

EVE IN THE NEW WORLD: THE SEARCH FOR ORIGINS IN ANNE HÉBERT'S *LE PREMIER JARDIN*

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The New World forms a diverse postcolonial space in which problems of identity and stability are often related to a search for origin. In his 1974 essay, "The Muse of History," the Caribbean writer Derek Walcott describes the legacies of identity and literary creation in the New World. He takes the myth of Adam in the garden of Eden as the structuring analogy of an argument in which he juxtaposes the innocence of the Old World with the experience of the New: "The great poetry of the New World does not pretend to such innocence, its vision is not naïve. Rather, like its fruits, its savour is a mixture of the acid and the sweet, the apples of its second Eden have the tartness of experience" (40-41). The question is, to what extent are the Edens of the New World in fact new? How can we speak of origin if innocence cannot exist in these gardens?

My main topic here is another New World Eden: the Quebec City of Flora Fontanges in Anne Hébert's 1988 novel *Le Premier jardin*. The title itself indicates the problematic of origins that is ubiquitous in the novel. In her article, "Du *Premier jardin* au jardin des délices terrestres," Jacqueline Ferry describes the multiplicity of this theme in the following way: "[. . .] le titre est une invitation à un retour vers les origines, qu'il s'agisse des origines de l'homme et de la femme sur la terre, ou de l'origine de la Nouvelle-France" (23). The character of Flora Fontanges takes center stage in this novel and embodies the complications of a search for definition and stability at the individual and collective levels. Flora enacts returns, but her words and actions also represent a flight from the security of origins. This is the paradox of the lack of innocence in the New World. What I would like to suggest

is that Flora can be read as embodying a debate about the problem of origins. Can she locate her Eden in the New World? Can the Eden of the New World offer a foundation for history and identity like the garden of the original Adam and Eve? These are questions of great relevance not only to the literature of Quebec, but to all postcolonial literatures. I will begin by offering an introduction to the difficulty of pinpointing origins in *Le Premier jardin*. I will then consider the tension between historical and traumatic disparity and demonstrate how they lead Flora to turn to resurrection in her search for origins.

There are three levels of interpretation of the novel that suggest the difficulty of pinpointing origins: first, the search undertaken by Flora; second, intertextuality as a primary structural component; and third, Quebec City as a New World Eden. Flora's search takes her from the Old World to the New. However, the reader has the sense that she never fully leaves either behind. She returns from France to her hometown of Quebec City in order to contact her daughter, Maud, and to play the role of Winnie in *Oh les beaux jours* by Samuel Beckett. The city is never named, but the geography and landmarks are described in detail. During her return, Flora encounters the layered pasts of her family life, various theatrical and historical roles she has played or imagines, and the history of Quebec City. The imagination of Flora Fontanges propels the narrative chaotically into the past. The narrative is comprised of the fragmented flow of Flora's experiences, the resurfacing of Flora's repressed memories, and the words emanating from the roles she plays. Flora has a partner in her quest for origins in the character of Raphaël, a student of history and Maud's boyfriend. United because Maud has fled, Flora and Raphaël visit Quebec city and attempt to resurrect its lost history. They spend much of the novel not knowing where Maud is, until Maud finally returns to them. At the end of the novel, Flora is called away - back to France - to play the role of Frola in *Chacun sa vérité*. At this level, *Le Premier jardin* is the story of a fragmentary identity encountering the past, and perhaps even coming to terms with it.

However, intertextuality constitutes the primary genetic component of the text. Despite the structure indicated by her search, *Le Premier*

jardin is a novel recounted principally through the texts of Flora Fontanges's life: her theatrical and historical roles, and her personal memories of childhood. Because of the power and frequency of these roles, the voices emanating from them dominate the voice and authority of the third-person omniscient narrator. Flora adopts many theatrical roles such as Winnie, Ophelia, Phèdre, and Mademoiselle Julie. In addition, she incarnates historical roles like Joan of Arc, Renée Chauvreur and Marie Rollet. Flora seems not to have an identity beyond the roles she plays: "Hors de scène, elle n'est personne" (9). Offstage, Flora is described as "vide" (10). Flora knows only one way to live: through acting. The narrative that recounts Flora Fontanges's return to Quebec City is therefore above all a chaotically woven fabric of discourses from other texts. Because Flora is constantly changing roles, *Le Premier jardin* is constructed through what Bernard Aresu calls the "caractère labyrinthique de l'intertextualité" (557). All of this is a reflection of the makeup of the dominant character of the novel, Flora Fontanges.

