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Ordinary Heroes:
moral and social vision
in the fiction of David Adams Richards

by

David F. Hallett, B.A., B.Ed.

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

Carleton University

Ottawa, Ontario

April 1, 1991

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Thesis Supervisor

Chair, Department of English

Carleton University

Abstract

The fiction of David Adams Richards displays a clear moral and social vision: a belief in the worth of the individual human being and in the value of the small acts of generosity and heroism that individuals perform daily. Despite the fact that Richards has repeatedly articulated this vision, his work is frequently misread by reviewers and academic critics, who often address the surface complexities of his narrative strategies rather than the themes they serve to develop. Through an analysis of Richards' work, and of extant criticism concerning it, the thesis will examine Richards' vision in light of his stated intentions, his narrative strategies, and conflicting critical responses to his work. The thesis will conclude that, although Richards himself occasionally fails to develop clearly his stated goals, for the most part, misrepresentation of his work and its goals is the product of either ideologically biased or incautious reading.

interest of others" (qtd. in Garrod 217). It is Richards' intention to make readers meet his characters, despite the oft-implied notion that, as Ken Adachi has actually been bold enough to assert, Richards' characters--(especially those in Road to the Stilt House)--are "people we would rather not know." Some of his characters are poverty-stricken, violent, or plagued by alcoholism--"unrefined." Most of his characters, even those relatively free from such obvious socio-economic traumas, are people with comparatively little use for the fine arts, for college educations, or for philosophies--in short, with little use for those refinements which condescending critics, often with the best of intentions, insist these characters lack. Richards says his work is a "great defence of the people I grew up with" (qtd. in Godfrey). Jo-Anne Claus called it a sympathetic portrayal of characters who would "endure rather than question and change" (26). Richards firmly believes that "it is prior assumption and contempt prior to investigation that destroys people" (qtd. in Glover 12). His fiction is intended to open up his world to investigation. It is writing designed to make the reader feel uncomfortable, to foreground contradictions, to show the beauty of lives usually ignored, or dismissed as squalid and poverty-stricken, and to refuse readers and critics access to the many "comfortable shelters" from which the world he portrays is so often prejudicially evaluated.

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Introduction: Vision

The work of David Adams Richards, to date, comprises one book of poetry, one collection of short fiction, at least four unpublished plays for both stage and screen, and six novels. It chronicles lives that are often ignored. It presents, in bitterly accurate detail, characters who live away from the centre of a province that is away from the centre of a country that is away from the centre of world affairs--at best a "companion" to the "powers that be." His subjects are truly from the margins. Often perceived as both powerless and poverty-stricken, these characters lead lives that are called fragmented, incomplete, vague, full of unrealized dreams, traumatized, disoriented--above all, brutally real.

David Adams Richards has been frequently praised for his talented use of various narrative strategies. These strategies include his use of repetition, his sensitivity and attention to the rhythms of nature and the way these rhythms echo in the lives of his characters, the poetic quality of some of his language, the open-ended plotting which focuses more on emotion than event, his foregrounding of beauty and dignity in the lives of his people, his refusal to valorize any one person simply because that person belongs to one of the marginalized social groups that are the focus of his fiction, his fine ear for the

reproduction of local dialect, his ability to articulate the concerns of a largely inarticulate and sometimes illiterate populace, and, most significantly, his character-driven narrative. It is also true that all the techniques for which Richards has been praised have provoked negative responses and accusations of overuse. Yet, as H.W. Connor notes, objection is often made to Richards' subject matter rather than his technique: it is considered unworthy of his narrative gifts ("River" 269).

In fact, David Adams Richards has provoked considerable critical dissension throughout his career. While much of the response to his work has been positive, even those who praise Richards caution that his narrative techniques may disturb, even alienate, the reader. Regrettably, much of this critical response to Richards either ignores or bypasses his intent. The focus on Richards' narrative strategies, their supposed complexity, and his skill (or lack of same) in manipulating those resources at his disposal for the effective telling of a story, has served, partially, to mask the true goal of Richards' fiction. Richards has a starkly clear vision of his world that is not always palatable to readers.

This "moral passion" (as Geoffrey Cook calls it [51]), without which Richards says he would not write (qtd. in Cook 54), is rooted in a firm belief in the value of individuals, especially when they "act spontaneously or in the best

interest of others" (qtd. in Garrod 217). It is Richards' intention to make readers meet his characters, despite the oft-implied notion that, as Ken Adachi has actually been bold enough to assert, Richards' characters--(especially those in Road to the Stilt House)--are "people we would rather not know." Some of his characters are poverty-stricken, violent, or plagued by alcoholism--"unrefined." Most of his characters, even those relatively free from such obvious socio-economic traumas, are people with comparatively little use for the fine arts, for college educations, or for philosophies--in short, with little use for those refinements which condescending critics, often with the best of intentions, insist these characters lack. Richards says his work is a "great defence of the people I grew up with" (qtd. in Godfrey). Jo-Anne Claus called it a sympathetic portrayal of characters who would "endure rather than question and change" (26). Richards firmly believes that "it is prior assumption and contempt prior to investigation that destroys people" (qtd. in Glover 12). His fiction is intended to open up his world to investigation. It is writing designed to make the reader feel uncomfortable, to foreground contradictions, to show the beauty of lives usually ignored, or dismissed as squalid and poverty-stricken, and to refuse readers and critics access to the many "comfortable shelters" from which the world he portrays is so often prejudicially evaluated.

At best, the repeated focus on Richards' complex narrative strategies praises a mistaken perception of his intent. At worst, it may be a screen for the frustrations of readers who are caught in a mildly panicked search for "artistic" reasons to criticize Richards' work in order to conceal a fundamentally intolerant distaste for his characters and their world.

The fiction of David Adams Richards displays a clear vision that is frequently misread, either accidentally or deliberately, by those reviewing and analyzing his work. Richards himself says "I think I have been misinterpreted and misrepresented . . . by people who say they understand my work" (qtd. in Scherf, "An interview" 40). Richards' vision can be expressed in three parts. The unique character of the "marginal" society in Richards' work, specifically the society of Atlantic Canada as seen in the north of New Brunswick, is dying by degrees as a result of the conflict with social forces it has neither power nor sufficient desire to resist. This social vision is accompanied by an equally clear moral vision: Richards' work laments this decay and insists that the quality and character of life in the "margins" is, though different from it, no worse than that of the "progressive centre." The third, and most important, component of Richards' vision is the value he places on individual human beings. Characters are valued "far more than the social comment" (qtd. in Garrod 211),

more, even, than plot (qtd. in Robb 24). Richards' fiction is, primarily, about people, not about socio-economic conditions--what Jeffrey Canton calls "observation of the complexities of relationships." As Richards says, of responses to his first novel, The Coming of Winter:

My intention was to show three people coming to grips with the death of a friend and a marriage of another and the love-hate bond of John and Kevin. The psychology of the characters was far more important to me than whether John was going to work next week. (qtd. in Garrod 212)

People live in society, shape it and react to it. Richards does not deny that his novels must, perforce, reflect socio-economic issues. But, Richards cautions, the characters are of greatest significance. His former mentor, Fred Cogswell, agrees: when the characters are right, "secondary ideas," like the expression of a social vision, follow (116). When asked how best to approach the teaching of literature, Richards replied:

talk about the characters and what the characters are doing, and what they're really doing as opposed to what the narrator sometimes implies they're doing. . . . It's the most important thing of all and it's what makes for the greatest conflict in the discrepancy between what the critics think and what the author is actually doing. (qtd. in Scherf, "Regionalism" 157)

Richards has stated his desire to defend the friends of his past (qtd. in Godfrey). Defend them from what? The "normative" pull of central North American popular culture. Perhaps the most destructive of the many forces that are addressed in Richards' fiction, it is a force which, as the

later years of this century have passed, has grown in power as a consequence of cable television, commercial franchise expansion and increased exposure to the values of life as it is lived in the centres of the continent that are seen to have power. Still worse, as Richards sees it--hence his increasing agitation in recent interviews over critical misreading--this same central culture tends to assume that, since the lives lived by those in the "margins" are different, they must be unfulfilled lives and the people living them must be miserable and in dire need of change.

Richards sees the milieu of his youth as having values not often recognized by the "central power structure." Value, for Richards, is not equated with financial success or advanced education. In explaining his fondness for Cicero, Richards summarizes a major component of his own goal as a writer: "Cicero was extremely good at distilling the essence of what is generous, and what is not, in humanity" (qtd. in Marchand). For Richards, human generosity is the ultimate value, and it transcends class barriers (Glover 11).

Some of Richards' characters may have less money and less formal education than many of those readers and critics who reject them, yet most have an honesty and a generosity which, Richards insists, is the essence of humanity: "the goodness, . . . generosity and gracefulness of the human spirit often comes more from people who have less" (qtd. in

Hovey 21). Regrettably, centralized, normative cultural standards are slowly eroding much of the faith the marginal areas might have in themselves. As the popular media bombards everyone with images of achievement, success and happiness, as defined by life in the centre, the marginal regions, seeing these values equated with a lifestyle they do not possess, devote increasing energies toward acquiring for themselves the possessions, hence the values, which they see constantly praised.

It may be true that some people need change in their lives. However, these changes must be the choice of the individual--not "legislated" arbitrarily according to standards imposed from outside the area of the individual's experience. In simple terms, Richards' attitude towards his own characters may be stated thus: if you are not satisfied with your own life, take steps to change it, but do not seek change merely because someone who has never experienced your life and its values tells you that change is necessary for happiness. Critics, says Richards, are "not saying what really annoys them [about my work]. . . . What bothers them is that I firmly believe that the only way a person can be free is through self-sacrifice. The only way a person can get something is to give something" (qtd. in Scherf, "Regionalist" 160). Change cannot be legislated: "the only proper changes come from the heart" (qtd. in Cook 53).

From the collision of values in the reading of Richards' work, certain questions arise. Firstly, what exactly is it that Richards is doing in his fiction? What are his narrative strategies? How do they work? What are the results? Secondly, why is it that even some of those who profess to like Richards have, apparently, misunderstood his intentions? How is this misrepresentation related to his vision? Finally, if David Adams Richards wishes to present his subjects in a positive light, make their "human value" perceptible to those readers who, as Richards says, are guilty of "assuming that [people] are dead-end because they are working in a gas station or a mine" and who hold "the idea that anyone who hunts or chews tobacco wouldn't care about anyone else in the world" (qtd. in Godfrey), why has he frequently employed complex and varied narrative strategies in presenting their stories? Why is he being so brutally explicit? What alternatives does he have? Why not employ more simple and appealing narrative structures and prose styles?

Richards develops his vision through complex, multi-faceted texts, which consistently employ character-driven narrative, shifting temporal reference, open-ended plot structures and a careful juxtapositioning of detail which achieves the verbal equivalent of cinematic "montage." He uses all these narrative strategies in order to challenge the reader into examining the lives he depicts and examining

the reasons for their responses to those lives. Richards' characters inhabit a world that often seems dark to those first encountering it from outside, from a world that often believes itself to be more "enlightened." Nevertheless, Richards insists that these "lives of short duration" are of no less value than any other.

Through a careful examination of Richards' fiction, I hope to delineate his social and moral vision, showing his emphasis on the worth of individual humans, to clarify how his technical skills are used in support of this oft-stated belief in the value of human generosity, and to suggest some possible explanations for the varied range of readings and misreadings to which his work has been subjected. The thesis will begin with an examination of Richards' own biography, restoring authorial experiences and intentions to the critical framework. This will be followed by a sampling from the spectrum of critical response and dissension and a discussion of some of the causes underlying such dissension. Admittedly, some of these interpretive approaches dwell on the margins of contemporary critical thought. However, I contend that the wilful ignorance of such notions as authorial "biography" and "intention" at least partially accounts for the misreadings to which Richards' texts are, in his own opinion, so frequently subjected. Having established the ground on which the dissension flourishes, I will examine Richards' development of characters--the

foundation of his project. The thesis will conclude with an analysis of Richards' narrative strategies, addressing both their effectiveness and some of the reasons why they are so frequently the site of misreading and misrepresentation.

Chapter 1--Points of Departure

Biographical Detail

Richards' emphasis on defending the "friends of his past" suggests that an examination of his past is essential to any full study of his works. Though biographical detail is often ignored in contemporary criticism, it seems impossible to discuss the work of David Adams Richards without defining exactly where he stands in relation to the world about which he writes.

Author of six novels, a collection of short fiction, a small book of poetry, and some unpublished scripts--for both stage and screen--David Adams Richards hails from Newcastle, New Brunswick and, in many ways, has never fully left there. He married a woman from just down the river, took the position of writer in residence at the University of New Brunswick, did much of his writing in the family cabin on the Miramichi River and, most significantly, set all of his work there. Richards says of himself: "I've been leaving and coming back [to the Miramichi] all my life" (qtd. in Fetherling 58). This sense of "home" surfaces in his fiction: his sympathies are clearly with those who cannot bring themselves to leave (Connor, "River" 273). As Philip Milner says, David Adams Richards is a local boy: he takes what he knows best and writes about it ("Yoknapatawpha" 4).

David Adams Richards himself embodies contradictions. It is important to clarify at the start that Richards is not the "backwoods savant" that he has sometimes been perceived to be. His parents were decidedly middle-class: the family ran the local cinema, beginning when Richards' grandparents were the in-house musicians during the days of silent film (Glover 11). Richards was "unusual" enough in his adolescence to be dubbed "the Homer of Harkins High" and he went on to attend university, where his writing was both encouraged and nurtured. At the same time, in a place the size of Newcastle, it was impossible for Richards to grow up "removed" or in any way distanced from all classes and types of people. Schooling would have brought children from all families together. The community itself was small enough to make passing acquaintance with most residents quite common.

Thus it is that Governor General's Award winning novelist Richards is also a practical hunter (i.e., he hunts for food, rather than for sport alone [Fetherling 58])--both woodsman and artist. Richards is both one of the people of the region and one who is different from them (French, "Celebration"). As Douglas Glover notes, Richards can easily go from discussing Keats' "negative capability" to discussing the finer points of moose hunting (10). Richards says of his work: "I'm writing to say something to myself as much as to anyone else, and if I ever get that half-right I'll be satisfied" (qtd. in Fetherling 59).

