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“We will call the damsel, and enquire at her mouth”. Re-writing Biblical Women in Contemporary British Novels

Ewa Rychter

This paper discusses the way four contemporary re-writings of the Bible –Jenny Diski’s *Only Human: A Comedy* (2000) and *After These Things: A Novel* (2004), Michèle Roberts’s *The Wild Girl* (1984) and *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987)– re-imagine their Bible-derived women characters. It also examines some strategies these novels use to change the asymmetrical men-women relationships established in the biblical hypotext. The idea through which I want to open the interpretation of these novels is that the Bible is an androcentric (male-centred) text, which devotes more of its space to stories of men, relegating women to men-dependent positions and reducing them to ancillary and marginal characters. Though in the course of my argument this initial idea will be modified, refined and revised, it will help to bring into focus what will later emerge as complex, if not ambivalent, relationships between the Bible and women characters.

As Esther Fuchs argues, women in biblical narratives are “men-related ciphers who appear as secondary characters in a male drama”¹. In their standard roles of mothers, brides, wives, daughters and sisters –labelled by Fuchs “gynotypes”²– biblical women are defined by their relationships with males. Mother-figures –relatively the strongest women characters in the Bible– are routinely subordinated to the task of sustaining patrilinear continuity, giving birth to a son, after which they are whisked out of the narrative, dying either a mimetic or diegetic death. As wives, women are “objective correlatives”³ of different phases in their husbands’ lives and careers. As daughters and sisters, they are shown as dependent on their male relatives, who tend to dominate even those narratives in which women suffer the most. All gyno-

1 Fuchs Esther, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 2003, p. 11.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 172.

types are restricted in their possibilities of delivering speeches or narrating events. Biblical women characters most often function as objects (or even male property) rather than subjects of actions. Their reactions, thoughts and feelings are rarely mentioned—a phenomenon noticeable even in the context of the famous biblical reticence about human motivations or internal struggles. As Fuchs sums up, “in its final representation the biblical text reduces women to auxiliary roles, suppresses their voices and minimizes their national and religious significance”⁴.

The contemporary re-writings of the Bible on which I want to focus remove biblical women characters from the shadows of their male counterparts and put them in the spotlight. Far more than mere “enablers”⁵ or foils, women in Roberts’s and Diski’s novels function as primary characters, strong subjects and focalizers or narrators. Thus, in Diski’s novels—both of which re-write the Genesis stories of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, Leah and Rachel—women dominate and/or frame the narratives. While the Bible “virtually nullifies”⁶ women’s independent point of view, Diski’s novels devote much space to the presentation of their motivations, plans, opinions. For most of their length, the novels focus on actions of the biblical matriarchs, their complex inner life, showing full range of their emotions (hopes, love, desolation, bitterness, depression, despair, rage). Unlike in the Bible, in Diski Sarai does not disappear from the text having fulfilled her maternal role, but *decides* to leave Abram after the Binding-of-Isaac episode. Diski emphasises her women characters’ freedom to choose, and their special knowledge and household power. It is Sarai who knows the truth about God—his act of creation and destruction, his capriciousness and divisiveness—of which Abram is completely ignorant, and it is she who is God’s true “rival”⁷, reducing Abram to a mere object between her powerful will and the will of Abram’s Lord. Rebekah utterly dominates her simultaneously gross and whimpering “ghost-beast”⁸ of a husband, shown as mentally and physically incapacitated by his near death at the hands of his father Abraham. Also, *Only Human* is structured as a clash between two narratives interrupting, correcting and warring with each other—“her story”⁹ in free indirect discourse and God’s first person narrative. If to narrate is “to presuppose a measure of authority”¹⁰, *Only Human* repositions the woman from the object of reporting to the one who shapes, if not creates, her narrative world.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

