, David Creelman concludes in *Setting in the East: Maritime Realist Fiction* (2003) that “appropriate amounts of joy and suffering are doled out to the redeemed and the damned respectively” (170). Creelman finds that in several novels, Richards’s “emphatic tone has limited the text[s]’ ability to engage and compel his audience” (171). This interpretation of Richards’s fiction as repellently and reductively one-dimensional in its themes prevails, again, in reviews of his novel *Mercy among the Children*, which was a co-winner of the Giller Prize in 2000. Sandy Fernandez claims that the protagonist, Sydney Henderson, and the narrator, Lyle Henderson, are embodiments respectively of New Testament mercy and Old Testament wrath, and that didacticism limits the complexity of the narrative: “The underlying allegories are clear, but the story is only half sketched in” (63). Aida Edemariam states that an emphasis on ethically powerful and unambiguous themes makes the characters one-dimensional: “The extent to which his characters represent absolutes, however, undercuts his ambitious book” (20). In a review-interview, Ray Robertson adheres to the consensus that has prevailed among Canadian critics since the appearance of Richards’s first novel, *The Coming of Winter*, in 1974, finding that Richards’s fiction tends to convey obvious moral messages and to construct excessively tidy plots: *Mercy among the Children*, he claims, “lays out another tightly wound tale of moral choice and the perils of conviction and non-conviction” (14).

If there has been what Tony Tremblay, one of Richards's most cogent apologists, calls "the worst kind of colonialist, satisfied dismissal" of his works because of their regionalism (84), it has been exacerbated by the polemical stance taken by the author. In a 2005 interview with Tremblay, Richards undertakes a direct attack on critical misconceptions of his work. He notes that regionalists who write with intelligence are bound to be scorned, implying that when critics recognize his regionalism, they also underestimate his intelligence (28). As for the anti-Catholic epithet, he points out that he is always for the faith but against the Church, for the saints but against the bureaucrats (28). He attacks those who have given insufficient or wrongheaded attention to his works, calling many professors of literature and literary critics "intellectual illiterates" who have no idea how to interpret what they are reading (38). Richards defends what Tremblay calls the "anti-academic thread" that has appeared in his work, commencing with *Hope in the Desperate Hour*, in which Professor Christopher Wheem is condemned for his lack of compassion; Richards argues that the cloistered and judgmental academic community needs to be scrutinized (40). This portrayal and others to come later, such as that of the condescending and careerist Professor David Scone in *Mercy*, express what academics Herb Wyile and Christopher Armstrong describe as Richards's criticism of the "reform identities of feminism and middle-class progressivism" (113). The interventions of liberal middle-class professionals to help the poor or marginalized come in for attack again in *Mercy*, in the satirical treatment of interfering and prejudicial social worker Diedre Whyne.

The deleterious result of this literary feud between Richards, his attackers, and his defenders, is that the intentional fallacy has proven to be alive and well in criticism of Richards's texts. Critics tend to think of the sensibility of the author lurking behind the texts rather than beginning with a close reading of each novel. Richards's literary reputation as a single-minded essentialist or his personal reputation as the Miramichi scrapper distracts critics from a diligent and responsible consideration of his texts. This distraction has led to the proliferation of false dichotomies. On the anti-Richards side, Richards has been labelled an absolutist, a universalist, a naturalist, or an anti-progressive thinker and therefore, according to Armstrong and Wyile, someone who "is in danger of being lumped with the neo-conservatives" (15). In response, the defenders of Richards have often opted for counter-labels. Rather

than a narrow regionalist, Richards has been regaled as one of the neglected voices of authentic Canadian society (Tremblay 79), embodying the needed alternative to a doctrinaire urbanism or Toronto-centrism or internationalism. According to Stephen Henighan, international content was such an imperative in Canadian literature during the 1990s that the catchphrase about Canadian literary texts used by our critics and publishers was “They can’t be about things here” (180). In countering the charge that Richards is a reductive moralist (and thus a simplistic thinker), some pro-Richards critics have emphasized his honest investigations of human subjectivity and emotion: Margo Wheaton argues that he stands in awe of the mystery of the human personality (57); William Connor that he celebrates the greatness of humans in the form of their potential for selfless heroic sacrifice (63). These counter-emphases to the moralist label suggest that Richards values universal moral and spiritual truths or the timeless truths of the heart rather than complex intellectual insights about how those truths are enacted by individuals in social and historical circumstances; nothing could be further from the truth. Sometimes a single critic offers up a dichotomy: David Creelman argues that Richards has moved from being a bleak naturalist whose heroes have no freedom outside society to being a writer of romances, whose protagonists achieve some free sense of self by tapping “some transcendental or mythic power” (162). If critics cannot place Richards on one side, then they must put him on the other: if his satire is “largely reserved for the middle-class” (Wyile 112), then his comedy is “the comedy of the underdog” (Wyile 109).