Richards first became interested in literature in his early teens. He was given an anthology of great Russian novels, which he read voraciously. He was an admirer of Dostoevsky and still mentions him, along with Tolstoy and Chekhov, when discussing literary influences. He often had poor grades in school, but he was writing and literature obsessed (Claus 28). At fourteen, Richards read Oliver Twist, which immediately triggered his interest in becoming a writer (qtd. in Garrod 211; Marchand).

He attended university, but dropped out to write full time. His first published work, while at university, included a chapbook of poetry, which, in tone and subject, prefigured much of his later fiction. Small Heroics (1972) is a collection of poems, some very short, others fairly lengthy, many of which address similar concerns to those he will later develop in prose fiction. Many also hint at elements of style he will employ, especially the juxtaposition and collision of precise, detailed images, and the presence of characters who rebel against conventional respectability (Connor, "Coming" 33).

At 23, Richards found himself a "recognized" writer. In 1975, he was described as a mildly rebellious "good-ole boy": a woodsman, fond of plaid shirts, wearing longish hair, carrying a crushed cigarette pack, who brought his own beer to an interview and slipped it into the journalist's fridge. At a University of New Brunswick writers conference,

he sang, unaccompanied, a lament for Brendan Behan--doubly affixing himself to a particular bardic tradition. Needless to say, students loved him: he dressed like they did, liked his beer and wrote stories in which characters were people they knew (Claus 25, 26).

The Coming Of Winter (1974) was his first novel. Blood Ties followed in 1976. His career continued to develop rapidly, the short fiction collection Dancers At Night (1978) filling a gap that occurred when he scrapped an early draft of a new novel and started again. Lives Of Short Duration, his third novel, finally appeared in 1981, and has been called everything from "more satisfying (from its powerful title on)" (Hoy 326) and "a novel of Faulknerian proportions and intensity" (Doyle 129) to "bloated" (Ricou 533) and full of "ceaseless repetition" that renders it "depressing" (Salamon). These earlier works show Richards experimenting with more complex, less conventional narrative strategies.

Road To The Stilt House (1985), the shortest of the novels, followed Richards' longest period of silence. It has been called the bleakest and most depressing of his novels, and has been often dismissed by critics. It is, however, despite its fatalistic paucity and erratic moments of very black comedy, an important work in that it marks a significant change in Richards' writing style. His

subsequent work has retained the clarity of prose and narrative structure first developed here.

Doug Fetherling once called Richards "famous for not getting quite the recognition . . . he deserves" (57). That changed with Nights Below Station Street (1988), which received the Governor General's Literary Award for English Fiction, beating the heavily favoured Margaret Atwood novel, Cat's Eye (Turbide). Richards' most recent work, Evening Snow Will Bring Such Peace (1990) is the second volume in a planned trilogy which began with Nights Below Station Street.

David Adams Richards' people are his message. As Sheldon Currie puts it, "what you are seeing is what is happening, it means itself" (66). He likes "writing about people with heart" (qtd. in Godfrey); his characters "are doing things . . . that the best part of themselves offers to the world" (qtd. in Glover 12). Because these stories are moved forward (or backward) by the perceptions, actions and memories of the characters, the nature of their lives must affect the presentation of those lives on paper. If the novels are fragmented, "incomplete" (in terms of conventional closure), vague, full of unrealized intentions, traumatized and disoriented, it is a reflection of the lives that inform the narration and the pressures to which those lives are subjected, particularly when they are so frequently defined by external values. Just as the novels

show strengths and unexpected subtleties upon closer examination, so do the lives Richards examines. That is his project.

Richards still writes from what he calls the "Dostoevsky method"--which Philip Milner describes as beginning with an incident or idea and letting the story tell itself ("Yoknapatawpha" 5). He revises but does not rewrite, insisting that rewriting would produce a whole new book--as happened with the aborted attempt at his third novel. Naturally, his style is affected by his revision habits. But, again, as Milner notes, his unpolished style is irrevocably tied to his subject ("Yoknapatawpha" 6), and his subject, from one book to the next, is unchanged. Though only the latter two novels have been marketed as part of an actual trilogy, in a very real sense all of Richards' work is an expansion of one story. As Milner makes clear, each book completes some action begun in another. Richards' books cannot be fully appreciated separately ("Structure" 201).

One of Richards' characters, Ivan Basterache, expresses surprise at the presence of profanity in books (Evening 81). In an interview, Philip Marchand asks Richards, whose works are liberally sprinkled with "dirty words," how he responds to an attitude such as Ivan's. Richards' response shows clearly his attitude towards his characters, and equally clearly displays his distaste for the pretentious:

When it comes from people like Ivan I'm really quite sympathetic towards it, because it isn't pretentious and it isn't full of that false sort of piety of little old ladies sipping tea.

It's sort of the idea, "I've never read books but they must be very good things."

In a way, that idea of books shows the nobility of a person like Ivan rather than the nobility of books.

For Richards, value resides entirely in people, not in objects, nor in the "refinements" of sophistication-- something he considers a middle-class pretension (Robb 25). There is no intrinsic value in the accouterments of culture. Nothing is of any worth without people. Regrettably, many people value possessions, education and money more than they do other people. They assume that people without possessions, education and money are not worth knowing. Richards has unceasingly condemned this attitude from the very beginning of his career. One of the epigraphs Richards employs at the beginning of Nights Below Station Street states the problem succinctly:

There is blood on their lips, you fight back, and
it's you they blame.

These words (written by fellow Maritimer Alden Nowlan) are from a piece entitled "Vampires." They summarize, uncompromisingly, Richards' evaluation of those who reject his people and their world.

Critical Dissension

As Alexander Gelley suggests, "readers of fiction are perfectly able to situate a fictive world in relation to their experiential life world" (xi). When the fictive world forces them to see both settings and people they have conveniently ignored in their "lived experience," there is often a scramble to find some "non-ideological" reasons for rejecting the fiction. Richards, as noted, feels that he has been misrepresented, in both reviews and scholarly studies (qtd. in Scherf, "An interview" 40). Reviewers may, perhaps, be limited by time and length: they must frequently respond quickly and very briefly to newly released material and write summaries designed for mass consumption and quick comprehension. Scholarly articles, however, are not subject to such restrictions, yet many academic critics perpetuate the same mistaken perceptions of Richards' intentions as those seen in newspaper and magazine reviews.

Misrepresentation of Richards' work takes three basic forms: criticizing the work for unnecessarily complex use of certain narrative strategies rather than addressing thematic issues as the real site of tensions; praising his work for demonstrating values to which it is fundamentally opposed; and omitting key contradictory examples from the formulation and discussion of theses on the work--what might be labelled academic misreading.

Similarly, there are three basic reasons for such misrepresentation: the scramble to find non-ideological grounds for criticism; legitimate confusion arising from either the critics' complete rejection of (hence unfamiliarity with) authorial intention or from Richards' own inability to make his intentions as clear to the reader as they are to himself; and simple sloppy reading.

A few critics have begun to make the case that misreadings of Richards' work reveal ideological assumptions, buried or overt, about his subject--the so-called "marginal poor." A notable example is Herb Wylie's¹ critical reading of Janice Kulyk Keefer's Under Eastern Eyes. Wylie suggests that Keefer, while astutely condemning one set of facile critical reductions concerning Richards, has subconsciously subscribed to another equally damaging condescension herself (5-15).

Keefer argues that Richards has relocated the "'canon of reality'" from the "civilized 'centre'" to the "backwoods 'region'" (176). Her intention is to show that this relocation is not always appreciated in the "civilized centre." However, as Wylie points out, Keefer, though proceeding with the best of intentions, betrays an underlying "centralized" distaste for Richards' "backwoods" people. Keefer, Wylie writes, addresses the fact that Richards has been "on the receiving end of a lot of condescension from reviewers," some of which "reflects a

conscious or unconscious class bias toward his subject matter" (5). However, her description of the industrial port of Newcastle as "backwoods"--along with other examples of diction--reveal her assumption of an "us" that is distinct from Richards' "them." Wylie cites the following: "in the work of recent Maritime writers new strategies have emerged to help us read the lives of the inarticulate and impoverished" (Keefer 161, qtd. in Wylie 7; emphasis mine).

Keefer insists that Richards is a voice for his inarticulate neighbors, a notion that, in Wylie's words, valorizes "a particular definition of articulateness--that which is the product of education" (8). Carrie MacMillan agrees: Richards' characters are inarticulate "in conventional terms," however, "speech, particularly the polite formulas and fashionable utterances of the middle class, can mask the true person" (190). Keefer also falls prey to an attitude shared by many evaluators of Richards' work: that his characters are passive slates upon which the realities of the region inscribe themselves, that they are victims of "an intolerably dreary, foreclosed reality" (170). Wylie challenges this assumption too: Richards' characters are "actors rather than objects of investigation" (14). Wylie argues that Richards' characters are frequently taken as regional representatives and that, since choices must be made and examples omitted in any definition of characters, the choices that are made reflect a "failure of

Evening Snow Will Bring Such Peace, Richards' characters "have trouble showing love, forgiving each other, or turning their back on family. Nothing unusual in that, except that people with more words at their disposal sometimes imagine they do a better job of it" (39).

It may seem that the issue of "educated" intolerance of the "unsophisticated, virtually illiterate" (Marchand) characters found in Richards' work is being over-stressed. Yet this is precisely the point. It makes the "educated" person uncomfortable to have such intolerance pointed out-- something Richards does in each of his encounters with journalists and academic critics. It is the response of the "centralized" critics that makes Richards most resemble the author to whom he is most frequently compared.

One cannot read even a small sampling of criticism concerning David Adams Richards without encountering the notion that (for those that like him) he has been influenced by William Faulkner or (for those that do not) that he is an inferior Faulkner imitator. Faulkner was often poorly received in his own lifetime, sometimes regarded by northerners as glorifying the poorer elements of society that were "atypical" of the U.S. (Broughton 37-8), sometimes as being, by nature of being southern-born, "incapable of working with the complicated concepts and high values that characterize great writing" (Broughton 37); southerners sometimes saw him as a local boy raiding the southern closet

the moment: Nazism, Stalinism and McCarthyism were all politically correct at one time and place or another as well, and literary criticism is in a constant state of flux, as the vultures hovering over the corpse of deconstruction throughout the latter half of 1990 seem to prove.² Pennee insists that the lives of the characters are static, all their movement merely an illusion created by Richards' "documentary camera" accumulation of shifting details (42-3). But the novel includes childbirth, marriage, divorce, two rescues in the midst of a winter storm, one man's triumph over alcoholism and the infusion of "city" values into the small town through the arrival of several younger, university-educated characters. Not exactly stasis, one would think.

Pennee concludes by criticizing the novel for showing only "the stuff of small-town drama and gossip," (as though the events named above never happen in cities) and for not "passing judgement on any of these dilemmas, or attributing blame or cause for them" (43). Yet, a few sentences later, she writes this: "Where the narrative does pass judgement is on those whose attempts at authenticity only expose their inauthenticity" (44). Pennee fails to see the relationship between the two. The blame for, and cause of, the dilemmas in the novel is attributed to those who overtly try to be authentic rather than simply accept the authenticity that is in themselves--those, like Vera Pillar, who subscribe to the

most trendy of theories and have "an answer for everything," as opposed to those like Joe, who, "with no promises," is becoming a new human being (Richards, qtd. in Glover 10). Pennee, it seems, is so concerned with criticizing Richards for not being in tune with the trends that she exposes her own "inauthenticity."

Richards is frequently commended for successfully presenting values he has no wish to present. As noted, he is often praised for being "a voice for the inarticulate," a value judgment which subtly implies that the critics so praising him are beyond the problems of personal expression so frequently faced by Richards' characters. Yet Richards flatly denies the notion that articulate expression comes more easily to the educated, or to those with well-balanced bank accounts. "I've seen very few people anywhere who are articulate about their private emotions," says Richards. The "inability to talk frankly," is as much a characteristic of the educated as it is of the illiterate. "I've seen more boot-licking malice in an English department of your average university than I ever saw on the streets of Newcastle," Richards continues (qtd. in Godfrey). He supports his view with an example from Nights Below Station Street: "Joe wouldn't know what the word altruism means, as Vera would, but certainly Joe is far more altruistic than Vera" (qtd. in Cook 52). Richards' point is not that the middle class are

no better than his people, but that his own characters are no worse.

Richards has also expressed dissatisfaction with the assumptions so frequently made concerning the economic status of many of his characters. John Bemrose wrote of the characters in Lives of Short Duration as the "poor" who "can approach life with an impetuous delight in simple things and a rude violence that middle-class society finds both repulsive and terrifying" (56). Yet, as Richards notes, "there are four millionaires" amongst the characters of the book and, in Richards' view, George Terri is unemployed by choice (qtd. in Scherf, "Regionalist" 166).

Richards states that many central Canadian critics misread his first novel and assumed that the work was "a study in poverty," when, in fact, most of the characters had jobs and were making good money. "The idea that my characters were poverty stricken," Richards insists, "comes from the misconception that if you work in the physical world, in forestry or fishing, for example, you must be poor" (qtd. in Marchand). Richards says reviewers misread him, not because the characters are poor, but because they "live in the physical world" rather than the academic world. "The academic world," says Richards, "treats this working world with a great deal of misplaced ideology and self-righteous falsehood." He also says that "Kevin Dulse was

called poor by critics who earn far less than he does" (qtd. in Scherf, "An interview" 40).

In fairness to the critics, there is little evidence in the text of The Coming of Winter to support Richards' assertions about Kevin's finances. Kevin's truck is twenty-one years old (9), the three-hundred dollars that he must pay in reparations for the cow he shot will make a sizeable dent in savings that took a year to accumulate (151) and he and John cannot afford both food and wine: they must buy one or the other and are broke after spending seven dollars (32, 29). Though H.W. Connor has bemoaned the fact that critics get distracted by Richards' skill in "capturing the details of life in his region," thereby missing "the psychological and symbolic depth beneath these surfaces" ("Coming" 31-2), this instance seems to suggest that, though Richards' intentions may be clear to himself, the surface details of his work can, occasionally, be counterproductive to the development of those intentions.