The notion of the garden in *Le Premier jardin* is multiple. In her article, "Les premières mères, *Le Premier jardin*," Lori Saint-Martin argues that the title refers simultaneously to three gardens: Eden, the garden of the first French-speaking settlers of Quebec, and the garden in Touraine where Flora and Maud lived during Maud's childhood (673). Saint-Martin is correct to suggest that these three gardens are interwoven in the text, and thus the search for origins must be seen as simultaneously taking place on several levels. What interests me in particular is the establishment of Quebec City as a New World Eden. It is significant that *Le Premier jardin* makes reference most specifically to the foundation of Quebec City. "Est-ce donc si difficile de faire un jardin, en pleine forêt, et de l'entourer d'une palissade comme un trésor? Le premier homme s'appelait Louis Hébert et la première femme, Marie Rollet. Ils ont semé le premier jardin avec des graines qui venaient de France" (76). Aresu notes the historical dimension of the polyvalent garden when he writes: "L'humus primordial fondateur et féminin de ce jardin prend simultanément une dimension historique, celle du sol primordial où se créa le Nouveau Monde [. . .]" (566). Neither Eden

nor the garden in Touraine are developed as subjects independent of the foundation of Quebec City. Significantly, the foundation of Quebec City is depicted as being a misunderstanding: "Raphaël, parfois, en guide scrupuleux, rappelle que la venue au monde de la ville n'a été qu'un malentendu, les fondateurs croyant être sur la voie de l'Orient et des richesses d'or et d'épices" (55). The garden of Quebec City is thus a place of creation, of cultivation, and of misunderstanding. It is this origin marked by disparity that Flora continually explores with Raphaël as they tour the city.

It is in the context of the disparity of this Eden that the multiple and fragmented New World Eve appears in the character of Flora Fontanges. Flora and Raphaël search out information on the little-known historical characters responsible for the foundation of the city. The multiplicity of the New World Eve they create can be seen in the description of the "filles du Roi":

En réalité, c'est d'elle seule qu'il s'agit, la reine aux mille noms, la première fleur, la première racine, Ève en personne (non plus seulement incarnée par Marie Rollet, épouse de Louis Hébert), mais fragmentée en mille frais visages, Ève dans toute sa verdure multipliée, son ventre fécond, sa pauvreté intégrale, dotée par le Roi de France pour fonder un pays, et qu'on exhume et sort des entrailles de la terre.
(99)

The biblical myth of Eve as one of the two central foundational figures of humanity is here transformed into a myth about the establishment of a colony in the New World. A parallel between Eve and the founding couple of Quebec City, Marie Rollet and Louis Hébert, is alluded to but quickly bypassed. Eve is no longer a single personage, the beginning seed of all who follow. Instead, she is many characters at once, impossible to fully define yet indispensable to the foundation of the community. Walcott suggests the necessity of this multiplicity when he writes that in the New World "maturity is the assimilation of the features of every ancestor" (36). The botanical metaphors that run

through this description signal the chaotic nature of her existence: Eve is above all a product of the garden, that is a product of human cultivation and of the unpredictable growth and accidents that ensue.

Disparity is manifest in the troubling multiplicity and lacking information of Flora and Raphaël's search for origins. Their process echoes ideas expressed by Michel Foucault in his 1971 article, "Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire." Foucault argues that the search for the identical at the origins of history is a fallacy. He writes, "Ce qu'on trouve, au commencement historique des choses, ce n'est pas l'identité encore préservée de leur origine – c'est la discorde des autres choses, c'est le disparate" (138). Foucault also suggests that the imposition of continuity on history does a disservice to actual historical experience. One of the implications of this argument is that in understanding the past we must be faithful to its absolute diversity and unpredictability: we must remember the accidents that form us.

In *Le Premier jardin*, the disparity theorized by Foucault on the collective level is inseparable from the disparity of Flora's own life. Her subjective position creates a dynamic in which all of the historical information gathered is filtered through the discontinuity created by her own traumatic experiences. Here, the disparity of collective history is in competition with individual trauma. Ultimately it is Flora's own origin that inspires and complicates the search for historical origins. Therefore, I would like to discuss the disparity created by Flora's trauma before turning to the intricacies of the problem of resurrection and origin.

Flora Fontanges is trapped by trauma, and always needing to flee. This can be seen in two important uses of the English word "world" in the novel. The Shakespearean epigraph of *Le Premier jardin* reads: "All the world's a stage" (7). It is hard to imagine a more appropriate sentence to begin this novel in which Flora Fontanges lives her life by the roles she plays. There is another line that serves as something of a refrain in the novel: "Anywhere out of this world." Seen together, these two quotes give an accurate picture of Flora's traumatized identity and constant need to escape. For Flora, the "world" is uninhabitable. It is a "world" from which she must constantly flee, but she can only

do that through treating the “world” as a “stage.” She is always playing roles, lightly touching the surface of people, places, and emotions before moving on. It is worth recalling in this context that Flora Fontanges has moved several times between the Old World and the New World. *Le Premier jardin* recounts an attempt at reaching a new world from which she will be free of the traumas of the past.

