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Intruders in Canadian Gardens: Subversive Rewritings of Genesis in the Works of Timothy Findley and Thomas King

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**INTRUDERS IN CANADIAN GARDENS:
SUBVERSIVE REWRITINGS OF GENESIS IN THE
WORKS OF
TIMOTHY FINDLEY AND THOMAS KING**

Résumé : L'article porte sur *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (1984) de Timothy Findley et *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993) de Thomas King ainsi que sur deux brefs récits de celui-ci, à savoir "Totem" et "One Good Story, That One". Dans la partie centrale des deux textes, les deux écrivains canadiens réécrivent et parodient les scènes et les concepts principaux du document yahviste dans la Génèse, notamment les récits sur le jardin d'Éden et sur le Déluge. Findley et King contredisent l'image anthropomorphique de Dieu dans la représentation yahviste; ils montrent les limites de cette approche yahviste et s'arrêtent sur les intérêts impériaux dissimulés derrière l'autorité biblique, reproduite plus tard par l'idéologie de l'Empire britannique. King reconnaît l'influence de Findley dans sa propre œuvre par la citation du titre de son fameux roman dans *Green Grass, Running Water*. Si Findley détériore le récit de la création et du déluge, situé dans l'Ontario rural, King, qui est en partie de descendance cherokee, décolonise le jardin canadien en dénonçant les desseins impériaux cachés derrière l'utilisation du mythe d'Éden en Amérique du Nord. Les deux auteurs subvertissent la narration biblique par les personnages marginalisés ou ridiculisés dans le grand récit. Ces intrus dans le jardin attirent notre attention sur les enjeux qui ne constituaient pas les préoccupations essentielles.

Dans un pays moderne et démocratique, il n'y a pas de place pour la censure officielle. La liberté d'expression semble être une valeur sacrée. Pourtant, il devrait toujours y avoir de la place pour un débat, un échange de points de vue et pour une remise en question de certaines opinions.

Timothy Findley in his Bible-centred novel *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (1984) and Thomas King in his fiction *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993) and "One Good Story, That One" (1993) face the foundation myth of the British Empire stemming from the colonial interpretation of the Book of Genesis, in light of which the white man [sic!] was supposed to "hold dominion" over the whole earth, much like biblical Adam. Their interpretations of biblical characters are set in Canadian reality and thus draw attention to a particular historical

context and cultural legacy. Findley and King take issue with the anthropomorphic image of God in Genesis by rewriting the Yahwist's narrative which expresses "the spirit of triumphant Israel in the days of the empire" (Cross 42). Both writers also refer to the Priestly source in their works, but even if they quote from it (like Findley) or parody particular concepts (like King), what is at stake is their response to God made in the likeness of man in the Yahwist source in Genesis (2:4b-25, 3:1-24 and 6-8), informed by anthropomorphism that was "extreme and daring" in comparison with the Priestly source (Halbatal 253). In the selected texts by the two Canadian writers the Yahwist God is challenged by those who are either marginal or disempowered in the biblical narrative.

The fact that Timothy Findley, "Canada's most gifted gay writer" (Hastings 419), repeatedly reverted to the critique of "normative masculinities" (Martin 449) in his works acquired particular significance in the novel *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, where homosexual interests are embodied in Lucy/Lucifer, a fallen angel who masquerades as a woman but is, in fact, a man. Lucy rebels not only against Yaweh, but also against his friend Dr Noah/Noyes, whom Yaweh resembles in being stern and restrictive. King found the biblical narratives of Eden and deluge equally oppressive because of their being allied with the political authority which brought about the loss of land by the first inhabitants of America in the past.

Allow me to digress for a moment to involve King's short story titled "Totem". While unrelated to biblical concerns, the story may well be used to illustrate King's attitude, which can be juxtaposed to Timothy Findley's equally ex-centric perspective. The title totem is "not wanted" at the exhibition dedicated to "contemporary Canadian art from the Atlantic provinces", organized in the "Southwest Alberta Art Gallery and Prairie Museum" (13). Thus when the totem pole appears one day in the corner as if it has always been there, its presence proves highly disturbing to the staff, because of unusual noises which may bother the patrons. Director of the museum has the totem pole cut down, but another one grows in its place, and the noises become "pretty disgusting" (16). Eventually the next totem is cut down as well and placed in the basement, but the problem continues. Upon the suggestion of his staff, the director decides to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to yet another totem pole that appears to replace the missing one. It is assumed that people will get used to the sounds and will begin to ignore the totem pole after some time. The story is really about an intruder in the closed garden of meaning structured by white culture. Nobody, it appears, owns the totem pole; nobody can recall it being in the area when the museum was built. With the arrival and resistance of the totem pole, a history of the first inhabitants which was erased from the white dominion claims its place in the corner or at the margin of the disciplined discursive space. The totem pole does not belong to