This is not to deny that Richards’s independent intellectual stance has long included an objection to the narrow interpretation of life and art along the lines of middle-class ideologies. In this regard, it is relevant to note Richards’s argument in his 1987 essay “*Lockhartville and Kevin O’Brien*,” included in his 1994 collection, *A Lad from Brantford and other essays*. Here, Richards finds that the play based on the autobiographical novel *Various Persons Named Kevin O’Brien*, by his mentor Alden Nowlan, reduces the novel from a “subtle and encompassing” (40) portrait of a young man searching for his identity while growing up in poverty in Nova Scotia in the nineteen-thirties and forties to a contemporized feminist complaint against patriarchy. Nowlan’s father, Judd, is portrayed with one-dimensional dogmatism, Richards argues, whereas the novel shows that the young Nowlan appreciates his father’s

tenderness, and Judd Nowlan's involvement in the First World War is trivialized rather than honoured, as it is in the novel (41). Richards argues that the play turns a complex young man of the thirties into a "quasi-feminist of the 1980's" (41), a multi-dimensional novel into an advertisement for a current ideology: "In the play, art has become social work. Nothing more than a holding forth on a morally superior lifestyle. Much of it contrary to the novel's genius" (42). We need look no further for Richards's direct implication that his art, like that of his mentor, is of the more "subtle and encompassing" variety.

Fortunately, in turning to an in-depth reading of *Mercy*, Richards shows us the way with this and other overlooked but leading comments, and the same may be said for some critical insights rendered by careful academic readers. Balancing the emphasis on a subjective view of human emotion in his novels, Richards points out that there is also a controlling intelligence, guided by "an analytical survey of humanity, which I prefer and have become very comfortable with" (Tremblay 36). This controlling intelligence has been labelled moralistic, didactic, and reductive; however, Richards draws attention to the irony in his own work (Tremblay 39). Tony Tremblay also draws attention to Richards's irony when he finds that his work is characterized by a "subtlety of intentions" (89) and by "the allowance for uncertainty that Richards gives his characters" (90). Margo Wheaton emphasizes this irony when she insists that his characters are "relentlessly complex" (54) and that his novels portray "human beings in all their immense, contradictory shades of light and darkness" (55). Sheldon Currie argues that the reader must bring to Richards's works "a healthy tolerance for ambiguity" and "the kind of intelligence and imagination necessary to discover meaning without the author's intervention" (67). Currie goes on to state that the reader needs "the wit and sense of humour necessary to see the comic in the tragic and vice versa," for these Miramichi narratives are "simultaneously tragic and comic" (68). Currie acknowledges furthermore that Richards's novels are indeed "subtle and embracing," that humour is important to Richards's vision, and that his humour is ironical rather than doctrinaire or one-dimensionally ideological. The subject of his humour, like that of all of his work, is the moral, spiritual, emotional, and intellectual struggles of humanity and therefore its beauty, as Inge Sterrer-Hauzenberger notes (68).

This article conducts a thorough, but by no means exhaustive, reading of *Mercy*, in order to articulate some of its complexities and indeterminacies; it does not read the novel “against the grain.” The central tenet of the critical approach here is that the novel is suffused or saturated with irony, which is seen in the multi-levelled insights of its astringent humour; its self-reflexive use of key thematic concepts that entail controversies of meaning; the multi-dimensional characterizations, which complicate the assignation of allegorical concepts with considerations of social and psychological realism; and the mediating narrative frame, which views the narrative’s central meanings through an interpretive lens that invites critical scrutiny. The upshot of these multiple ironies is that the tone becomes multi-faceted, character is destabilized, the assignation of the one-to-one equivalencies of traditional allegory is dislodged and becomes no longer adequate to describe the text at hand, and we must recognize that Richards is practising a much different kind of allegory — the kind that conducts an ongoing and finally unresolved debate about the narrative’s meanings while in the process of constructing them.

The humour in *Mercy* is caustic, all-pervasive, and directed not against any particular group but against sin, folly, and self-deceit; in the novel, acerbic wit combines with compassionate understanding to inspire meditations on the tragicomic nature of life. As Tremblay affirms, Richards’s seldom-recognized humour is closely related to his humanity (12). This derisive satire is apparent in the sudden and complete self-deceptions of Connie Devlin. For example, Connie, Sydney Henderson’s low-life nemesis, is “astonished at his own goodness” in saying nothing about Sydney being “that way” and molesting young Trenton Pit (26). The satirical point here is multi-layered. First, Connie Devlin, that devilishly self-serving con man, indulges in “his old enduring weakness” of going along unthinkingly with what others say for his own advantage. In order to endear himself to Mat Pit, the young thug who rules the Stumps road with brutal power and to whom Connie plays brainless and generally overlooked sidekick, he allows Mat to foster this vicious lie about Sydney. Second, in deciding to say nothing himself, Connie manages deftly both to take the path of least effort and to stroke his ego with a false compliment about his own nobility: here we have the lazy and laconic con man conning himself. Third, whatever thought he does muster is guided by a laughable lack of integrity and by

utter cowardice. Fourth, the ethically and intellectually puny Connie is Sydney's opposite, for Sydney is the prodigiously self-schooled, principled, and courageously independent thinker who suffers much for his greatness of character. This use of Connie as a foil for Sydney develops further ironic depth when we discover that protagonist and antagonist were both molested by the same priest, Father Porier (310), and that this early trauma has propelled their lives in dramatically different directions.

