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### A Deceptive Initiation: An Ecological Paradigm in Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John*

**Abstract I:** Il romanzo *Tay John* di Howard O'Hagan è stato ampiamente dibattuto come un lavoro modernista di decostruzione, che mina alle basi i concetti consolidati di mitologia, narrativa e genere, così come sono normalmente intesi. Nel presente saggio, analizzo uno degli aspetti del dramma mitologico del romanzo precedentemente trascurati – lo scontro tra le epistemai ecologiche pre-moderne e moderne, che rivela un evento precursore dell'ingresso nella modernità. Io sostengo che l'ironia drammatica di un mito indigeno ricodificato presenti gli Shuswaps aborigeni alla percezione colonialista dell'ambiente, rendendoli ingannevolmente ostaggi delle loro stesse convinzioni e, così, modificandone drasticamente il continuum spazio-temporale.

**Abstract II:** Howard O'Hagan's novel *Tay John* has been widely discussed as a modernist work of deconstruction that undermines the established concepts of broadly understood mythology, narrative, and gender. In this article, I focus on one of the previously neglected aspects of the novel's mythological drama – the clash of the pre-modern and modern ecological epistemai, which unfolds as an originary event of entering into modernity. I argue that the dramatic irony of a recoded indigenous myth introduces the aboriginal Shuswaps to the colonialist perception of the environment, deceptively making them hostages of their own beliefs and thereby drastically changing their temporal-spatial continuum.

The titles of all three chapters in Howard O'Hagan's novel *Tay John* (1939) – “Legend”, “Hearsay”, and “Evidence – Without A Finding” – are suggestive of the problem with the narrative's trustworthiness. The first and the shortest part of the novel, “Legend”, which will be the focus of this essay, in addition seems to exploit the rich semantic potential of the titular word: it is a story of the mysterious birth and the early years of the legendary figure Tay John, the son of the white missionary Red Rorty and a native Shuswap woman; it is a legend of Red Rorty as a pseudo-saint or a pseudo-apostle; and it is also “legend” as the wording on a map – the map of Western Canada at the end of the nineteenth century. Prior to becoming a popular tourist destination and a mine site, the Rocky Mountains of Western Alberta and British Columbia were a part of central Canada's hinterland, which “was shaped separately to a greater extent and tied in loosely to Confederation with a railroad” (Harrison 1977: 74). Still, the Canadian Pacific Railroad, which was launched in 1885, lay two hundred miles to the south of Yellowhead Pass – one of the central geographical points

of *Tay John*. Even the prairies to the East from the Rockies, before acquiring the image of the archetypal garden in the works of George M. Grant, Ralf Connor, Nellie McClung, Arthur Stringer, and R. J. C. Stead, were, in Dick Harrison's words, "hardly more than a source of land, markets, and raw materials" (Harrison 1977: 74). It means that at the beginning of the narrative, in 1880 – according to "men's time" (O'Hagan 1989: 11), as opposed to the cyclical time of myth and nature – the Athabasca valley as the main setting of the novel was largely a land scarcely populated by trappers and fur-traders and visited by prospectors and surveyors as well as missionaries. At the same time, this wilderness, necessarily viewed as such by colonizers from Ontario, was home for a few indigenous peoples (Crees, Stoneys, Shuswaps), whose habits and mythologies O'Hagan studied from the "White" anthropological sources such as Diamond Jenness's *The Indians of Canada* (1932).