Another common misperception of Richards' world is that "physical" and "violent" are somehow inextricably linked, as though all those who work in the physical world must be essentially violent and all violence must be essentially physical. But, as Richards notes, violence "is used when people do not have power" and "there is violence before fists are ever used" (qtd. in Garrod 218). Jerry Bines physically pummels Arnold (Road 114-15); Cy Ramsey, the

night after Trendera has broken up with Arnold, persists in telling him all about the "kiddie porn" pictures her own father took and circulated (Road 47-8). Arnold is deeply hurt by both; the wounds from the physical beating are just more obvious. Throughout Richards' work, from when Pamela criticizes Kevin at his birthday party for having kept the cow incident a secret from her (Winter 151-52), to when Thelma Pillar, deliberately ignoring Adele's feelings (Ralphie, Thelma's son, and Adele's child having been adopted by Ralphie's childless aunt and uncle), talks about how much she looks forward to having a grandchild (Evening 10-11), his characters are exposed to a violence that has nothing to do with being physically abused--the persistent attempts of others to define and control them. This violence, it should be noted, is done to the characters as much by readers of Richards' work as by their fellow dwellers in Richards' fictional world.

It is not terribly surprising, given the aforementioned restrictions of time and space, that the writer doing a basic "review" for a newspaper may help propagate some of these flourishing misperceptions of Richards' work. One would suspect, however, that academic articles surveying Richards' career would be less prone to misrepresenting him. But this does not seem to be the case. Academic misreading may stem from a distaste for the vision Richards so doggedly insists upon presenting. Alternatively, it may be the

product of narrow readings, often characterized by omissions of character behaviours that do not support the critic's theoretical perspective. Admittedly, this is a common practice, and a necessary one, in academic study: one searches for examples that will support one's thesis or critical agenda. As Wylie notes, select examples must be chosen and many others omitted: work as densely textured as Richards' is "very difficult to reduce and convey in critical discourse" (11). However, Richards has so clearly and so frequently stated his own intentions that mistaking them would seem impossible.

George Byrne, writing in 1982, provides an example of this first sort of academic misreading. Byrne argues that Richards has drawn a clear line of demarcation between good and evil and that good is mostly female, evil mostly male (55). He further argues that the character of Orville embodies the hope for the future of the entire community--a man who learns to accept his "female" qualities (62). Though Richards had said, prior to Byrne's writing, that John was (for Richards himself) a more sympathetic character than Kevin (qtd. in Milner, "Yoknapatawpha" 5-6), Byrne defines John as "the local version of the embodiment of complete evil" (56). Byrne's argument was so poorly supported that it immediately drew a critical refutation from H.W. Connor. Connor notes Richards' professed fondness for John, and points out examples of "selective reading" on Byrne's part--

quotations from which necessary ellipses are omitted ("A Note" 144) and implications of violence attributed to a character who merely thinks violently but does not so much as speak, let alone act on his thoughts ("A Note" 148). When, in 1990, Richards defined what he would consider as "the most deplorable way" to approach his work--"that there are demarcation lines of good and evil in my work, and that the men are generally bad and the women are generally good" (qtd. in Scherf, "Regionalist" 159)--he precisely condemned the whole thrust of Byrne's argument.

The second sort of academic misreading can be found in a 1989 article by Frank Davey. He writes that Joe Walsh's attempt to stop drinking, in Nights Below Station Street, is "constructed as unsuccessful" (23) and focuses on how, following an accidental mistaking of vodka for water, Joe slips into drinking again. Davey cites several specific illustrations to show how Joe is, once again, caught in the deterministic discourse of the region. Davey somehow manages to miss that, on the same page of the novel as the one from which he draws a citation to prove that Joe is trapped, Richards has Joe pour out the remaining vodka in the bottle (Nights 224). Furthermore, as a consequence of the accidental drinking that brought Joe to the woods, Joe rescues Vye who gets lost during a blizzard. Davey sees the rescue (which happens by chance at the end of the novel) as further proof that the characters are incapable of giving

any deliberate shape to their lives (25), conveniently ignoring the fact that Joe is able to complete his rescue as at least a partial consequence of having not finished the vodka, of having thrown it away. Davey also seems to think that the manner in which the rescue is accomplished is more important than the fact that a human life was saved.

There is a third type of academic misreading for which no excuse can be offered. Philip Milner, who is one of Richards' greatest defenders amongst critics and reviewers, is, at the same time, frequently guilty of sloppy reading. In one article, Milner cites John Mills' review of Blood Ties, calling it a review of The Coming of Winter ("Yoknapatawpha" 6). In another, there is a series of errors, several committed in one paragraph. Milner somehow finds six generations of the Terri family in Lives of Short Duration when there are only five, calls Packet the son of Lois when he is, in fact, her older brother (there, one suspects, is the source of the "extra" generation), and says Lois won \$5,000 in the lottery when the actual amount was \$50,000 ("Structure" 206). In his worst error, Milner states that Packet "is murdered in an action that has so much suggestion and so little narrative that the reader cannot be sure exactly what has happened to him" ("Structure" 207). Compare the following passage from Janice Kulyk Keefer's Under Eastern Eyes: "Packet . . . has somehow broken his family chains, given up drink and drugs, and . . . lives on

the edge of the community" (173). Only the most cautious noting of several sentences voicing implications concerning Packet's life, spread at random throughout the novel, indicate that Packet's collapse on the streets of Victoria, B.C., the last action we see in the physical novel, is a collapse from over-consumption of alcohol and not the result of internal medical trauma, or external attack. Though the last we see of Packet seems to suggest he is near death, the last we see of him is not the temporal "end" of the novel. We are told, indirectly, that Packet and Emma Jane Ward II have returned from B.C. and now are contemplating marriage while together building a farm (Lives 8, 23, 31, 45, 217, 235, 270, 274, 275). Milner is, accidentally, correct--correct because he is confused. He, as reader, was not "sure exactly" what happened to Packet.

Critical readings of Richards' fiction are by no means consistent. Ironically, the absence of any clear critical consensus is an indication that Richards' overt intentions, the foundations of his project, are being successfully embodied in his writing. Though Richards appears increasingly frustrated with critical misunderstanding and misrepresentation (qtd. in Godfrey; Scherf, "An interview"; Scherf, "Regionalist"), in fact it is such misunderstanding that proves the effectiveness of his stylistic choices. As Soviet filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein suggests, an understanding of the creative process as a whole can only be

derived "from the external indications of its flow" (36). It is Richards' intention to change perceptions of his subject. His methods of doing so, however, do not create easy reading. He is being noticed, if not always positively, and his work is gaining an increasingly wider audience. The controversy that Richards has aroused, both the positive and the negative reviews, the critical misreadings and the comprehension of the nature of his vision--all are indications of the flow of his process. Seamless consensus challenges nothing.

Richards' increased success, his awards, and his wider profile as a Canadian writer whose work is worthy of serious consideration indicate a slight change in "public tolerance." Philip Marchand's carefully-worded article on Richards reflects this subtle shift in response to Richards' work. "My surprise that an author who writes so much about rural, working-class people should also read Cicero is doubtless the result of stereotyping," writes Marchand, neatly summarizing a prevailing attitude towards Richards' characters while gently mocking the inadequacies of his own vision of Richards himself. "Richards," writes Marchand, "is well known for his poignant novels and short stories about working people in his native New Brunswick." Further, he adds, "those of his characters who are bookish or intellectual tend to come off rather less well than his mill workers." Or, as Marni Jackson puts it, in reviewing

Evening Snow Will Bring Such Peace, Richards' characters "have trouble showing love, forgiving each other, or turning their back on family. Nothing unusual in that, except that people with more words at their disposal sometimes imagine they do a better job of it" (39).

It may seem that the issue of "educated" intolerance of the "unsophisticated, virtually illiterate" (Marchand) characters found in Richards' work is being over-stressed. Yet this is precisely the point. It makes the "educated" person uncomfortable to have such intolerance pointed out-- something Richards does in each of his encounters with journalists and academic critics. It is the response of the "centralized" critics that makes Richards most resemble the author to whom he is most frequently compared.

One cannot read even a small sampling of criticism concerning David Adams Richards without encountering the notion that (for those that like him) he has been influenced by William Faulkner or (for those that do not) that he is an inferior Faulkner imitator. Faulkner was often poorly received in his own lifetime, sometimes regarded by northerners as glorifying the poorer elements of society that were "atypical" of the U.S. (Broughton 37-8), sometimes as being, by nature of being southern-born, "incapable of working with the complicated concepts and high values that characterize great writing" (Broughton 37); southerners sometimes saw him as a local boy raiding the southern closet

for publishable money-making skeletons and exploiting stereotypes (an attitude shared by some of Richards' Newcastle neighbors and friends [Robb 25; French, "Celebration"])).

In 1975, Richards told Jo Anne Claus that his first (and still primary) influences were the Russians--Chekhov, Tolstoy and, most importantly, Dostoevsky (28). In 1986, he spoke about his inspiration by Dickens' Oliver Twist, and also mentioned Edgar Allan Poe, Dylan Thomas and W.B. Yeats as having been important to his own development (qtd. in Garrod 211-2). In 1988, Diane Turbide reported Richards saying that he was influenced by Thomas Hardy and Joseph Conrad. In a 1990 interview, Richards finally addressed the Faulkner issue, indeed the whole question of writers who have "influenced" him: "I can understand what they're saying about . . . the influence of William Faulkner, but I certainly write very differently from Faulkner" (qtd. in Scherf, "Regionalist" 156). For Richards, the most influential aspect of a writer is not the use of technical skills, but rather what he calls "writers' philosophies . . . ideas of what humanity could be in art" (qtd. in Scherf, "Regionalist" 156). He then restated his respect for the Russians and added Dante to the list of those whose philosophies influenced him. In any case, over-emphasis on a writer's influences can make the critic appear to play the fool. Richards has noted on several occasions, with wry

amusement, that when he was first criticized for being too heavily influenced by D.H. Lawrence, he had not yet read any of Lawrence's works (qtd. in Garrod 215; Scherf, "Regionalist" 156).

The larger question concerning critical response to Richards' work is not whether or not he is a "poor-man's Faulkner," but rather whether or not he is simply too narrow in focus to be at all relevant to a world outside New Brunswick. This charge of narrow "parochialism" is also a criticism levelled at Faulkner. Certainly, many critics think Richards is too limited in his vision. James Doyle says there is a Faulknerian sense of exotic exclusiveness in David Adams Richards (128-9). Ken Adachi, in his 1985 review of Road To The Stilt House, says Richards' "canvas is too small, his vision too parochial" to be universal.

However, the massive number of authors from various places and various times with whom Richards shares points in common (and to whom he has been compared)--some thirty or more, ranging from James Joyce to Alice Munro--seems to suggest that, though his subject matter and geographical setting are limited, he is by no means "valid" only in northern New Brunswick. Newfoundland novelist Kevin Major's characters may have never been to New Brunswick, yet they would feel right at home having a beer or two in the bar with Kevin and John or going in the woods hunting deer. Nor indeed is he valid only in Atlantic Canada. The fact that

his first novel was translated into Russian suggests that Richards has an appeal which transcends both nationalities and ideologies. As Keefer insists, "Richards's is truly a global village" (176). Marian Engel writes, in a review of Lives of Short Duration, that the anger displayed by the Terri family (indeed, by the whole neighborhood)--"You feel low, find someone lower than you . . . : burn, abuse, stomp"--is "not a pretty mixture but it's true of many parts of Canada." It is true of many parts of the world, including the Dickensian London inhabited by Oliver Twist. As William French says, Richards is as universally valid as any novelist: "the miniature scale of [his] world has no bearing on the breadth of his vision" ("Flowing"). Others state it even more simply: Richards' characters are locked in "the human struggle for love and belonging" (Turbide); the problems Richards' characters face "are common to the broad brave world outside" (Noonan 121). The repressive harm done by prior assumption and the evidence of human dignity in the face of adversity are undeniably universal themes.

All of this discussion begs one obvious question: do Richards' intentions and background at all matter? Some theoretical schools might insist that it would make no difference if Richards' intention were to compile the world's most definitive laundry list--it is the text and only the text that is relevant to its own meaning. The New Critical notion of the "intentional fallacy" often seems a

simplistic reduction. Here, it is absurd. Richards, unlike some authors, has been very vocal about his intentions. He clearly does not himself believe that authorial intention is irrelevant to textual interpretation.

On the opposite end of the critical spectrum, it might be argued that neither writer nor theorist can guide a reading: only the reader can derive meaning. This notion, as well, is too simplistic a reduction. It is precisely the wide spectrum of reader interpretation that has prompted Richards to become increasingly vocal in his interviews, and to alter substantially the style of his prose in the second decade of his career.

No single interpretive theory is sufficient. Richards' intentions are significant to the meaning of his texts; however, the texts themselves do not always appear to fulfil their creator's stated goals; the wide variety of reader interpretations of the texts prompts, in turn, a renewed, redoubled effort on Richards' part to clarify his intentions, both inside and outside the texts.

Richards' own attitude toward critical theory and its role in literature doubtless helps to maintain his frequently antagonistic relationship with those who interpret his work. In Richards' view, literary theory is something he feels "safe" in knowing little about (qtd. in Scherf, "Regionalist" 157), and the whole idea that he is writing a "great working class tract" (an idea he calls

"trash") is the product of an "academic middle class mentality" (qtd. in Scherf, "Regionalist" 167, emphasis in original). Critics, Richards insists, have a responsibility to answer the questions raised by authors: "Some of the more famous ones think they have a role to shape Canadian literature, and if this is the case, they should at least see what the hell a person is doing in his work" (qtd. in Scherf, "An interview", 40). Literary theorists are, apparently, dwelling in an even shakier stilt house than the one Richards wrote about, and critics, it seems, possess attention spans of short duration.

Richards' goals seem clear. Equally clear, however, is that a wide spectrum of responses to his work exists. We must now turn to analysis of the texts. As Richards himself has insisted, the place to begin is with an examination of the contradictions, complexities and contributions of the people who populate his world.

Chapter 2--The Ordinary Heroes

The foundation of Richards' project, his moral and social vision, is the worth of the individual, the essence of human generosity exemplified in his characters, what Canton called, in reviewing Evening Snow Will Bring Such Peace, "the resilience of the human spirit." Richards foregrounds both the dignity that plays some part in each person's life and the contradictions which make any universal evaluation (either affirmative, or, as it is far more frequently, negative) of these characters impossible. Richards wants to present a group of people who have been rejected, marginalized, dismissed and downtrodden, and to show those people possessing the same dignity that is usually attributed to heroes from the centres of power and literary discourse. Of course the reader must be made uncomfortable. Without discomfort, no questions are asked. If no questions are asked, there is nothing learned.

