'Rogues and Brutes ... in Pinstripe Suits': Timothy Findley's Headhunter

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Abstract

Timothy Findley's recurrent obsessions with the legacy of colonialism, new forms of Empire under capitalism, and the social construction of masculinity come together in his 1993 novel Headhunter in a particularly troubling fashion. The novel replays Conrad's Heart of Darkness during a terrifying time of an AIDS-like plague in the late twentieth century, sometime in the near future, relocating its characters and their obsessions in Toronto, Canada's financial heartland. This deadly disease proceeds by discoloured speckling of the body that could be termed 'speckulation', the implicit pun signalling an intertextual relation with 1980s capitalism as much as with Camus' The Plague. The Conradian frame is explicitly invoked in the title, 'Headhunter', the epigraph to Section One, which cites Marlow's famous beginning, '... this also ... has been one of the dark places of the earth' and the novel's delightful opening paragraph, which runs as follows:
Timothy Findley’s recurrent obsessions with the legacy of colonialism, new forms of Empire under capitalism, and the social construction of masculinity come together in his 1993 novel *Headhunter* in a particularly troubling fashion. The novel replays Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* during a terrifying time of an AIDS-like plague in the late twentieth century, sometime in the near future, relocating its characters and their obsessions in Toronto, Canada’s financial heartland. This deadly disease proceeds by discoloured speckling of the body that could be termed ‘speckulation’, the implicit pun signalling an intertextual relation with 1980s capitalism as much as with Camus’ *The Plague*.

The Conradian frame is explicitly invoked in the title, ‘Headhunter’, the epigraph to Section One, which cites Marlow’s famous beginning, ‘... this also ... has been one of the dark places of the earth’ and the novel’s delightful opening paragraph, which runs as follows:

On a winter’s day, while a blizzard raged through the streets of Toronto, Lilah Kemp inadvertently set Kurtz free from page 92 of *Heart of Darkness*. Horror-stricken, she tried to force him back between the covers. The escape took place at the Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library, where Lilah Kemp sat reading beside the rock pool. She had not even said *come forth*, but there Kurtz stood before her, framed by the woven jungle of cotton trees and vines that passed for botanic atmosphere.¹

The whimsical parody is overt, simultaneously funny and serious: the jungle has been faked; the darkness is real. We begin in the library. The library is the institutional repository of the images that haunt us, the representations that have shaped our world, enabling and constraining our ability to imagine otherwise. The library has become the simulacrum of the jungle, a more appropriate symbol for the darkness of Western civilization: its colonizing modes of knowing, its classificatory ambitions (including its stereotypes of gender construction), and its commodification fetish. Lilah Kemp, the schizophrenic retired librarian who loves books, had, a few years earlier when inadvertently possessed by the fascist bookburner Otto, burned down her old
workplace, the Rosedale Public Library, symbol in the popular imagination of everything that was most genteel about the colonial Upper Canadian tradition. (There is a bookstore cutely called 'Not the Rosedale Public Library'.) Now she has unwittingly, she believes, released Kurtz into her world. Her burning of the books reveals her own complicity in the horror she dreads from Kurtz. Their conflict is not posed in the simplistic oppositions of us and them, but rather through the tangled emotions of a character so involved in humanity that her rejection of Kurtz comes from intimate knowledge rather than any assumption of moral superiority.

Not so much an 'Intended' as someone chosen to focus the hauntings of our past, and to be perceived as out of the mainstream of capitalist logic, Lilah is the moral centre and the great triumph, in human terms, of the book. In living for her readers as Conrad’s ‘Intended’ never could, she reverses the gendered focus of Conrad’s tale. Herself a reader, she is for readers the most sympathetic focalized centre of consciousness in the book, although an omniscient narrator guides us through a maze of characters and their interconnected stories. It is typical of Findley’s work to locate the moral centre of the text in feminine consciousness and for the masculine to represent evil and a lessened awareness. In this opening scene, Lilah experiences the horror attributed to Kurtz in Conrad’s tale; Kurtz remains oblivious to her presence and the significance of their encounter.

The headhunter of the book’s title is most obviously Kurtz, who works as Psychiatrist-in-Chief at the Parkin Institute of Psychiatric Research, but Marlow (introduced later) shares his profession if not his approach to it. In Findley’s resituating of horror from the beginning to the end of the twentieth century, inner and outer worlds are more closely fused. In the invader-settler context of Canada, the colonial encounter has usually involved settler attempts to appropriate the native, as Conrad does the African, to a European agenda. But in Headhunter, the focus clearly falls on the self-interrogation of the settler psyche. In Walter Benjamin’s terms, the practice of psychiatry supplies the documents of civilization that simultaneously encode an ultimate barbarism. Just as Conrad’s Kurtz’s idealistic memo includes its coda to ‘Exterminate the brutes’, so Findley’s Kurtz has produced a memo documenting his search for ‘absolute power’ via the motto: ‘psychiatry is my mode, psychiatric research is my delivery system ... Under my guidance, they will soon enough become the willing addicts of desire’ (p. 426). Brutes and rogue traders are the same people in Findley’s Toronto, and they are engaged in exterminating one another, egged on by the power-hungry Kurtz.