The application of these studies to a vivid artistic imagination resulted in the kind of a 'legend' which combined a generally trustworthy account of the rite of initiation with an imposed on the Shuswap worldview myth of a white-haired messiah, destined to lead his people to a better life on the Pacific coast. The hybrid mythological basis of the legend is fully mirrored in the figure of the novel's protagonist, Tay John, the subject of the rite of passage and the ostensible messiah, who himself has a hybrid and murky provenance, being a child of a failed white missionary and a married Shuswap woman. During his manhood vigil ritual Kumkleseem (Tay John's Shuswap name) fulfills the expectations of his tribe and becomes one with nature, acquiring the bear-spirit as his guardian spirit, thus confirming his messianic leadership among his people, but at the same time brings from the valley a seed of destruction in the form of dark sand that shines at night. Gold sand changes the natural environment of the valley by bringing prospectors and miners, yet its lethal 'magic' begins well before the influx of the white colonizers: Kumkleseem breaks the Shuswap custom by refusing to share the sand with his tribesmen and later, having received a rifle and other valuables from the colonizers for his guide service, alienates himself from his people even further by perpetuating his proprietary mode. On their way to the coastal Salish, a cousin tribe on the Pacific coast, the Shuswaps forget their habits and ecological worldview and turn into lazy fur-traders, constantly on the brink of survival. The fate of the tribe is magically tied to the disposition of its leader, Kumkleseem, who adopts a French nickname *Tête Jaune* (yellow head) and later its Anglicized version Tay John, and, refusing to sacrifice his personal happiness for the sake of his people, abandons them altogether. The demise of the Shuswaps and their land reads first of all as ecological deterioration, precipitated by a series of 'magic' coincidences, misinterpretations, and misrecognitions, among which the merging of the Judeo-Christian messiah mythology with the Shuswap beliefs in a yellow-haired leader, paralleled by the very appearance of Kumkleseem-Tay John, a progeny of a native woman and a Christian missionary slash rapist, seems the most important. Kumkleseem's rite of initiation, mirroring all the ambiguities of its hero and of the mythologies behind him, becomes an embodiment of these misrecognitions – as a just a story, a "legend", a ritual, and an originary scene of entering to modernity.

In his novel, O'Hagan mixes the narrators and their versions of the events, thereby concealing the otherwise ungraspable passage from a pre-modern mythological state to the realm of modern ideologies in a convoluted time-space continuum, described by Jack Den-

ham, the main narrator of the novel, as “the country of illusion”: “Remember that I speak to you in the country of illusion, where a chain of mountains in the distance seems no more than a dog might leap across” (O’Hagan 1989: 163). The blurred vision and uncertain hearing to which the reader of the novel is subjected are fortified by a mosaic of time patterns, which features modernity’s straightforward thread interwoven into the multilayered mythical substance, much like a railroad penetrating a mountain country. As Ronald Granofsky notes, “Vision is so problematic in this borderland country because different versions of time are operative in the various worlds adjacent to it and among the various inhabitants” (Granofsky 1992: 110). Articulated as an ambience of any story that unfolds in the novel along the lines of myth, this illusory environmental time-space is not a mere background but the very fabric of the narrated reality. It renders most of the story “untold”, to the effect of arriving at the mode of fiction that Michael Ondaatje labels as “mythic realism” (Ondaatje 1989: 265). In his “making the point that no story is complete”, O’Hagan, as Margery Fee argues, creates a “new world myth” by also “undermin[ing] to varying degrees several dominant and interconnected Western ideologies” (Fee 1986: 9), which Jack Robinson defines as “the Christian division of spirit and flesh, the egocentric self, the use of language and story as means of subduing nature, the process of knowing through intellectual dominance, the myth of the world-dominating male, the centralist and imperialist concepts of culture, and ideology as *teleos*” (Robinson 1988: 173-174). These very ideologies are described as prevalent epistemological and behavioral modes of the anthropocene in the works of Bruno Latour (1993), Donna Haraway (1991), Timothy Morton (2009), Adrian Ivakhiv (2001), Jedediah Purdy (2015), and other scholars of ecocriticism and modernity.

This all-penetrating suspicion of mythology makes it possible for O’Hagan to wield what Ondaatje calls “that raw power of myth” (Ondaatje 1974: 24) precisely by means of exploiting the mechanics of its creation and of exhibiting this mechanics in a postmodernist manner. One of the novel’s stories that is particularly interesting in this regard is the story of the originary event that – through its inscription in myth (the myth of exodus) and rite (the rite of passage) – introduces the Shuswap people into modernity, represented by white men, their values, capitalist relations, and colonial enterprise. In what follows, I argue that the paradigm of the originary event runs contrary to the circular, insular mythology of the natural cycles. The very event represents a breakthrough from that closed time-space of pre-modern religiosity toward historical time, and the ecological implications of this change for the indigenous people in the novel are disastrous.