I have described Richards' fiction as being character-driven, and insisted that people are the foundation of his work. One of his primary methods of characterization is the device of showing characters performing acts or holding ideas which are intended to destabilize any perception of them as being one-dimensional, thereby denying the reader any easy generalizations about their natures. Yet, as noted even the most well-educated of readers and the most

"articulate" critics have ignored elements of characters which contradict their views of what Richards' fiction should be, rather than what it actually is. In this chapter, I will examine in detail several of Richards' characters and show how he has presented each. Particular attention will be paid to the manner in which Richards destabilizes perceptions of his people and establishes them, regardless of political correctness or theoretical trendiness, as individuals who perform both creditable and questionable acts--people who, at some point, offer the "best part of themselves" to the world, no matter how the world might disdain them.

The essence of Richards' attitude can be derived from one of his earliest published works, the title poem of his chapbook, Small Heroics:

They fan small wings to stay alive
Yet fire rages round their hive

In unison the choked bees die. (6)

Small heroics fascinate Richards; his characters perform them. The most significant intellectual challenges to any reader of Richards' fiction are situated in the "small heroics" performed by individual characters, foregrounded by the orchestrated juxtaposition and collision of images depicting their lives: from the unnamed tractor driver in one of Richards' earliest stories, "The Fire," who steers a tractor, in reverse gear, several miles into the forest, at night, using only "a flashlight, and guts, making the slow

journey alone" to fight a forest fire (106), to Ivan Basterache, the central figure of Richards' latest work, Evening Snow Will Bring Such Peace, who heads directly into a forest fire in an effort to rescue a horse that his family had owned for years (206-21), Richards has consistently valued the unselfish action, the moment of individual heroism that is so minuscule on a "world-class" scale that it usually passes unnoticed, or, worse still, is considered of minimal value by those critics who apply standards derived in a reality outside that of the region. These examples of "ordinary courage," writes Marni Jackson, need "a special witness" (39)--which role Richards' fiction fulfills.

Richards' narrative strategies combine to elicit an emotional and intellectual response. Shifting narrative voices dramatically force the reader to question who is providing the information and what right or qualification that individual has to so speak. The disjointed, fragmented narrative (as opposed to a smooth linear flow), the refusal to "tell" one clear story about a recognizably central character, in conflict with one other, or a series of peripheral antagonists, and the denial of a unitary, consistent and readily identifiable point of view resemble daily life. Speaking specifically of Arnold, perhaps his most traditionally "deprived" character, Richards insists that what he writes about, in essence, "happens to everyone"

(qtd. in Scherf, "An interview" 40): "he's faced with a dilemma and doesn't know how to get out of it" (qtd. in Garrod 219). It is the essence of humanity that Richards is aiming for, not a social manifesto. Put another way, Richards is not trying to examine what his characters need to change in their lives; he is trying to show the good in what is already present.

There are two basic methods by which Richards accomplishes the foregrounding of characters and their intricacies. One is the slow accumulation of detail: a compilation of character traits which seems to present a one-sided portrait of an individual is sustained long enough for the reader to be sure that the character can be compartmentalized as a particular "type" of person (often a negative judgment), then is called into question by a change in character behaviour or attitudes--often simply an unexpected act of kindness or unselfishness performed by a character whom the reader had long since dismissed as being incapable of such actions. This is a "large canvas" device, often developing subtly throughout the entirety of a novel. The second is more immediate: the juxtaposition of images--that which we earlier called "the verbal equivalent of cinematic 'montage.'" Images which are contradictory are placed in close proximity and the reader must resolve the ensuing conflict between and among them.

Perhaps the most subtle examples of the "large-canvas" technique are found in the "violent hierarchy" of apparently misogynistic male characters which develops throughout the fiction. Richards seems to follow a pattern in the development of these male figures: though they are, often overtly, presented negatively, one warring element, a counterstroke against the otherwise consistent canvas, always prevents the reader from seeing them as entirely negative. As Richards puts it, "I'm continually striving to show the underlying intentions behind surface action. . . . This is probably why I set up conditions where my characters on the surface seem unlikeable" (qtd. in Scherf, "Regionalist" 168). Richards allows the reader a great deal of time to form a one-sided opinion. Rather than present the contradictions in character side by side through immediate collision of contradictory images, Richards develops these characters over large spaces, almost invariably presenting them entirely negatively at first, then slowly introducing elements of their personal histories which, while not excusing their attitudes and behaviours, do much toward explaining their origins and force the reader to confront earlier assumptions made about the nature of the individual.

Cecil, the abusive husband of Leah in Blood Ties, is an example both of Richards' efforts to challenge our perceptions of characters, and of an instance in which Richards' stated intentions are not fully realized in his

work. Cecil is both violent and dangerous, in many ways resembling the "sovereign" type discussed by Michel Foucault (135-6), possessing the power within his family unit--power both to hurt or refrain from hurting. Cecil is at once sustaining and breaking down the patriarchal assumptions which inform his actions. Cecil marshals all the standard arguments used by men in defending their poor treatment of women: women are kitchen and bed slaves--she promised, her responsibility, my house so my decisions--but, through careful word choice and the overt opposition of another male character, Richards challenges Cecil's views while making the reader feel sympathy for him and for his wife, both equally caught in their marriage. Cecil presents his own side of the story and comes across, at first, as a fool who blames everyone but himself for his own troubles (40-51). He lies, he whines, he throws things. In the midst of defending the physical abuse to which he subjects Leah and Ronnie (his wife and child), Cecil insists on a code of honour which says one cannot take a man's last cigarette (51), a "nobility" which seems ridiculous when presented side by side with Cecil's defense of his right to violence, but at the same time shows him possessing a set of values, capable of thinking in terms of right and wrong, even if, at the moment, he is quite confused.

Maufat MacDurmot, Leah's step-father, is the male character who is most overtly disapproving of Cecil's

patriarchal posturing. He dismisses Cecil's beating of his child and harassing of his wife as "gutless" and senseless (29). When Cecil insists that Leah's rejection of her "obligation" to cook for him is a reason for his violent abuse, Maufat counters that a woman's refusal to cook for "her man" cannot be judged without hearing her side of the story (48). Thus, though Cecil himself supports the idea of male domination, of "owning" his family, his ideas are framed unfavorably. Unwilling, however, to completely reject or praise any one character, Richards then presents the one fact in Cecil's past which, if not excusing his behaviour, certainly accounts for some of his extremes: the explosion of the stove (which he was checking on Leah's insistence) that has disfigured him for life (54). Later in the novel, Cecil is seen acting unselfishly in both the car-accident scene (236-43) and in the section which frames his memories of the accident: he behaves generously during Leah's final departure when, despite Cecil's current rehabilitation--new employment and such--she leaves him (233-44).

Richards speaks very highly of Cecil, insisting that Cecil's love for Leah is clear, despite the fact that he throws their son Ronnie against the stove, kicks Leah out of the house and locks the door (qtd. in Garrod 225). Though it is, certainly, Cecil's confusion about their steadily decaying marriage that prompts his outburst, it is not his "tremendous love for Leah" that is obviously implicit

beneath the overt acts of violence in this scene (28-33, 40-51). Kathleen Scherf challenges Richards defense of Cecil in an interview: "Cecil didn't just push [Ronnie] out of the way . . . he smashed the kid against the bloody stove" ("Regionalist" 170). Richards evades the challenge, insisting that "Cecil through three quarters of the novel acts with dignity and some humanity toward other people" and that he "doesn't need my forgiveness or, I might add, yours" (qtd. in Scherf, "Regionalist" 170). Richards considers that Cecil behaves well in the aftermath of the car accident in which he and his friend Shelby are involved (qtd. in Garrod 219). He does not mention, however, that, when the accident happens, the lads are drunk, cruising around on a Christmas Eve, looking for "some woman" (Blood 240-1).

Richards explains why he considers Cecil no worse than anyone else:

My whole idea of violent action starts from the spoken word, which can be the cruelest, most cutting, most indefensible weapon around. . . . If people take offense at Cecil and his violence, they must also take offense at the spoken word that sometimes causes his violence (qtd. in Garrod 219)

His intentions are clear, yet, ultimately, one must conclude that the Cecil of the novel is not quite as noble as the Cecil of Richards' intentions. We must also remember that Cecil is one of Richards' earliest creations. The techniques with which Richards tries to render Cecil sympathetically become more polished as his career progresses. Though Ivan

Basterache is, in many ways, much like Cecil, he is, as Richards draws him in Evening Snow Will Bring Such Peace, much more immediately admirable.

George Terri, of Lives Of Short Duration, seems even worse than Cecil. Equally violent, George is a braggart who believes fully in the business world of men (13-15, 219). When things do not go his way he takes a swing at his new girlfriend (5) or performs other acts of violence to improve his mood, such as burning the bridge which links the Terri property with Lester Murphy's (6-7). He demeans his own daughter (14), makes drunken leers and passes at women (27-8), and lies about his war experiences--an act of bravery which saved his life is transmuted into an act of his own bravery, even though the man who saved him still lives across the river and can give the lie to George's story at any time (40-1, 34).

There appears no justification for George. But, in typical Richards fashion, the root of George's misogyny is finally explained. His attitudes toward women have been greatly influenced by his ex-wife, Elizabeth Ripley Terri, who, it is suggested, made herself the main attraction at their roadside restaurant (116, 132), sometimes leaving their children to run the place while she did so. Included among her beaux is one of George's best friends, Lester Murphy--the man who saved George's life in the war (132). Suddenly, though not excused, some of George's more extreme

attitudes are explained. It seems clear that the explanation is intended only to foreground contradictions in George's character, not to excuse his actions, as the treatment George receives from Richards after we know the source of some of his attitudes is no different from that which preceded the revelation: he is still a figure capable of all manners and actions--as are all of Richards' characters.

When George discovers his wife in bed with Lester, he goes on a drunken binge in which he visits a prostitute and tries to "do something" to her with her statuette of the Virgin Mary (134). Later, he opens a whorehouse, selling the sexuality of Indian girls, and is offended when Old Simon and Daniel Ward show up to make him stop. "'What's wrong with it?'" asks George. "'Everyone has a good time,'" and there is "'good money in it'" (142). George takes money from Lazarus Masey to help in the search for Masey's missing child, and then, after searching for three hours, goes into town to buy spare parts for his car (144-45). However, even George has his moments of being atypical. Surprisingly, George uses condoms in a time when they were not at all fashionable and decidedly not the "male image" (171). An unusually pleasant George actually thanks Lois for the money she has kicked into "his" parties--a rare admission that the luxury the Terris enjoy following Lois' Atlantic Loto win of \$50,000 does not stem from his own ingenuity (169). And, left alone in the house following the news that his father's

body has finally been found (Old Simon wandered into the woods on the first of November, unwilling to face a slow death in a hospital in St. John), drunk, ill, and lonely, George actually cries (51). As George Woodcock notes, George Terri sees some points of his life with "a special visionary brightness" ("Fires" 14), especially in recalling his father immediately after hearing the confirmation of Old Simon's death (46). One begins to sympathize with George as he becomes more clearly a man who has been cheated as often as he has been the cheater, more clearly a man who is gregarious, outgoing and lively, but is never as successful as he thinks he can be.

Arnold, the controlling consciousness of Road To The Stilt House, seems at first a pathetic, posturing punk. He considers that a little blood might be the way to deal with his girlfriend Trendera's "desertion" (8). He buys a knife, in case he sees her with anyone else (21). Arnold's only real violence, however, is self-directed (27) and the police confiscate his new knife before he ever gets near to using it (21). Richards' use of first person narration challenges this early image of Arnold as primitive-man-with-knife, often allowing us to see Arnold's consciousness as articulate and sensitive: a total contrast to the rotten teeth and endless street-punk poverty we see in him from the outside (138). Indeed, far from being a man "in control" of anyone or anything, Arnold often appears to be "a spectator

in his own life" (Potyondi), and is ridiculed for his unselfish ideas (85).

In Nights Below Station Street, Joe Walsh is a positive model of a man overcoming his problems. From the start, he is presented with some dignity (7). His attempts to beat alcoholism are made secretly because he does not want to set up false hopes in his family. Richards makes us see him sympathetically as Joe's daughter, Adele, repeatedly treats him with utter disdain. Joe stutters: both his wife, Rita, and Adele habitually finish sentences for him, one of the most insulting things that can be done to someone with a speech impediment (73).

But Joe has a history. He has come close to setting the house on fire, falling into drunken comas holding lit cigarettes (8). Adele used to go out hunting for Joe in neighborhood ditches (61). He once left Adele in a truck outside the bar while he was supposed to be babysitting her and got so drunk that he forgot the truck, and Adele, and walked home (62-3).

Having established Joe's sins, Richards returns to building sympathy for him. Adele is caught shoplifting--for the second time. Rather than chastise her, Joe apologizes to her for his own mistakes, the hurt his alcoholism has caused the family (74-5). In the drunken past, Rita would beat Joe till he bled over lost money (110). As George Woodcock points out, people take advantage of Joe ("Too Often" 130):

he is occasionally hurt by actually believing that people mean everything they say, especially when they make empty promises to help him get work (104). His first attempt to quit drinking is broken by Rita's brothers, who then get mad at the inevitable consequences (122-25). Joe always believes things could be worse (196) and this fundamental optimism sees him through the numerous times when he does what people seem to expect of him, only to find they are angry, disappointed or unsatisfied with him. A classic example of Richards' "small heroics" in character development can be seen in Joe's taking a job as bar bouncer, facing the huge temptation to begin drinking once more in order to earn money and contribute to the family (196). Throughout the course of the novel's climactic action, Joe's dignity, beset and tested, remains intact. He is the strongest of the male characters Richards presents: by no means perfect, but quite clearly evincing the human generosity which Richards values so highly.

Richards' female characters are equally complex. Richards believes a male author can create female characters "by being human. . . . The way you think and proceed and want to give and want to hope and want to love, all that's pretty well the same" (qtd. in Scherf, "Regionalist" 165). Perhaps the best of Richards' female characters (certainly one of his own favorites [qtd. in Garrod 216]) is Lois Terri, of Lives of Short Duration.