The comedy intensifies as the novel's narrative speeds toward its conclusion in a tragicomic series of events that take place in a Friday blizzard on the Stumps road, and we realize that the blindness caused by the blizzard is a moral one: Drowne notes that this "moralized landscape" is especially common in allegory (210). In one strand of the narrative, Lyle, Sydney's son, goes to the home of Connie Devlin, planning to kill him because he suspects Connie of robbing and killing his father. With comic bathos, Connie is found hanging like a coat in his own closet, squirming and squeaking in the process of hanging himself. Unable to commit the murder he had intended, Lyle cuts him down (383). The reader expects some gravity or perhaps a sincere confession from Connie at this moment, but his first words are a comic deflation of expectation: "Tea would be nice," he suggests. Calmly, he insists that it be properly steeped and served with a baby biscuit; he then proceeds to tell the story of how he caused Sydney's death, beginning with the detail that he first robbed him of twenty-five thousand dollars because he "was tempted" (384). Again, this tale within Lyle's first-person narrative is set in thick snow, symbolic of moral blindness (386). On his way back from a three-year exile in a northern work camp to earn money for his destitute family, Sydney has carried the tiny Connie, made a fire for him, been robbed while fetching firewood, and tried to rescue Connie from a ledge where he had fallen after hopping around because his shoe caught on fire (386). Unable to move because he has ruptured his own appendix while carrying Connie, Sydney gives Connie his boots and socks. Connie promises to send help and to rescue Sydney's poems but takes the money, leaves the poems, and says nothing about Sydney when he finds help. Sydney dies helping Connie, who closes his story by admitting to Lyle that he's "never been able to do those things like help people" (387). Thus are the great brought down by the small not with a bang but a self-indulgent whimper, says the text's tragicomic humour.

Comedy is also prominent in the second series of climactic events that unwind during that Friday blizzard, this narrative strand involving the petty criminal doings of the Pit siblings, Mat and Cynthia. Mat grabs his sister Cynthia, Leo McVicer's lover; throws her into Leo's Cadillac; heads down the Stumps road in the blizzard; and runs over the six-year-old Percy Henderson, who has come out to the highway to look for his older brother Lyle, who was supposed to be taking care of him (400). Mat drives on, beating Cynthia as he does (for her many betrayals of him); then, knowing that her brother plans to kill her, she jumps out in the centre of the city in front of the civic centre. With marvellous comic incongruity, the emotionally and physically bruised Cynthia wanders dazed into a child visionary's rally, and is saved. It is the one indisputable moment of purely Augustinian redemption in the novel: regardless of merit, and without her even being aware that she has a soul, the sinner is unexpectedly saved.

The series of events leading to Cynthia's salvation, with its blend of comic absurdity, violence, and Catholic doctrine, is similar to the work of Flannery O'Connor, the highly ironic and comic regionalist with whom Richards is never compared. Yet they should be compared, for Richards and O'Connor both use the shock tactics of brutality and acerbic wit to confront the reader with moral and spiritual truths. O'Connor's story "Parker's Back" depicts a similar sinner who turns his back on God and religion. Parker is an indolent, self-centred, and cynical drinker and brawler who nonetheless is mysteriously (though he finds her ugly and repellent) compelled to marry a "saved" woman who castigates him for the vanity of his tattoos, the one touchstone for intimations of immanence in his life (and, on an emotional level, the one relief from his periods of gloom). This wayward everyman experiences his moment of salvation while hurtling through the air in the middle of a tractor accident, "yelling in an unbelievably loud voice, 'GOD ABOVE!'" (665).

Through its use of humour, Richards's text can mean more things simultaneously and with heightened seriousness. The same can be said for its recognition of the layers of meaning attaching to key spiritual terms, such as *grace*. The ironies surrounding Cynthia's salvation show a recognition of the intertwining of the theological and psychological meanings of the word. On the theological level, Cynthia's moment of grace or redemption is a strictly Augustinian one: her grace comes

unbidden and unwilling, as a pure gift from God. Etienne Gilson insists that grace must not be based on merit: it is given even when the receiver's actions are manifestly evil. Gilson cites Saint Paul and Saint Augustine as examples (161). On the other hand, Cynthia is psychologically and emotionally prepared to receive grace. First, she has been deeply shocked by the accident involving Percy, in which she is an accomplice: "She could not get the little boy's face out of her mind, and she staggered forward in a daze" (400). Second, she has been morally prepared by her recent dream in which Sydney whispered to her, "Take care of your little girl. She is more important than Leo's money" (376). After her moment of grace, she becomes a better mother to her daughter, Theresa May. Gilson notes that while grace cannot be prepared for or won, it is defined by its impact or consequence: if a true moment of grace has occurred, a change of heart and of behaviour will follow, for "those who have grace want to do good and succeed in doing it" (160). The text thus registers a degree of self-reflection about the different levels of meaning attached to the word *grace*: it shows an understanding of what Quilligan calls "the problematical process of meaning multiple things simultaneously with one word" (24).

Further deliberate ironies attach to the mediations of words and images in human communications involving matters of the spirit, and here, there is an additional thematic parallel to Flannery O'Connor's story "Parker's Back." The words on the pages of *Mercy* convey clearly an awareness of the interrelation between subjective perceptions or spiritual experiences and the words and images that humans attach to them. When Cynthia appears at the civic centre and finds herself standing face to face with Vicka, the child visionary whispers to her in Yugoslavian; thus, Cynthia has no understanding of the literal meaning of her words, yet she feels in her soul that a particular sentence has been uttered: "Holy Mother has asked you, her daughter, here today, and now wishes you to change your life" (402). In the text's commentary on distracting images, Cynthia wonders that Vicka is able to recognize her as female, addressing her as "daughter," for she has disguised herself as a man, donning Leo's clothes in order to escape the town with his money. Despite these linguistic and imagistic distractions, one soul has spoken clearly to the other. By contrast, misunderstanding among true seekers prevails in O'Connor's tragicomic ending. After Parker's moment of grace, he bears on his back "the haloed head of a flat stern Byzantine

Christ with all-demanding eyes” (667) in the hope that his wife will be forced to accept his tattoos; yet his wife still throws him out for his idolatry. The two true seekers after spiritual truth are confused by crossed purposes. First, Parker has spent his life in denial of spiritual questing. Then, when he receives grace, he knows that his life has changed profoundly but cannot find words to declare the change to his wife; instead, he pursues his old idolatrous ways. Parker finds false comfort in graven images, she in strict literal interpretation of the Bible’s written words (675): the result is tragic distraction and isolation.