Due to the special role, inscribed to Kumkleseem by his people, the magic impact of his initiation is expected to influence the fate of the whole tribe rather than his personal life only. Therefore, the time-space of his initiation moves from the personal sphere to the realm of the sacral and the collective. The essence of initiation itself is an environmental experience: a boy should go away from people into the wilderness and spend several days there without food until he sees a vision that shows him “the spirit that would guide him” (O’Hagan 1989: 45). In their expectations for Kumkleseem’s initiation, the Shuswaps waited for a specific place that he would choose, and that very space would serve as a sign for them; accordingly, his prospective vision would be an indication of the path before them. The fact that Kumkleseem-Tay John chooses for his initiation a taboo place testifies to a special role

that he himself ascribes to his personality, and becomes an omen for his tribesmen: if someone breaches the taboo and encroaches into the prohibited area, spirits should punish him; or, if he is a great man, the life of the whole tribe should drastically change.

The taboo place where Kumkleseem went for his trial has all the appearances of the valley of evil. It is

a valley into which no man went. The water that came down from that valley was turgid, dark, and flowed silently, with no rapids. It was said that if a man drank of that water he would lose his voice and go from the sight of his fellows, roaming the hills at night to back at the moon like a coyote (45).

The taboo space is marked by the mystic quality of the environment of the evil valley that casts a spell and thus distorts the natural creation within its boundaries. But the real fear that the valley provokes in the Shuswaps is the threat that the evil spirit of the place presents for the whole community:

The spirit of the valley was cruel. Men feared that one night, taking the form of a great white bear, it would come down upon them in their sleep and leave them with a coyote's howl for voice and only a coyote's claws for hands, and each man would be forever a stranger to his neighbour (46).

As the expectations of Kumkleseem's initiation vision were so high that his tribesmen hoped to obtain a vision for the fate of the whole tribe, their fear of his going to the evil valley becomes even more understandable: the spatial transgression could be interpreted as an apocalyptic prophecy, as a prediction that the evil spirit would overpower all men and thereby ruin the whole community forever.

Although Tay John-Kumkleseem already goes to the taboo land, he nevertheless has to set some temporal-spatial limitations for himself. He was going along the valley for four days until he could "go no farther", then he listened for four days more, and on the ninth day, he turned back. At some point it seems that the landscape and its evident physical signs – the beginning of the river or the high mountain ridge – served as postmarks for his journey: "On the end of the fourth day my eyes told me I could go no farther. I had come to where the river is born and where a man could step across it. Rock walls were before me. Ice hung upon them – white, and cold as an old woman's breast. One place there was where man might still go on, but I knew I had come to the end of my journey" (48). The secret symbolism of those limitations comes to the open only after Kumkleseem returns to his people and tells them his story.

The narrator – along with Kumkleseem as a story-teller who relates his adventure to his tribesmen – is pushing the reader to the understanding of the importance of those limitations gradually, developing the environmental experience of the hero from the personal significance of his initiation toward the collective meaning with metaphysical, and even apocalyptic, implications. The personal dimension of his initiation experience unfolds in the field of sensual environmental perception, which deploys along the temporal axis of the day-and-night cycle with prevailing visual experience during the day and hearing ex-

perience during the night accordingly. The completely passive, contemplative mode of this experience is definitive of the principal existential attitude toward the natural environment that the Shuswaps represent in all the aspects of their life. This chthonic mode is a striking opposition to what the modernizing spirit of the colonizers has to offer: accepting instead of imposing, patiently looking upon instead of restlessly changing, reading instead of dictating, and just diligently noting instead of actively interpreting:

Against a spruce-tree, withered by lightning long ago on some sand the river had fallen away from, I sat and waited and my ears listened. Close to me I saw in the green coarse grass a place where a cow moose had borne her calf three days before. Closer to me still, so that I could see the broken tips of the willows in the sun, an old moose had browsed. Earlier, when the snow had just left the ground, a she-bear and her two cubs had crossed on the sand past my feet, for the marks were there before me. On the ledges above my head goats came when the day was warm and lay down in the sun. The rest I saw was grass trembling in the wind, and the roof of the forest bending when the mountains breathed, and sun shining on running water (48-49).