Lois possesses a totally open sexuality. She tells the nuns who run a home for "wayward" girls: "I jus like ta screw" (236). She has three children by three different fathers (59). Lois has had marriage proposals but rejected them, unwilling to marry a man she felt wrong for her (217). In Lester Murphy's memory of her childhood, Lois was doomed by her precocious sexuality (174). Yet, though drunk from a Hallowe'en evening on the town, Lois immediately moves to take care of Old Simon when she encounters him escaped from the hospital (102-3). When she finds her grandfather, she is wearing a witch's costume: a layer of disguise, perhaps, is peeled away by her treatment of Old Simon. We are not allowed to dismiss Lois as "loose," or "selfish." The poem she has on her wall is apparently in total contrast to the daily details of much of her life, yet it reveals her values:

Begin the day with friendliness,
 keep friendly all day long,
 keep in your soul a friendly thought,
 in your heart a friendly song.
 Have in your mind a word of cheer
 for all who come your way
 and they will greet you too, in turn
 and wish you a happy day! (203)

Its simple diction and sentiment show a side of Lois that the realities of human interaction sometimes will not let her show. She can be neither fully praised nor fully condemned.

Lois' mother, Elizabeth Ripley Terri, sleeps with a series of men, including her husband George's best friend.

But has George been any more reasonable in his behaviour toward her, in his expectations of her? George often expects Elizabeth to run the restaurant, do the books and bring up the kids while he either cooks or just goes drinking with friends and customers who come in (115, 132). Elizabeth Ripley Terri is not a mature person: she is seen fighting with her own child over a chocolate bar (131), and gets the mentally-retarded boy across the road to strip for her, later claiming he was the instigator (158). She is also prejudiced against the Indians, believing that there are enough "bucks" for the "squaws" so that Packet (her son) does not need to have any Indian female friends (185). Finally, she complains that George does not beat the kids properly--so the marks do not show when they go to church (237). But, as Merium, her mother in law, says of Elizabeth: "'in her own way,' she tried" (137)--it is a fair summary of Richards' attitude to all these lives.

Just as Road To The Stilt House contains the most violently unregenerate male character, Jerry Bines, so it gives the most fully drawn negative female character--the aptly named Trendera--who is, in everything, entirely for herself. Trendera lies about the theft of Mabel's purse. Her lie is not fully explained until Norman takes over as the narrating consciousness of the novel: Trendera blames Norman in order to throw off suspicion that she has been secretly having sex with him (10, 77, 149-50). When Trendera tells

people that Arnold is simple-minded, the first-person narration through which Richards has developed Arnold as an almost poetically fatalistic philosopher of poverty foregrounds her act as one of selfish cruelty (53).³

Trenda, however, like all the dwellers in Richards' world, is allowed her chance to offer the best of herself to the world: she stops Jerry from continuing his savage beating of Arnold, at that time saving Arnold's life (115).

Adele Walsh, as Nights Below Station Street opens, is an arrogant, whining teenager (7-12). She orders her father around the house, instantly yelling if her demands are not met (9-10). The word "screech" is used so frequently to describe her manner of speaking that the mere presence of the word on the page begins to have a negative connotation. She believes anything different must be better (33). Adele tries to shock Joe by telling him she will "live with" her boyfriend, Ralphie. Joe responds by quietly admitting that his own parents were never married, and Adele is upset because Joe is not (34-5). She hates the house to be dirty but never lifts a finger to clean it (84-5). Unfortunately, she sees herself as a flawless judge of character (121).

Adele's image begins to shift, very slightly at first. When her peers tease her about not drinking, she does not immediately tell the story of Joe's "sins" as a defense of her own choices (52). Then we see her friends use her shamelessly after Ralphie gets an apartment. Ruby is

especially manipulative in this way (51-4, 89-90). Adele also helps the epileptic Cindi when the friends she craves are publicly embarrassed by her seizures (52-3, 142-3). Adele disappears from the "front lines" of the novel for several chapters: we are told that she begins attending mass daily and becomes more reclusive, especially modest about sexuality (145). Though we do not know it until very late in the text, she is pregnant and bearing the burden of the knowledge entirely on her own, which may, as Woodcock suggests, account for her frequent rages and mood swings throughout the second half of the text ("Too Often" 130).

Adele frequently treats Joe with contempt, no matter how often he offers the olive branch to her. When he asks forgiveness for the sins of his alcoholic past, she merely replies: "I see" (76). Surprisingly, then, Adele is happy when Ralphie gets a job where Joe used to work (194). It is only when Joe is clawed with a hammer in the course of performing his "bouncer's" duties that Adele, her consciousness modified by her own keeping of secrets, accepts Joe totally and sacrifices her squeamishness over blood in the dressing of his wound (199).

Thus far, we have concentrated on the "large canvas," the slow revelation of detail that serves to change readers' first impressions of many of Richards' characters. His most effective foregrounding of the contradictions inherent in every life, however, is done at a very minute level of his

work. Not content with calling reader perceptions of character into question only through large-scale devices such as he employs in his series of violent male characters or through his differing perspectives on the same events, Richards attacks complacency in the reader, providing what William French calls the "antidote to middle-class smugness" ("Desolation"). By combining images that conflict and raising contradictions, sometimes within individual sentences, Richards undermines and unsettles all assumptions that can be made about his people and forces the reader who is willing to accept the lesson to see what H. W. Connor calls "a spiritual intensity that runs counter to the soul-killing social circumstances that make up the surface of their lives" ("Coming" 32). There is beauty and dignity alongside squalor and selfishness--at all levels of society.

Richards' use of "verbal montage" can be separated into four categories, employed for four purposes. Through careful juxtapositioning of images, thoughts, speeches and actions, Richards highlights discrepancies between thought and action, between action and action, between thought and thought and between image and reality. These discrepancies are employed to foreground biased assumptions, to highlight impossible choices that certain characters face, to develop thematic statements in a manner other than overt authorial intrusion and to show moments of dignity and spontaneous generosity in the lives of individual characters.

Discrepancies between action and action keep the reader unsettled about character evaluation. Discrepancies between thought and action are fairly common at all levels of society: the poor have no monopoly on hypocrisy. Indeed, Richards would argue that hypocrisy is an invention of the powerful, not the powerless. Discrepancies between thought and thought are a natural consequence of the character-driven narration and serve particularly well to foreground biased assumptions: as we come to see the mental processes of Richards' people, we also learn to see the reasons for their actions and professed attitudes. When these conflict within one person, the reader is forced to see the individual as a complex entity--not merely the one-dimensional stereotype of a garage mechanic, a mill worker, or even a town drunkard. Discrepancies between image and reality serve to draw attention to one of the world's most troublesome problems--the prevalence of image-consciousness as a key factor in decision making.

Discrepancies between actions begin immediately in the first novel. Kevin shoots a cow, mistaking it for a deer. It might be expected that, realizing the consequences of his action, Kevin might desert the scene before he can be accosted by the cow's owner. Instead, he stays (Winter 7-8). John, after assorted misogynistic comments, says he loves Julie. This avowal, however, is first expressed as "I love that bitch" (Winter 184). In one of the most ridiculous and

simultaneously frightening examples of incongruous actions, a group of boys, many of whom are members of the town's "elite," chase Dane's brother, whom they think is a homosexual, yelling "stay away from us" (Dancers 140). If they want him to stay away, why do they keep pursuing him? Lives Of Short Duration, as always, provides many illustrations. It is rife with contradictions in character actions. George opens the novel by burning the footbridge that links his property with Lester Murphy's; he then disparages Lester as an arsonist (7-8). Karen Brown attempts suicide and, when that fails, goes in for cosmetic surgery (36). Lois offers Beth kindly health warnings about her pregnancy while passing around the hash oil (38). George will kick open Packet's locked room but never enter it (75).

Because intentions are so significant to a full understanding of characterization, discrepancies between thoughts and the actions growing out of them are particularly revealing. John Delano, both in The Coming of Winter and in Blood Ties, is remarkably perceptive about the way friendships work. He is also capable of being savagely selfish about his part in them. Realizing that he has caused a breach between Kevin and Pamela, he goes on to encourage Kevin to beat Pamela in order to solve their impasse (Winter 28-9). Knowing that Kevin would like him to compliment Pamela, he refuses. Conversely, when he re-enters Pamela's apartment, John removes his boots without being told because

he knows she wants it that way (Winter 122). Kevin's mother, Rubena, buys Kevin a new rifle for his birthday, days after the cow-shooting incident, explaining her decision with a wonderfully humorous phrase: "I don't mind him hunting . . . as long as he don't shoot no animals" (Winter 138). The rifle is a poor choice of gifts, particularly since, in light of Kevin's impending marriage, other gifts would be more practical, yet it is given with love (Winter 157). In a scene of marvelous irony, after a mass celebrated in an empty church, Orville steals candles while the priest natters on about disrespect and eternal damnation (Blood 161-5). Orville's motivation, though, is shown to be a desire to possess some physical portion of what he perceives as the power of the church.

Similarly, discrepancies either voiced or within the thoughts of characters--uncertainty, conflicting beliefs or intentions--serve to challenge one-sided views of these individuals. John is outraged at the thought of Walkie hiring his wife out as a prostitute; however, his outrage is at the thought of sex with Mammie, not at the thought of a man selling his wife's sexuality (Winter 33). Cecil thinks "to hell with her" as Leah has, once again, left the house and his violence; despite this rejection, he finds he cannot stop thinking of her (Blood 135-7). Leah herself feels sympathy for Cecil, whom she wants to hate (226). Father Gordon is called, by one of his Indian parishioners, a

"white bastard" who is a "good priest" (Dancers 101). Jerry Bines devotes his intellect to planning a means of escape for the next time he is in prison, rather than planning how he might stay out (Road 59).

Finally, there is the difference between an image and the reality underlying it. The Indians show a fierce pride in being Indian, despite the economic and social poverty that characterize their existence (Dancers 95). Ceril Brown, for all his advances in business and society, still urinates in the bushes (Lives 29). Little Simon is one of the only people in the town who can be banned from the tavern for his actions while sober (Lives 177).

Perhaps the strongest example of discrepancy between image and reality is portrayed in the character of Arnold. He looks pitiful: five foot, two inches tall, tattooed, with rotten teeth and dirty clothes, Arnold carries the appearance of someone with no mental abilities whatsoever. Yet his consciousness is aware of ironies, sensitive to nature (like so many men in Richards' fiction), and sometimes almost poetic. Even if Arnold cannot name "nihilism," "existentialism" or "fatalism," he is conscious of them as values relating to the life he is forced to lead (Road 9, 33, 53, 105, 156).

These various discrepancies, then, serve to challenge the perceptions of the reader. Richards refuses to let the reader feel superior to the subjects of the fiction (Moss

293-4). No one can be seen as being entirely "good" or "bad." Each person is presented as a complex mixture--actions conflict, thoughts conflict, and "assumed" images are shown to be false, whether they are "good" fronts or "bad" ones. No reductive evaluation is applicable to any individual. Richards himself says of Joe's struggle to quit drinking: "what he has to do . . . to be himself, is not to drink. I mean, that's not for everyone, but for Joe" (qtd. in Cook 52). Donna Pennee has accused Richards of believing that, by writing from the Mirimachi, rather than from some distanced "ivory tower," he will achieve guaranteed authenticity. She insists that "all" discourse is enculturated" and questions the authority of anyone to say where "authentic moral discourse" can be found" (44, emphasis in original). However, Richards says that Joe's moral commitment is "for Joe alone" (qtd. in Cook 54). He is in no way attempting to make a prescriptive statement of universal authenticity grow out of the example of one character. He subscribes to no single "ism"--not even social realism.

As noted, this "verbal montage," the joining of neutral depictive images, serves to foreground some of the assumptions common to the community in which his characters live--attitudes and beliefs that inform the daily lives of the individuals that populate the area, the "regional

discourses." A powerful example is found in Richards' treatment of the "Indian issue."

Mrs. Ripley speaks the "white" line in the story "Safe in the Arms": poverty is a problem for everyone, she insists, but more so with the Indians (Dancers 123). Her hypocrisy is foregrounded by her solicitous comments to Father Gordon as he picks up the old clothes she has donated to the Reserve clothing drive and how these pious sentiments contrast with the bitter truth her ailing mother tells Father Gordon: Mrs. Ripley will not let the children receive communion from Father Gordon just after he has been to the Reserve in case there are any "Indian germs" on his fingers (124). Ironically, while she takes such precautions in the home, her teenaged son Tom is already notorious among the men of the area for going down to the Reserve every night "ta get into the little squaw's pants" (116). In truth, the prejudiced views spoken by whites of Indians are restated by Indians of whites: everyone is equal (127).

This foregrounding of the marginalized status of the Indian is continued in Lives Of Short Duration. White men chuckle at subservient Indians, then become subservient themselves, whining and wheedling in the same way to their bosses (84). As French points out, the whites condemn the Indians for over-drinking, while evincing the same lack of control themselves ("Flowing"). Havlot Peterson's violent attack on Lazarus Masey is based on the erroneous assumption

that Masey, like the woman with him, is an Indian. The fact that Peterson cannot at first tell the difference between a poor white boy and a poor Indian boy, and then, once told, does not seem to care, suggests the differences are not as distinct as established attitudes would have us believe (67-8). Perhaps the strongest and most overt comment on the conditions of Indian life comes when the TV news, focusing on the world at large, reveals third world poverty to be no different from the lives of the Indians on the Miramichi Reserve. Anne Murray appears on TV, illustrating the living conditions of the third-world poor: Old Simon hears of "children with flies crawling over their body, as he'd seen them crawl over Daniel Ward's children in Daniel Ward's house" (107).

One of the most important sites of conflict in all of Richards' work rises out of a clash in regional discourses--framed in the action of his first novel, The Coming of Winter. Kevin is pulled in conflicting directions, by his best friend John, who does not want to accept the changes forced upon him by the passage of time, and by his fiancée, Pamela, who is pulling Kevin, no less violently, in the direction of socially conventional behaviours. "Verbal montage" brings into sharp focus the impossible choices that are often faced by characters in these sorts of situations, when, seemingly, no matter what one chooses to do, one will be perceived as having done wrong.