6 Fuchs Esther, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

7 Diski Jenny, *Only Human: A Comedy*, London, Virago Press, 2000, p. 145.

8 Diski Jenny, *After These Things: A Novel*, London, Little, Brown, 2004, p. 43.

9 Diski Jenny, *Only Human*, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

10 Fuchs Esther, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

In Michèle Roberts's *The Wild Girl* and *The Book of Mrs Noah*, women are no longer home-bound underlings or passive listeners to men's (or God's) words, but leading prophetesses, preachers or miracle-workers. In *The Book of Mrs Noah*, it is Noah's wife's dream of the oncoming catastrophe that spurs Noah (Jack in the novel) to consult "his" God and to start preparations for the flood. It is her interpretation of the rainbow that Noah/Jack later ascribes to his God, which she comments wryly, "your God is just copying me"¹¹. Also, it is Noah's wife who invents writing and the first script¹². In *The Wild Girl*, Mary –a literate woman surrounded by illiterate men– is entrusted with the task of writing down an account of Jesus' teaching and her prophetic visions. In both novels, women are depicted as independent and autonomous in their decisions about the type of sex life they want to have, and about the type of life they prefer in the future (in the case of Noah's wife, it is life without her family; in the case of Mary Magdalene, it is a mission outside her original community). Also, Roberts emphasises her women characters' special relationship with the divine –Noah's wife's bond with an immanent, world-tied God, and Mary Magdalene's status of Jesus' chosen companion, whose spiritual and sexual relationship with the Lord is hailed by Jesus himself as an image of the sacred marriage between God's feminine and masculine aspects and an icon of the true sense of resurrection.

Notwithstanding these examples of women underlings raised to superior positions and advanced to the roles of primary characters, the idea that the four novels by Diski and Roberts merely reverse the hierarchy preferred by the Bible suppresses the complexity with which these re-writings engage with the biblical text. Neither Diski nor Roberts are naïve enough to believe that the simple change of places within the otherwise unaltered hierarchic thinking about sexes can be anything but a repetition of patriarchal mentality. As an alleged corrective to androcentrism, gynocentrism would actually imitate what it meant to improve¹³. Moreover, neither Diski nor Roberts perceive the Bible as a *simply* androcentric text. Rather –like some feminist biblical scholars (to whom I will refer in a moment) who disagree with Esther Fuchs's single-minded description of the Bible as out-and-out sexist– they stay tuned in to the Bible's many intricacies, which in the long run complicate, or momentarily suspend, its androcentric effect. As an exceedingly complex, heteroglot, even contradictory text –more of a library than a unified book¹⁴– the Bible does not offer a

11 Roberts Michèle, *The Book of Mrs Noah*, London, Minerva, 1993 [1987], p. 77.

12 For King, this is a vital motif in the novel, through which Roberts reclaims women's power to shape the symbolic order and represents their will to achieve autonomy (King Jeanette, *Women and the Word. Contemporary Women and the Bible*, London, Macmillan, 2000, p. 45, 54).

13 See Irigaray Luce, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Ithaca & New York, Cornell UP, 1985, p. 33.

14 For more on the heterogeneity and polyvocality of Bible, see e.g., Timothy Beal, *The Rise and Fall of the Bible: The Unexpected History of an Accidental Book*, Boston & New York,

perfectly homogeneous perception of femininity. For Mieke Bal, though the main tenor of the Bible is patriarchal and androcentric, “there are traces of a *problematization* of man’s priority and domination. [...] Dominators have, first, to establish their position, then to safeguard it. [...] Traces of the painful process of gaining control can therefore be perceived in [...] biblical] myths”¹⁵. A similar conclusion is reached by Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, who –like Bal– rejects both apologetic approaches to the Bible (i.e., those that seek to de-patriarchalize it) and condemnatory interpretations à la Fuchs. As Fiorenza contends, “On the one hand, the Bible is written in androcentric language, has its origin in the patriarchal cultures of antiquity, and has functioned throughout history to inculcate androcentric and patriarchal values. On the other hand, the Bible has also served to inspire and authorize women and other nonpersons¹⁶ in their struggles against patriarchy”¹⁷. Arguing in the same vein, Ilana Pardes observes that in the Bible the dominant patriarchal discourses intersect with women’s counter-voices, or “antithetical female voices”¹⁸. For a group of scholars, some of these female counter-voices belong to women authors or editors, who participated in writing and/or redaction of the biblical texts¹⁹. In his sensational and stimulating, if over-simplified²⁰, “imaginative surmise”²¹, Harold Bloom claims the earliest strand of the Hebrew Bible –the Yahwistic Document (abbreviated as J)– was written by an aristocratic woman, the ultimate strong poet.

Far from simply reversing or undoing biblical androcentrism and patriarchalism, Diski’s and Roberts’s novels engage in complex and subtle relationship with the Bible, whose polyvocality they tacitly acknowledge. In their

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011, or McConnell Frank, “Introduction”, *The Bible and the Narrative*, Frank McConnell (ed.), New York, Oxford UP, 1986, p. 3-18.