This description is worth special attention because it is not a white-narrator's poetic landscape portrayal, crafted in accordance with the romantic or any other tradition of nature-writing; rather, Kumkloseem himself presents it as an account of his initiation. At some point in his story, when the temporal-spatial limitations are all set, the active role of the subject ceases and what follows is his all-encompassing as well as all-respecting position of a receptive organ that records the environment with minimal interpretation and later relates everything without discrimination or selectivity. "Grass trembling in the wind" has much more active and acting power and energy than Kumkloseem himself, whose perceptive organs organize the surrounding environment into the world first in his mind and later – as a confirmation of his sanity – in making sense of it through the narrative. A natural change reflected in the capacity of his receptive organs uncovers still different aspects of the environment and calls for new personification metaphors that employ his keen sense of touch and hearing against the backdrop of the weakened nightly vision:

At night in the darkness I felt the mountains come closer so that they were against my elbows, and my bones that could not move were sore and aching. At night the river spoke loudly. An owl, the soul of a departed woman, was in the tree above me, and my ears, become lonely, were tender to its message. Mice ran over my toes (49).

It then becomes clear that the narrative acquires a mythical pattern, and through a gradation of animals – from the smallest to the biggest – which fulfills the number of days Kumkloseem spent in a receptive position, he leads the story to the conclusion that his tribesmen expect from him. After the mice, the first morning he realizes that a marten was beside him under the spruce-tree; the second morning he had a visit from a lynx; a "great black wolf" came on the third morning; and, ultimately, the fourth morning brought him an old bear, who made his bed beyond Kumkloseem's feet and stayed there the whole night to watch him.

As the climax of Kumkleseem's story matches what his people expect from it, the oldest and the wisest of the tribesmen, Squeleken, rose and said: "It is well. You have spoken with the words of a man. The bear spirit will be your guardian spirit" (49). Squeleken's concluding remark nicely wraps up the conventional part of the initiation story, which results in determining the guiding spirit of a newly-baked man or warrior, thereby securing for him a double connection, necessary for both present and after-life: a special personal connection with an animal, with a piece of a non-human natural environment in which he lives, and with a divine entity that this animal symbolically represents. Of course, Tay John's connection with the bear spirit does not appear accidentally.

The bear spirit was suggested for Kumkleseem as the right choice before the trial, as an opportunity to choose the moral instead of the immoral, the collective instead of the individual. When the time of Kumkleseem's initiation came, people were saddened because he was constantly "sitting on a ridge and gazing up" the horrible valley, whose "cruel spirit" is able to induce irrevocable transformations in human souls. To fathom the dubious character of the bear spirit with regard to Kumkleseem and the Shuswaps, we need to remember the shape that the cruel spirit of the valley takes for them. Probably, upon seeing the boy aspiring to the bear spirit, old Smutuksen decided to present him with an alternative bear spirit. The night before Kumkleseem's trial, the old man takes him outside the village and in a forest clearing shows him the Big Dipper: "That is The Bear. You see him, and he sees you" (46). The Bear that sees Kumkleseem is an alternative concept of the omnipresent God, to whom Smutuksen introduces the boy, full of pride in his desire for transgression – to enter the country of the "white bear". This white bear has its spatial limitations: it dwells in the horrible valley; its localization makes it possible to evade it, to avoid the horror by simply not encroaching upon the cursed land. The Bear, by contrast, cannot be disregarded: "he sees you" anywhere, even in the land of the "white bear", which is what the old man seems to be trying to convey to Kumkleseem. The bottom line of that warning is a matter of conscience, etymologically *co-knowledge*, shared between the two participants of the intimate connection that excludes the third party: "You see him, and he sees you" (46).

