

THE PROBLEM WITH BIBLICAL MOTIFS IN KNUT HAMSUN'S *GROWTH OF THE SOIL*¹

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Abstract: *Religion does not play a major role in Norwegian Nobel laureate Knut Hamsun's work. The one brilliant exception to this detached and seemingly cavalier attitude toward religion or, should I say, Christianity, is Hamsun's masterpiece, Growth of the Soil (1917), which won him the Nobel Prize in literature in 1920. In this mythic novel, Hamsun draws upon a plethora of biblical motifs to create a heroic cosmogony that proposes an alternative to the rapid social and economic transformation under way in Norway in the second half of the nineteenth century and a vision of Norway founded on the cultivation of the land through hard labour and the populating of the earth.*

Numerous critics have remarked on the Biblical allusions in the novel (e.g., Per Thomas Andersen, Nettum, Rottem, Storfjell, Øyslebo); however, only Rolf Steffensen and Andreas Lødemel have studied the role of religion in Growth of the Soil in any depth. I will expand upon their work to examine whether Biblical allusions are part of a rhetorical strategy that aims at a coherent worldview. Biblical motifs cleverly interspersed throughout the novel suggest that it is always gesturing toward a world outside its pages through a dialog with pre-existing texts, in this case the Bible, absorbing and transforming voices from culture and society, historical memory and national identity. I will reexamine not only the place of Christianity in this important novel but also the foundational myth that undergirds it, that is, the idea that Isak is the founder not so much of a new civilization as a biblical exemplum of a traditional way of life and old values based on the cultivation of the land.

That said, upon closer examination, Growth of the Soil does not amount to a faithful adaptation of the Old Testament; the novel is fraught with contradictions and the narrator also subverts its biblical framework by promoting an ambiguous reading of key scenes and motifs. Isak is not a bona fide practicing Christian and the novel should not be seen as an apology for Christianity in any way, shape, or form. Hamsun's Isak is no biblical patriarch, even though he, too, at first appears to be divinely chosen to bring about a new beginning for humankind; instead, Isak turns out to be just another human being—albeit an exceptional one—who works hard to make his life dream come true. Moreover, it “er tvilsomt om MG var tenkt som en ‘agrarisk oppbyggelsesbog’” (Rottem 2002, 167); however, an intertextual reading does enrich the novel's narrative as well as moral authority by drawing on Biblical persona and antecedents.

Finally, I feel compelled to address a postcolonial perspective if for no other reason than that an insistence on a Biblical reading of the novel largely ignores the import of the Samí, who ultimately pay the price of Isak's colonization of the land, which prefigures the conquest of Northern Norway by homesteaders like him as well as the advance of what is euphemistically called “civilization.”

¹ All references to *Growth of the Soil* are to the translation by W.W. Worster.

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Introduction

A little over one hundred years ago Knut Hamsun published his magnum opus, *The Growth of the Soil* (henceforth *GS*). Since then, his novel has been widely studied, inspiring a variety of approaches, including ecological (e.g., Hennig, Wærp), postcolonial (e.g., Per Thomas Andersen, Eglinger, Storfjell) and feminist (e.g., Britt Andersen, Zagar) readings. Another most fruitful approach has been inspired by the Russian semiotician and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) and has shown that Hamsun's masterpiece is more complex than previously assumed (e.g., Per Thomas Andersen, Nesby).

Bakhtin's work did not become widely known in the West until the 1970s but has led to several groundbreaking works in the humanities (literary criticism, history, philosophy), as well as in the social sciences (psychology, sociology, anthropology). In literary criticism Bakhtin's name is most closely associated with the theory of chronotopes as well as his concept of dialogism which can be defined as the "relation between distinct voices in a narrative text" (Bakhtin 3). Intended to serve as a paradigm by which to evaluate the construction, integrity and evolution of literary genres (Bemong & Borghart 3, 8) a chronotopical approach to literature studies the representation of time and space and shows how both are far less congruent than most traditional thematic readings of a novel suggest. Similarly, the dialogic approach opens up the concept of chronotopes to include intertextuality, which further undermines the idea that time and space can exist in anything but a complex relationship and leads to the discovery of new layers of meaning transmitted over time from one generation to the next. For example, Nesby challenges the conventional interpretation of *Growth of the Soil* as a rural idyll; by studying the articulation of time and space in the novel, she demonstrates that Hamsun's idyll is anything but utopian and rather like life itself: a web of oftentimes conflicting aspects of time and place, which creates a unique *Lebenswelt*--(a Husserlian concept designating the lived world around us but also the world we ourselves create through our lives)--quite distinct from more traditional fare in Hamsun studies. Space, for example, in a Bakhtinian reading, turns out to be distinctly multipolar, accounting for all the various milieus that each contributes to the overall meaning of the novel.²

Isak's world is not as timeless as an idyllic reading of the novel makes one believe either. True, on one level, life at Sellanraa follows the cyclical changing of the seasons; however, time does pass outside this homestead, which affects life there in significant ways. For example, Inger is condemned to a lengthy prison sentence for infanticide and returns much transformed. And the development of capitalism in northern Norway, which has an aura of inevitability about it, results in major changes for inhabitants. For example,

² "På makronivå kan *Markens Grøde* sies å operere med seks ulike settinger: Ødemarken, ødemarken som bygd, lappesamfunnet, bygda, byene (Trondheim og Bergen), samt nasjonalstatene Sverige og Amerika. På mikronivå finnes det en hel rekke settinger hvorav de viktigste er: Gården, Sellanrå, Breidablikk, Måneland, elven hvor Barbro føder og tar livet av sitt barn, skogen bak Sellanrå hvor Inger begraver sitt barn, hvor Inger og Gustaf skjuler seg for Isak, Storborg, gruvesamfunnet, herredskasserer Siverts sted, kaia i bygda hvor bl.a. Ingers og Eleseus avreise finner sted, ekteparet Heyerdals hjem, stien som knytter lappebygda til Sellanrå, fengslet i Trondheim og Brede Olsens logihus" (Nesby 59-60).

the mining enterprise initiated by Isak's discovery of copper-bearing stone on his property proves to be a disaster (economic and environmental³) but before long Isak proudly rides on a sparkling new "mowing machine" (GS 233) as if to say that he can adopt modernity piecemeal, à la carte, if you will. Isak is not even sure what to call this piece of machinery and just refers to it as the "machine," which rather reminds one of Hamsun's well-known hostility toward machines and the "machine age" (cf. *The Cultural Life of America [Fra det moderne Amerikas Aandsliv]* 21). But on a later occasion he is fascinated by another much smaller machine, a portable forge. "Isak is suddenly lost in wonder and delight over a little machine that works with a treadle—simply move your foot and it works. He understands it at once." (GS 305). Isak is not stupid and knows when a piece of machinery can simplify his life.

Nettum and Per Thomas Andersen also study the idyllic chronotope, which dates back to Theocritus in the third century BCE, and is comprised of subcategories, such as "Kjærlighetsidyllen, den agrare arbejdsidyllen, håndverkets arbejdsidyll og familieidyllen" (Per Thomas Andersen 121). But, as their close reading of the novel reveals, all these idyllic subtexts are entwined, so once again chronotopes must be construed as heuristic devices for interpreting a text rather than as eternal categories that exist in splendid generic isolation. Curiously, as if to confirm an uncanny Derridean aporia, the anagram of "paradise" is "diaspora," which suggests that Hamsun's idyll is a subjective construct that does not resist a close reading.

My paper builds on Bakhtin's insightful essay titled "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel. Notes Toward a Historical Poetics" first published in the 1930s.⁴ Although Bakhtin's theory of chronotopes was intended to corroborate "generic divisions in the history of the Western novel" (Bemong & Borghart 3), his theory of the interaction between time and space actually shows how the textual analysis of chronotopes rather complicates interpretation by bringing out hitherto unnoticed temporal and spatial relationships that problematize the concept of genre. These relationships can be of an intertextual character as well since individual novelists can also be seen as rebels against the constrictions of genre: "a genre is always the same and yet not the same, always old and new simultaneously. Genre is reborn and renewed at every stage in the development of literature and in every individual work of a given genre" (Bakhtin 106). What this means in practical terms is that Hamsun's novel replenishes our understanding of both the Bible and *Growth of the Soil*, as well as of the genre of epic literature in general.