- 15 Bal Mieke, *Lethal Love. Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories*, Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana UP, 1987, p. 110.
- 16 The problem of the tension between the repressive and emancipatory dimensions of the Bible has been famously expounded by Ernst Bloch. For Bloch, the Bible contains two Scriptures: one, only vestigial because repressed, speaks for the underprivileged, the excluded non-persons; the other Scripture, much stronger, speaks against the poor and serves the purposes of the rich, the exploiters and “the drudge-merchants” (Bloch Ernst, *Atheism in Christianity. The Religion of the Exodus and the Kingdom*, London & New York, Verso, 2009, p. 8).
- 17 Schüssler Fiorenza Elizabeth, “Introduction: Transforming the Legacy of The Woman’s Bible”, in *Searching the Scriptures. Volume One: A Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, New York, The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001, p. 5.
- 18 Pardes Ilana, *Countertraditions in the Bible. A Feminist Approach*, Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, Harvard UP, 1993, p. 11.
- 19 See e.g., Schüssler Fiorenza Elizabeth, *But She Said. Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1992, p. 28.
- 20 For a balanced criticism of Bloom’s claims about J, see Pardes Ilana, *Countertraditions in the Bible. A Feminist Approach*, Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, Harvard UP, 1993, p. 33-37.
- 21 Bloom Harold, *The Book of J*, New York, Grove Weidenfeld, 1990. p. 11.

re-writings, they work out a multifaceted response to biblical heterogeneity, a response which I propose to discuss with the help of Schüssler Fiorenza's (somewhat modified) four-part model of feminist biblical interpretation. Admittedly, the model is not the only one available –on the one hand, Fiorenza herself offers a ten-part alternative; on the other hand, there are models devised by non-biblical scholars, focusing on women's literary revision of myths, of the Bible and other authoritative texts²². Fiorenza's four-part model, however, has the advantage of embracing both the purely corrective and imaginative aspects of women's biblical re-writings, and those elements of their revisionary texts which neither demystify the Bible nor create its new narrative components, but which –gleaned from the biblical text and stitched together– explore and test the emancipatory potential of their re-visioned hypotext. The first three strategies in Fiorenza's model are: the hermeneutics of suspicion, the hermeneutics of remembrance and the hermeneutics of imagination. To better fit Fiorenza's model to my discussion of literary re-writings of the Bible, her last strategy –the hermeneutics of proclamation– will be modified and renamed as the hermeneutics of weakening.

Proceeding via an ever repeated, dance-like²³, non-linear movement through the four strategies, women's re-writings of the Bible function as shifting and flexible texts, able to cope with many different challenges posed by the patriarchal elements of the Bible. The hermeneutics of suspicion, compared by Fiorenza to the practices of a detective, is energised by the recognition of the male-centred character of the Bible. As such it informs those aspects of Diski's and Roberts's novels which identify, explore and question the androcentric-patriarchal dimension of the Bible. Thus, for example *The Wild Girl* tries to resist the typical biblical strategy of making female sexuality a vehicle of faithfulness –or lack thereof– to God. In many biblical texts, all that is sensual and tempting is projected onto the women's body, which comes to

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- 22 Alicia Ostriker's offers a model based on three strategies characteristic of women's biblical revisions: (1) "the hermeneutics of suspicion", concerned with the problem of power and powerlessness and informing the woman writer's attack on, or mistrust of texts' patriarchal power; (2) "the hermeneutics of desire", which describes women's self-insertion into the revised text and her finding there whatever she wanted to find; and (3) "the hermeneutics of indeterminacy", responsible for revision's playfulness, or irreducibility to any truth-claim (Ostriker Alicia Suskin, *Feminist Revision and the Bible*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1993, p. 66–67). There is also DuPlessis's two-fold paradigm of the "narrative of delegitimation" and "narrative of displacement" (DuPlessis Rachel, *Writing Beyond the Ending. Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers*, Bloomington, Indiana UP, 1985, p. 108). The former consists of bringing the text's ideological premises to readers' attention by deforming its patriarchally determined grammar, vocabulary, plots, and by disturbing the conventional narrative and politics. The latter is understood as writing from non-canonical perspective, as a committed identification with otherness and with taboo aspects of femaleness. It gives voice to the muted, the despised and the marginalized, articulating what was hardly noticed before.
- 23 Schüssler Fiorenza Elizabeth, *But She Said*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