An ambiguous philosophical implication of the bear image develops gradually throughout the novel and ultimately acquires a polar metaphysical meaning of both dark and light, predator and victim, power and weakness. The Bear is going to watch what kind of a bear Kumkleseem is becoming himself during his initiation. Additionally, there is a fear, a helplessness before the eyes of a bear that charges "out of the dark" (243): a fear of the unknown. There is also the imagery of the dark compared with the inside of the bear, and the bear as an allegory of wilderness that constantly vies with man. "An epic battle: man against the wilderness" (86) was a generalizing characteristic of the narrator John Denham's first meeting with Tay John. In the battle scene, Denham is merely an onlooker, whose position at the opposite side of the river gives him a passive, contemplative, and philosophizing capacity to generalize the battle as an object but never to approach it from the point of view of Tay John himself. Tay John's victory over the she-bear thus becomes Man's victory over darkness, which Denham immediately associates with the wilderness, yet does Kumkleseem endow the episode with the same meaning? He himself comes from the darkness of

the earth and disappears – at least for the white onlooker – into the womb of the earth at the end; the wilderness is the home where he lives, and the bear is his guiding spirit, acquired during the initiation trial. Ultimately, there is also a bear that Tay John kills out of mercy: the bear cub, mutilated by a European woman, Ardith Aeriola. The cub is also a small piece of wilderness, taken as a pet by a civilized woman, who out of ignorance cuts the cub's nails off so that the creature cannot walk. All these bear episodes point to the fact that Tay John is not only closely tied with the bear image but also shares its collective fate: as the she-bear, he also impersonates the wilderness, killed by Man; he mutilates himself when he falls prey to the horse passion; and he symbolizes the darkness, the unknown, the unfathomable that lures and scares the Europeans.

"His mark will be upon you, and your mark upon him" (50), says the old Squeleken to Kumklesseem about the bear-spirit. While Squeleken is satisfied with the expected outcome of the initiation, Smutuksen, who had shown to Tay John – before the trial – The Bear who was going to watch him from above, suspects that there is more to Kumklesseem's story. And, urged by this suspicion, Kumklesseem tells his tribesmen about a temptation that he struggled with far away in the mountains: "There was a word. There was a voice. I heard speech in the trees. It called me farther than I had gone. Still I returned my face from it for I had gone as far as my return would let me" (50). This is the second part of the story, the one that fulfills not the collective, tribal expectations of the initiation, but Tay John's personal quest for self-identification.

The result of this quest, however, is as ambiguous as the image of Tay John at large. The whole of Kumklesseem's initiation enterprise was based on breaching the taboo of the evil valley. A spatial restriction that Kumklesseem imposes upon himself in spite of all the luring voices seems to suggest that The Bear, an allegory of a higher overseeing divinity, overpowers Tay John's urge toward transgression: when reaching the point of no return, he stops himself and does not cross the Rubicon that would separate him from his tribesmen and probably call down afflictions upon them. But the reaction of his people to his story proves that separation has already taken place: some of them were wondering "if the valley had cast its spell upon Kumklesseem so that he no longer spoke to them wholly with a man's tongue, for these were words they did not understand" (50-51). Although, at least this time, Kumklesseem curbs his desire for transgression, his frightened tribesmen in their apprehension are not far from the truth: the evil spirit of the valley has already been unleashed, and Yellowhead-Kumklesseem unknowingly brings it to their lives.

As a proof of his unusual journey, Kumklesseem brings a bag with sand from the bank of the river where he was fasting. Mirroring the dichotomy of Kumklesseem-Yellowhead, who comes out of the dark of the earth but has remarkably light hair, this sand combines the qualities of darkness and lightness. "It is the dark sand where the dark waters come from" (51), says Kumklesseem as he presents his trophy. "It is dark, yet the light of the sun has entered into it so that it shines even now at night" (51). However, his tribesmen, who lay their tongues upon the heavy sand, associate its bitter taste with "a mountain goat long dead" and suspect some dark magic in it (51). Along the line of that dichotomy, during the celebration of the happy outcome of Kumklesseem's initiation, three white men arrive; they surprise