The term *mercy* is another word mediating the novel’s moral and spiritual meanings. Two allusions to literary uses of this word are widely known (as is the Augustinian meaning of the word *grace*) in western cultural heritage. First, even readers who are not intimately acquainted with Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* may be aware of the four lines of Portia’s opening speech in the trial scene:

The quality of mercy is not strained,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven,
Upon the place beneath; it is twice blessed;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes. (4.2.180-83)

This passage emphasizes the heavenly, non-societal source of mercy, the metaphor of rain identifying mercy with natural events, yet the passage also recognizes that mercy is partly a matter of human will: it comes from a human giver. The quotation also directs the reader’s attention toward certain painful truths about the central characters of the novel. While Sydney’s brand of mercy blesses him, it also prevents him from surviving in his social circumstances. The blessing Sydney confers on Connie Devlin produces nothing but a few feeble expressions of gratitude, uttered while the feckless Connie goes about destroying Sydney with his very weakness. Second, the allusion to Yeats’s poem “Among School Children” in the text’s title evokes a famous meditation on the individual and society. Yeats’s question, “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” (217), is the central question of *Mercy*. The text asks whether Sydney is able to take his inspiration directly from heaven, despite the wounds dealt him by the earthly church, or whether his character and spiritual outlook have been shaped and misshapen by his treatment at the hands of others in his particular social and historical circumstances. In its relentless deconstruction of dichotomies, the text

lays bare both processes. As Yeats found, the dancer has agency but moves according to social choreography: one cannot ever “know” the dancer and the dance as separate.

This brings us to another problematized word in the novel, *pact*. At twelve, Sydney is shovelling snow from the fifty-foot-high roof of the church with Connie Devlin; when Connie steals his molasses sandwich, Sydney gives him a shove, and Connie lands in the snow below, as if dead. At that moment, Lyle tells us, his father made a “pact” with God, vowing that “if the boy lived he would never raise his hand or his voice to another soul and he would attend church every day” (23-24). Yet, the moment that makes Sydney an embodiment of Christian mercy has some attendant ironies. For one, after Sydney made what Lyle calls “this horrible pact,” Connie “stood up, wiped his face, laughed at him, and walked away” (24). When his father tells him of this pact years later, Lyle expresses his doubts: “Dad, you never touched the boy — so therefore God tricked you into this masochistic devotion. God has made you His slave because of your unnatural self-condemnation” (24). The text is careful to make the point, through the narrative filter of the non-believer, Lyle, that Sydney may have been deceived by the devil’s representative, Connie, or by God. Lyle also suggests that Sydney’s self-sacrifice may be rooted in masochism. Further, in the light of the text’s use of a rigid Augustinian doctrine concerning the definition of grace, Lyle’s statement implies that it may be blasphemous for a human to initiate a unilateral pact with God.

In turning to explore the text’s ironies about the nature of Sydney’s lifelong devotion to mercy and passive resistance, we find that meaning oscillates between the allegorical or conceptual level of the narrative and the level of social and psychological realism. Here the text throws much complicating evidence in the reader’s way, so that settling simply on the allegorical level of meaning is all but impossible. Paul de Man writes that the reader of allegory is inclined to focus on the text’s logical code, or grammar, but is compelled to pay equal attention to the details that erode or contradict the meaning system (*Allegories* 268-69). Brian McHale states that this oscillation between the grammar and the figures, or the conceptual and literal levels of the allegory, is ontological. The allegorical narrative displays more prominently than other forms the innate inability of narrative to create a single ontological grounding for meaning (142). To begin with, Lyle states that “from the time

his own father died” Sydney believed that “whatever pact you make with God, God *will* honour” (24). While trying to avert a strike of Leo McVicer’s men, Roy Henderson is mistakenly identified as a drunken strike leader who had destroyed valuable machinery and spilled barrels of herbicide and pesticide, necessitating a costly clean-up (16). Roy is photographed for a local newspaper as a drunken arsonist, and the fire becomes known as the “Henderson horror,” bringing shame on the Henderson family for thirty years. Roy’s pact that he would not eat until Leo came to see him in prison brings nothing but his own death: it is a counterproductive display of hubris, and, as such, a poor model to his son for making pacts with God. Pitifully, Sydney has no choice but to honour this one episode in which Roy’s behaviour displayed some semblance of noble conviction.