Findley is romantic about madness. He sees madness testing and revealing the limitations in psychiatry’s modes of knowing. Madness opens imaginative possibilities psychiatry tries to close down. He shares
a female character’s perception of Kurtz as ‘everything she feared. Authority with an armed guard’ (p. 249). If we are to define madness as a sickness to be cured, then for Findley the sanctioned violence and miseries of our present system are the true insanity. In Conrad’s text, his madness constitutes Kurtz’s charisma. Marlow is seduced by that madness, and critics have been too, seeing Kurtz as the moral centre of the book for exposing the logical extreme of imperialism. Findley reverses this dynamic. His Marlow is seduced, not by Kurtz, who seems chillingly sane and businesslike, but by a series of mad and anguished figures Marlow cannot save, although he tries. Most of them suffer, like Amy Wylie, ‘from a madness called benevolence’ (p. 370). Several of them die because they get in Kurtz’s way. Findley’s Marlow seems to spend most of the narrative avoiding Kurtz and the discovery of his madness, which the text labels incomprehensibly evil in its quest for absolute power.

To blunt the insight of the clinically mad, psychiatrists prescribe drugs. Kurtz experiments with a new drug, called ‘Obedian’, that creates absolute docility. It makes him the god he believes psychiatrists should be. His interest is power and he wields it ruthlessly. During the 1980s, the word ‘headhunter’ was widely used to describe corporate raiders, searching for the kind of executives who could make them the most money most efficiently. This use of the term best describes Headhunter’s Kurtz, and others in his circle, who hunt, recruit, use, and even torture and kill people to advance their own wealth and power. It is as if Findley anticipated the Bernardo case in diagnosing the evils of our times.³ These men, the executives and tycoons who would abuse their own children for a moment of fleeting gratification, embody Findley’s own horror, made manifest for him through the Holocaust, that ‘there is nothing people won’t do’ (p. 96). In earlier books, such as The Butterfly Plague and Famous Last Words, he explored this horror in its explicitly Fascist manifestations, what he calls the ‘aggressive face’ (p. 98) of this will to power at all costs. In Headhunter, he describes its ‘corporate’ (p. 98) face.

This face is masculine in modality, but can be assumed at will by men and women in Findley’s world. Freda Manly, for example, is the kind of phallic mother to make one wonder about Findley’s gender conservatism. Her son, Warren Ellis, makes his rejection of her and what she stands for, the ‘manly’, into a public gesture of defiance by appearing at his father’s funeral in a Balenciaga dress, accompanied by her chief rival, his dead father’s partner, whose cause he is now committed to serve. The gallery owner Fabiana Holbach (Kurtz’s Intended in Findley’s text) sums up the novel’s position on gender construction: ‘We’re all in drag ... It’s a drag act – men pretending to be men – women pretending to be women – but only the artists will tell us that. The rest of us cannot bear the revelation’ (p. 239). In that sense,
Warren’s cross-dressing marks his self-positioning as an artist. He has chosen the form of his complicity, refusing to become a ‘manly headhunter’, to highlight instead a self-construction that brings headhunter categories into question, while continuing to wear the class-marking Balenciaga. Warren also articulates the novel’s equation of ‘bedrooms and boardrooms’ as places where ‘someone is always getting bonked’ (p. 94).

In Canada during the 1980s, the corporate face of power (Findley’s horror), the headhunter or rogue trader, became associated, by Findley and eventually by the majority of English Canadians, most directly with the Progressive Conservative government of Brian Mulroney. The greed of the eighties has already become a legendary memory but few Canadian writers have attempted to understand it in their fiction. In a recent interview, Findley describes a hypothetical situation that I believe comments on the genesis of Headhunter, although he doesn’t explicitly say this. What he says is:

Let’s say you state that Mulroney killed Canada – which I believe. How am I going to make that more than a mere rhetorical statement? I have to find a fictive way of proving that he did that – a believable way – by working that story through the lives of people and incidents in a way that is so engaging that you can’t help but close the covers of the book and say ‘It is all true’.4

‘Mulroney’, too, then, is the headhunter conjured by the book’s title, as a potent symbol of the comprador class selling out the nation yet again within a neo-colonial world system, thus repeating the unimaginative ways in which Canada’s elite has always operated under earlier forms of colonialism. This fusion of the corporatism of ‘the new world order’ hailed by George Bush, fascist ambitions for refashioning humanity, earlier forms of colonialism in Canada and imperialism in Conrad’s text, creates a volatile, and self-condemning mix, in Findley’s novel.