Julia Kristeva coined the term "intertextuality" in the late 1960s and it was originally seen as a revolutionary approach in the spirit of the times. Kristeva sees the text as an "intersection of textual surfaces," a "mosaic of quotations," the "absorption and transformation of another text" (Duff 58); however, her approach is synchronic unlike the now conventional understanding of intertextuality, which is primarily diachronic and preoccupied with the adaptability of genres. Since then, the term has taken on a much

³ See Henig.

⁴ This essay is available in an English-language translation edited by Michael Holquist (Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1994.)

more colloquial connotation and is widely seen as an umbrella term in literary criticism that looks at such topoi as allusions, influence, reception, and quotations.

In my article I will pursue the Biblical motif as a chronotope in its own right and draw upon the ideas introduced above to show how an intertextual and dialogical reading of the novel further expands the chronotopes of time and space, in keeping with Bakhtin's argument in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1975). As Todorov makes clear, "the work must first be put in relation to the whole of literature" (Todorov 35) and "all discourse is in dialogue with prior discourses on the same subject, as well as with discourses yet to come, whose reactions it foresees and anticipates" (Todorov x). Thus, genre depends heavily on the intertextuality of discourse. Bakhtin, however, does not offer a "definitive *definition* of the concept" of chronotopes (Bemong & Borghart 5) and "this lack of analytical precision in Bakhtin's essays has led to a proliferation of heterogeneous chronotopic approaches to literature and, more generally, culture" (Bemong & Borghart 5). In his "Concluding Remarks" to the *Dialogical Imagination* Bakhtin greatly expands the concept of the chronotope to include a "veritable kaleidoscope" (Bemong & Borghart 6) of chronotopes, e.g. "minor" and "major", "chronotopic motifs," "chronotopes of whole genres," "basic," "adjacent" and "local" chronotopes. Following Bakhtin's example I believe that the Bible can be added to this list of chronotopes since it is a viable reference point in Hamsun's novel and therefore justifies the same kind of critical scrutiny as other more established chronotopes. As Linda Nesby states: "kronotopbegrepet er elastisk" (Nesby 2009, 7). Bakhtin himself uses the terms "chronotope" and "motif" synonymously (Bemong & Borghart 6).

Hamsun and Religion

Norwegian Nobel laureate Knut Hamsun's oeuvre has not faced much scholarly scrutiny from a biblical perspective, in large part because religion is not very present in it. Indeed, today religion itself has somehow become "taboo" (Steffensen 10) in Scandinavian culture and this taboo has bred widespread ignorance of and a general indifference toward the notion of a common Christian heritage. Hamsun's early novel *Hunger* is universally praised, but few readers recognize its powerful biblical resonance or are willing to consider its penniless and starving hero as a modern-day Job. Hamsun's only novel to justify any sustained commentary in this regard is *Growth of the Soil*, as Andreas Lødemel is quick to remind us: "De aller fleste som har skrevet om *Markens Grøde* (1917) har nevnt romanens tilknytning til Bibelen" (Lødemel 35), which is not to say that critics have explored this connection as fully as I propose to do here.

Reading Hamsun one cannot help but feel that he did not take kindly to religion. Hamsun's biographers tell us that the author reacted against his puritanical Lutheran, "pietistiske" (Steffensen 10) upbringing at the hands of his unpleasant uncle, Hans Olsen, a "pious and hardworking tailor and merchant" (Næss 2) -- for whom he went to work at the tender age of nine (Ferguson 10). "Hamsun forkastet en pietistisk kristendom til fordel for en nietzscheansk panteisme der lengelsen rettes mot en jegets sprengning og oppgaaen i altet, opphavet, naturen, jorda eller havet" (Sæbø 29). As a result, Hamsun allegedly rejected Scripture forever and remained suspicious of the authority of the written word period, preferring the authenticity of lived experience and the inspiration of nature. During his inquest on charges of high treason in 1945, Hamsun was asked by Dr. Langfeldt about his thoughts on religion and simply answered "indifferent" (Sæbø 31).

Hamsun went on to clarify: “Jeg er ikke gudløs, men som alle mine kjendte og kamerater likegyldig overfor religiøse spørsmål” (quoted by Sæbø 31). The consensus among scholars appears to be that Hamsun resented the Church’s “asketiske og livsfiendtlige fornektelse av det jordiske liv i det de retter blikket bort og opp mot det hinsidige” (quoted by Sæbø 34) and that his literary work is not very concerned with exploring questions of religion, though this does not mean that it does not occasionally strike a religious chord. Hamsun’s biblical allusions have been mentioned by a host of critics, including Per Thomas Andersen, Nettum, Rottem, Sæbø, Storfjell, and Øyslebo; only Rolf Steffensen and Andreas Lødemel, however, focus on the place of religion in *Growth of the Soil*. As Lødemel himself admits: “det bibelske motiv-sporet har imidlertid aldri blitt grundig forfulgt” and Steffensen argues that readers have to be aware of the religious dimension of Hamsun’s work in order to understand him at all (Steffensen 25).

The pantheism of Hamsun’s early and immensely successful novel *Pan* has attracted due attention (Sæbø) and scholars have insisted on the close bonds between Lieutenant Glahn, the main protagonist, and the singular beauty of Nordland, northern Norway, where Hamsun grew up and where twelve out of his thirty-three novels take place (Næss 3). “No one can know God,” one of Hamsun’s characters in *Den siste Glede* exclaimed, “only gods,” as if to suggest that the divine is everywhere, and especially in nature with which Lieutenant Glahn and several of Hamsun’s other well-known protagonists maintain an intimate personal relationship. Other readers underline Hamsun’s paganism and remind us that many of Hamsun’s novels appear to observe cosmic cycles and the rhythmic changing of the seasons (Storfjell, 2003, 97) calling attention repeatedly to Isak sowing, performing what Storfjell calls “såingens sakrament” (Storfjell 99).

His ironic outlook on life and eccentric characters notwithstanding, Hamsun’s fictional world *is* colored by the traditional values of Christianity, as well as by biblical language and allusions, if for no other reason than because contemporary Norway was still deeply religious, at least on the surface, and Hamsun therefore had absorbed more than just a modicum of Christianity as well as an understanding and appreciation, I think, of basic Christian master narratives and moral precepts. Judging from Hamsun’s novels, many, if not most, inhabitants of Nordland are not hardcore believers; they practice Christianity eclectically: on Sundays they go to church and the lessons of the Bible still serve as a moral compass in everyday life and help them to draw the line not only between right and wrong but also between what is socially acceptable and not. The characters in many of Hamsun’s novels all live this “lie.” They pay lip service to the Church but live their lives as they see fit; this inconsistency certainly does not make them amoral, however. Rather, I would say that people in Nordland maintain a healthy Scandinavian skepticism with regard to organized religion in all its forms while at the same time trying hard to observe the Golden Rule in some way, shape or form. Steffensen rightly talks about a “variant av den kristne livsanskuelse” (Steffensen 9) and “den nord-norske religiøsiteten” (Steffensen 28), which is less observant and less devout than elsewhere, especially in North America. For example, Inger always has a little something for any Lapp who happens to be passing through, a cheese, a loaf of bread, a bundle of wool, a pair of socks, or an old pair of shoes. Oline practices the same type of charity but readers also know that she has ulterior motives. Despite her evil streak, however, people are not always unkind toward her: Sivert is to inherit his uncle, who includes a provision in his will for Oline even though she is not family and Axel is reluctant to throw her out upon Barbro’s unexpected return.

Still, religion evidently does not occupy an important place in Hamsun's oeuvre. The brilliant exception to this detached and seemingly cavalier attitude toward Christianity is Hamsun's major epos, *Growth of the Soil* (1917). In this mythic novel, his most overtly ideological and polemical novel, I would argue, Hamsun draws upon a plethora of biblical motifs to create a "retro"-heroic cosmogony that proposes a real alternative to the rapid social and economic transformation under way in Norway in the second half of the nineteenth century and a vision of Norway founded on the cultivation of the land through hard work and the populating of the earth. Indeed--and I am by no means the first to say so--*Growth of the Soil* could be construed as a secular creation story in embryonic form (cf. Rottem 2002, 137-138). By extending the concepts of time and space all the way back to Biblical times the novel achieves a sense of timelessness appropriate to the epic style as well as the moral authority needed to propose a vision of what Norway should look like in the new century.