Flora Fontanges is a character of multiple traumas. To use Sharon Willis’s term, the “non-lived moments” of trauma cause her to simultaneously repeat elements of traumatic experiences and to live a life marked by discontinuity. It is difficult to go back to an original trauma, just as it is difficult to find the real Flora Fontanges behind the roles that she plays. As a New World Eve, her character is determined not by innocence but by experience. In one of the rare articles on Hébert devoted to a psychoanalytical reading of one of the characters, Saint-Martin writes, “[...] le refoulé qui fait enfin retour est celui de l’incendie de l’orphelinat, certes, mais aussi et peut-être surtout celui de l’absence de la mère” (670). In addition, the trauma of Flora’s adoption by the Eventurels is significant. All of these non-lived moments, and perhaps others, motivate Flora’s actions and roles during her rediscovery of Quebec City.

In the beginning, Flora is an orphan by the name of Pierrette Paul. The fire is the earliest instance of trauma to which the novel makes explicit reference. In 1927, Pierrette Paul survived the fire in the orphanage and this traumatic experience has a great impact on the narration of Flora’s return to Quebec City. As Marie-Lyne Piccione states, “Cette nuit où la petite Pierrette Paul vit mourir ses compagnes, est au cœur même du récit dont elle rythme les péripéties, les pauses et mêmes les silences” (91). Throughout most of the novel, Flora succeeds in avoiding this repressed memory or in transferring it to another role.

However, before the beginning, lies the second layer of trauma: the absence of the mother. The trauma of abandonment is not referred to specifically, and the absence of the mother is lived more as an ongoing reality than as a singular event. Describing the indelible importance of this loss, the narrator writes: “Un seul secret avait de l’importance pour elle, celui de sa naissance qui ne lui sera jamais révélé, ni aux

époux Eventurel, malgré leurs recherches” (149). The reason is simple: the fire in the orphanage has destroyed all the records of her birth parents. Flora’s origin only exists for her in the form of repressed memories.

Pierrette Paul’s adoption and forced repression by the Eventurels represents a significant traumatic experience linked to her profession as an actress. This leads to the complete effacement of her identity, and to the creation of a new role as Marie Eventurel. Marie is initially overtaken by a fever, a fire inside, that makes her hysterical. The Eventurels aid Marie in repressing her trauma and in becoming suitable for their class: “Ils ont pris toutes les précautions pour qu’elle ne soit plus jamais la même. Une quarantaine bien pleine, dépassant de huit jours l’ordonnance du médecin [. . .]. Ils n’ont qu’à la faire sortir toute nue de sa chambre, après lui avoir rasé les cheveux” (130). There was no risk that she would ever be the same, and now this is doubly true. After her fever subsides, Marie Eventurel remains silent until she can properly play the role of an Eventurel. After she pronounces her first words, the narrator tells us: “Cela sonnait bien dans sa tête comme sa première réplique de théâtre” (137). Thereby, the link between the disparity caused by trauma and the constant need to be playing a role is clearly established.

The lack of assimilation of individual traumatic experiences engenders a quest to recreate a past moment through the accumulation of details: “Depuis longtemps, Flora Fontanges est persuadée que, si un jour, on arrive à tout rassembler du temps révolu, tout, exactement tout, avec les détails les plus précis – air, heure, lumière, température, couleurs, textures, odeurs, objets, meubles – , on doit parvenir à revivre l’instant passé dans toute sa fraîcheur” (104). This desire for full experience in the past is no doubt motivated by the many non-lived moments of Flora’s own life. Her inability to pinpoint her own origins leads her on a historical search in which resurrection is the operative dynamic. Because she cannot or will not resurrect her own past, she uses her talents as an actress to excavate the signification of feminine victims of history.