Findley’s narrator uses a fashionable gallery opening to pull these threads together for his readers. On his arrival at the gallery, Kurtz muses that ‘nearly everyone in this room ... has violence somewhere in the family background’ (p. 59). The artist, Julian Slade, had been what Kurtz calls, in the currently dominant business-speak that Mulroney (and now Klein and Harris) have inflicted on the nation, ‘a client’ (p.59) of his at the Parkin Institute. Slade’s paintings represent horror: ‘Eyes that were blinded and mouths that were screaming’ (p. 60); they are paintings that literally ‘bled’ (p. 60). Although he had wished to dedicate his paintings to Kurtz, to ‘the man who released my demons’ (p. 60), as he put it, Kurtz had refused, finding the paintings ‘too alarming’ (p. 60). Griffin Price, one of the headhunting businessmen, thinks that Slade ‘is the Mengele of art’ (p. 61). He believes that ‘The human race needs another Mengele to bring it up to date’; that ‘we are ready for another version of the human race. The final honing’ (p. 61).
Here, in this echo of Hitler’s ‘final solution’, is the seduction associated with Conrad’s Kurtz. Findley’s Kurtz is not immune, hanging one of Slade’s most horrific paintings in the lobby of the Parkin Institute.

Each character in the text is ‘placed’ by his or her response to Slade’s paintings. Kurtz embodies the susceptibility of the scientific community; Griffin Price that of genteel old Toronto. Price hates his heritage, describing it as ‘Like most pioneer colonial societies, [where] the rules of conduct were limiting and uncreative. More British than the British had been the motto then …’ (p. 62). The narrator continues to paraphrase Griffin’s thinking:

Besides the old Toronto society there was the new. This … is common in every culture – but the difference between one new society and another lies in the uniqueness of the given old society. It is the old society that is being aped – and what is being aped depends on where the old society got its values. In Toronto, Griffin said, they were got from snobs. So snobbery was aped – and, while snobbery itself is bad enough, the aping of it is vacuous. Money turned the key, as always – and what this produced, according to Griffin Price, was a social class of rogues and brutes dressed up in pinstripe suits and screwing everything in sight. Metaphorically speaking, of course … (p. 62)

The irony here is that in the world of Headhunter, this metaphor is made literal, through the description of the sadistic rituals of a group of men, calling themselves the Club of Men, who recruit children (sometimes their own) to satisfy their various sexual fantasies, drugging them with ‘Obedian’ to ensure their compliance. Their activities parallel the unethical experiments of Kurtz and a Dr. Shelley (echoing Frankenstein) with ‘Obedian’, creating a group of severely traumatized children at the Parkin. Kurtz ‘raids’ a colleague’s list of ‘clients’ (many of them members of the Club of Men) so he can use their confessions to his own advantage. These stolen secrets join his other collectibles: ivory, pornographic photographs, and fetishized objects of sadism and misogny from around the world. Peggy Wylie seems right the first time when she misreads the sign ‘THERAPIST’ as ‘THE RAPIST’ (p. 322) on her visit to the Institute.

The metaphor of ‘screwing’ in its linking of money and sex through violent aggression toward others, defines the Torontonian world in this text as the late twentieth century inheritor of traditions of conquest begun much earlier, traditions embodied for Findley in the constructed masculinity of the rogue in a pinstrip suit. Findley’s fictional persona, the Irish writer Nicholas Fagan, provides both the diagnosis and the cure for his protege, Lilah. Fagan’s journey up the St. Lawrence River to Toronto makes him think of the colonizers who preceded him. He concludes:

There is little beauty left – but much ugliness. Little wilderness – but much emptiness. No explorers – but many exploiters. There is no art – no music – no
literature – but only entertainment. And there is no philosophy. This that was once a living place for humankind has become their killing ground (p. 259).

So much for Canada. On a more general level, he writes:

If I were to propose a text for the twentieth century, it would be Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. As subtext, I would nominate Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Nothing better illustrates than these two books the consequence of human ambition. On reading them again, I ... took up my current view that the human race has found its destiny in self-destruction (p. 98).

When Lilah says that she thinks this ‘is the saddest sentence in all the world’ (p. 260), Fagan responds that it is also ‘a very angry thought’ (p. 260). He sees some agency and some hope in the idea that every Kurtz ‘has a Marlow’ (p. 261) and both are conjured for us by literature. Fagan’s Marlow, unlike Conrad’s, is less a secret sharer and more an alternative – a model of integrity in a fallen world. Does this make Findley a naive or a resisting reader of Conrad? I'm not sure, but it does mean that he refuses to explore the homosocial implications of Conrad’s text in his rewriting.