In Hamsun's own words, the novel was "a warning to my generation" (Ferguson 254) that the juggernaut of industrialization and accompanying urbanization spelled the end of traditional Norway and heralded a chaotic new world order. Hamsun evidently sought to make country life attractive again (Rottem 1999, 268) and even considered giving his novel the subtitle "A Book to My Contemporary Norwegians" (Kolloen 160). So, in some ways, this is a roman *à thèse*, what Rottem calls "budskapsdikning" (Rottem 1999, 125), written largely to prove Hamsun's UR-conservative thesis that the call of the soil is stronger than the temptations of the city as well as his Social-Darwinism and his traditional, patriarchal views on women, who could only find happiness and fulfillment living off the land under the guardianship of their fathers and husbands. Isak has a duty toward Inger and his family: "It was his place to protect her and them all; he was the Man, the Leader" (GS 184).

According to Næss (38), the novel also was written in response to a newspaper survey on infanticide, on what to do with mothers who kill their newborn babies. Apparently, Hamsun, like Ibsen, wanted to use literature as a vehicle to bring attention to social issues, in this case young mothers who kill their infants because society does not afford them another choice (Næss 115) As Barbro's advocate Fru Heyerdahl argues during her inquest, "the laws are made by men (GS 344) and "no man can imagine it" ([childbirth] GS 343). In point of fact, there are numerous and controversial allusions to infanticide, abortion, contraception and premarital sex throughout the novel. Yet other readers (among them Swedish Nobel laureate Selma Lagerlöf) see *Growth of the Soil* as a reaction to World War I, to the senseless slaughter and carnage, insofar as it proposes a peaceful alternative to the trenches of eastern France and shows how Norway could survive a world at war by remaining self-sufficient (Rottem 1999, 270).

Growth of the Soil: a Biblical Reading

Harald Næss called *Growth of the Soil* "the least characteristic novel that Hamsun ever wrote" (Næss 109); Penguin calls it a "timeless classic" in its latest edition from 2007, in a wonderful new translation by Sverre Lyngstad, which suggests that it embraces past, present and future in keeping with one of the central tenets of a dialogic approach, namely that the literary text is in a state of perpetual becoming, its meaning recreated by successive generations of readers. "The individual text becomes a 'space' in which other texts intersect" (Duff 63). *Growth of the Soil* is an epic novel set in the second half of the

nineteenth century, featuring the travails—the pain and sorrow and very rare joys, the “toil and pleasure, ups and downs, the way of life” (GS 16) of one Isak, whom the narrator describes simply as a taciturn, unemotional and rough-looking (GS 6) “lumbering barge of a man” (GS 5), capable of singlehandedly carrying a stove up the hillside to his cabin (GS 18).

The many biblical parallels in the novel are too numerous to ignore and, in my opinion, are too obvious to be sheer coincidence. Like the biblical Adam, Isak, literally, is a man without a past; like Adam, he suddenly appears out of nowhere and before long creates his own paradise for himself and his family. Moreover, the reader soon realizes that Isak does not seem to evolve much over time but rather is static, the very incarnation of a one-dimensional character. He ages, like the rest of us, but his personality evolves very little, though Inger brings out his sentimental side and convinces him that he is in love. Also, as in the Bible, the narrator never describes Isak in much detail, except to say that he has red hair and scars on hands and face (GS 3) and that his forefathers too were farmers (GS 30). The biblical narrator lists Isaac’s genealogy--albeit in cursory fashion--but there is no mention of where Hamsun’s Isak came from or even his family name and only naïve, tongue-in-cheek speculation about what he might have done in life before arriving on the mountain: “Maybe the man has been in prison, and is looking for a place to hide; or a philosopher, maybe in search of peace” (GS 3). Neither scenario is very likely. But despite his “lordly ways” (GS 19) Isak is portrayed as an intrinsically good man: He is “like a tree stump with hands to look at, but in his heart like a child” (GS 31). In one place, perhaps to underscore his savage appearance, the narrator likens him to the biblical Barabbas of popular lore, a notorious rebel released by Pontius Pilate (GS 9) to please the people. Isak thinks slowly but is far from dumb just because he is illiterate; only he thinks in accord with nature, in the long term (GS 181). Nevertheless, he can appear very dim-witted and, unbelievably, does not realize when his wife is with child.

Isak’s name, with its biblical resonance, and especially the biblical Isaac’s destiny, are laden with symbolism and anchor Isak’s life story firmly in the realm of world literature, inviting the reader to seek confirmation of this extraordinary man’s universality outside the text proper. True, biblical names were common in nineteenth-century Norway but the author has the freedom of choosing names and, as far as we are concerned, could have given him another name if he did not want readers to be reminded of inter-textual parallels. A name is a name. In this regard, the author is God, so he must have named him Isak for a reason. Great books carry on a dialogue with other great books, do they not?

The story is well known, so it is unnecessary for me here to go into much detail, but let me briefly summarize the plot of *Growth of the Soil*.

One day, in an apparently godforsaken and largely uninhabited corner of northern Scandinavia, an ambitious homesteader by the name of Isak appears out of nowhere and quickly sets his eyes on a choice piece of land in the Almenning (a “masterless wilderness” [Storfjell 2011, 244]), essentially all land not owned by any one individual but by the absentee landlord known as the “state.” He has brought tools with him (GS 15), so it is not like God created him *ex nihilo*; he has come with a purpose. He sets his eyes on a nice piece of land, but never gives much thought to actually staking out his claim to the land until much later. He advertises for a “woman-body” (GS 5) to a Lapp who is passing through and, miraculously, a woman, Inger, soon joins him to share his life and help him cultivate the land. Isak fathers two sons by Inger; however, the couple only wed

in preparation for their first-born's christening (a practice that was very common in Scandinavia, where a majority of children are still born out of wedlock today).

Isak's life is not easy by any stretch of the imagination. Other than having to work around the clock and contend with the whims of nature (which can be dire indeed at this latitude), he also has to somehow manage his growing and somewhat dysfunctional family. Inger means well but goes astray on more than one occasion, killing one of her newborns because the poor thing was born with a harelip like herself and committing adultery with an itinerant Swedish laborer much younger than herself. But she soon realizes her sins and makes amends, in no small part thanks to religion, which helps her to find peace with herself, and then dedicates herself to her work for the greater good of farm and family. "You see I'm some good after all" (*GS* 17), she exclaims in frustration and this at the very beginning of the novel, long before she has faced any real difficulties. By working hard it is possible to overcome life's challenges and at the same time to give praise to God (*GS* 188). Inger, however, has violated not one but several of the Ten Commandments: "thou shalt not kill," "thou shalt not commit adultery," "thou shalt not steal," among others. Inger wiggles her way out of each transgression, as if to suggest that the Bible is not a moral absolute but a guide of conduct, at best. Still, at the end of the novel, she has paid her dues to society and become reconciled with life.

Isak and Inger's two sons are a mixed blessing, just as in the Bible, though readers are spared a reincarnation of the Cain and Abel trauma. One son--Sivert--turns out alright and decides to stay on the family farm; the other, Eleseus, becomes a wastrel, who loses himself in city life and eventually drifts off to America never to return to Norway again. For Eleseus, not working on the farm is like a degenerative disease: "something rotting him from within" (*GS* 417). Inger is also blessed with the birth of a daughter, Rebecca, after her stint in prison for infanticide and, thankfully, she is perfectly normal and goes on to make her family proud.