the exhibition, so there are attempts to remove it and relegate it to the subconscious. When this fails, the strategy changes from repression into neglect. The staff get used to the sounds when assured that this is like “living next to the train tracks or by a highway” (17). The totem pole embodies Amerindian concerns in a very subtle way, for Amerindians refuse to disappear off the federal or provincial agenda. The exhibition called “Seaviews” brings to mind the paintings of the Canadian Group of Seven which hardly registered any other presence in the Canadian wilderness apart from that of the white artist who was the beholder of pristine uninhabited space (Mackey 44). Hence the totem stands for a signature of the other, who was excluded from the mainstream narrative. At the same time it enhances the constructedness of Canadian identity housed in the museum.

Discussing the possible origin of the totem pole, the staff connect its existence with the previous exhibition on the Northwest Coast carving. Through this they try to reduce it to the position of an exhibit, which is purely ornamental and no longer fit for this location. The totem pole resists this interpretation. Its origin cannot be traced back; moreover, it seems very much alive in the face of rather violent attempts to reduce it to silence and inertia. The totem pole provides a good starting point in the analysis of Findley’s and King’s texts, in which the characters considered peripheral in the Yahwist source in Genesis, or characters invented by the writers suddenly acquire a voice or agency which proves as unsettling as that of the totem. Relegated to inferior status or to discursive asides in the Bible, Findley’s and King’s characters claim attention and become a challenge to the custodians of discursive space, now translated into Canadian reality.

Published in 1984, *Not Wanted on the Voyage* opens with a sentence of the Prologue which is a response to the Yahwist and sets the tone for the whole novel: “EVERYONE KNOWS it wasn’t like that” (3; emphasis in the original). First, the capital letters enhance the authority of EVERYONE, who disagrees profoundly with the Yahwist’s message. Second, the sentence announces a countercommentary to Genesis, in light of which the official version of the deluge story will be thoroughly discredited. What follows is a passage about the departure of a ship saturated with allusions to the British Empire. “They make it sound”, as if this were a colonial venture with a band playing “Rule Britannia”, Noah and his sons drinking port and smoking cigars like proper sahibs; Mrs Noah and her daughters-in-law “neat and tidy”, bidding farewell like elegant English ladies, honoured by “banners and a booming cannon.” Predictably, they leave behind the whole crowd of cheering spectators. “Well,” - the narrator hastens to add – “it wasn’t an excursion. It was the end of the world” (3). The Prologue is extremely important for the whole narrative, since here the writer signals his locatedness as a member of Canadian nation, whose past history embraced and subverted the legacy of the British Empire at

the same time. The postcolonial undertone of the Prologue paves way for the subversion of the Yahwist's authority, which was also connected with holding the territorial and discursive dominion through "a propaganda work of the empire" (Cross 40).

To appreciate Findley's completely different perspective the reader needs to turn the page and meet one of the chief focalizers of the narrative: "*Mrs Noyes went running – headlong down the darkening halls – her skirts and aprons yanked above her thighs – running with the blank-eyed terror of someone who cannot find her children while she hears their cries for help*" (4; italics in the original). Depicted in the way that stresses her physicality and domestic role, Mrs Noyes tries to save and protect, when she realizes that what is happening in "the darkening halls" is the result of her husband's decision to make a burnt offering of all the animals who would not come aboard. A fictional creation that evolved from a passive element in Genesis ("his wife"), Mrs Noyes appears at the beginning and at the end of the novel as a person who consciously sabotages her husband's actions out of ethical motives. The focalization of a substantial part of the narrative from the perspective of this marginal, though inexplicable character makes her presence as disturbing as that of the totem in King's story when it suddenly chooses to use its own voice.