Pamela condemns the drunken ramble that Kevin and John engage in following Andy's death. Drunken wakes degrade the memory of the deceased, she insists (44). Kevin responds: "Everyone I know gets drunk when someone dies, so I don't care what in hell you think" (44), thereby displaying two assumptions of the "regional discourse" at once--drunkenness is the response to death, and women are not supposed to challenge men. One is supposed to go "a little strange," Kevin insists. "For whose benefit?" counters Pamela (45). Her steady, calm questioning, a complete contrast to the actions of John and Kevin in the immediately preceding pages, serves to undermine these assumptions. Kevin's immediate reliance on the "truth" of these "discourses" both shows their prevalence and the extent to which he is defined by them. At the same time, we must not lose sight of the fact that, while Pamela is much more "refined" than John, she is, in essence, treating Kevin exactly as John does, pressuring him to accept her world-view.

H.W. Connor puts it this way:

Pamela . . . is responsible and has almost too few vices; she is respectable by small-town standards and superficially seems a more attractive character than her deeply troubled adversary [John].

Nevertheless, Pamela is very much a part of a course in life that represents the death of the soul The wildness of youth is totally foreign to her nature; yet she is very much aware of it in Kevin and his friends and regards it as something to be suppressed. ("Coming" 36-7)

Richards agrees, saying "Pamela is every bit as violent,

. . . every bit as manipulative and controlling as John she just does it in socially acceptable ways" (qtd. in Scherf, "Regionalist" 162, emphasis in original). But, despite finding John "far more interesting spiritually" (qtd. in Harder 17), Richards also thinks "a lot of what [Pamela] says is absolutely right" (qtd. in Scherf, "Regionalist" 162). As Connor concludes, this "is not a debate; no one can win" ("Coming" 37). There is no universal "right" or "wrong" in either John's refusal to accept the passing of time and the inevitable changes of life, or in Pamela's complete conformity to socially respectable norms. Harry Thurston insists that Richards' characters are not crusaders: "their concern, as for most of us, is the day-to-day interactions with those closest to them" (12). These impossible choices are part of everyone's lives: as Dennis Duffy says, the reader's distance from Richards' characters "is social and economic rather than moral" ("Losers").

Kevin tries to make Pamela understand his need to look after John: "not apologize for it but rather make her understand the position he was in" (45). He also tries to make John understand his attitude toward Pamela (26-9). He wishes to be with John and the boys during the birthday party given him at home (158), then when he is with "the boys"--John, Bruce and Boyd--he wishes he were with Pamela again (191). The question is, of course, unanswerable. There is no way to reconcile the mutually contradictory demands

placed on Kevin by his two closest friends. It becomes, therefore, much harder to condemn what first seems like inexcusable behaviour on Kevin's part: what looks like overt misogyny may be, instead, the confusion that many young people feel when they first face the inevitable reality of growing older. No matter how often Kevin boasts and swears, insisting that he will be just the same as he always was after the marriage, he knows he will not be and he enters the marriage reminded of this fact by John himself (249).

The same sort of impossible choice is faced by Leah in deciding whether or not to leave Cecil. She claims it would be unfair to deprive Ronnie of his father, yet, given that Ronnie has been the target of Cecil's violence even more than Leah has, it seems equally unfair to him to stay (Blood 33). Leah must decide for two people, and must conquer not only her fear of Cecil, but also her fear of leaving, of breaking the routines of her life (227). The decision is further complicated by her feelings of guilt over saving every cent she could get, stinting on grocery shopping, housecleaning and everything else, to put into her "getaway" fund (227). Worst of all, by the time she struggles her way into a more or less independent financial position, Cecil has, to some degree, straightened out. He has, at last, gotten a job. Therefore, as Leah tries to decide the best course of action, she is tortured by the thought that, try as she might, she cannot hate Cecil and, try as she might,

she cannot rid herself of the feeling that she chose whatever pain and suffering she has endured by not, as her friend Mary did, leaving when she was still a teenager (229).

The final, and most important use of "verbal montage," is to foreground thematic statements. It is through this repeated collision of individual depictions that the intellectual context which has been Richards' goal all along is achieved. The reader is repeatedly reminded that hasty generalizations about any individual are simply not acceptable. Characters have dignity, occasionally beauty, no matter how sordid and squalid their surroundings. As Morton Ritts puts it, "adversity and deprivation" are contrasted with "meaningful values" and "self-worth" (60).

Betty, at forty-four, bemoans being pregnant again. At just that moment, Orville enters with his snared rabbits. For Betty, pregnancy is a trap (Blood 125-6). Kopochus, of "Kopochus 1825," dies as a result of his own insistence on fighting to prove himself (Dancers 78). The thematic values implicit in these constructions are clear.

In "A Rural Place," another of the Dancers At Night stories, the old woman, Janie Bell, is suppressed all her life by the demands of patriarchy: her life is ruined because she cannot reveal the identity of the man who made her pregnant--her cousin's husband. Fearing both his violence and the consequences for the traditional family he

has built, Janie lives her entire life like a servant in their home while never betraying Bennie's secret. Bennie and Isabel even make Janie's child call Isabel "Momma." Janie's case seems to support completely a one-sided patriarchal philosophy--until we realize that, in shifting the point of view while presenting the story, Richards is allowing Janie her own voice to tell, at last, the truth of how she was repressed and defined. Thus the scene in which Bennie, like so many men, thinks a gift will make up for the insult he has delivered Janie in forcing sex on her (Dancers 18) can now be interpreted through Janie's perception: "He'd lied to himself all his life" Janie says (26). Because she is finally given her own voice through the interior monologue of the story, we are allowed to see what the family, indeed the culture, had hidden. Janie Bell is no longer the "loose woman" who had a secret child out of wedlock and alienated her own family with her inconsiderate ways. Each shift into her memory not only serves to foreground her own story but also contrasts strongly with the obnoxious lads who surround her, making endless sexual comments about the ninety-six year old woman and who, when they are not talking sex, perform "helpful" acts such as throwing one man's equipment into the river--just for fun (22).

In "We, Who Have Never Suffered," Richards creates perhaps the most succinct statement of his controlling purpose through this method. Denis Bryan condemns the old

men in the bar for their drunkenness, but he is drunk himself (Dancers 81). Denis keeps talking about the advances they have made, about how there is no need for people to be as poor as those who surround the two men in the bar. Yet it is Denis, representative of the upper class elite, who, drunkenly screaming at his friend, Steven--"Was it good . . . fuckin my wife?"--gets the two ejected from the bar (89). Denis and Steven part, Denis, the advanced one, screaming "You mindless hypocrite . . . You lifeless son of a whore" after his ex-friend as they part. Steven's final act is to blunt the endless repetition of "isn't it good to know we're all the same" with a large dose of marijuana which helps him laugh the implication off (90).

The device is also used effectively in Road To The Stilt House. D.O. Spettigue comments that the "apparently benevolent intentions" of Billy (the priest) and Juliet (the social worker) are met with violence (369). Even in these overtly good intentions, Richards buries contradictory elements. A hundred years ago, Oscar Wilde wrote that "the best amongst the poor are never grateful. They are ungrateful, discontented, disobedient and rebellious. They are quite right to be so" (4). Wilde was not speaking frivolously, for the sake of wit. These "apparently benevolent intentions" provide inadequate answers to the family's problems: forgiveness and stoicism do not improve much in their impoverished lives. Juliet's habit of always

blaming Arnold for his attitude does not work either (31). Billy and Juliet (even the grouping of names seems designed to grate on the reader's expectations) disagree with each other on what is best for the family (33). As Arnold perceives, Juliet has her own problems--she cannot be expected to produce miracles which will solve theirs (38). He is embarrassed that Juliet knows every detail of their lives when they know nothing of hers (72-3). Billy says be true to yourself, find God and forgive (68-9). They are true to themselves, but fights start anyway, always: on one occasion, Juliet gets punched--Arnold is blamed though it is he who gets her a cloth and tries to help her clean up (75-6). It is never clear if he really was responsible. In the fatalistic view of this novel, it really does not matter. As David Williamson summarizes it, the only answer to lives of this sort seems to be death.

The collision of expectations that Richards makes us see, when Joe, intending to give Adele a lecture when she has been caught shoplifting for the second time, instead apologizes to her for his own mistakes in his alcoholic past, exemplifies well Richards' slightly altered style in Nights Below Station Street (70-5). That Joe realizes he has no moral authority from which to pontificate about Adele's errors in judgement is a clear foregrounding of Richards' thematic values. We can all make mistakes; we can all show dignity. Sometimes the latter will appear when we recognize

our responsibility for the former. But, most importantly, none of us--Joe, the reader, the critic--is in any position to make sweeping value judgments about anyone else's life.

These moments of dignity, as noted, are the foundation of Richards' project. Richards intends to make the reader aware that we are all more or less the same, no better and no worse. "I'm dealing," Richards says, "not with abnormal or subnormal or poor or poverty stricken human beings, but . . . with human beings at the moments of emotional or physical crisis" (qtd. in Scherf, "Regionalist" 164). As Arnold suggests, we are really all alike: the poor just show it more (Road 125-6).

Kevin's sense of responsibility to John is admirable (Winter 38). Are the "elite" better at looking after their friends, even when there is nothing attractive in the situation? If Lester Murphy's experiences with the Bryans (Lives 228) are anything to judge by, or Denis Bryan's raving in "We, Who Have Never Suffered," the "elite" desert their friends at something like the speed of sound: the moment a whisper of discontent invades their perception of an individual, that individual is ostracized by them.

Even John, who, as the most regularly appearing character, has many chances to show his bad points, also displays moments of generosity and warmth. He responds positively to Kevin's marriage announcement (Winter 124), concealing his inner feelings on the subject. In Blood Ties,

John helps Dane after Dane is violently thrashed by Cecil (106). Finally, after John discovers he has contracted a venereal disease, he has the decency to tell Cathy she is also infected (252). While the reader might take such action as a "given," that is by no means sure. Richards has shown many men who have run away from sexual responsibility: Irene (Blood 169-70), Rita (Nights 111-12), Janie Bell (Dancers 20-1), and Lois (Lives 59) have all been deserted in one manner or another by the men who made them pregnant.

Though Cecil seems primarily a man of violence, even he shows the positive qualities so valued by Richards--especially in letting Leah go (Blood 243-4). There are no screaming accusations about her responsibility for his disfigured face. Instead, he gives her his watch (the one that never seems to work on his wrist), promises to pay attention to how Ronnie is doing and encourages her to get a good job, something he once ridiculed her for wanting, something that will, finally, make her independent of him.

Richards' fiction frequently restores the dignity so often denied to the aged. Janie Bell (Dancers 6) and Old Simon Terri (Lives 85) both walk out of their situations, insisting on self-expression. Annie Everett may not be able to speak, but her senses are more alert than Irene and Cathy believe (Blood 23). The senior Mrs. Ripley, too, tells the truth about her daughter's prejudices (Dancers 124). All

these senior citizens are given their individuality by Richards.

Hospitality, another regional characteristic, can also help to show characters at their best. Leah leaves her house, and Shelby waiting in it, with no thought of being so rude as to make him stay outside and wait for Cecil to come home (Blood 187). Ramsey Taylor brings his bottle of rum along on the fishing expedition, but will not drink unless the man who has hired him as a guide also wishes to drink. Then, we are told, Ramsey will spare nothing, will share until the bottle is dry (Dancers 34).

The Indians, marginalized even within the marginal society, also evince human generosity and humour in face of adversity. They recognize "white" prejudices and can mock them (Dancers 99). "Be quiet as a fuckin Indian" (98) says a chuckling Indian father to his son as they outwit the white warden, catch fish out of season and then sell them to the white cottagers. The conditions of life on the Reserve do little to promote a positive self-image. Yet the Indians never lose sight of who they are, and are usually proud of their identity--something that cannot be said of the young rich like Denis Bryan, the newly rich like Ceril Brown, or the many priests in Richards' fiction, men who frequently question their decision to wear the cloth and follow the cross, and often fall into the trap of alcoholism (Blood 160-1; Dancers 105-7; Road 157-8; Nights 205).

Lois sides with Little Simon in a fight (Lives 181); when Lois is raped, Little Simon cares for her--never knowing why she is upset but simply responding to her emotional needs (Lives 197-8). Little Simon shows a sharp wit in dealing with the R.C.M.P. (Lives 239-48), and, as Michael Taylor suggests, this wit helps to lighten the overwhelming sense of doom that accompanies our knowledge that Little Simon does not survive his struggle ("Lives" 107). Somehow, though we know he is guilty, it is his defense against the R.C.M.P. constable's efforts to trick a confession out of him that wins our admiration.

Even Arnold, the poorest of the poor, has moments of dignity. For a brief period, he takes over doing Sadie's hair (Road 28-9) and relaxes in the new sensation of feeling he is doing something constructive for a change. Despite the utter meaninglessness of Christmas to the family, the constant reinforcement of their conscious awareness of being poor that is forced onto them by their devotion to the television, Arnold tries to buy Christmas gifts for everyone (93).

Adele, in Nights Below Station Street, helps Cindi when the other girls are embarrassed by her epilepsy (52-3). Though she screams at Joe, rejects his efforts to please her, and demands her own way in everything, she never says to Cindi what Ruby (the most manipulative of her so-called friends) does: "try not ta be an epileptic for one night

willya" (143). Ivan Basterache, swearing the whole time, the stereotypical image of a "worthless juvenile delinquent," moves everything in the apartment and eventually asks the neighbors for help in his efforts to get Thelma a cup of tea while she waits for Ralphie to return (Nights 152-3).

When Ivan reappears, as the central character in Evening Snow Will Bring Such Peace, he is still, basically, unselfish. He endures wasp stings while removing a nest as a favour to a friend (17) and, in defending Nevin, who is helpless in the world of physical violence, from the Russells and Antony, Ivan shows both wit and the will to act for others:

"Yer some big-feelinged, arentcha," Frank said. "I'll have to take you down a peg or two."
 "As I said before--don't let fear stop you," Ivan said, holding the fork to his throat. (182)

The fullest realization of Richards' vision of human worth, however, is seen in Joe Walsh. We have already noted how, in taking the job as bouncer, Joe faces terrible temptation (Nights 196). He puts his own status as recovering alcoholic second to his desire to contribute to the family. He endures cautions from well meaning friends who, when they see him inside the bar, automatically assume he has forsaken his vows and is bingeing again. Finally, he is struck with the claw end of a hammer while attempting to stop a fight. Through all these events, he does not drink (196-9). In a moment that seems to support a generally fatalistic view of life, Joe accidentally takes a drink,

after Adele's pregnancy is discovered and she is taken to the hospital, mistaking a bottle of vodka for water. However, Joe later conquers the temptation to drink (and the fatalism by which, so many critics insist, Richards' characters are defined and trapped) by pouring the vodka into the snow, moments before he rescues Vye (224).