The opening page of the novel sets the action in a timelessness that is truly sublime, as though we were taken back to the beginning of time, and then man suddenly appears, seemingly out of nowhere. Now, God does not create Isak but he may just as well have, in order to populate this apparently forlorn and desolate land. For its beauty alone the passage is worth quoting in its entirety:

The long, long road over the moors and up into the forest—who trod it into being first of all? Man, a human being, the first that came here. There was no path before he came. Afterward, some beast or other, following the faint tracks over marsh and moorland, wearing them deeper; after these again some Lapp gained scent of the path, and took that way from field to field, looking to his reindeer. Thus was made the road through the great Almenning—the common tracts without an owner; no man's land. The man comes, walking toward the north. He bears a sack, the first sack, carrying food and some few implements. A strong coarse fellow, with a red iron beard, and little scars on face and hands, sites of old wounds—were they gained in toil or fight? Maybe the man has been in prison, and is looking for a place to hide; or a philosopher, maybe in search of peace. This or that, he comes: the figure of a man in this great solitude. He trudges on; bird and beast are silent all about him; now and again he utters a word or two; speaking to himself. 'Eyah--well, well'-- so he speaks to himself. Here and there, where the moors give place to a kindlier spot, an open space in

the midst of the forest, he lays down the sack and goes exploring; after a while he returns, heaves the sack to his shoulder again, and trudges on. So through the day, noting time by the sun; night falls, and he throws himself down on the heather, resting on one arm. (*GS* 3-4)

The idyllic chronotope generated by the evocation of Isak's first appearance in Nordland already has some cracks in it. Evidently, Isak is not the first human to frequent this land; in fact, the narrator acknowledges as much by evoking an already existing "long road over the moors and into the forest" (*GS* 3) as well as the sporadic sighting of a roving Lapp. In the process of establishing himself and growing prosperous Isak also shatters the idyllic chronotope by introducing everyday reality in the form of his work on and off Sellanraa, in the hills and forests surrounding his land, as well as in the village. In actuality the spatial chronotope gradually expands in concentric circles, beginning with the proverbial "path" (*GS* 3) on which Isak one day appears out of nowhere. His tracks in the surrounding fields and forests eventually become paths too, attracting animals and the occasional roving Lapp. Isak makes a hut for himself at first and then a house; he claims ever more land in the process and expands his property according to his needs and ambitions. Isak lives in isolation in the hills with the closest village a one-day walk away, where he can replenish his supplies and sell goods produced on the farm. But the space between the two grows ever smaller with the expansion of Isak's property and the establishment of more homesteaders in the area.

Isak needs a female companion and, as previously noted, puts out word that he is in need of a "woman-body" (*GS* 5) and before long, finds himself with a companion in arms, the harelip Inger. Here, without apparent reason, the narrator assumes a very biblical tone: "Inger was her name. And Isak was his name" (*GS* 9). It is difficult not to be reminded of *Genesis*, where God creates Eve to provide Adam with a life-time companion. With her harelip Inger is a somewhat deformed yet worthy descendant of Eve. In the narrator's words, this is a "woman-body" (*GS* 5) and far from beautiful: "now Inger was a monster and a deformity to look at" (*GS* 8). Man and woman couple in best biblical style, on the first day, in fact (*GS* 9). Who cares if they are not married, "couldn't come by it, getting down to a church and all" (*GS* 26). More importantly, "[Isak] loved her and she loved him" (*GS* 16). "[Isak] felt himself more and more in love or drawn towards her, or whatever it may be" (*GS* 10) and Isak's undiminished love for Inger remains a constant in the novel. But make no mistake, this marriage and others described in the novel are mainly for the sake of convenience. In *Growth of the Soil*, everyone needs each other and everyone is entangled with everyone else: as family, neighbor, friend, or lover. Isak needs Inger just like Axel (another homesteader) needs Barbro, the daughter of another neighbor. Throughout, Isak remains wary of love. We are told again and again that "love make[s] a fool of the wise" (*GS* 11). Occasionally, though, Isak has a lapse of vanity, as when he carries a big log home on his broad shoulders, mainly to give her a reason to marvel at his physical strength. And miser that he is, he still agrees to buy a wedding band for his wife—in gold, no less—"all for being in love with his wife" (*GS* 139).

Neither Isak has to go out looking for a wife; they each receive a wife, no questions asked. In the Bible, a servant of Abraham is dispatched to find a suitable match; in Nordland, it is a roaming Lapp who spreads the word near and far that Isak needs the company of a woman. Hamsun's Isak begins his monumental task with undaunted courage and is blessed by God (*GS* 182), just like Isaac in the Old Testament who thrives

on his land (*Genesis*, 26: 12), raising cattle and sheep but also growing crops. The biblical Isaac's wife, Rebekah, has twin sons, each of whom is different, representing two different human types, a naive but faithful "*man of the field*" (*Genesis* 25: 27) and the untrustworthy rogue who uses deception to become Isaac's primary heir. Again, the reader is reminded of Hamsun's Isak, whose two boys (though not twins), represent two fundamentally different human types of man: the faithful farmer, who is content to cultivate the land (Sivert, whom Isak actually wanted to name Jacob, like in the Bible, *GS* 40) and the rootless wastrel and city slicker (Elseus), "a man-about-town" (*GS* 187), who disappears to America after gradually losing his roots in the local small towns and then in faraway Bergen.

In the Old Testament (*Genesis* 27), the two brothers dispute the inheritance of their dying father; Jacob, whose name means "he who holds" (he is the second-born twin and allegedly holds on to his older sibling's foot during birth) or "deceives," gains his father's blessing by ruse. However, in the end, Isaac recognizes his mistake and his two sons eventually become reconciled and God bestows upon Jacob the name of "Israel," making him the legitimate heir of Isaac and his grand-father Abraham. From now on the Hebrew people become known as Israelites. In *Growth of the Soil*, the two brothers, too, split up their future inheritance, though without any skulduggery or quarrel; on the contrary, Sivert supports his older brother to the end and personally sees him off to America with the deepest sorrow and regret. Finally, Isak and Inger have a daughter, whose name is Rebecca; in the Bible, however, Isaac's wife is called Rebekah.

Isak works hard and is never one to complain; in his domain he is "lord of creation" (*GS* 17): "There was never an end of building at Sellanraa" (*GS* 379). As Brad Leithauser notes in his introduction to the most recent English-language translation of the novel: "Adam's curse will obtain in whatever territory he discovers: man must live by the sweat of his brow" (Leithauser ix). In his old age, there still is one huge stone that defies him (*GS* 379-384), but Isak will not give up and nearly dies trying to remove the stone. But that is the kind of man he is, physically strong and stubborn; he will not rest until he has got his way: "When a man is filled with mortal hatred of a stone, it is a mere formality to crush it. And suppose the stone resists, suppose it declines to be crushed? Why, let it try—and see which of the two survives!" (*GS* 382). In the end, Isak succeeds and decides that this will make a fine door stone in yet another house he is building.

It is the former lensman (state official) and roaming entrepreneur Geissler who "christens" Isak's property "Sellanraa" and, in so doing, "christens" him: henceforth Isak and everyone in his family will carry this name as their surname. Does the name "Sellanraa" mean anything? Geissler suggests that "maybe it was not a name at all" (*GS* 49). But it certainly does contain the echo of the Swedish word "säll" (after all, Geissler and his family live off and on in nearby Sweden and must have been familiar with this commonly used word) or "selig" in German, both of which mean "happy" or "blessed." Moreover, "rå" in Swedish can mean "to possess" or "to control" as in "rå om." The name "Sellanraa" certainly carries the connotation of ownership: Sellenraa quite literally, is a place one owns by oneself: "Sellanraa, det vil si det stedet der man er sin egen herre, der man selv *rår* [my italics]" (quoted by Rottem 1999, 282). Would it be too farfetched to propose that Sellanraa gives Isak and his growing family a lease on happiness? In common parlance, Sellanraa is their "little corner of paradise." And the cagey and conniving profiteer Oline with her "ready wit" (*GS* 103) is the first to recognize that

Sellanraa is indeed “full of milk and honey, as the Bible says” (*GS* 61). And Isak and his family *are* happy, not only because they are doing well for themselves but also because they feel that they have found their vocation in life:

They had this good fortune at Sellanraa that every spring and autumn they could see the grey geese sailing in fleets above that wilderness, and hear their chatter up in the air — delirious talk it was. And as if the world stood still for a moment, till the train of them had passed. And the human souls beneath, did they not feel a weakness gliding through them now? They went to their work again, but drawing breath first, for something had spoken to them, something from beyond (*GS* 189).