epitomise filth, whoredom and corruption; all that is desirable is symbolised through “the stereotyped purity of good femininity”²⁴. Roberts re-writes two Revelation passages about the sun-clad woman (Revelation 12:1-6) and the great harlot (Revelation 17:1-6) in ways that undo the earlier contrast and establish an intimate bond between the saint and the sinner. In *After These Things*, the common biblical device of making women (brides, wives, sisters) into objects of male gaze –or prized objects whose perspective is bracketed off– is foregrounded and resisted when Rebekah, Isaac’s bride, is positioned as the focaliser, whose view of her betrothed defines the reader’s understanding of Isaac, and corrects his biblical portrayal as a major patriarch. Also, Rebekah is shown as perceiving herself through the eyes of men who look at her hungrily, which both complicates the structure of focalisation and establishes Rebekah as a narcissistic figure. In *The Book of Mrs Noah*, Mrs Noah recognises the lethal, violence-breeding effects of God’s post-deluvian order to offer Him burnt meat as a sacrifice and to hold dominion over the earth, decodes its true meaning for her husband and finally, rejects it, announcing her own covenant based on the refusal to enslave any creature.

The hermeneutics of remembrance –likened to the activity of quilt-maker, who stitches patches together– reconstructs from the fragments scattered and hidden in the Bible (and from non-canonical sources) a new story or representation of women, one which allows them a full historical and narrative presence and which dislodges the patriarchal structure of the biblical text. Fiorenza called this strategy a “dangerous” and “subversive” memory²⁵ because it reclaims and keeps alive the suffering and struggles of women of the past, throwing a challenge to the deep-rooted and complacent male-centredness. Diski’s *Only Human* and *After These Things* bring together analogous motifs from the conjugal lives of different women characters and emphasise the similarity of their suffering and loss, repeated across generations²⁶. Significantly, Sarai/Sarah, Rebekah, Leah suffer primarily either because they lose love (Sarai) or because they are not loved by their husbands (Rebekah, Leah). Unlike in the Bible, in which wives’ lives are subordinated to and defined by procreation, in the two novels the matriarchs are in the first place craving for

24 Keller Catherine, *Apocalypse Now and Then. A Feminist Guide to the End of the World*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1996, p. 74.

25 Schüssler Fiorenza Elizabeth, *Bread Not Stone. The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1984, p. 19.

26 In one of the very few existing commentaries on Diski’s re-writings of the Bible, Wright argues that the novels draw extensively, though subversively, on midrashic literature, from which Diski appropriates the emphasis on the complexity of human feelings, especially on the devastating effects of the Akedah on Sarah (Terry Wright, *The Genesis of Fiction: Modern Novelists as Biblical Interpreters*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2007, p. 85-112). For Wright, the novel’s focus on women’s internal life is the result of Diski’s insistence on humanising and psychologising the Genesis story.

love. The puzzlingly marginalised theme in the Bible of a wife's love for her husband (only Michal, king David's first wife, is said in the Bible to love her husband²⁷) is re-membered in Diski's novels and fanned out into a new narrative life. In *The Wild Girl*, Roberts focuses on the submerged story of women preachers and apostles who not only supported the Jesus movement with material means (hosting missionaries and donating money) but also actively proclaimed the Word. She re-writes the well-known story of two sisters from Bethany, Mary and Martha, in such a way as to gradually eliminate the rivalry between them (the motif introduced in Luke 10:38-42) and reinforce their roles of apostles (the motif visible in John 11 and 12), visible in their ministering of the word, gathering followers, working miracles and having prophetic dream visions. In *The Book of Mrs Noah*, Roberts recovers the motif of the loving relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, present in the biblical Book of Ruth, and develops its emphasis on the deep affection and loyalty between the two women into a non-saccharine²⁸ story of slowly developing intimacy between two strong-willed women on the Ark – Noah's wife and her daughter-in-law, Sara.

The hermeneutics of imagination helps women writers to retell biblical stories from a new perspective or intensify the more emancipatory elements. Fiorenza compares the imaginative freedom of this strategy to "the feminist 'leaven' of the bakerwoman God that will transform patriarchal biblical religion, making the biblical story truly a resource for all who seek a sustaining vision in their struggle for liberation from patriarchal oppression"²⁹. Importantly, the hermeneutics of imagination (together with the hermeneutics of remembrance) is always supported by the hermeneutics of suspicion, directed here at discursive practices employed by the women writers and relied on lest the re-writings replicate the patriarchal (hierarchical, dualistic) way of thinking. In *The Wild Girl*, Roberts's Mary Magdalene is Jesus' lover and mother of his child, a daughter named Deborah. Developing the theme of Jesus kissing Mary on the lips, contained in the Nag Hammadi library of gnostic writing, Roberts allows Mary and Jesus to have quite passionate sexual life. There are descriptions of their kissing ("His tongue gently exploring my