On the psychological level, the text provides much evidence that Sydney’s embodiment of New Testament mercy is rooted in self-condemnation and masochism, as Lyle maintains. As a boy, Sydney is beaten by Roy whenever he tries to protect his mother from Roy’s drunken assaults. At twelve, he is shot in the stomach by Roy, bringing on a lifelong appendix irritation that eventually causes his death. Moreover, Sydney’s repeated physical abuse at the hands of his biological father (Roy) and sexual abuse at the hands of his spiritual father (Father Porier) delivers the overwhelming emotional message that he is deserving of abuse. Unable to articulate this repressed message, Sydney transforms his early role of taking beatings into his adult behaviour pattern of harming himself in order to avoid harming others. Sydney’s efforts to live by an idealistic code of universal kindness may be read as an adult wish to return to a state of blissful infantilism, before the troubles of his childhood began. This may also be said of allegory as a literary form: Fletcher points out that allegory mediates between the id’s nostalgia for infancy and the superego’s wish to conform to social values (149).

On the level of social realism, alcoholism marks the Miramichi area as profoundly as domestic violence and fathers leaving the area to find work. In his contribution to *Addiction: Notes from the Belly of the Beast*, Richards writes honestly of the alcohol abuse in his family during his childhood years and of his own long struggle with alcoholism: “When I was little, drink surrounded me as rivers did fish” (108-09). In his teen years, he and his friends all drank heavily “because we came from a hard-drinking river” (111). At fifteen, Sydney is both a reader and a

drunk, drinking to avoid what Dr. Johnson called “the pain of being a man” (20). Between fifteen and eighteen, he disappears for three years in order to avoid the “help” of the social workers who would put him in a foster home (20). When he returns, he has given up alcohol for literature. Years later, he admits to his children, Lyle and Autumn, that his reading had been an escape from his suffering: “He then told us that in order to run away from his life, he had read” (116). The text here carefully plants the irony that Sydney’s reading is a second obsession, on a par with alcohol as a means of killing the pain of being engaged in the social world.

Let us turn, then, to examine the polyvalent ironies surrounding Sydney’s role as the reader-hero. In his early life, Sydney the autodidact states that he finds his ideal of universal kindness in his reading. At nineteen, when he is wooing his future wife, Elly, he tells her that “those who scorn you taunt only themselves” (38). He tells Elly that reading “reminds” the reader of certain universal truths that he or she already knows, and that it invokes an innate moral sense of certain inalienable rights. Reading is his means of reminding himself of natural or universal truths that exist beyond social truth. He believes that the world is divided into two groups of people: one believes that “the world must change” and the other that “in man’s heart is the only truth that matters” (39). Identifying with the latter group, he declares that the truths revealed in his reading have nothing to do with social change; rather, they pertain only to his personal morality and knowledge.

In this regard, Elly provides a significant character foil for Sydney. As an orphan who was abandoned by her family, she is already, like Sydney, one of the injured or wounded: she fears “that anyone had power to do what they wanted with her life” (25). Thus, she turns from society toward nature, where she reads miracles (25). When she is two months pregnant with her first child, she takes a walk in the woods, meditating on the fundamental truth she shares with her husband: that no one has “authority over her enjoyment of the world” (85). Yet as time goes on, Elly finds her precious enjoyment of nature, apparently gifted from God, taken from her by the all-too-fallible authority of Leo McVicer, who has spilled herbicides in the region. Elly has numerous miscarriages as a result of this poisoning of nature; her daughter, Autumn, is born an albino, and eventually Elly dies due to chemical poisoning, as do numerous other members of the community over three

generations. Once again, Richards implies that no truths exist beyond temporality, history, and the politically engaged writing of the human drama in texts like the novel.

While Sydney withdraws from championing his truths in the social sphere, the text provides two important character foils that attest to the importance of doing so. When Sydney is wrongly suspected of the sexual abuse and murder of Trenton Pit, he refuses either to defend himself or to hire a lawyer, but Elly engages the lawyer Isabel Young, who speaks well for him at the inquest. Elly empathizes with the suffering Isabel undergoes for Sydney's sake, and tells him that "She is a hero — not you, Sydney — *she* is." (154). This one moment in which the meek but wise woman dares to confront her husband suggests ironically that she, the non-reader, perceives the fallacy in Sydney's view that the truths of his reading pertain only to the private sphere of the heart. It could be said, nonetheless, that the narrative finally confirms Sydney's Stoic and pacifist position that "the truth will out" because after his death, his reputation is rehabilitated: "The men who had one time tormented him because he was different now held a place for him in their hearts" (347). Constable John Delano seems to support this view: "All of a sudden falsehood just goes away" (335). Yet the constable's actions inform against his words, for Delano has re-opened the case of the bridge sabotage, leading to the clearing of Sydney's name, and he has gathered the evidence to prosecute Connie Devlin for his part in Sydney's death. Like Isabel Young, Delano stands up for Sydney when he will not; together, they voice the textual irony that the omnipotence of no truth can be assumed, that all truths must be represented and debated in a dialectic social process.

Sydney's interaction with the one academic in the novel demonstrates both the narrow-minded middle-class prejudice of Professor David Scone and the futility of Sydney's social disengagement. Scone is conveniently silent when a contemporary novel exploring alternative sexual mores is stolen by Mat Pit from Sydney's bookshelf and used at the inquest as evidence that Sydney has molested and killed Trenton Pit. Scone, and other professors who have praised and taught this novel as a contemporary classic, do not come forward to attest to its greatness as literature and therefore to its having a valid place on the shelf of any serious student of literature (153). Also, when Sydney, at eighteen, comes to Scone inquiring about university study, Scone misreads Sydney, see-

ing in him only the stereotype of a common labourer who would be incapable of intellectual pursuits. Outraged, Sydney goes home and writes a letter of protest, but then his pact with God intervenes: he is convinced that he has committed a “crime” by having “set out in a letter to injure someone else,” and he burns the letter in shame (22). The text points out that the educated person should be motivated by virtue, but also that virtue must speak for itself or it will be repeatedly stepped on. When Sydney silences himself, he again takes a beating, as he did in his childhood.