Gradually, the reader identifies all the major characters from the Yahwist story, reconstructed in Findley's interpretation which queers the Yahwist narrative in Genesis. When Yaweh and Noah's family watch the Masque of Creation with Ham playing Adam and Lucy playing Eve in the garden of Doctor Noyes, Michael Archangelis is deeply troubled by Lucy/Eve. Sauntering in Noah's yard, Michael comes across a feather from his brother's wing, and realizes that the rogue angel Lucifer was not slain as a result of heavenly holocaust, but simply escaped and joined the household of Yaweh's most cherished friend, Doctor Noyes. Implicit in the tableau featuring Adam and Eve is the "gender trouble". Lucy/fer masquerades as Eve, while using his/her transgressive potential to dissolve the essentialist concept of sexual identity. The intrusion of Lucy is completely unexpected; after all Noah "was about to draw whatever strings or threads – or throw whatever lever he must use to produce his Eve ... that paper cut-out meant to rise from Ham-Adam's side" (Findley 97-98). "Paper cut-out" from Adam's side is Findley's definition of Eve conceived as a derivative being, properly controlled by the patriarchal imaginary like all the women in the house of Doctor Noyes, including the beautiful Hannah, who is as privileged due to his attentions as she is exploited. The only "woman" to step out of "her" role is Lucy, recognized by another rebel – Mrs Noyes and by Michael Archangelis; both of them keep their discovery to themselves.

According to Judith Butler the drag “effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity” (174). As a result of Lucy/fer’s drag the creation myth is open to a different reading connected with homosexuality that enters the garden and seems apparently bound up with Findley’s image of Yaweh himself. While watching everything with modesty and deference Mrs Noyes is puzzled by the fact that Yaweh did not have a wife or even a mistress, and yet her daughter-in-law Hannah was pleasant to his eye. At the same time Mrs Noyes takes note of the fierce beauty of Michael Archangelis and other angels polishing his breastplate and greaves. There was “not a single female angel” (71) in Yaweh’s retinue that consisted of “male acolytes,” a homoerotic undertone lurking in the description. Thus Findley teases the consequences out of the anthropomorphic image of God, who walked in the garden, and wrestled with Jacob in the closeness that suggested both combat and intimacy. With her/his “parodic identity” Lucy/Lucifer as the binary opposite of Michael also accommodates Eve, whose sex is both an improvement and a hindrance to the Yahwist concept of humanity. The reasons for Lucy/fer’s fall are specified in the words s/he utters in front of Mrs Noyes: “I wanted difference” (282). The same might be said about biblical Eve.

While Yaweh is being entertained by his friend, they both go into the orchard that is reserved for Noah only. Hannah, due to her beauty, is asked to stand at the gate, an honour that was not granted to Mrs Noyes, who was slighted more than once during the visit. Situated in rural Ontario, the orchard is explicitly connected with Rabbi Akiva; indeed the story is in circulation as a warning to potential trespassers, who intrude at a later time. One of them is Mrs Noyes’ cat, Mottyl, the other – her mistress, who ventures into the orchard when the rest of the family are aboard the ark. Pondering on other visitors in the garden, Mrs Noyes thinks “*they went in there for knowledge and all I want is food... Rabbi Akiva went into the orchard and came out whole. And so would she*” (134; italics in the original). Indeed Mrs Noyes ventures into the orchard to get apples, which are also meant to distract Noah’s attention from the fact that she is smuggling her blind pregnant cat, whom Noah did not wish to see aboard. In fact, Mrs Noyes hardly managed to save Mottyl from the holocaust prior to the ark’s departure.

Yaweh’s edict states that no one else will be saved apart from those enumerated by him. Thus the ark turns into a hierarchical world structured by relegating impurity and excess to the margin. At the same time the tight framework contains the seeds of its own deconstruction through the sexual contestation of Lucy and her husband Ham, and through the maternal attitude of Mrs Noyes, who defies her husband as if to atone for not doing it earlier. In Ham biblical Adam whom he played in the tableau acquires a disturbing potential for deviance. Encoded in the image is also Mrs Noyes’ memory of

little Adam, a deformed child consigned to death by Dr Noyes because of imperfection. The patriarch makes the same decision when Hannah gives birth to a similar child, who is thrown into the waves to keep the purity of the ark and its owner intact. What Hannah does is a structural repetition of Mrs Noyes' deed, when she drowned her deformed son. In both cases the blame is placed on the woman who has to kill the newborn baby.

Thomas King included an allusion to *Not Wanted on the Voyage* in his novel *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993). The passage in question concerns the mythical heroine Changing Woman, who falls out of the sky to land on the back of the coyote, a passenger on board Noah's ark or rather canoe which is full of excrement because of animals crowding on the deck. As she lands there, "a little man with a filthy beard jumps out of the poop and asks her: "Any relation to Eve? ... She sinned, you know. That's why I'm in a canoe full of animals. That's why I'm in a canoe full of poop" (King, *Green Grass* 145). The question places an Amerindian woman in the context that identifies her as Eve associated with defilement and abjection. The woman resists that and forms a bond with animals. Like Mrs Noyes she can understand the animals' speech. Like Findley's animals, King's coyote and others think, ask questions and also make practical jokes. "Why are you talking to animals? says the little man. This is a Christian ship. Animals don't talk. We got rules" (King, *Green Grass* 145). This is an echo of the fact that Noah from Findley's novel is the only person in charge of rules, as Mrs Noyes is quick to point out.