Isak emphatically declares: “It’s just this way, you see—‘tis the land I’m here for” (*GS* 94).

To be sure, women have a role to play in this scheme, too, though a minor and subservient one, as is often the case in the Bible. Women are mothers and homemakers, in addition to which, of course, they have to help out in the fields. Isak seldom asks Inger for advice and on one occasion confronts her about stealing from him (he had his suspicions ever since she arrived with Goldenhorns, a cow whose origins she could never quite account for). He realizes that she has stolen a small sum of money from him and he knows, too, that she has been unfaithful into the bargain but, like the biblical Isaac, he accepts being ignored and even duped: “promised and ever deceived” (*GS* 144), perhaps in an effort to preserve domestic peace. As the Bible says: “No prophet is accepted in his own country” (*Luke* 4: 24).

Inger is strikingly biblical because she is “flawed (He 92), that is, sinful and naturally unfaithful: “Oh, a woman cannot tell one man from another; not always—not often” (*GS* 307). Infidelity and deceitfulness are somehow ingrained in Inger; so, naturally, she betrays Isak and tries her best to deceive him about the death of their newborn child. When Isak discovers that Inger has stolen a small coin from him, he shakes her up and down, but this is the only time he lays hands on her and also the last time that she steps out of line. In the end, Isak prevails upon his wife to change her ways and she is soon her old subservient self again, respectful, loving and caring to a fault: “To think that a man’s hard grip could work such wonders” (*GS* 164). Small surprise that Inger at this point becomes religious: “How could she help it? No one can help it in the wilds” (*GS* 180). At any rate religion helps her to cope and to remain dedicated to Sellanraa. Toward the end of the novel she has a relapse and falls in love with Gustaf the Swede; he soon leaves, however, but she regains control of herself thanks to religion: “And Inger’s trouble passed off too; she got over it, but she keeps on with her hours of devotion, and finds merciful refuge there. ... And once more it is seen that the fear of the Lord and the contentment therewith are a precious gain” (*GS* 333).

We receive confirmation of Isak’s elect status when we learn, about half way through the novel, that God blesses Isak’s hard work: “for it is nothing but good” (*GS* 182). Like Noah in Genesis (9:1), Isak appears to have been chosen by God to give humanity a fresh start and Isak goes on to strike a covenant of sorts with God to carry out his work on earth. And God’s advice to Noah applies equally well to Isak: “be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth” (*Genesis* 9:1). It is Isak’s manifest destiny to protect and provide for his family (*GS* 184). Isak is a “tiller of the ground” (*GS* 30) and the latest reincarnation of

a timeless civilization without beginning nor end: "For generations back, into forgotten time, his fathers before him had sowed grain" (*GS* 30). Inspired by Jesus Isak sows the fields: "Isak walked bareheaded, in Jesu name, a sower... so it is throughout all the earth where grain is sown... Little showers of grain flung out fanwise from his hand; a kindly clouded sky, with a promise of the faintest little misty rain" (*GS* 31). In the parable of the Sower in *Luke* 8:4-15 the seed is the Gospel; if it falls on good soil, it will yield a hundredfold. Thus, Isak penetrates the soil of the earth with his seed and plants his roots deep in the earth, creating a bond with nature that his offspring will nurture and grow. You reap what you sow, says another biblical proverb (*Galatians* 6:7) What began small, with time, has grown, and--for better or worse--heralds the dawn of a new age in northern Norway.

These Biblical allusions function much like prosopopeia (a rhetorical figure invoking an imaginary, absent, or deceased person as speaking or acting). For example, the invocation of the biblical Isaac creates a sense of timelessness and his recognition by posterity over time lends increased authority to Hamsun's Isak, to all he says and does.

Time and again, Isak repeats that his fate as a farmer is all in the hands of God (*GS* 33), as when drought strikes; however, this is not enough to make him a believer or practicing Christian. His anxiety about marrying and baptizing his first-born son is downright comical: "And all that fuss just to be wed and christened... And now they were wedded and christened, everything decently in order; they had remembered to have the wedding first, so that the child could be christened as of a wedded pair" (*GS* 33). Isak tries his best to respect nature and therefore also must respect God, whatever "God" is. To be sure, he is thankful to God for his many blessings. As the not-altogether sympathetic but clever and always indispensable Oline concedes: "we've much to be thankful for, 'tis true" (*GS* 43).

Does Isak believe in God? I don't think so (despite a late-night chance encounter with Satan [*GS* 183] or was it perhaps the Holy Spirit?--Isak is not sure), at least not in any conventional sense of the word. He believes in the existence of a superior being, to be sure, but is unsure, to say the least, of how to articulate a personal relationship with God. By working hard and trying to do good in his own gruff way, by trying to be forgiving and humble and not to hurt anyone's feelings too much, he hopes that Inger will soon be released from prison and that "the Lord may give him back his Inger the sooner" (*GS* 92). "Praise and thanks to God," he exclaims, upon learning of her imminent release (*GS* 114). Isak remains in awe of "creation." Somehow he realizes that there is an order in the universe and that it is his privilege to be in tune with nature and to have found his place in the grand scheme of things. Listen to this mesmerizing evocation of Isak's worldview: "his thoughts were often with God; it was natural, coming of simplicity and awe. The stars in the sky, the wind in the trees, the solitude and the wide-spreading snow, the might of earth and over earth filled him many times a day with a deep earnestness" (*GS* 7-8). For all we know, Isak could be a modern-day prophet who communicates directly with God and does not need church, theology, or a formal marriage, for that matter, in order to farm his land and live happily with Inger, as well as serve as an example to all around. He is the proud patriarch of a new tribe of intrepid Norwegians fortunate to live out their lives in close communion with nature, which, just as in the Bible, is God's gift to man to grow and make prosper for the glory of God, and Norway. Isak is Lord of creation and the progenitor of a small but growing community of homesteaders. However, in his

everyday life he is more practical than religious and stands firmly with two feet on the ground; if anything, he is a pragmatist in religious and spiritual matters, unsure of what to think: “he was a sinner and feared God; on Sundays he washed himself out of reverence for the holy day, but worked none the less as through the week” (GS 8).

Life at Sellenraa is far from perfect but nevertheless could be construed as an Eden of sorts, a land full of milk and honey, “as the Bible says” (GS 61). Curiously, the narrator uses the word “Eden” only a handful of times. The first time it is to describe Isak’s second-born son, Sivert, who has a religious epiphany as he contemplates a sheep grazing in the field: “’Tis most as if he stood looking into the garden of Eden” (GS 129). But the narrator cannot resist a typically Hamunsian ironic urge and situates the adulterous tryst between Inger and Gustaf the handsome young Swede in a pastoral idyll, a veritable “Garden of Eden” (GS 308), as if to mock the concept of original sin. No one will accuse Hamsun of trying to remain faithful to the Bible: he appropriates this and reinvents that, all in keeping with the fundamental tenets of intertextuality. Inger has gone and fallen in love with that handsome young Swedish stone cutter, or at least she thinks it is love. Perhaps it is just lust after all or frustration at growing old and feeling unwanted at home: “Aye, a woman getting on in years” (GS 308). Isak is not exactly talkative: “If only she could have spoken out to Isak, and relieved her mind, but that was not their way at Sellenraa” (GS 331). As Roland Barthes mused: “intertextuality is the general discursive space that makes a text intelligible” in the first place (Culler 106).

However, it is hard to relate the novel to the idea of Eden. If Sellenraa is Eden, then which event triggers the “fall”? The biblical fall is a game-changer; however, there is no similar cataclysmic event in Hamsun’s novel. Isak is already condemned to a life of labor, is he not? Inger’s murder of her child is a big sin (though infanticide at this time was more common than most imagine), but the couple make up and go on to “live happily ever after.” It makes more sense to see Sellenraa as post-Fall, if for no other reason than because Isak/Adam (and with them all of humankind) are condemned to a life of toil and suffering. To Adam, whom conventional wisdom holds up as the first farmer, God proclaims:

Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return. (*Genesis* 3: 17-19).