27 Fuchs Esther, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

28 Pardes describes the Book of Ruth as "idyllic" in its representation of the way female loyalty and faithfulness overcome all difficulties in the life of Naomi and Ruth, and brings about a happy resolution for all their problems (Pardes Ilana, *op. cit.*, p. 99). Admittedly, Roberts's depiction of the relationship between Mrs Noah and Sara handles the pivotal moment in the Book of Ruth – the older woman's advice to the younger one to re-start her life apart from the mother-in-law – in a completely different way. Unlike Ruth, Sara (pregnant and with her own plans for the future) leaves Mrs Noah, who, caring for Sara's wellbeing, is deliberately harsh and drives her "newly found daughter" (Roberts Michèle, *The Book of Mrs Noah*, *op. cit.*, p. 88) away.

29 Schüssler Fiorenza Elizabeth, *Bread Not Stone*, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

mouth was one of the sweetest and sharpest pleasures I have ever known”³⁰), of their first “awkward and fumbling” love-making³¹, and of their ecstatic sexual acts during which Mary feels “taken upwards and transformed”³². It is during sex with Jesus that Mary whispers words spoken by Jesus in the Gospel of John, words which in the canonical text described Jesus’ special position. Here, uttered during orgasm, the sentence “it is the resurrection and the life”³³ communicates the deep relation between what is experienced through the body and the divine or holy³⁴. By such a re-writing and imaginative expansion, Roberts counters the dualistic tradition which holds the spirit against the body and male spirituality against female sexuality. By treating the dogma of Jesus’ celibacy with suspicion, she emphasises the positive, spiritual character of human erotic life. In *Only Human*, the motif of Sarai as Abram’s half-sister (the motif present in Genesis 20:12) is creatively expanded so that the childhood brother-and-sister love adds more complexity to Sarai and Abram’s multifaceted and ever-changing relationship. In *After These Things*, the artistic recreation of Leah and Jacob’s wedding night (during which Jacob was tricked, thinking he was with Leah’s beautiful sister and his beloved, Rachel), the description of their perfect physical love never repeated with Rachel (whom Jacob marries later), supplies the otherwise missing element of Leah’s identity –passion– and transforms her from a mere underling into a truly round character.

Fiorenza’s fourth strategy of feminist biblical interpretation is the hermeneutics of proclamation, which focuses on the interaction between the patriarchal text and contemporary religious culture, assesses the current use of biblical texts, and evaluates its significance for present-day readers of Bible-related confessions. Since the Bible can be (mis)used to reinforce or legitimise oppression of women, it is vital that feminist biblical scholars pay attention to the role of the Bible in contemporary religious communities. Neither the hermeneutics of proclamation,³⁵ however, nor any of the previously discussed types of herme-

30 Roberts Michèle, *The Wild Girl*, London, Minerva, 1991 [1984], p. 41.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

33 *Ibid.*

34 This motif has provoked mixed reactions. For Haskins it is an unnecessarily “romantic” element, which defuses the argumentative power of Roberts’s text, otherwise commendable for its Christian feminist ideas (Haskins Susan, *Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor*, New York, Riverhead Books, 1995, p. 380). For King, it provocatively “interweaves [...] the Christian gospels with mother-goddess mythology and imagery in such a way as to indicate their common ground” (King Jeanette, *op. cit.*, p. 110). Falcus appreciates the motif and reads it in the context of Roberts’s poetry, in which the link between spirituality and sexuality is similarly explored (Falcus Sarah, *Michèle Roberts: Myths, Mothers and Memories*, Frankfurt a. Main, Peter Lang, 2007, p. 58).

35 In the case of women literary re-writings of the Bible what matters more than the pastoral

neutics are calibrated to deal with an important dimension of women biblical re-writings, namely with the simultaneous urge to present the so-far suppressed truth and the realisation that to brandish the "true" version of truth against its "false", i.e., male version is to yield to the violence inherent in patriarchal and androcentric thought. Women re-writings of the Bible do not try to resolve this tension or dilemma, but build it into their texts and make it the warp and weft of their novels. More than simply allowing their re-written bibles the status of "the made thing, the playful poetic fiction" free from truth claims,³⁶ women biblical revisionists dramatise the act of giving up on an absolute –the only true– perspective. I suggest that this aspect of women biblical re-writings can be called the hermeneutics of weakening, and seen as linked with Gianni Vattimo's weak thought (*il pensiero debole*). Vattimo's weak thought is based on the observation that in modernity the strong structures of metaphysics, which are the source of metaphysical violence –i.e., the concept of universal, absolute or objective truth, or of the ultimate foundation– are weakened but not entirely eliminated. They are retained within weak thought, functioning, as Vattimo puts it, "like traces of an illness or sorrow to which one is resigned"³⁷ and from which one is convalescing. *Il pensiero debole* is meant to correspond with the Heideggerian concept of weak overcoming (*Verwindung*), which does not try to leave behind metaphysical devices (this would reinscribe it as another form of metaphysics), but which "aims to short circuit the logic of repetition in attempting to overcome a metaphysical tradition driven by the compulsion to overcome"³⁸. To do so, it accepts its own weakness, its inability to lay new foundations, treating its own frailty "as the possibility for a change, the chance that it might twist in a direction that is not foreseen in its own nature"³⁹.