Richards employs the strategy of "verbal montage" to bring the contradictions so often hidden and buried behind the appearances of people, or ignored by the scant "first impressions" of individual worth, to the forefront. As readers, we may find this technique discomfoting, for we do not wish to see these contradictions, do not wish to have a neatly categorized system of evaluating individuals disturbed by being reminded, on nearly every page, that no individual "fits" such a pre-determined system. We have seen Richards' remark: "it is prior assumption and contempt prior to investigation that destroys people" (qtd. in Glover 12). The ordinary heroes of his work cannot be ignored.

Chapter 3--Richards' Toolbox

In order to understand how and why Richards has been misread and misrepresented, it is helpful to examine, in addition to his characterization skills, other specific details of his technique: what are Richards' narrative strategies, how have these been misread or misrepresented and what are the values that a more careful analysis of his technical skills will reveal? His narrative strategies have consistently provided critics with non-ideological targets for criticism, given them something to talk about other than the values of the characters. It can be seen, however, from a study of the regular use of certain identifiable patterns across the whole body of Richards' work, that his narrative strategies and stylistic experiments, though varied, are not, for the most part, as incomprehensible as they are sometimes represented to be. As Andrew Seaman puts it, "Richards treads carefully a path between traditional novel structures and the de-structured experiments of other contemporaries" (37).

Ena Salamon summarizes Lives of Short Duration: "The ceaseless repetition of character and theme have turned this into a depressing and disturbing book whose attributes, alas, are too few and far between." Trevor Ferguson, reviewing Nights Below Station Street, writes: "the

continuous repetition of the same rhythms can be numbing." Dennis Duffy, reviewing Dancers At Night, suggests that the repeated explicit detail of the characters' lives may evoke disinterest in the reader ("The wretched"). John Mills, writing of Blood Ties, says: "its cadences are either non-existent or too subtle for me to grasp" (105). All these writers miss an important point in their criticism of Richards' use of repetition. Yes, Lives of Short Duration can be depressing and disturbing: Richards wants settled sensibilities disturbed. Of course, the continuous repetition of rhythms can be numbing: that is part of Richards' point--when spontaneous action is taken, it interrupts the numbing effect of the same rhythms, as when Joe throws out the remains of his vodka and subsequently rescues Vye (Nights 224-5). And certainly the cadences of Blood Ties are too subtle for a reader who complained that he did not understand all there was to know about the novel after reading only thirteen pages of it (Mills 105).

Repetition functions even at the level of the single word. In Lives Of Short Duration, perhaps as a balance to the otherwise wildly fluctuating elements of the novel, we see the repetition of "means" as an organizer of theme (52-3, 254-9). The increasing frequency with which characters in thought will ask themselves what all of this "means," serves to draw the reader back from the sometimes apparently uncontrolled free association of images, people and places

that often constitute the narrative. In other cases, repeated words help interpret character. As noted, Adele "screeches" so often in Nights Below Station Street that the word itself becomes annoying with its frequency of repetition (121-4). This is a vehicle for ironic comment. At one point, Adele screeches because the kids her mother babysits are screaming (144-5).

Repeated words or phrases also frequently signal impatience or uncertainty in the character. As workers at the senior citizens' home mobilize to hunt down the wandering, ninety-six year old Janie Bell, they engage in the following dialogue:

"I don't care she's gone, I'm not talkin ta ya, botherin standin here arguin about it--I ain't gonna argue about it while she goes drowns herself and you stand here and argue about it!"

"I'm not arguing about it," said the woman.

"Ya are arguin ya are," said the man
(Dancers 5)

Rance, hospitalized at twenty-four with a "blown stomach" as a result of over-indulgence in alcohol, incessantly apologizes for his inability to control his flatulence (Lives 54). His mantra--"excuse me"--irritates his ward mate, Old Simon Terri. Simon does not mind the sound, or the smell--just the inevitable "excuse me" that follows. In this case, Richards' repetition achieves a certain black comedy.

Repetition operates in Richards' work on many levels other than that of the single word or phrase. It serves to

create a rhythm in the prose. Michael Taylor calls it "the rhythms of indigence, ferocity and despair. . . . the rhythm of lives without the solace of direction" ("Soldiers" 112). Taylor is correct, but it should also be noted that rhythm does not only convey directionless despair. Many of Richards' characters find security and solace in rituals, from John, whose whole opposition to Kevin's impending marriage is that it is a major interruption in the rhythm of their friendship (Winter 124-6), to Cindi, who counts to ten when she is angry at Ivan--though it is Ivan's temper that this "defusing" was supposed to curb (Evening 8-9). Repetition is part of the reality of this world, no matter how it is perceived.

Important events are repeated, or local history and folklore are explained and re-explained, as in the legend of Mallory, who is so similar to the "real" character of Cecil, in Blood Ties (71-7, 117, 195-6). This device is used with great irony when Packet's aunt, Devoda, echoes the first Emma Jane Ward in describing the second Emma Jane Ward: "she is not a squaw--she is an Indian woman" (Lives 277). The irony is double-edged: Devoda appears utterly unaware that the woman she is defending is descended from a woman who was murdered, partially because of her insistence on repeating the truth of that very phrase; secondly, Emma Jane Ward II, far from being a victim of her self-image, actually helps save Packet from the potential consequences of his own

alcoholic over-indulgence once they leave Devoda's house (Lives 280 ff).

Similarly, events of total insignificance, snatches from popular songs, television and radio news and advertising jingles (Lives 46, 50, 168-9; Road 57) and other trappings of daily existence turn up with regularity: exactly as they do in the lives of both the characters and the readers. This is of major significance as it serves to reinforce Richards' view that the "centralized" popular culture is invading, dividing and conquering the formerly isolated individuality of the region.

The prime mover behind this creation of rhythm is the presence of the Miramichi River, a significant "natural" feature that is "ever-present" in Richards' writing (Williamson). The river figures in all his work, often serving as an attractive visual image, one which helps explain why so many people stay in the region and why so many others regularly return to it:

the sight itself . . . was infinitely appealing to anyone who'd take the time to look. . . . Kevin . . . parked his truck . . . and . . . walked below to where a small rising jutted above the shoreline and [he watched] the black wintry bay waters and the horizon and the opposite shoreline. All was colour. The day was filled with colour. (Winter 54)

Unfortunately, the river must also serve as a reminder of encroaching decay as it is polluted by the mills (Lives 111) and its salmon population declines. It is a constant that is a part of each individual's life no matter how that

individual might differ from every other character. Shifts at the mill and the shift change whistle are overt reminders of this tie to the river (Winter 161).

The river is one example of Richards' skilled development of symbolism in nature. Another is his use of the rhythm of the seasons--so subtle that its symbolic effect may be missed altogether, which partly explains some of the criticism Richards has received for overuse of repetition. The incautious reader may see the season cycle merely as careful attention to detailed imagery or as unnecessary repetition. However, the river, the seasons, and the geographical realities of the land combine to underscore thematic concerns (French, "Searing"). When Kevin contemplates the view of the river, for example, we are reminded, though it is late autumn, of the inevitable arrival of spring (Winter 53-4). In Evening Snow Will Bring Such Peace, Ivan and Cindi split up in April, as the spring thaw arrives (12), become totally estranged through the heat of the summer (164) and reunite on a "bright cool day in August" (197, 200). Hanging over their hopes, however, is the coming of winter. The novel ends with the light snows of November (222) and a stroll through a graveyard near the bay (226). Though these examples can all be considered nothing more than geographical setting and the inevitable passage of time, the river and the seasons are omnipresent in Richards' works, subtly woven into the flow of his characters' lives.

Repetition is also employed in plot structuring. In Lives Of Short Duration, which has a time scope exceeding one hundred years, families seem doomed to repeat certain patterns of behaviour. Lois has three children as her mother had three children--equally uncontrollable (87)--which is not surprising as Lois has learned all her parenting skills from her mother (Keefer 175). Family traditions, such as watching parents and assorted lovers having sex and wrecking cars before the age of ten, are also repeated (96; 167, 175). All these elements of repetition within the family are perceived as part of the river cycle--and everyone's river is the same, as Packet thinks near the end of the novel (280).

Another of Richards' techniques that sometimes provokes critical misreading is his fondness for simple grammatical structures, to the point of being laconic in some of his prose. It is this device, perhaps more than any other, which fuels the perception of Richards' characters as being inarticulate. Keefer writes:

If Maritime realism is indeed a language, a means of communication between the speechless illiterate and the articulate educated, then Richards is a master of this language. . . . his ability to combine minimal sentence fragments with elaborately run-on sentences . . . produce[s] a narrative capable of conveying both the crudity and density of experience in this particular world. . . . most of his characters show signs of this decay [a general, social breakdown in the region] in their very speech: nasty, poor, brutish, and short, it is epitomized by the declaration 'I don't give a fuck fer nothin--never did, never will' [Lives 60]. (173)

But, as Herb Wylie notes, Richards' characters "are certainly not speechless, and of them, only Old Simon Terri . . . is conspicuously illiterate" (8). Packet, though he never finished school, reads Hardy and Tolstoy (Lives 233, 234), dreams of Voltaire and Villon (Lives 273-74), and his room is littered with books wherever he goes (Lives 233). Richards says "I love having [my characters] talk, and maybe someday that's all I'll have them do; then no one will be able to say they're inarticulate" (qtd. in Garrod 223). The problem is that the simple grammatical structures, sentence fragments and run-on rambles, are not, supposedly, educated speech. Because Richards' people do not speak with extended Proustian introspection, they are judged inarticulate.

The people of the region, as Wylie points out, have "their own discourse" (8). Richards' talent for recording the intricacies of local dialect is evident from the start. "Swill it inta ya and piss 'er out" (Winter 20), says an old man in the tavern washroom, displaying the shifting pronoun use common to rural speech, perhaps the world over, and, simultaneously, commenting humorously upon the habits of beer consumption. Throughout the novels, dialogue is laced with the dialectal forms of the region and close attention is paid to variants within the immediate geographical area. Rance, speaking to Lester Murphy and Ramsey Taylor, affects "an upriver manner of speaking with his downriver Irish Catholic accent" (Lives 154). Like Shaw's Professor Higgins,

Richards is sensitive to the fact that, contrary to apparently common belief, there are variants in speech patterns within towns and within parts of towns: there is no single New Brunswick accent.

The language is Richards' servant--a point he makes clear from the first page of his first novel. He manipulates grammatical conventions effectively. The sentence fragment is one such device: "A perfect Saturday. Not a stir" (Winter 5). Whether it mirrors character thought or simply provides variety in the structure of the writing, the fragmented sentence draws attention to itself by being incomplete. Shorter sentences and single sentence paragraphs are frequently used, especially in the more recent Road To The Stilt House.

Another fight.

That's all life was about. If one thought of it enough. After supper this evening his girlfriend had left him again. He saw her walk across the road.

What was he to do ? (6)

As Marlene Goldman notes, a sense of their alienation is both developed and conveyed forcefully through this style. It is also confirmed by the manner in which their consciousness is dismissed by reviewers who insist on their inability to speak.

For supposedly inarticulate people, Richards' characters speak and think an amazing quantity of brilliant, figurative

language. Little Simon's aphorism on guilt is, perhaps, the most memorable example in the whole Richards canon:

"Guilt," Little Simon said, "is always with
ya--can't go a day without sneezin in the wrong
Kleenex--" (Lives 214)

Arnold is rendered the more tragic through Richards' use of first person narration which invests Arnold with a poetic consciousness trapped in his misery. As H.W. Connor notes, this allows us greater contact with the "inner sensitivity" of Arnold ("Poetic" 107). "Old memories are like cranberries in the sun," thinks Arnold, "life's casualties long before the end is near" (Road 138).

It must be admitted that not all criticism of Richards' narrative strategies is easily dismissed. Richards develops a sometimes heavy-handed symbolic structure which leads critics such as Frank Davey to charge that the recognizably distinct discourse of the author "both mocks and patronizes" his characters because they do not have access to it (19). Certain passages appear contrived or pedantically didactic, sometimes detracting slightly from the generally neutral tone of his work.

In truth, Richards handles "nature" symbolism--the seasons and the river--so smoothly that, by contrast, his "presence" in the construction of other symbolic values is distracting. Both Clinton Dulse and Ramsey Taylor are characterized by a preference for hand rolled over pre-pack cigarettes (Winter 234; Dancers 32), which distinguishes

them from "outsiders"--Clinton from Pamela's family, Ramsey from the American tourist-sportsman he guides on the river. More overt is the sewer pipe, built but unused, that runs the length of Arnold's road (Road 19) and the fact that the road itself is crumbling away into nothing (Road 79). In a rare moment of familial "togetherness" in Nights Below Station Street, Ralphie, Adele, Joe, Rita, Myrrha and Dr. Hennessey (an unusual combination) play a board game:

Ralphie brought over a game called Risk--a game where everyone had a certain number of armies and tried to take over the world. Ralphie . . . was sure also that he and Adele could take over the world, if they just got lucky.

On the other hand, Joe was certain that he could take over the world, that he and Rita had always planned to take over the world, and now it was time to do it. (139)

Overt authorial intrusion, rarely seen in the early novels, also begins to play a larger role in Richards' later career--perhaps in response to critical misunderstandings and misrepresentations of his concerns in reviews and analyses of his early work. If, indeed, its increased use is designed to counter critical misreadings, it does not appear to have worked: Michael Taylor comments that the intrusive authorial voice which first regularly appears in Lives Of Short Duration gets a little too tendentious ("Lives" 109). Gerald Noonan, discussing Nights Below Station Street, states that, at its worst, the "stronger instances of author intrusion . . . raise the suspicion that Richards is occasionally, after four novels, giving in to the temptation

to preach" (120). Like contrived symbolism, overt authorial statements, on the whole, though certainly clear in intention, are less effective than Richards' other narrative strategies.

Oddly enough, though Richards has insisted frequently that his characters can speak for themselves, he draws a subtle distinction in discussing his use of the "narrator's voice." Characters, he insists, "don't expostulate about their sense of self. They expostulate about others around them or how they feel about others, but they don't really expostulate about their sense of self. And I think it's the narrator's job to do that" (qtd. in Scherf, "Regionalist" 169, emphasis in original). Though Richards presents his intervention as a sort of proof that his people are not self-centred, the notion that his characters need him to speak for them, about themselves, conflicts somewhat with his insistence on their own articulateness and gives some weight to Frank Davey's arguments.