But again, Isak and Inger eke out a living for themselves and, in the process, even find a modicum of happiness. Clearly, Hamsun’s novel is not a faithful rendition of biblical events and is not only or, primarily, about Isak and Inger, either. I mean that Hamsun sets out to describe a way of life as much or more than a motley group of characters. When all is said and done, the novel does offer a convincing analysis of the main characters.

The only really interesting, psychologically complex and unpredictable character is Geissler. He is the quintessential outsider or *landstryker* and is not even part of the conventional reading of the novel as a panegyric of the fruits of the earth. Geissler is the perennial vagabond but also a benefactor to Isak and his family, as well as yet another example of the existential *raté* in Hamsun’s oeuvre. Indeed, some critics have gone so far

as to consider him another incarnation of Hamsun's eternal vagabond (Storfjell 2009, 277). Paradoxically, as Rottem has noted, the harder Geissler tries to help Isak, the less control he seems to have over his own life (Rottem 150), which continues to spin out of control in the second half of the novel.

When all is said and done, *Growth of the Soil* is about universal life, as the narrator explains by way of conclusion, spelling out the symbolic value of the title of the novel: "Growth of the soil was something different, a thing to be procured at any cost; the only source, the origin of all" (GS 376).

By the end of the novel, maybe two decades or so after Isak's arrival, ten or more families of homesteaders have settled in the hills of Sellanraa, "beckoning a hundred more," making Isak "the founder of a district, the pioneer" (GS 388), if not the founder of a new civilization (which he is not, since he is only the reincarnation of an eternal human type). Isak flirts with the new society, buying a sowing machine, which is compared to the biblical Elijah's chariot in the heavens (GS 249), and selling off a small plot of land to the mining company. But, not surprisingly, he needs his educated sons' help in order to understand the instructional manual. As for the mine, it goes belly up; before long it shuts down, as if to say that not all that glitters is gold and that riches buried deep in the ground are of less value than those cultivated in the ground through the blood, sweat and tears of intrepid homesteaders like Isak and Inger. Geissler makes one final big speech, assuming the role of prophet, stating emphatically that Norway needs "two-and-thirty thousand men" (GS 50 and 427) like Isak ready to dedicate their lives to the "celebration of simple agrarian values at the expense of a valueless modern civilization" (Simpson 1):

Look at you folk at Sellanraa, now; looking up at blue peaks every day of your lives; no new-fangled inventions about that, but fjeld and rocky peaks, rooted deep in the past—but you've them for companionship. There you are, living in touch with heaven and earth, one with them, one with all these wide, deep-rooted things. No need of a sword in your hands, you go through life bareheaded, barehanded, in the midst of a great kindness. Look, Nature's there, for you and yours to have and enjoy. Man and Nature don't bombard each other, but agree; they don't compete, race against each other, but go together. There's you Sellanraa folk, in all this, living there. Fjeld and forest, moors and meadow, and sky and stars—oh, t'is not poor and sparingly counted out, but without measure. Listen to me Sivert: you be content! You've everything to live on, everything to live for, everything to believe in; being born and bringing forth, you are the needful on earth. 'Tis not all that are so, but you are so; needful on earth. 'Tis you that maintain life. Generation to generation, breeding ever a new; and when you die, the new stock goes on. That's the meaning of eternal life. (GS 429)

The Catholic Church considers Isaac one of the biblical patriarchs and the New Testament sees him as a Christ-like figure, insofar as he is the uncontested patriarch of a new tribe of pioneers in the Norwegian far north. Without stretching the imagination too far, we might even be tempted to re-contextualize the famous sacrificial scene from the Bible: Norway, like Isaac in the Bible, is about to be sacrificed herself--by which I mean her time-honored way of life--on the altar of the Industrial Revolution. As one newspaper review quoted by Rottem suggests:

Vi holder paa med rivende fart og av stor og merkelig dygtighet at bringe vort land fra det trygge og sammenhengende op i det usikre og oprevne. Vi bytter jord i penger og usundhet, og vi tror at fos og sjø og skog er tilfældige smaating vi ustraffet kan sætte hvor vi lyster. (Rottem 2002, 127)

However, Isak, this invincible homesteader, revolts and not only survives the wilderness but also prospers and goes on to inspire, if not lead, a small band of faithful pioneers struggling to put down roots in this uninviting territory. In fact, he “laughs” in the face of the outside world, fulfilling the biblical etymology of his name; “Isak” (“he who laughs”) overcomes his apparent destiny to live out his life a pauper just like his ancestors and shows everyone in the village and beyond just what he is capable of. But, just to be clear, Hamsun does not faithfully transcribe the biblical myth; if anything, he flirts with it, teasing us, as it were, doling out a small sampler of heavy-handed allusions that invariably carry biblical associations for most readers. This fundamental ambiguity makes for a better novel, to be sure, but at the same time, of course, it also puts into question Isak’s status as a biblical patriarch and spokesperson for the biographical Hamsun’s arch-conservative political agenda.

In his article on the ambivalence of the novel, Storfjell looks at conflicting views of progress, as well as the representation of nature and capitalism, and rightly speaks of “a nexus of contradictions” (2011, 249). Rottem (1999, 281) and Eglinger concur. In my opinion this ambivalence extends to religion as well. But, as we all know, Hamsun was a deeply conflicted person. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that he could never make up his mind about the true worth of peasants anymore than he could decide how he really felt about city life. It is a fact that the peasant figure has dubious status in most of his literary oeuvre; *Growth of the Soil* is one of the few novels where he is given full recognition and enjoys a measure of social standing (Rottem 1999, 273).

Ever since he went north in 1911, Hamsun, too, had a personal fantasy, of “finding himself” on the land, of somehow reconciling his socio-professional profile as a writer with his neo-romantic obsession of somehow becoming a real farmer (Kolloen 159; Steffensen 17). Fortunately for posterity, Hamsun was also a poet and it was his poetic inspiration that ultimately won out: “Han slo seg selv på munnen. Han var ikke bonde, ble det heller aldri, kunne ikke bli det (Rottem 2002, 140). Hamsun finished *Growth of the Soil* only after selling his beloved estate at Hamarøy in early 1917. This would not be the first time in history that someone wrote a novel about something or someone they could never be.

In fact, in the novel, Hamsun’s alter ego might not be Isak at all but the enigmatic yet sympathetic Geissler, who acts as Isak’s guardian angel in whom Isak (like all the other villagers) has an almost childlike faith; Geissler, too, knows what he must do in order to fulfill his dream, though he does not always do what it takes. He is aware of his own shortcomings yet seems to relish his lordly status in this godforsaken village in northern Norway even when his fortunes decline. “Children! thought Geissler, maybe in his lofty mind; he felt his power now, felt strong enough to be short and abrupt with folk” (*GS* 314). And it is Geissler who provides a possible moral to the novel even if in so doing he destroys the convenience of a conservative or reactionary reading of *Growth of the Soil* as a justification of a “return to the soil” and the impossible rebirth of a pre-industrial civilization. Geissler confirms the obvious: Isak’s quest is quixotic; in this day and age, no one can live in complete self-sufficiency. What Isak *can* do under Geissler’s able

tutelage is to find his own way and maintain enough independence to “do his own thing” and yet at the same time abide by the laws of the land (for example, claiming his land with the authorities first of all and then paying for it, including taxes, and even accepting that Inger must do prison time for her crime). In his recent and monumental biography, Ingar Sletten Kollen rightly calls this attitude a “compromise”: an “acknowledgment that nature and culture must enter an alliance” (Kolloen 159).