The task of Flora and Raphaël is not to read information about the characters forgotten by the historical discourse of the founding of

Quebec City but to resurrect these characters and thereby to make the New World Eve live in the present. They recite lists of names of feminine characters from the past found in the archives of the city. For example:

Raclot, Marie-Madeleine
 Turbal, Ursule
 Varin, Catherine
 Touzé, Jeanne
 Raisin, Marguerite. (106)

These are the multiple names of the New World Eve. The incantations are designed to bring the characters back from the forgotten recesses of history. As Ferry puts it, “[...] des servantes, des femmes de chambre, des cuisinières, des bonnes d’enfants, des bonnes à tout faire, des bonnes secours. Anne Hébert les invite toutes à sortir de l’Ombre et de l’Oubli” (26). Saint-Martin comments on the process of recitation by saying: “Le nom à lui seul peut faire surgir un personnage du passé; c’est lui qui permet de retrouver, intactes, Barbe Abbadie et les filles du Roy, les bonnes [...]” (679). Does a name suffice to bring a historical character into the present? Despite Saint-Martin’s assertion, I believe that a close reading of Flora’s struggle reveals that the process is indirect and contains unexpected meanings. I would therefore like to consider the efficacy of two attempts at resurrection: Renée Chauvieux and Joan of Arc.

Renée Chauvieux is a young girl who was found dead in the snow during her first winter in the New World in 1670. Flora becomes obsessed with this young girl, but unfortunately, not much is known about her: “Pour la petite Renée Chauvieux, il y a très peu d’indices, trois lignes à peine dans le registre de la ville et l’inventaire de son maigre trousseau” (104). The question of how to make a historical character live again is posed in the following way through the use of free indirect discourse: “Mais comment la réveiller, cette petite morte, raidie sous la glace et le temps, la faire parler et marcher à nouveau, lui demander son secret de vie et de mort, lui dire qu’on l’aime farouchement comme un enfant qu’on doit ressusciter?” (104). Flora

doesn't just want to speak of Renée Chauvreur, she wants to make her live again. Much as she reads the names of the "filles du roi," she reads the "Inventaire des biens de Renée Chauvreur estimés à 250 livres" (105). However, this is all the material she has to work with. The question becomes clear: how can she bring this historical character back to life? The problem of the resurrection of Renée Chauvreur is linked to that of her own traumatic origin. Implicitly, the question is: how can she access her own traumatic memories?

The answer to the question of how to resurrect Renée Chauvreur is put off or, to be more accurate, transferred to another character, Ophelia from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. This was Flora's first theatrical role at the age of eighteen. "Ainsi Flora Fontanges s'est-elle déjà approchée d'Ophélie, au fil de l'eau, parmi les fleurs à la dérive, posant à Ophélie la même question torturante qu'à Renée Chauvreur, au sujet de la destinée amère des filles. Pourquoi?" (104). The narrator then goes on to describe, not how Flora connects with Renée Chauvreur, but how Flora was able to bring Ophelia to life many years earlier. This sliding between characters highlights both their individual incompleteness and the ubiquitous theme of suffering. If we concentrate on the wholeness of the individual subject, the resurrection that takes place must be seen as incomplete. However, the resurrection is an affective success as it allows Flora to give words to the female suffering that is a previously unnamed foundation of history.

The example of the role of Joan of Arc brings Flora closer than any other role to a specific traumatic memory. In the past, she played this role with great success. Now, here in Quebec City, the role takes on new dangers: "De tous ses rôles, celui de Jeanne a été le plus applaudi au cours de sa carrière. Mais pourrait-elle le reprendre, ce rôle, ici, dans la ville, sans risquer d'y perdre la vie?" (27). The narrator spells out clearly the dilemma faced by Flora. Adopting the role to fit her needs with Raphaël and his friends, she twice repeats this line in a cafe: "J'ai eu si peur d'être brûlée..." (31). This phrase is given in the past tense and directly connotes two moments in Flora's life: the period in which she played Joan of Arc, and the fire in the orphanage. Fear would normally only be connected with the latter instance. Flora was

frightened in the past, and she survived where others perished. Her own traumatic origin is accessed indirectly and incompletely through the role of Joan of Arc. It should be noted that this historical figure is the central foundational personage of the French nation. She is the Eve of the Old World. However, what Flora resurrects through the character of Joan of Arc is not Joan of Arc herself but the foundational character that Flora may embody in the New World.

My reading of *Le Premier jardin* presents Flora Fontanges as a New World Eve. She is a new type of foundational character, a character of chaotic renewal tainted by experience. Through her words and actions she lives multiple levels of individual and collective signification. The choral cacophony of history can be heard in the voices that sound themselves through her. Her interaction with history offers an example of the disparity Foucault theorizes in historical origins. However, Flora also manifests a disparity related to the traumatic experiences of her childhood. Flora demonstrates that the only way to play the role of the foundational character is to play many roles, to transform oneself incessantly. The roles she adapts reflect both her inner disparity and the disparity of the historical discourse in which she makes meaning. Flora's search for origins and stability does not reveal that which is identical, but rather provides an opening toward the ultimate disparity of the human construction of history.

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