The narrative voice which Davey accuses of being a "patronizing discourse" in Nights Below Station Street (19) first surfaces in Lives Of Short Duration. It would "take an imbecile or a lunatic" not to become an alcoholic under these conditions, a narrative voice tells us in summary of regional prohibition--from 1917 to 1963--noting that reading was just as bad an activity as getting drunk in thousands of households (114). We are told in no uncertain terms that we

cannot condemn something just because it looks awful to us (118). Packet, serving as a mouthpiece for the author, repeatedly questions the meaning of it all (254-5) and makes an overt attempt to order the mass of events and times that have comprised his part of the narrative.

Explicit value judgments are more frequent in the more recent novels. Ignorance is the hateful sin (Road 69); only the poor know the cold (Road 89). The "back-to-the-land-poor" look in fashion--for those who can afford it--is condemned (Nights 48). If a woman takes a job outside the home, that does not automatically signal the decay of her family (Nights 61). One cannot be part of a culture just by sympathizing with it (Nights 160). "There's lots of ways people hide bigotry from themselves," mumbles Dr. Hennessey. "Today's way is progressive concern" (Evening 166).

Davey concludes that, through the power of the authorial discourse, the text of Nights Below Station Street supports the values of the past, values held before the arrival of mainstream North American culture, and that this support suggests "a New Brunswick that would not produce Nights Below Station Street" (26). While this is, itself, an oversimplification of the issue, applying, as Helen Hoy has said of other criticisms of Richards' work, "standards extraneous to the world of the novel" (327), it does serve to remind us of Richards' "double-agent" status as a woodsman and "good-ole-boy" of the region yet at the same time one who has had

a university education and who comes from the middle class of the town (French, "Celebration"). Perhaps it is true that, without some of the social forces which Richards condemns, his own opportunity to speak on such issues might never have arisen. Perhaps it is equally true that, like Packet Terri, whose intellectual abilities are many, Richards would have produced these texts anyway, even if he had not finished high school, let alone university. As Richards himself says, "all the characters that I care about generally rebel against school, though not against learning" (qtd. in Garrod 214). The two are not precisely synonymous, though that is not a popular view with the many educated reviewers and academic critics who discuss Richards' work.

There are other areas in which criticism of Richards' narrative strategies reflects a real problem in the clarity of Richards' style, not merely critical avoidance of more central, challenging issues. Richards employs temporal shifting as part of his open-ended, character-driven method of presenting his stories. People remember many unconnected things and memory does not function chronologically: Richards says that the novel must "have time lapses, because that's how people [think] and that's in essence how they [act] in their lives" (qtd. in Scherf, "Regionalist" 169). While this development of character memory is legitimate, Richards does not consistently signal such temporal shifts by use of a single method or structural feature. His shifts

in narrative perspective, too, are not consistently signalled by use of a single technique. Richards employs parentheses and italics, sometimes to signal a shift in time or perspective, but sometimes for no clear purpose whatsoever. "The car drove on; the passenger train snaked its way past the creamery where an odd tree stood bleached and barkless" (Lives 107), shows an odd use of italics. Similarly curious is the opening of parentheses (Lives 29) which never, apparently, close. Devices like these disturb the reader. Already faced with a complex narrative--which is driven forward by characters responding to events rather than actively shaping them--the reader can be easily confused by surface stylistic features. It can be difficult to determine which ones have particular meaning and which do not.

It is in Lives Of Short Duration that stylistic variants are most erratic and, seemingly, uncontrolled: thus it is the Richards' novel which is most commonly misread. As Wylie says, the novel is "particularly conducive to myopic misrepresentations" (11). Here, Richards experiments with a narrative that does not actually move forward, and with narrating consciousnesses that are hampered in their clarity by alcohol (22) or made immensely complex by old age (103ff). In each of these cases--George Terri's drunken rambling, Old Simon Terri's eighty-year memory span--the irregular variance and inconsistency of transitional signals

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is a fair reflection of the way these individuals perceive their world. It does, however, make for hard reading, especially given Richards' increasing tendency to give the reader answers to questions not yet asked, to give one-sided portraits of troubled individuals just long enough for readers to form solid impressions of them before their behaviour radically changes or the reasons for their antagonistic stances are revealed.

Because Richards insists on showing characters from their own perspectives, and on giving "multiple perspectives on the same series of events" (Keefer 171), point of view in the novels occasionally resembles a lottery. This is a less frivolous analogy than at first it might seem: though the point of view in all the fiction is clearly third person (save Road To The Stilt House and the short story "A Rural Place" in which it alternates with a first person narration), this usage varies between omniscient and limited, and, when limited, is often not clearly attached to any one character. Through ambiguous pronoun reference and frequent shifts in and out of the limited point of view, Richards often appears to be playing a game of "guess whose consciousness" we are reading now with his reader (Claus 26). Sometimes this shifting point of view is disconcerting --causing some reviewers, in fact, to stop reading. Because transitions in time and consciousness are not always

(sometimes not at all) clearly labelled, the reader must "work hard" at understanding the novels.

Of the many critics who mention Richards' use of temporal shifts, most say it is, at the very least, challenging. A few feel they have to work too hard to make Richards worth the effort (Mills 105). In a film, character voices are, usually, accompanied by a screen image and it may take some time before that character is actually identified--given a name, an identity, a background, tagged and compartmented as an element of the world which the viewer knows. But once the viewer has identified the characters in a film, a sudden shift into the point of view of any one of them is not terribly difficult to follow. In the novel, it is more difficult as the aural signature of an actor's voice or the physical image of the body is not present. The reader has only the words of the text to follow. Richards has developed a series of clues that enable the reader to eventually identify the narrator, but these clues are not as clear as they might be. Thus some readers will as Monk said she wanted to do, put the book down (524), or, as Mills has done, reject the values of the work as being too hard to decipher if they have not understood everything within the first few pages of text. While Richards is responsible for some of the difficulty readers find in decoding his texts, Monk displays considerable impatience and Mills displays an intolerance for any reading that is challenging.

The writing is disorienting, notes Philip Milner in defending Richards, full of fragments, run-ons and repetitions of extraneous detail. But David Adams Richards is less interested in the action than in the mind involved--its rhythms and emotions. If he polished his style, tightened the prose, focused the narrative more clearly, did away with all these challenging ambiguities, "he would lose the ambience that he worked so hard to create" ("Structure" 208-9).

There are many other examples of critical focus on the problems caused by technical devices in Richards' fiction rather than on their positive values. Each of these criticisms, however--whether the critic recognizes the fact or ignores it--draws attention away from the values of the people presented through these strategies.⁴ Narrative strategies are tools for telling stories; excessive focus on them is analogous to praising (or condemning) a carpenter for the contents of the toolbox rather than for the house that has been constructed with them.

Conclusion: Words as Weapons

We began by exploring three linked questions: what is Richards' vision? ; how and why has it been misread or misinterpreted? ; how do his narrative strategies contribute to both the expression of his vision and the subsequent misreadings of it? In light of the foregoing discussion, certain answers suggest themselves.

David Adams Richards' vision is threefold: social, moral and individual. Richards' fiction chronicles the society and people of small-town, working-class New Brunswick, insisting that they are as good as anyone. However, their society is being slowly eroded by forces they cannot resist. James Doyle notes that the conflicts and violence of the Miramichi are "concentrated reflections of modern North American society"--a society which "destroys nature and aboriginal peoples, ruthlessly sets individuals against each other, . . . then salves its conscience with meaningless gestures of institutionalized benevolence" (130). Doyle is correct about Richards' social vision, but he neglects, as so many critics have, Richards' individual vision: in Richards' world, there are many people who, despite such negative social circumstances, still perform acts of kindness and generosity, many people whose personalities survive the erosion of the society in which they live.

Richards' moral vision is equally simply stated. It is regrettable, in Richards' view, not so much that contemporary society promotes a corrosive conformity, but that more and more people seem willing to embrace such "centralized" values and norms. The more Richards' characters try to shape their own lives to embrace the "central" values, the more the vision that Doyle calls "bleak which fascinates even as it appals" (130) is obvious. Richards values spontaneous action over pre-determined planning (qtd. in Garrod 217). Conforming to the outside world is a futile effort, Richards suggests, simply because his people will always be defined as those outside the centre: their efforts to conform to central values will put them in a position of permanently trying to "catch up" to the images with which popular culture surrounds them. When people try to mold themselves according to outside standards, they neglect and ignore the "meaningful values and self-worth" which they already possess. They lose their spontaneity. Critical complaints that Richards denies his people any possibility of the changes they so badly "need," reflect and confirm this "normative" tendency.

The third component of Richards' vision is the foundation of his entire career. All people are essentially the same, regardless of financial status or formal education. We all search for love, belonging and self-worth; we all face moral dilemmas; we all know pain and violence, comfort and peace.

The small acts of generosity and heroism that individuals perform daily, unintentionally and without fanfare, are the most valuable of human actions.

Critical misreading and misinterpretation, seem to grow out of several varieties of incautious reading. This is always a danger, and is particularly relevant in Richards' case since much of the extant criticism of his work is in the form of reviews--brief notices, often written for the mass market of the daily newspapers--and not in detailed academic analysis. More serious, though, is the critical misinterpretation which seems to stem from either an unwillingness to discuss Richards as he presents himself or from an ignorance of certain elements in his fiction that foreground concepts of which these critics disapprove--a fault that even academic analyses have displayed. The former manifests itself in the praise Richards is given for such things as being "the voice of the inarticulate." Reviewers often assume that Richards pities his characters for their inability to articulate their innermost feelings when, in fact, Richards insists that the very writers who praise him so eloquently for giving the inarticulate a voice are themselves no more articulate about similar emotions and conflicts within their own lives. The latter is seen in arguments such as those put forward by George Byrne, Donna Pennee and Frank Davey, each of whom ignores elements that seem of major significance to the characters under

discussion because these elements do not quite fit the limited picture of the characters, or of the work as a whole, which they wish to use in defense of a particular textual reading or critical discourse.

Richards' narrative strategies play a large, though largely unjustified, role in the misreading and misinterpretation of his work. In fact, Richards' narrative strategies are not as complex as they are often said to be. Most of the fiction is linear, employing flashback and foreshadowing no more than "average," and is challenging only in that the endings do not always achieve traditional closure. One must also read carefully in order to be aware of when the regularly used third-person-limited point of view shifts into another controlling consciousness. Richards' work is not really hard to comprehend--just hard for many to accept. What is difficult is not the strategies, but rather the thematic values they present. Readers unwilling to accept Richards' presentation of all humanity, rich, poor or otherwise, as basically equal, different in the specifics of the lives they lead but no different at all in the complexity of their responses to that "lived experience," blame his surface narrative strategies for their ideological clashes with Richards' overt intentions and underlying themes.

Richards' narrative strategies are merely tools with which he builds his fiction. The contradictions and values

he sees in every human being are real. Any attempt to suppress them is born out of the same discourse that has kept the margins of Canadian culture marginal. His task is not to change the people he writes about, but to change the attitudes so commonly held concerning them. A text that does not cause the reader some discomfort does not challenge any of the reader's deeply held views. The deeper the challenge, the greater the discomfort. Certainly, Richards could write romantic paeans to the noble lives of the poor, showing only their dignity in the face of uncaring adversity. But he would be lying, and such portrayals would only reify the structures that keep such evaluations alive. William French suggests that middle-class readers probably should respond to Richards' work with discomfort and guilt ("Searing"). The rich never begin revolutions, but the comfortable middle class may learn to fight if they are taught to question the processes and discourses that have made them what they are.

It is the great irony of Richards' work that, in order to accomplish his goals, he must appear, in the eyes of many, to have failed. His view of the complex mixture of impulses and actions that is every human being, the unpredictable interplay of "good" and "bad" that characterizes us all, is not easy to accept because it means that there are no incontrovertible standards by which any one of us can judge another. As Keefer notes, "Richards does not pacify or placate the reader" through condemnation (174). By refusing

the reader a comfortable position from which to judge his characters, based on a set of pre-determined character standards, likely derived in a world that has little or no surface resemblance to the one under discussion, Richards forces the reader who is willing to read the books with anything more than the most cursory glance, to see that, though there may be little surface resemblance, there is an undeniable undercurrent of relationship. Sometimes that relationship is a bit too threatening to the self-image of some readers. However, writes Keefer, Richards "makes it necessary for us to understand rather than summarily reject the inescapable vileness that such poverty and such intolerance breed. More importantly, he forces us to acknowledge it as part of our own reality" (175, emphasis mine).

David Adams Richards shows both good and bad in unexpected places, either in conflict, or, harder still to accept, in full co-operation, with each other, within each individual. This is a powerful picture of humanity, but not always a popular one. Regrettably, many readers are so troubled by the negative surface of many of Richards' characters that they fail to see any of the generosity and human spirit with which Richards has so painstakingly imbued them. In an theory-obsessed, image-conscious age, when so many people are incessantly concerned with being, at all times, politically correct, Richards' insistence that there

is good beneath all the surface flaws of humanity is hard to accept.

Arno'd says that Juliet, the social worker, does not know "that people cut each other open just for spite and you can't apply any words to it. The more you apply words, the more there is misunderstanding" (Road 58). Nevertheless, David Adams Richards continues to employ words as weapons, doggedly persisting, despite misunderstanding, misrepresentation and, occasionally open antagonism, in articulating his vision of humanity.

Notes

¹ Various spellings exist for this name: I have seen it rendered as "Wylie" and as "Wyile." In the event that I have chosen the incorrect form, I convey my sincerest apologies.

² See, for example, Mark Kingwell's essay, "Strangled by its own success." Kingwell writes disparagingly of trendiness in critical theory.

³ Many readers, including H.W. Connor (one of Richards' greatest defenders), consider Trenchard's view of Arnold to be correct: Connor calls Arnold a "detailed study of mental illness" ("Poetic" 107). I tend to hold with those who consider Arnold to possess an almost elevated intelligence, a "learning" that is distinct from success in formal "schooling" (see, for example, McDonald 374).

⁴ See, for example, Dennis Duffy who admits his review of Evening Snow Will Bring Such Peace might be perceived as being "arrogant and elitist" ("Losers").

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