Tzalas with a map showing geographical intelligence of the Shuswaps' country and reveal that their final destination is the same tabooed dark valley. The clash of the two epistemological systems, with their respective languages of ecology, happens right at that point. The white men are not at all discouraged by Tzalas's admonition that it is an evil place with bad water or by Kumkleseem's affirmation that "there is nothing up the valley" (54). A dichotomy also hides in white men's representation of themselves – "We are peace-lovers, and no harm rides with us" (53) – and their actual threat to the Shuswap community, apparent in their reaction to the gold sand, which is produced by Kumkleseem as material evidence from the evil place: "They laughed. They hit each other upon the shoulders until the people thought they were fighting. Tzalas stood close and wondered at the magic of the sand" (54). The dramatic irony of this description foreshadows the tragic consequences this seemingly shared wonder at the magical qualities of the sand will bring to those who interpret them from non-Western, "child-like", "innocent" perspective.

The white men steal Kumkleseem from his people and hire him as their guide to the evil valley, promising him "a rifle that would kill a moose with its voice [...] and a coat to wear, red as bear's blood" (54). Not the Bear's spirit but the coat of "bear's blood" becomes the real, ultimate initiation of Kumkleseem. That is why "when Kumkleseem returned he was no longer Kumkleseem" (55). White people called him "Tête Jaune" (accommodated to the local pronunciation as "Tay John"), Yellowhead, mimicking the nickname of the historical Pierre Bostonais, an Iroquois-Métis fur-trader and trapper who at the beginning of the nineteenth century crossed the Rocky Mountains through the pass known later as Yellowhead. As this name, uttered by the white men in relation to Kumkleseem, was combined with praise for his good eye and knowledge of the mountains, the Shuswaps decided that the name has been given to him for his good qualities and deeds. Thus, the whole figure of Tay John, following the above array of misinterpretations, becomes a product of deception, of internal, essential falsity that undermines him as a chthonic demigod and thereby also weakens the temporal-spatial ecological integrity of his land. Together with Tay John, the Shuswaps unwillingly and unknowingly become involved in an alien symbolic system, which, as though in a curved mirror, distorts and contaminates their mythical, pristine world of harmony between the human and non-human and of the direct ontological correspondence between the name and the thing.

A number of scholars have been attracted to the mystic significance of naming in *Tay John* (Fee 1986: 10; Davidson 1986: 37; Zichy 2004: 197; Hingston 2005: 183), which Fee qualifies as "analogous to mythmaking" (Fee 1986: 10), yet the main focus has been on the naming of wilderness as the way of appropriating it. The fake name "Tay John", mimicking the name of another person, depersonalizes Kumkleseem and brings upon the name the functional, not mythical, meaning that it has with people of a different cultural system. This clandestine enemy, deception, ruins the long-established homeostasis of the Shuswaps' life and corrupts the people's morals. The hunters become traders and hunt only for animals that can be sold profitably to the white buyers: "Days came when the young men, following Tay John, failed to hunt meat and hides for the village. They began now to hunt other animals than the moose, caribou, goat and deer — smaller animals deep in the timber; the



martin, the lynx, the mink and the fox, and to pack the fur on their backs to traders across the mountain" (O'Hagan 1989: 56-57). The young Shuswaps come back to their village with rifles and other perks of civilization, but the ecological balance of their land has already changed: the game retreated into the mountains, famine crawled into the life of the village, and "black sickness" (58) took many Shuswaps' lives. A medicine man, Kwakala, mentions "new shadows" that are cast upon their land: "Your fathers lived where you live for many, many winters. They were friends with the place where they lived. They were gentle. They spoke to a deer before they killed it that its spirit might not be offended. They did not boast [...]. Their women sang songs to the berry spirit" (59). With the advent of the new epistemological order, the ecological equilibrium of the land changes drastically: "The young men shake their rifles and boast. Still young bellies are empty. The women have become lazy and do not sing. Their berry baskets are empty" (59). In the face of this apocalyptic picture, Kwakala tries to resuscitate an old Shuswap myth of the Promised Land across the mountains, where their cousins still live and wait for them to come back, and where there are game and berries in abundance. It is a common belief among his tribesmen that Kumkeseem is the prophesied messiah, who will lead his people to that paradise. If the spatial dimension of this mythical land lies somewhere across the mountains, "south, yet more to the west than the dark river" (60), its temporal dimension is directed not toward the future but toward the past, for this is the modernity that the Shuswaps are fleeing in their journey, and this is their pristine, prelapsarian past that they are pursuing in their flight.