The destructive energies of Frankenstein and Kurtz’s quests for forbidden knowledge find their counterpoint, in Fagan’s reasoning, in the capacity of books to function as ‘A way of singing our way out of darkness. The darkness that is night – and the darkness that is ignorance – and the darkness that is ... fear’ (pp. 97-98). This is probably why Findley names the good psychiatrist who tries to save the children, only to be killed herself, Eleanor Farjeon, after the children’s writer.

Findley’s faith in the redeeming powers of literature, and in the ability of the Marlows of this world to bring the Kurtzes back into the fold of humanity, is both the charm and weakness of Findley’s text. After successfully equating the evil of the members of the Club of Men, who are voyeuristic, greedy, and selfish, with that of the researchers tormenting children and animals in that spirit of objective enquiry our society has coded ‘masculine’, *Headhunter* retreats from its insights. Kurtz’s role in linking the activities of the Club of Men and the Parkin Institute was in the service of a grand dream that there must be ‘a new social contract’ (p. 434). On his deathbed, he tells Marlow: ‘of his immense plans. I was on the threshold of great things ... ’ (p. 433), and later still calls them ‘a business proposition ... The future is a business proposition’ (p. 434). Marlow speculates that ‘the absolute exercise of absolute power’ has cut Kurtz ‘loose from reality’ (p. 433). Later, Kurtz offers another explanation, confessing, in halting, drawn out fashion, that when he was a boy at school, he had wanted ‘not to be me ... I wanted to be ... my father’ (p. 435). This is pure Findley: at the heart of all conflict lies the Oedipal struggle between fathers and sons. Although Kurtz’s confession articulates a logic demonstrated
throughout the narrative, most notably in the rewriting of *The Great Gatsby*, its statement here seems bathetic. In the end, the range of gendered subject positions explored in this text seems very narrow, the script already tightly written and unreceptive to substantial revision. Indeed, it seems to be in that generic contract that brings resolution at the end of a story that Findley pins his hope.

Fagan speaks the final, apparently authorized interpretation of the text we have just read, and his words seem complacent and insufficient. He writes to Lilah:

Every Kurtz must have his Marlow – and Marlow will always come to take Kurtz home ... This process is played out over and over – and with every journey up the river, we discover that Kurtz has penetrated just a little farther than his counterparts before him ... why does [Marlow] always agree to go? ... I would guess it is because he is beholden to Kurtz for having provided him, after darkness, with a way to find new light. (p. 440)

After the desolation Kurtz has sanctioned, such consolation seems special pleading, an uncanny echo of the 'Sustaining fictions. Uplifting fictions. Lies' that Marlow tells Fabiana, Kurtz's 'Intended', after his death (p. 438). Lilah is left with Fagan's 'uplifting fiction', lying in bed 'with *Heart of Darkness* beside her', thinking no one would believe the story she has just lived: 'Its only a book, they would say: That's all it is. A story. Just a story' (p. 440). Findley, of course, hopes he has convinced us to think just the opposite, that 'it's all true'.

In *Headhunter*, Findley explores the implications of the stories our culture tells itself about human limitations and possibility. The range of intertextualities is much vaster than those I have discussed here, but they all share, in Findley's retellings, an obsession with interpellated subjectivity and ways of living in bodies marked by gender, class and race. Perhaps his biggest innovation in rewriting *Heart of Darkness* is his reversal of Freud's equation of woman with that symbolic African darkness, reappropriating it instead for an analysis of the construction of masculinity and neo-imperialism in the late twentieth century. The aptness of his image of 'rogues and brutes in pinstripe suits' has been recently reaffirmed by media mythologizing of the latest celebrity 'rogue trader', Nicholas Leeson, who allegedly is responsible for breaking Barings Bank. Nonetheless, some troubling questions remain.

Marlow's complicity, retrieved by Fagan as part of the redeeming lie that men tell women to keep them quiet, links Fagan, Marlow, and Kurtz in the continuation of a civilization that the novel has exposed as morally bankrupt. Lilah embodies the idea that redeems the destruction, the values of Western Literature and the insights they provide, but she is effectively cut off from reality, living in her own schizophrenic world populated by ghosts and fictions. Marlow's lie to Fabiana, echoed in Fagan's reassurance to Lilah, suggests that the
homosocial relationship of Kurtz and Marlow, unexplored in this text, remains nonetheless its own silent heart of darkness.

NOTES

1. Timothy Findley, *Headhunter* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1993), p.3. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
3. The Bernardo case was a sensational murder trial that dominated media attention for the first half of 1995.