Devoted to a universal love of mankind, Sydney keeps his pact of doing no harm to others. Repeatedly, he refuses to defend himself or his family against physical and verbal attacks from members of the community. Since he is physically big and strong, courageous, and articulate, his refusal to defend his family conveys the message to his children that they are not worth defending. In other words, his aggression is passive, and it takes the form of neglect, whereas his father’s aggression was active and took the form of abuse; nonetheless, Sydney’s neglect causes the same damage to his children’s self-esteem as his father’s abuse did to Sydney. He also makes a significant error in judgment that can only injure his family members further, inflicting upon them a sense of abandonment. In order to pay back taxes, he leaves his family for three years to work in a northern camp; once again, he chooses to act on universal principle: a man pays his debts. In doing so, he neglects personal loyalties and the possibility that some compromise could be worked out between principle and personal love. When he leaves, his family sorely needs him: Autumn is being molested by local boys (210); Lyle has recently punched a teacher (225); Elly’s health is still in question; and Percy is just three years old. During the three years of Sydney’s absence, Lyle becomes a drunk and a thief, inflicting slashes on his arms and chest as an emblem of his emotional and spiritual torment. At the end of the three years, Percy, Elly, and Sydney have died, and Lyle has become an agonized and lonely wanderer who “can’t forgive himself” (403). The text does not indicate that he blames himself specifically for the death of Percy; rather, it suggests that his self-condemnation is more generalized. Sydney’s social disengagement is thus an action in itself, and one that has devastating consequences for him and those he loves.

What is true for Sydney is also true for the text itself. Just as Sydney’s passive resistance and silence constitute a political stance, so the literary

text is always part of an ongoing political discourse. Jacques Derrida calls this “the political stake and structure of the text, the political allegory of the literary text” (142). Sydney attempts to place his truth above those of others by refusing to debate it; inadvertently, he allows his pact of universal kindness to impair his attachment to individuals. Ironically, his gradual withdrawal from those closest to him becomes the way in which his principles are known in the world. *Mercy* thus makes the points through its protagonist that identity is always mobile and multiple because manifested in action, and that narrative meaning is always unresolved. Josipovici explains the nature of allegorical meaning with reference to Giotto’s figures representing charity and envy: “Giotto’s figures always step partially out of their frames: we are shown Charity in action, not someone who has a charitable disposition; Envy in action, not someone who has an envious disposition” (182). Character and narrative are fluid in their meanings rather than fixed, as in the conventional interpretation of allegory. Tony Tremblay acknowledges this unresolved non-fixed nature of meaning in Richards’s fiction: “his world is organic and infused with spirit; three-dimensional, it is a realm of ideas and personalities in action” (12).

The allegory of *Mercy* warns against rigidity in conceptualizing Sydney’s character. To regard him as the reader-hero who has direct unmediated knowledge of the truth or the ideal is to make him an idol: the text warns against such idolatry. It also warns against seeing him simply as a fool or an icon that must be smashed by an iconoclastic interpretation. At the very least, we should read him in two ways simultaneously. In Creelman’s terms, *Mercy* reveals its protagonist to embody not individualist liberalism (149) but the individual both embroiled in and transcending social circumstances. One plea for such a nuanced reading is expressed by Sydney himself, when he admits to Elly that he is “not very good at the world” (137). He admits that he retreats from the world because it does not operate according to his principle that those who harm others harm only themselves. Very close to the end of his life, he has a quite different conception of the value of reading than he had at nineteen, when he declared to Elly that his reading proved this principle (38). At the end of a life lived by his ideal of universal kindness, a Québécois fellow labourer asks him, “What should I get from books?” Sydney replies simply, “that you are not alone, even along this broken tractor road. You need to know nothing else” (348). At

this point, he conceives of literature as offering identification with the suffering of others; no longer is literature an affirmation of his embodiment of mercy, at whatever cost to himself and those he loves. Rather, literature is now a window onto the views and emotions of others, a means of bringing people into closer understanding with each other. In his answer, Sydney perhaps admits that his pact had brought suffering to himself and others; nonetheless, he remains true to his pact, allowing his kindness to Connie cause his death.

Lyle's narrative offers a complicating gloss on his father's life. Through Lyle, the text again advises readers against one-dimensional interpretation. On one hand, Lyle, too, is an avid reader, and all of his allusions support his father's vision and courage. Lyle laments that his father did not know that "he and not Thoreau, was the real article, or that his civil disobedience went to the very soul of man" (45). He describes his father as Job-like and as knowing the Book of Job to be "the greatest and truest book in the world" for its celebration of great faith in a world of suffering (350). He praises Sydney for living by the Stoic imperative that a man must be true to his principles regardless of earthly reward or punishment, a truth that Sydney discovered in his reading of the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius (138, 274). Lyle also refers to Albert Camus's essay "The Myth of Sisyphus," in order to express his respect for his father's heroic suffering in a world that often seems absurd to him (120). The cumulative effect of these allusions and many others is to align Sydney with some of the great icons of individualism in the western cultural tradition.