The Shuswaps' journey to the Promised Land resembles, in its main shape, the biblical exodus of the Jews from Egypt. The people are first encouraged by the abundance of food just days away from their village. Later, the exodus becomes more challenging: the Shuswaps face tribulations, hunger, diseases; many of them die, and the rest start to doubt. Tay John, who becomes a figure of Moses, has to deal with small riots and complaints similar to those the historical Moses faced: "Have you taken us away to die in the wilderness? Were there not graves enough where we were?" (61). The road to perdition is embellished, though, with improvised miracles that the nature of the land offers to the travelers. From time to time they find spots full of game and berries, and one of these stops becomes an ultimate challenge, which the people cannot take, ultimately forgetting about their spiritual goal: "They stayed there, and forgot that they had been on their way to their cousins across the mountains, for now game was around them and the bushes bent with their summer berries [...]. It had come about as Kwakala said, and Tay John was the leader who had led them [...]. Smutuksen smiled to have seen this before he died" (63). But this was a false Promised Land, and Tay John was a fake Moses. There is no way to run from modernity and colonization; the return to the modus of life of their forefathers is only temporary.

O'Hagan employs dramatic irony by recoding the scene of the Shuswaps' initiation to their Promised Land onto their accelerated passage to modernity, represented by the white westerners and their mythologies of human dominance. Displaced from their native land and deprived of their, established by custom and traditional beliefs, eco-friendly attitude of coexistence with the environment, the indigenous people fell easy prey to the market economy, which made people dependent on the precarious fortunes of trade and re-coded the

landscape from a mythologized time-space to raw materials of profit. Being a wide-ranging satire of Western ideologies at large and of their implementation at the forefront of colonization in particular, *Tay John* makes it clear that at the beginning of the twentieth century the colonizers not only overlooked the very existence of culture in indigenous peoples but were also bedazzled by their own culture's suspicious virtues – not much different from the civilizing agenda of the first explorers of the Canadian west two hundred years previous. In his account of the failure of the missionaries to “civilize” the aboriginals, Alexander Mackenzie (1801) insisted that “a savage people” should have been introduced to agriculture as one “of those useful arts which are the inlets of knowledge,” leading to objects of higher comprehension” precisely because “it gives [“the wandering tribe”] a sense of property, and of lasting possession, instead of the uncertain hopes of the chase, and the fugitive produce of uncultivated wilds” (*Voyages*, cited in Harrison 1977: 14-15). In the light of this advice, *Tay John* looks subversively ironic. Skipping the step of agriculture, the Shuswaps were immediately introduced to the “sense of property”, which spread from their leader to the rest of the tribe and which, if anything, had a demoralizing and pernicious effect on the whole people. Being a progeny of Red Rorty, who came to the Shuswaps as a missionary but ended up leaving his semen in a married native woman, Tay John also – unconsciously – becomes a victim of his descent and of historical circumstances. In the ritual of his manhood vigil, he does justice both to his native part, in its spiritual unity with the natural environment, and to the hubris of his yellow hair, which brings him and ultimately his people to the “civilizing” ways of the sense of “lasting possession”. In the ironic twist of his initiation, Kumkleseem degrades to Tay John, and the bear-spirit that he supposedly acquired turns to be the evil spirit of the tabooed valley. This spirit, or the spirit of civilization, subverts the Shuswap ecological mentality, which deteriorates from sympathetic coexistence to apathetic exploitation. Driven by their origin fantasy, the Shuswaps arrive at the wasteland instead of the promised Eden and meet their future of bondage and demise. Their ecological episteme, marked for generations by the recurrent cycles of nature and chthonic mythology, is presented in the novel in the process of the originary event of their entering into the linear time of modernity. This ironic substitution is mirrored in Tay John's initiation resulting in a series of misinterpretations in the wake of which the Shuswaps fall prey to their own fantasies: the taboo valley becomes the colonizers' entrepreneurial investment object, and the westernized appellation of their leader renders them apathetic victims of the new episteme.

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