In closing, the novel gives us one final image of Isak, this Robinson Crusoe-like romantic, sowing his fields. A rainbow has just appeared, as it did for Noah in the Bible, as a signal of divine blessing. After the flood had receded, God made up with Noah and relented in his persecution and, even though man was inherently corrupt, decided to reward hard work:

Isak at his sowing; a stump of a man, a barge of a man to look at, nothing more. Clad in Homespun--wool from his own sheep, boots from the hide of his own cows and calves. Sowing--and he walks religiously bareheaded to that work; his head is bald just at the very top, but the rest of him shamefully hairy; a fan, a wheel of hair and beard, stands out from his face. 'Tis Isak, the Margrave. 'Twas rarely he knew the day of the month--what need had he of that? He had no bills to meet on a certain date; the marks on his almanac were to show the time when each of the cows should bear. But he knew St. Olaf's day in the autumn, that by then his hay must be in, and he knew Candlemas in spring, and that three weeks after then the bears came out of their winter quarters; all seed must be in the earth by then. He knew what was needful. A tiller of the ground, body and soul; a worker on the land without respite. A ghost risen of the past to point the future, a man from the earliest days of cultivation, a settler in the wilds, nine hundred years old and, withal, a man of the day. (GS 434)

To summarize, the biblical motif in *Growth of the Soil* is a powerful presence and must be read intertextually, as a reminder of the continued relevance of canonical works and as an enrichment and amplification of the novel's major themes. As Bakhtin has argued, “Only the mythical Adam who approached a virginal and as yet verbally unqualified world with the first word, could really have escaped from start to finish this dialogic inter-orientation with the alien word that occurs in the object” (Bakhtin 279). “The word is never your own, but always in part the word of another, for whom in turn the word is never their own” (Bakhtin 93). Bakhtin argues that every speech act involves repetition⁵ and quotation as well as the anticipation of a response in the future, which can be interpreted as a reminder that reading, to some no small extent, can be redundant but also--and more importantly--that the reception of a text is an ongoing and neverending process. Tzvetan Todorov goes on to state that the most interesting aspect of dialogism precisely is its “intertextual dimension” (Todorov x) and that “culture consists in the discourses retained by collective memory, discourses in relation to which every uttering subject must

⁵ One could argue that the novel repeats itself, otherwise, through a clever *mise-en-abyme*: thus, Barbro repeats Inger's cardinal sin when she kills her child by Axel and then confesses to killing her first-born in Bergen. Moreover, Axel, is not unlike Isak by his naïveté and work ethic, though most readers probably find him obsessive compulsive. This “restatement of Isak's life” (Simpson 3) adds depth to the novel and highlights certain aspects of Isak's life. Also, Oline plays the same part again and spreads word of Barbro's crime, eventually leading to the latter's arrest in Bergen.

situate himself or herself” (Todorov x). What this means in textual terms here is that biblical motifs in *Growth of the Soil* are performative utterances that “inflect” or reinterpret biblical points of reference, providing a novel interpretation of both the Bible and the novel. Thus, Isak has gained in stature and his experience has acquired an exemplary significance it otherwise would not have had.

Hamsun and the Postcolonial Challenge

In closing, if for no other reason than because the novel’s appropriation of Biblical motifs ignores, not to say violates Samí territorial integrity, I need to address a postcolonial perspective. The Biblical overtones of Isak’s life might be construed to authorize and legitimize the appropriation of Sapmí by invoking similar if not identical incidents of dispossession in the Bible. The Samí ultimately pay the price of Isak’s annexation of the land, which prefigures the colonization of Northern Norway by homesteaders like him as well as the advance of what is euphemistically called “civilization.” But, as a chronotopic reading of the novel confirms, looking at how time and space are manipulated by the narrator throughout, the Samí are all but ignored and marginalized even though they too are an integral part of the milieu as well as of the action as it unfolds across time and space. Interestingly, the only Lapp ever mentioned by name in the novel is “Os-Anders” and, not surprisingly, he is the only one to have any kind of dramatic importance or impact on the plot: it is he who deposits a dead hare on the pregnant Inger’s doorstep, which, according to Inger at least, causes the same harelip in her child that she suffers from herself, prompting her to kill her newborn infant.

To be sure, the Samí have been there all along but are not mentioned other than parenthetically, which of course puts into question the myth of a new beginning announced by Isak’s sudden appearance. Their continued presence throughout the novel (though less so in the second half) exposes the deceptions and lapses the narrator has engaged in all along to somehow hide them from our view. In point of fact, this land has been inhabited by humans for time immemorial even though they have not cultivated the land as Isak and his offspring are now doing at the expense of the aborigines.

However, the narrator must be aware of his contradictory stance since he *does* identify the Samí from the outset; at the same time, he clearly does not take them seriously enough to dwell on at any length. Naturally, the Samí are nowhere to be seen in the Bible (neither are Norwegians), which only adds to their alienation in the novel, but Western civilization (including Norway) has appropriated the Bible as a point of origin and forged a moral covenant of sorts with its leading protagonists (Moses, Isaac, et al) in order to enforce law and order near and afar. Because the Samí do not fit neatly into the biblical narrative of progress and growth, unsurprisingly, *Growth of the Soil* does not dwell on their fate and ignores them as though they did not exist. Thus the Bible, as it were, justifies their exclusion not only from the novel but also from the future of Norway.

Of late, postcolonial and decolonial readings--an outgrowth of what Rottem calls “ideologikritiken” (2002, 134)--have become more widespread and, as Troy Storfjell has shown, make the case not only that Isak invades Sápmi but also that Hamsun, knowingly or not, promotes or at least condones the idea--more myth than reality--that northern Norway was a *terra nullius* waiting to be colonized by white settlers eager to penetrate this virgin territory (see Storfjell 2003 and McClintock, quoted by Storfjell, *ibid*, 106). In point of fact, the Samí are more present in the novel than a cursory reading lets on, but

primarily in the first part: “Og er samene tilstede i teksten, så er det nok ikke gjennom hele fortellingen at de er å finne” (Storfjell 2003, 109). By the time Isak has established himself as the venerable elder of this outpost of civilization in the northern part of Norway, the Samí have receded into the background, as though they had never existed at all, creating a timeless vacuum that gives readers the impression that the novel takes place in an ahistorical space. At that point it is clear that the narrator has no real interest in the original inhabitants of Nordland. Therefore, the narrator either feigns ignorance or chooses not to acknowledge the inevitable repercussions of Isak's success as a frontiersman on the aboriginal population. The novel is about more than him, to be sure; it is about the future of Norway, but it is clear from the outset that the Lapps are not and never will be part of that future.

However, postcolonial readings can be uncomfortably anachronistic, not to say subjective, insofar as no one can reasonably expect Hamsun to be aware of or to take full responsibility for his reactionary and culturally insensitive views, any more than one can demand that Socrates or Plato condemn slavery or pedophilia, both of which were widely practiced in ancient Greece and never addressed by either philosopher.

What are we to make of this unusual novel? And what could it possibly mean to us today? A century has passed since *Growth of the Soil* was published and a lot has changed since then. Norway, firstly, is no longer the same. Norway is no longer a traditional, semi-agrarian, pre-industrial society. Nonetheless, I think that the novel resonates with contemporary readers who are frustrated and disappointed by the rapid pace of change, by globalization and its aftermath, and who seek a refuge in a Golden Age, which, sadly, almost by definition, can never be resuscitated no matter what and usually comes at the expense of another community, in this case Sapmí.

The back cover of the most recent translation of *Growth of the Soil* mentioned above states that the novel “carries a message as fresh today as the day it was written. Amidst surging environmental concerns and an increasing detachment from nature, perhaps a bit of regression is in order to rebuild what we continue to destroy.” This is all well and good as we keep in mind that Isak, too, participates in the market economy. Does he not sell his goods in the marketplace and profit from the land he has sold to Geissler? But he remains in control of his fortune in the world precisely because his wealth is rooted in the earth, not in the volatile market place governed by Jews and Yankees and others of the ilk of Geissler's son: “My son, aye, he's the modern type, a man of our time; he believes honestly enough all the age has taught him, all the Jew and Yankee have taught him” (*GS* 429). The local mines were a folly and show just how fickle the market can be. The anonymous investors in faraway Sweden don't give a hoot about the wellbeing of the locals and shut down their mining fields as soon as they realize that there is not enough money to be made in the hills surrounding Sellenraa.