On the other hand, what Lyle endorses in theory, or on the level of reading and literary analysis, he finds repugnant in practice, or on the level of lived life. Lyle believes that his father should have defended his family against attacks and avenged wrongs done against them; Lyle himself tries to do the latter in his failed attempts to kill Connie Devlin and Mat Pit. Lyle also blames his father for leaving the family to work in the north. When Sydney is about to leave, he justifies his departure to Lyle by referring to his past: "if you saw what I saw in my childhood, you would know why I do and say as I do" (223). This unexplained statement likely means that he was so often abused as a child that he vowed never to hurt anyone; yet, as Lyle tells us, he believed at the time that Sydney was "using his childhood to shirk his responsibility to *our* childhood" (223). Lyle spurns and curses his father, seeking revenge in

petty and futile ways against the institutions that wronged his father (stealing a chalice from the church, for example); he turns against his father's nonviolence when he becomes a tough guy like Pat Pit, acquiring Mat's "cold self-mesmerizing eyes of disillusioned pain" (317). Then, he discovers that Mat's "self-infatuated pain" is "an opiate that all clung to" (150), yet he still torments himself. Although Lyle becomes wealthy through an unexpected inheritance from Leo McVicer (it turns out that Elly, Isabel Young, and Diedre Whyne are his illegitimate daughters) and a government compensation package for his mother's death as a result of the herbicide pollution, the money brings no joy or sense of purpose. Lyle travels and returns home to consider suicide; he tells his ten-hour story to Terrieux, dressed in jacket and slacks, looking like a bouncer. Children see him with knife marks across his arms and chest. He lives like a hermit and is seen only far upriver; he packs up the family's vertical shoebox of a house and is gone (417). He cannot bring himself to read Autumn's novel, the vehicle by which she has exorcized the demons of her own past. His anger at himself leaves him stewing in the same "self-condemnation" and "masochism" that he said were the motivations behind his father's pact of nonviolence.

The different positions assumed by Lyle make it difficult to read his narration and his character foil for his father in any reductive way. His torment may be understood as evidence of the terrible consequences of Sydney's solipsism; from Roy to Sydney to Lyle, one can identify three generations of the fathers' anger at the world visited upon the sons in the forms of abuse and neglect, culminating in Lyle's self-hatred. Lyle's anger and violence may also be read as leading, ironically, to the same personal isolation as his father's passive aggression. Lyle's tragic direction in life can hardly be called a convincing counterargument to the propositions involved in Sydney's world view; rather, both lives are flawed, just as both are, to some extent, socially predetermined. At the same time, Lyle's narrative may be read as a painful tribute to his father, conveying the allegorical lesson that, even when exposed for all its self-centredness and self-delusion, such nobility in suffering as Sydney's deserves respect as a sincere and courageous reaching for human greatness, guided by the insights of some great texts in the western literary tradition. Yet Lyle's narration also emphasizes the irony that, when transferred to life in Sydney's rigid uncompromising way, these literary truths are not only ineffective but also self-destructive. Lyle's story of his father's embodi-

ment of mercy raises questions about the cultural and religious tradition that serves as the broad intellectual context for that project.

The prologue and afterword, written in the voice of an omniscient narrator, explain that Lyle chooses Terrieux as his listener for two reasons. The now middle-aged man has lost his profession as a policeman because he was deemed overzealous in the arrest of Mat Pit; in fact, he saved the young man's life (5). Lyle wants to let Terrieux know that he has fallen under Mat's spell and escaped it, and that he respects Terrieux for saving Mat's life (413). He wants to let Terrieux know also, through various parts of his story, that he understands how institutions can mete out justice "as if justice was truth" (129). He has become aware, through witnessing his parents' encounters with the flawed representatives of various institutions, that, like individuals, social institutions are fallible — they do make honest mistakes — and that they do not always inquire honestly and disinterestedly into truth in a factual and moral sense; indeed, the judgmental Lyle scorns his parents for their "rustic propriety" or naive trust in the law and its bogus truth claims (129). For his part, Terrieux finds that the storyteller exhibits a "tenderness" that is "a commodity of valiant people" (415). The comment suggests that Lyle possesses his father's courage and perhaps also his father's drive to discover spiritual truth.

Lyle's lonely and desperate non-quest may be illuminated by another relevant comparison to O'Connor's fiction. The self-inflicted knife slashes across Lyle's arms and chest are similar to the barbed wire wrapped around the chest of Hazel Mote, the self-torturing hero of Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*. Mote is a paradoxical anti-priest who preaches his denial of Christ and redemption from the hood of his car, but whose father was a preacher and whose blood is said to know what his mind does not. Lyle, too, denies the spirit, but it seems that his attacks on his father's Christianity and his restless wanderings and self-lacerations are part of a spiritual quest that has chosen him, in spite of himself. O'Connor describes *Wise Blood* as a comic novel about a man whose integrity lies in what he was not able to do; that is, Hazel Motes is unable to rid himself of Christ, the ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind. O'Connor suggests that freedom is a mystery and that a novel "can only be asked to deepen" that mystery (1). As O'Connor's novel points out, there is a fine line between heresy and redemption; as with Hazel Mote, it may be that Lyle occupies both

sides of that line simultaneously. O'Connor also makes a comment that affirms the same multiplicity of intention that is found in Lyle, Sydney, and many of Richards's key characters: she notes that "free will does not mean one will, but many wills conflicting in one man" (1).