King's Noah treats Changing Woman as a welcome sexual resource: "[a] gift from heaven (...) you must be my new wife (...) Lemme see your breasts. I like women with big breasts. I hope God remembered that" (King, *Green Grass* 145). Yet Changing Woman does not succumb to his scenario, and a chase ensues. She manages to keep Noah at bay. In the meantime she learns about Noah's story from animals, and she is almost ready to find a redeeming trait in her antagonist because he took animals aboard, but the old Coyote says:

[h]e tried to leave us behind (...) he tried to throw us into the water. But his wife and children said no, no, no. Don't throw all our friends into the water.

Wife? says Changing Woman. Children?

Noah threw them into the waters instead, says Old Coyote. It's the rules (147).

The last sentence is an obvious allusion to throwing a deformed baby overboard in Findley's work. No matter how comic the passage sounds, the text exposes King's Noah as a criminal. A fragment that makes an explicit allusion to Findley's oeuvre in King's novel comes after Noah gets angry at Changing Woman's resistance and sails away in his ship full of animals:

This is a Christian ship, he shouts. I am a Christian man. This is a Christian journey. And if you can't follow our Christian rules, then you're not wanted on the voyage.

"Oh, oh," says the Coyote. "Changing Woman is stuck on the island all by herself. Is that the end of the story?"

"Silly Coyote," I says. "This story is just beginning" (148).

King picks up where Findley leaves off. Abandoned by the patriarchal script, the woman is facing her own story, which is about to unfold. Disobeyed, Noah sails away, much to the relief of his unexpected antagonist, a remarkable change from the final passages of Findley's novel, where Mrs Noyes sits on board with Mottyl under her apron and thinks: "The voyage will never, never end" (Findley 352).

I would like to connect King's image of the island with Kant's island of "pure understanding" in *Critique of Pure Reason* as interpreted by Pamela Sue Anderson. In light of Anderson's analysis Kant's island with its "unalterable" limits illustrates rationality, order and control, which is an asset of a male philosopher (Anderson, "Primal Scene" 21-22). The island is contrasted with the dangerous sea identified with desire, death and femaleness (Anderson, *Feminist Philosophy* 11). King's version of the contrast between man and woman in the story of Noah and Changing Woman switches the traditional attributes of both sexes around. Noah is associated with desire, abjection and death. His canoe is full of excrement; i.e. "the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death", as Kristeva puts it (71). Changing Woman shakes off this threat to her identity. Instead, she is the one who makes room for herself on the island unclaimed by the sea that Noah roams in a futile way. Inquisitive, practical and rational, she is in control of her own limits. Changing Woman is picked up by Ahab's whaling ship which, like patriarchal scenario, resurfaces regularly after being destroyed by the whale. Interestingly, King joins Findley in dissolving the sexual identity of his major character. At some stage she is seen playing with a whale that was first referred to as Moby Dick, until Changing Woman correctly calls her Moby Jane (King, *Green Grass* 196). The Coyote implies that the two females are having sexual fun in the water, which is a joke on Melville's all male crew as well. Yet the fluid sexual identity of Changing Woman does not place her on the side of transgression, irrationality or rebellion. It is more like a practical joke played on the commentators on her story, which is bent to her own making. Ahab, like Noah, remains associated with the sea signifying death, desire and abjection now projected on the male character.

Significantly, the Coyote, who is a commentator on the patriarchal foundation myths compares Ahab to "God-guy", who, in turn, bears resemblance to Noah. Like in Findley's novel the story of deluge is not the

only biblical intertext interpreted by King. Several pages of the novel go to the retelling of the Yahwist narrative on Eden, and they should be read next to “One Good Story That One”, because both texts are complementary. Interestingly, the protagonist of King’s short story is the First Woman, described as a big, strong woman, far from ascetic, anorexic, courtly or pop ideal. The story of Eve’s transgression is transformed into an adventure:

First Woman walks around, says, straighten up, and she says, mind your relations, and she walks around that world with her head in the trees, looking off in distances, looking for things that need fixing. So that one walks off the edge of the world.

So that one starts falling (39).