Here I feel compelled to contest the commonly held belief that Hamsun's inspiration is an offshoot of Nazi style *Blut und Boden*. As I have shown, there is too much ambiguity in the novel--and enough genius too--to call this a political novel. Such novels do not win Nobel prizes and go on to become part of world heritage literature. Although *Growth of the Soil* was much celebrated later on by the Nazis because it appears to carry a made-to-order “re-agrariseringsprogram” (Rottem 2002, 136) and carry a reactionary message, there is not enough, in my opinion, to justify the case that *Growth of the Soil* exalts race, Volk, or nation. Hamsun does give each their due; he does so, however, in his own, non-

confrontational, peaceful but didactic manner, for example in Geissler's aforementioned long speech ("Look at you folk at Sellanraa, now" (*GS* 429)). There is little or no physical violence in the novel which on a certain level does not appear to be about the conquest of territory at all even though it is obvious from the start that Isak has come to stay and that he is looking to make his fortune in this new land. This is perfectly obvious to the Lapp he encounters within days of his arrival: "Then came the first stranger passing, a nomad Lapp; at sight of the goats, he knew that this was a man who had come to stay" (*GS* 5). Let there be no doubt: the novel espouses the primacy of heredity and roots and soil, and offers a credible alternative to what Nils Magne Knutsen calls "overfladiskheten og rastløsheten i det moderne samfunn" (2008, 98). That does not make it a political manifesto though.

Isak is anything but a Nietzschean Superman despite his superhuman strength, endurance and willpower. Just to be clear: Isak is hungry for land to cultivate, but he does not conquer it outright as much as stake out his claim on what is portrayed as a vast and uninhabited land in the far north, for all practical purposes a *terra nullius* (nobody's land), free for all to cultivate, the so-called Almenning or common land (*GS* 43); nor does he spill anyone's blood, literally, in a war for land. As Nils Magne Knutsen writes: Isak builds up "en trygg og fredlig tilværelse for seg og sine barn" (Knutsen 2008, 97-98). Throughout the novel, he comes across as peaceful, hardworking and good. The "landnám" ("Landnám" is Old Norse for "land take") Isak claims may be public land; however, as Eglinger and Storfjell remind us: "det finnes folk på det øde landskapet allerede" (Storfjell 2003, 108) in this "herreløse land" (quoted by Eglinger 79). They are rarely seen, however; only the occasional Lapp passes through. Is that enough to make of Isak the great penetrator of the north and facilitator of cultural genocide, as some voices in the postcolonial community seem to imply? Despite the undeniable presence of a small number of nomadic Lapps in the region, interestingly, with one notable exception--either through the narrator's unconcern or feigned ignorance--they remain largely invisible in the novel and are not seen engaging in their traditional occupations, such as reindeer herding (mentioned only in passing on p. 3), fishing, or fur-trapping. In the novel, Isak is portrayed rather like the colonizers of Iceland, who arrived in an uninhabited no man's land and seized land for themselves. As far as the narrator is concerned, "er det Isak som framstilles som den første mannen på stedet" (Storfjell 2003, 96), even though, clearly, this is not true.

Hamsun repeats negative stereotypes about the Lapps or Sámi (e.g., *GS* 290), which have existed since the time of Tacitus, who was the first historian to discuss the mores of the Samí people. Moreover, the fact that Lapps are closely associated with the clever but manipulative Oline--the only antipathetic character in the novel--serves to reinforce readers' prejudice toward Samí. Furthermore, on more than one occasion, the narrator expresses racial slurs (cf. *GS* 290) and negative stereotypes about the native population and appears to "bagatellisere" (Lødemel 50) Samí culture; still, it remains unclear whether or not this is intentional and malicious or "just" a reflection of widespread and subconscious prejudice among Norwegians at large at this time.

According to what Rottem calls an "ideologikritisk lesning" of the novel (Rottem 1999, 279), Isak could be seen as an exemplary representative of the white patriarchy exercising its arbitrary power over defenseless natives, suggesting that Hamsun was not somehow aware of his historical blindness. A cynic would say that twenty-five years later the author

would plead the same kind of historical ignorance with regard to his involvement with the Nazis.

However, many would argue that Isak and his hardworking family are not colonizers in the commonly accepted sense of the term, since the process of "colonization" *per se* can only begin when ambitious, violent and rapacious colonizers actually grab land from subjugated natives. Isak is hardly competing for the same land, is he? And he has not wittingly dislodged anyone, has he? The only real enemy of Isak--this inherently good man, as the novel portrays him--is nature itself. Isak fights for himself and his family and, as the narrator reminds us time and again, for a greater Norway that thrives not on industry and commerce, but on the simple life and the virtues of farming. Clearly, the narrator is not interested in how native peoples will fare in the ensuing and inevitable clash of civilizations.

But can Isak be charged with genocide, of crimes, real and imagined, of a generation of colonizers who followed in his footsteps, as Storffjell seems to imply (2003, 103)? The answer, some readers would still say, is "yes," if for no other reason than that Isak is guilty by association; he is "the man of the day" (*GS* 434), in other words, a role model, whose life is held up as an example to his peers for generations to come. To be sure, the era of discovery in the Renaissance and empire building in the nineteenth century inaugurated a long period of oppression for indigenous people everywhere.

Finally, is it possible to speak of a Hamsunian strain of Rousseauism (Buttry): a general suspicion of city life and naïve enthusiasm for farmers and their simple virtues? I do not think so, for the simple reason that *Growth of the Soil* is not a romantic fantasy. Sellenraa is not utopia. Hamsun does not seek refuge in the past, but rather creates a vision of a productive society moving forward into the brave new world that is the future. As Hamsun makes clear, his is not a stagnant vision of life in the present, since progress in this extraordinary novel is measured as much by the productivity of the land as it is by the procreation of life-worthy offspring. But it deserves to be pointed out that Isak repeats or reincarnates the history of civilization insofar as he does not create anything that has not already been created somewhere else by someone else than himself. To be sure, he is a pioneer (at least in northern Norway) but he is not alone in the history of humankind to work hard to improve his lot and not be ashamed to rely on tradition for guidance. In this sense, Hamsun does not deliver on the biblical potential of his character: Isak is and remains a well-intentioned heathen, a gentle and forgiving but uneducated and illiterate giant of a man whom Geissler/Hamsun feels can deliver Norway from the clutches of the industrial revolution but who probably would be just as happy to be left alone. Most of Hamsun's well-known characters are socially awkward (Nagel and Lieutenant Glahn immediately come to mind, though the latter might be an extreme case) and none more so than Isak Sellenraa. If the name "Isak" means "he who laughs," perhaps in the end the only man left laughing is the narrator himself who, as usual, by his general unpredictability and unnerving sense of humour, can mock his overzealous readers that think they have understood everything. With Hamsun, things are never as straightforward as a first reading of his novels might suggest.

Hamsun's vision of Norway is not unique to Norway but could be adapted to most of Western Europe and North America, which underwent the same kind of paradigm shift in the late nineteenth century, as nations across the West grappled with industrialization and the emergence of a new type of market forces and the novel force of consumerism.

Hamsun does not situate his novel in time but the references to such things as the construction of a telegraph line, the currency reform and mass emigration to America make it possible for us to place it somewhere in the second half of the nineteenth century. Ecologically-minded readers today, among others, will feel refreshed by Hamsun's representation of a "harmonious land community and a healthy agrarian ethic" (He 89; Wærp), i.e., the idea that nature and man must coexist in harmony; we all need to keep in mind that nostalgia, however, wishful thinking and frustration with the present are no substitute for engaging with life in the here and now.

Conclusion

To return to the title of my article, the "problem" with biblical motifs in *Growth of the Soil* is that the novel does not offer a biblical interpretation of life in Norway in an age of transformation. Nonetheless, as a dialogical and intertextual approach suggests, the novel resounds with biblical echoes that reinforce the moral authority of the main protagonist Isak and make it possible to consider him as an exemplum in the biblical sense of what it will take for Norway to remain faithful to its ancient roots and not veer off course as it enters the industrial age. These biblical motifs do not add up to a coherent narrative but, as the term "motif" suggests, they are recurrent and just like in a symphony serve as a guide to navigate the complexities of the novel. In this case the Biblical allusions help readers understand Isak's life experience by situating it against the backdrop of a common Western heritage exemplified in the Bible; readers also are able to recognize Hamsun's originality and genius in drawing on Biblical motifs to reinforce the emotional and intellectual power of his novel.

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