Each of the above interpretations of Lyle's character is valuable, but if any is taken as what Maureen Quilligan calls a "unifying coherent truth" (241), it proves inadequate, partial, and therefore false. The narrative frame of *Mercy*, like other parts of the text, expresses Paul de Man's point that allegory lays bare the inability of narrative to convey fixed totalizing meanings about what is true and what is good: "the imperatives of truth and falsehood oppose the narrative syntax and manifest themselves at its expense" (*Allegories* 206).

Lyle tells his story to Terrieux in order to explain "what happens in life" (6). Whether Lyle attaches a particular or general meaning to this phrase is not stated. It is clear, however, that the text's presentation of allegorical meaning is certainly "subtle and encompassing." As the early reviewers of *Mercy* recognized, the novel seems lifeless and contrived when read as a closed-sign system or grammar distinguished by a series of one-to-one equivalencies between the literal and conceptual levels of the narrative, the grammar and the figure; in this mistaken attempt to find the correct reading and to jettison incorrect readings, the meaning of the novel becomes stultifying and two-dimensional. By contrast, if interpretation is able to unpack the text's multiple meanings, then *Mercy* becomes an allegory according to Spivak's definition of "the allegoric tendency" (327) as a confession of literature's multivalent nature.

Critics and theorists have defined the journey that our understanding of allegory has taken over the last three centuries. Until the end of the eighteenth century, Spivak explains, "the typology of fabulistic characters was available to the reader outside the context of the fable itself" (337). This typology was spelled out for the reader in works of visual art, accompanied by commentaries. These works go back as far as the Italian artist Giotto (1267-1337) and come forward in time until well into the eighteenth century in the form of Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia or Moral Emblems*, which was reprinted in the German Hertel edition in 1758-60. The book gives a list of concepts, such as "Taste," "Justice," "Incredulity," and so on, in alphabetical order; it provides an allegorical image that embodies each concept and a verbal description of the image with an explanation of how it is drawn from classical literature and

the Bible. Until the end of the eighteenth century, the reader needed only a receptive imagination to use these sources to grasp the conceptual meaning implied in the literal level of the literary allegory's double structure.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a debate over allegory developed. The Romantics discredited the far too explicit mediation of allegory between the literal and conceptual or the factual and the analytical. Goethe, Blake, Coleridge, and Yeats preferred a mystical model of the mind, as conveyed in the aesthetic of the symbol, which erased the borders between these kinds of meaning. In 1969, de Man argued that the Romantic symbol involves an impossible identification between reader and text, reader and world (207). In 1979, in his interpretation of Rousseau's *Julie*, de Man posits that allegory reminds us that literary meaning is always temporal and indeterminate. Literary meaning can never be detached from the material level of the narrative and its roots in time and place. Similarly, it can never be deracinated from the particular nuances of the text. The task of the critic is therefore not to recover what Jonathan Culler calls "some meaning which lies behind the work"; rather, it is, as Culler puts it, "to participate in and observe the play of possible meanings to which the text gives access" (247).

In the twenty-first century, most scholars, critics, academics, journalists, teachers, and intellectuals remain unaware of this debate and of de Man's revaluation of allegory and its implications. Spivak notes that "pedagogy still undertakes the nineteenth century dismissal of allegory" (327); thus, allegory remains a stumbling block for several reasons, attached to misunderstandings caused by the use of an outmoded definition. As Fletcher notes, "allegories raise questions of meaning *directly*, by asserting certain propositions as good and others as bad" (306). Traditional allegory is understood to be about truth and specifically about moral truth. This primacy of the moral message in allegory means that some readers approve or disapprove of the work solely on the ground of the reader's agreement or disagreement with its moral propositions. Leeming and Drowne call this disease of reading "allegoresis" (14). Such is the intensity of the debate over values invoked when an allegorical text is under consideration. This debate over values is understood to take place regardless of the aesthetic qualities of the text. Traditional allegory is assumed to place moral assertion before all aesthetic requirements and thus to be somewhat lacking on the aesthetic

level. Thus, in examining allegories, it is expected that there will be little to say about the aesthetic qualities of the text and that analysis and evaluation will focus on the moral content. Finally, critics resent didacticism, the province of allegory as traditionally defined, because it forecloses interpretation. Fletcher comments that “allegorical works present an aesthetic surface which implies an authoritative, thematic, ‘correct’ reading, and which attempts to eliminate other possible readings” (305). Northrop Frye finds that the critic often resents the author’s use of this literary form because “allegory prescribes the direction of his commentary, and so restricts his freedom” (90).

If allegory has been redefined in a way that also redefines criticism, then it should be no surprise that *Mercy* is not the kind of text that readers of Richards might have wanted or expected or thought it to be. The novel invites the attention of Culler’s “interpretive critic,” who has the patience to “observe the play of possible meanings” rather than to seek the fixed sign system behind the text. Tony Tremblay notes that since Richards’s fiction is unique, it requires a new way of reading (11); this article hopes to elucidate that unique quality and to represent that new way. This way of reading recognizes Richards’s intelligence through acknowledging the apotheosis of irony in *Mercy*; it recognizes that the text’s ironical meanings cannot be detached from its regional and historical realities or from the words of the narrative itself.

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