The First Woman has a great deal in common with Mrs Noyes because of her care for the family and maternal attitude to everything that needs “fixing”. She is a reformer and traveller, an image that the white culture produced relatively late, because its women were confined in limited space rather than allowed to move around on their own. The woman lands on the grandmother Turtle, and this establishes the bond between her and animals, which, though depicted according to a unique Amerindian pattern, can be compared to the situation when Mrs Noyes and Mottyl throw themselves at the mercy of animals in time of need. The creation of the world in King’s novel is an act of making land from the mud. This is authored by the First Woman and grandmother Turtle. The Coyote approves of that, but adds: “what we really need is a garden. Exactly, says that backward GOD” (39; emphasis in the original). King reverses the sequence of events in Genesis. God arrives on the scene much later when the world has been made, and he clearly comes out of somebody else’s script. What strikes the reader immediately is how King handles the anthropomorphic description of God from the Yahwist text. God is an intruder on the privacy of the first couple, whose origin begs for attention: “That good woman makes a garden and she lives there with Ahdamn. I don’t know where he comes from. Things like that happen, you know” (King, *Green Grass* 40). The nonchalance with which the narrator dismisses the patriarchal world order is exemplary. No toil or artistic design goes into the making of Ahdamn. He comes from an unknown place, and has no patrilinear or even matrilinear genealogy. His name refers to a swear word that the indigenous people may have learnt as one of the first words connected with the colonizers. If Eve was supposed to be “a cut-out” model from Adam’s side in Dr Noyes’ *Masque of Creation*, King’s Evening is as daring and inventive as Lucy, but her Adam is far from Ham in terms of intelligence. “That Ah-damn not so smart” (8) says the narrator of “One Good Story, That One.” The woman is the first to act, while walking around head in the clouds: “So she doesn’t see that tree. so that tree doesn’t see her. So they bump into each other. Pardon me, says that Tree, maybe you would like

something to eat" (King, *Green Grass* 40). The tree seems to be as alive as the totem in the other story, as well as discursively emancipated. The First Woman takes armfuls of its gifts to Ahdamn. They include apples, pizza, hot dogs and fried chicken. An Indian ideal of sharing and hospitality is thus fused with the biblical narrative. Like Mrs Noyes the First Woman is defined by her ability to feed others. "Wait a minute, says that GOD. That's my garden. That's my stuff" (King, *Green Grass* 41; emphasis in the original). The conflict is connected with ownership. This is how King interprets the biblical ban, which was shown as clearly misogynist in Findley's rewriting of the Hebrew tale about Rabbi Akiva.

King's GOD is later developed into a colonizer, who evicts Eve/Evening from her garden in "One Good Story, That One". In the story Evening is supposed to be an Indian woman, while Ahdamn's identity, like that of God, is connected with the white race. In the short story God banishes the couple from the garden saying "Go someplace else, just like Indians today" (9). The tree that is supposed to nourish all the relations is claimed as divine property. Yet it leaves Eden too. Like the totem, the tree is alive and capable of making sounds and decisions. Ahdamn makes a spectacle of himself upon eviction, and then he hurts himself on the rocks, so Evening has to "fix him until he is any good again" (King, "One Good Story" 9). Like Findley, King undercuts the power of mythical Adam, whose imperfection in the story is a contrast to his partner's cleverness and skill, a contrast to the biblical narrative as well.

Let me revert to King's short story "Totem", whose title protagonist is, after all, a tree turned into a work of art due to the native carving tradition. The tree from indigenous space enters the closed garden of white hierarchies. At the same time the "talking" tree from Evening's garden leaves the space claimed by petulant, colonial deity. The two trees seem complementary. They signify withdrawal from the white man's space and then intrusion into it so as to reclaim it.

In *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, the ark symbolizes the interpretative strategy that masters the world of nature. It is composed of trees that have gone into its construction, and now contain the rebellious potential of Mrs Noyes, who ignored the male warning and dared to venture into the garden for nourishment. Her alliance with Lucy/Lucifer both exploits the stereotypical connection between women and impurity, and draws attention to the fact that abjection is the most propitious place from which to negotiate radical transformation (Anderson, "Abjection" 221). However, King goes a step further than Findley, because his female heroines simply shrug off the patriarchal demands. Also, they are stronger and cleverer in comparison with their male partners who end up abject and pathetic. King's fiction exposes the cultural imposition of the Yahwist's God and thus decolonizes the garden. Both authors subvert the message of Genesis by making intruders a sign of hope for those who question the repressive strategies and thus expand our understanding of grand narratives and ethical concern.

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