Like Vattimo's *debolezza*, the hermeneutics of weakening in women biblical rewritings does not reject truth claims altogether or collapse into relativism, but proposes an enfeebled mode of truth –one which gives itself historically

diagnosis of the Bible's use and status, is the way women writers re-vision the Bible from the non-confessional perspective and re-work it for the not-necessarily-confessional reader.

- 36 This is how Ostriker characterises the hermeneutics of indeterminacy (Ostriker Alice, *op. cit.*, p. 67). She emphasises the overall sense of non-dogmatism of women poetic revisionism, and enumerates its symptoms, e.g., ambivalent and mutually incompatible words or terms. While her hermeneutics of indeterminacy overlaps to some extent with my hermeneutics of weakness, it seems to be predicated on the idea that women revisionist see themselves as liberated from the constraints of truth-claim making rather than –as it is the case of the hermeneutics of weakness– with the deliberate exploration of the limits and dangers of truth claims.
- 37 Vattimo Gianni, "'Verwindung': Nihilism and the Postmodern in Philosophy", *Contemporary Italian Thought*, Spec. issue of *SubStance* 16.2 (1987), p. 12.
- 38 Vattimo Gianni, and Sebastian Gurciullo, "Interpretation and Nihilism as the Depletion of Being: A Discussion with Gianni Vattimo About the Consequences of Hermeneutics", *Theory & Event* 5.2 (2001), note 4.
- 39 Vattimo Gianni, "'Verwindung'", *op. cit.*, p. 12-13.

and non-absolutely, one which is bound to women who enunciate it but is not made by them, one which is ultimately groundless but enables them to comprehend the world. Like the weak thought, which does not try to transcend metaphysics, the hermeneutics of weakening does not aim to ultimately overcome androcentrism and prove the stronger party; rather, it hopes to enfeeble androcentrism, making itself similarly weak and provisional. In Diski's and Roberts's novels, women characters are aware of the pluralistic and incomplete character of all truth claims, including their own. They divest themselves of the status of masters of "Truth" and effectively de-strengthen the claims of God and men to be so. Shorn of triumphalist tones, hermeneutics of weakening resonates with the sense of accepted, yet painful, defeat of "Truth", with the sense of characters' resignation to their no-win situation. Through the hermeneutics of weakening, Diski and Roberts short circuit the desire to overcome androcentrism, leaving its traces in their re-writings, which come to resemble an enfeebled body (of writing) recuperating from an illness.

Thus, in Roberts's *The Wild Girl* Mary Magdalene is shown as a guardian of Jesus' real teaching about equality and mutual dependence of sexes, and as the antagonist of Simon Peter, who distorts the original Christian ideas to make them fit his androcentric and patriarchal worldview. Mary is commissioned by the mother of Jesus to write down the true account of Jesus' life and teaching, and the novel we read turns out to be her gospel. However, Mary Magdalene considerably weakens the status of her text as the only true story of the Jesus movement when she emphasises that this (or her) truth is neither stable nor single. She acknowledges that she cannot deny Peter's right to see events differently and to follow his inner voice. Moreover, she admits that Peter is her dark side –her desire to dominate, master and take revenge– and together with his ideas, a part of everything that happened ("Was not Peter also a part of all that?"⁴⁰). She says, "I have been commanded to write down the truth as I, who am not Simon Peter or John or any other male disciples, saw it, and I shall do so. Our different truths, collected up and written down in books, are for the use and inspiration of the disciples who come after us. [...] I am telling the truth, my truth, as fairly as I can. It is not simple, and it is not single, and the telling of it changes me and changes it"⁴¹. Mary Magdalene simultaneously claims authority and undermines it, singles out her own insight and denies the possibility of privileging any truth. The idea of single truth (or truth as correspondence), like the one Peter claims to be *the* guardian of, is part of the patriarchal, violent game of exclusion and repression. Yet, the novel neither simply repeats it nor pretends it can redeem it, but inscribes it as *Verwindung* –a distortion and drained force, an object of resigned acceptance, an ineradicable trace of illness inside women writing, with which they should come to terms and try to convalesce from.

40 Roberts Michèle, *The Wild Girl*, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 70.

Jenny Diski's *Only Human* dramatises the dissolution of all that poses for an absolute foundation or the uncontested origin. Neither of the two major narrating voices –the woman's and God's– manages to firmly establish its priority over the other; instead, they become entangled in an ever-more-complex process of mutual mirroring and reflecting back, the effect of which is the weakening and defeat of both. God claims to own the story, to actually *be* both the ur-narrator and the narrative itself, its "commencement and the conclusion"⁴². His greatest power is interruption –he not only interrupts eternity to make time, but also, even more importantly, interrupts human relationships, longing "to remain implicated"⁴³, and in the meantime, undoing human love. Admittedly, God's first appearance in the novel is through an interruption, when he interferes with the other narrator's story, saying "Damn impertinence! Who dares to speak of the beginning"⁴⁴. But God's power proves limited and kept in check by the force of human interruption, effected in the woman's story. The woman narrator and her story represent "the inconclusive middle: the wish, the desire"⁴⁵, which interrupt the smooth flow of both God's world and God's narrative in ever new ways. Though initially the power of creation belongs to God, it quickly becomes a human prerogative: humans create disobedience⁴⁶, responsibility and death⁴⁷, sex⁴⁸, cooperation⁴⁹, justice⁵⁰, love⁵¹ and meaning⁵². God finds himself "way behind [...his] creatures"⁵³, who outdo him and whom he starts to imitate or mirror, using what humans created to his own ends. Ultimately, God who "made a mirror" and "imagined a likeness"⁵⁴ becomes a reflection in the mirror he created, "too weak, too fearful, too human"⁵⁵ to retain his privileged position. Also, by becoming implicated or dependent on humans –their future and their continuing mirroring of him– God deprives himself of the power to end the story, i.e., to destroy his creation. The weak God is mirrored by the weak woman narrator, who –despite her privileged (women-only) knowledge of God's earliest history and character, and despite her mature restraint, contrasting with God's childish impetuosity– does not control her narrative either.

42 Diski Jenny, *Only Human*, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 203.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 190.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 56.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 74.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 201.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 135.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 185.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 66.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 213.

If “only the ending makes sense of anything that went before” and if all endings are “nothing but artifice, just ways of stopping short”⁵⁶, her ending is God’s interruption of Sarai’s long-desired family happiness. The female narrative stops short when God destroys Sarai (and Abraham, together with Isaac) demanding that Isaac be sacrificed. When the woman narrator asks Sarai to indicate “the central thread”⁵⁷ of her life –the yarn of her life story– she learns “it was all endings [...], no conclusions”⁵⁸, i.e., it was all God’s destructive intrusions. Thus, for neither of the narrators is there any possibility of the strong overcoming of the chronic or incapacitating presence of the other.

In *After These Things*, it is the editor who seems to hold the ultimate control over the whole story. The editor is a “stitcher together of disparate narratives, a ruthless cutter out of anything that would hold up the progress and logic of the story”⁵⁹. The editor’s privileged status, however, is repeatedly weakened, for example, when we learn that characters like Rebekah, Rachel, Leah or Jacob are also editors: “the editorial function takes many forms. Us managers of things, us behind the scenes tailors of reality are truly to be found everywhere”⁶⁰. Rebekah cutting Esau out of the main story, Leah stitching herself into it, are all forms of life editing, far more than the prerogative of the editorial voice we hear from time to time in the novel. Though identified with the scheming God⁶¹ or the objective way of the world⁶², the editor himself (herself?) is only human, a “*homo fabulans*”⁶³ who wrenched the control of the story from the deity, and who, together with others, keeps re-shaping the narrative, adding “just another story [...] to the mountainous heap”⁶⁴. Diski’s editor emphasises that all stories are somebody’s, i.e., that they depend on the perspective of the one who shapes his or her narrative, and in that sense, they are interpretations (the editor asks if there can be a narrator “[w]ith no story of his or her own to tell? Hardly. Such a one has never been”⁶⁵). Unlike the biblical redactors of the Documentary Hypothesis, who do not flaunt their perspectival predicament, this redactor makes no secret of it and therefore, considerably weakens the impression of his/her objectivism. Like the women characters who struggle for meaning in their lives, the editor struggles with

56 *Ibid.*, p. 210.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

59 Diski Jenny, *After These Things*, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

60 *Ibid.*

61 *Ibid.*, p. 147.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 191.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

65 *Ibid.*

various life stories and manipulates them to "see if they make... anything"⁶⁶. Thus, *After These Things* offers a glimpse into the conditioned construction of truth, performed both by women, who desperately want meaning in their lives, and by the editor, who tries to make sense –or "anything"– of their lives.

Diski's and Roberts's re-writings of the Bible seek to transform and complicate the pattern applied to women in many biblical narratives, namely that "women are foregrounded as active agents at the beginning of a story, and disappear by the end of it"⁶⁷. In their novels, women are defined outside or against the usually allotted gynotypes and moved beyond the standard position of secondary characters. However, far from believing that androcentrism can be simply negated, reversed or overcome, the novels dramatise the more subtle, more equivocating, relationship to the largely male-centred biblical text. Intensifying (or radicalising) biblical heteroglossia, Diski's and Roberts's re-writings on the one hand, allow both the female and male voices to resound in the novels, but on the other hand, enact the process during which the voices weaken and restrain each other (contrary to the Bible, which enfeebles solely the female voice). Congenially with Vattimo's concept of *debolezza*, the novels present a weak truth of biblical women: once the cultural context is re-written and the discourse in which female characters are described is re-worked –once the Bible is filtered through the hermeneutics of suspicion, remembrance, imagination and weakening– a different approximation or disclosure of reality emerges, one in which a weak truth of the women's perspective becomes possible. Unlike the strong (metaphysical but also patriarchal) truth, the weak truth does not offer the absolute version of truth, replacing the previous, bad one, but promises to significantly qualify and recalibrate our experience of the world. In the re-written order of the (biblical) world, Jenny Diski and Michèle Roberts "call the damsel and enquire at her mouth" (Genesis 24:57), eliciting neither a violently androcentric nor a crudely gynocentric narrative, but a self-conscious and mature women's story.

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Abstract

In this paper I focus on four contemporary British novels which re-write parts of the Bible [Jenny Diski's *Only Human: A Comedy* (2000) and her *After These Things: A Novel* (2004); Michèle Roberts's *The Wild Girl* (1984) and *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987)] and examine the

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶⁷ Ostriker Alicia, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

way those novels deal with the androcentric (male-centred) character of biblical narratives. Drawing on the taxonomy proposed by Elizabeth Shüssler Fiorenza, I argue that Diski's and Roberts's re-writings engage in a complex and subtle relationship with the Bible, in the course of which they do much more than merely trying to reverse or undo biblical patriarchy and androcentrism. I explain and give examples of how the four novels rely on strategies similar to Fiorenza's types of feminist hermeneutics (the hermeneutics of suspicion, the hermeneutics of remembrance, and the hermeneutics of imagination). To account for the nuanced self-consciousness of Diski's and Roberts's novels, I introduce the concept of the hermeneutics of weakening, which –emerging from Gianni Vattimo's *il pensiero debole*– is meant to conceptualise the enfeebled mode of truth. I see as established by the two woman writers.

Keywords

Sidekicks, Bible, gender.

Résumé

Cet article se concentre sur quatre romans contemporains britanniques qui copient les extraits de la Bible. [Il s'agit de *Only Human: A Comedy* (2000) et *After These Things: A Novel* (2004) par Jenny Diski, et de *The Wild Girl* (1984) et *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987) par Michèle Roberts]. L'article présente les façons dans lesquelles les romans cités confrontent l'androcentrisme des histoires bibliques. En me penchant sur la taxonomie proposée par Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, je constate que Diski et Roberts trouvent une relation subtile et compliquée avec la Bible dans laquelle elles ne se limitent pas uniquement sur le fait de renverser ou d'annuler le patriarcat et l'androcentrisme. Dans mon article, je montre des exemples et j'explique que les romans auxquels je fais référence, profitent de la stratégie propre aux types d'herméneutique féministe chez Fiorenza (de l'herméneutique de soupçons, de souvenirs, et de l'herméneutique de l'imagination). Cependant, pour mieux approcher l'autoconscience nuancée des romans de Diski et de Roberts, j'introduis la notion de l'herméneutique affaiblie qui, prenant ses sources de *Il pensiero debole* par Gianni Vattimo, a pour objectif de conceptualiser la vérité affaiblie, laquelle dans mon opinion a été atteinte par ces deux écrivains.

Mots-clés

Faire-valoir, Bible, genre.