"Filling in what was left out: voices and silences in contemporary novelistic reconfigurations of biblical women"

Bertrand, Ingrid

ABSTRACT

This thesis is devoted to a selection of six contemporary novels reconfiguring biblical women perceived to be largely confined to the gaps of the Scriptures: Michèle Roberts’s "The Wild Girl" (1984), Margaret Atwood’s "The Handmaid’s Tale" (1985), Michèle Roberts’s "The Book of Mrs Noah" (1987), Emma Tennant’s "Sisters and Strangers" (1990), Anita Diamant’s "The Red Tent" (1997), and finally Jenny Diski’s "Only Human" (2000). It shows how, in the selected corpus, each female protagonist gives herself a voice through which she can define herself as speaking subject, a voice that not only rests on language, but also, crucially, on silences. After succinct theoretical prolegomena in which the two fundamental concepts of "voice" and "silence" are defined, the first part of this doctoral research, entitled "The Silenced Feminine?" concentrates on the common starting point of the six novels. It shows that all the selected biblical rewritings are rooted in the same two fundamental forms of silence – the "implicit dimension" and "silencing" – and adopt a complex, ambivalent approach to the Scriptures and the Judeo-Christian tradition, both feeding on them and challenging what is perceived as their almost systematic confinement of women to the silent background. Brief first explorations of the novels foreground the various ways in which the protagonists’ freedom of expression is depicted as drastically threatened or limited. The second, and most substantial part, "Voices Draped in Silences," describes the way in which each heroine, as an answer to he...
FILLING IN WHAT WAS LEFT OUT

Voices and Silences in Contemporary Novelistic
Reconfigurations of Biblical Women

Thèse présentée par
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<table>
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<tr>
<td>BMN</td>
<td>Michèle Roberts</td>
<td>The Book of Mrs Noah</td>
<td>Methuen, London</td>
<td>1987</td>
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<td>HT</td>
<td>Margaret Atwood</td>
<td>The Handmaid’s Tale</td>
<td>Vintage, London</td>
<td>1996 [1985]</td>
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<td>RT</td>
<td>Anita Diamant</td>
<td>The Red Tent</td>
<td>Picador, New York</td>
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INTRODUCTION
– You left a lot out of Genesis, didn’t you? the Forsaken Sibyl remarks to the Gaffer […] The Gaffer reflects.

– You could say I discarded a chapter. […] But why should you want to read what I left out? asks the Gaffer: why try to rewrite my story?

[…]– Someone tell a story, the Forsaken Sibyl suggests: about one of the characters the Gaffer completely forgot to put in? Fill in one of his gaps.

This dialogue between a sibyl and the divine authority – subversively renamed “Gaffer” – in Michèle Roberts’s *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987), could not encapsulate the topic of this doctoral thesis more neatly, for after foregrounding the issue of the numerous gaps of the Scriptures and the urge felt by many to fill them in, it introduces, as an answer, an embedded story revolving around a woman forgotten in the Bible, which precisely mirrors the creative enterprise at the heart of the novels studied in this work. As the comparatist Yves Chevrel points out in the preface to Cécile Hussherr and Emmanuel Reibel’s collection of essays *Figures bibliques, figures mythiques* (2002), “[l]e caractère ambigu des récits bibliques constitue bien souvent la faille dans laquelle s’immiscent les artistes. […] La Bible est un livre silencieux.”

This tendency of the Scriptures to cultivate silence seems particularly marked when women are involved. As has often been pointed out, the Bible being basically a story written by men and about men, its female characters tend to remain in the shadow of their male relatives, to appear for a brief moment, and then vanish, leaving us to imagine the rest of their fate. In other words, and to borrow R.M. Brownstein’s formulation, “[t]he women in the Bible are so sparsely described that they invite […] projection, identification, embroidery.” Each of the works of fiction analysed in this study constitutes an original response to this invitation, which has, especially since the 1980s, given rise to a highly substantial number of novelistic reconfigurations of scriptural women in the Anglo-Saxon literary world.


A quick browse through the major Internet booksellers reveals that not far off a hundred works of fiction in English based on a female biblical character are currently available on the market. This plethora of rewritings consists of novels as dissimilar as Dan Brown’s bestselling esoteric-religious thriller *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), Francine Rivers’s pentalogy *A Lineage of Grace* (2000-2001) or Margaret Atwood’s dystopia *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985). How could this publishing phenomenon be explained?

The answer to this question partly resides in the essential fact that the Bible continues to be the most influential book in the Western world. Although many denounce and deplore the secularisation of our society, whose most manifest symptom is the growing ignorance of the Scriptures among the population, everyone remains familiar with at least some of their stories and characters. Biblical rewritings consequently strike a chord among readers, for they invariably evoke something at the back of the readers’ minds, names or events mentioned at Sunday school, in church, at the synagogue or temple. Moreover, these biblical stories, like all great masterpieces of literature, address fundamental issues of the human psyche, issues that remain as relevant today as they were in biblical times, as Marek Halter, the French author of several novels on women of the Bible, rightly points out: “To my knowledge, no other [book] so precisely speaks about all of us: women, men, children, old men, as well as our hopes, our failures, our passions, our desires and our faults.”

It seems, however, that the emergence and unprecedented expansion of works of fiction based specifically on biblical women in the last decades also constitute, much more than a passing literary trend, the result of an evolution in the attitude towards the Scriptures and spirituality in general. Besides the global decline, marginalisation and desacralisation of religion in the Western world, which have contributed to freeing people from their inhibitions regarding the Bible, and made personalised explorations of the Bible admissible, if not altogether fashionable, it seems that the conjunction of two developments at the intersection of religious and literary studies, has made possible the rise of novels revisiting biblical women.

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5 Arguably in a more marked manner among Christians than Jews, since Judaism not only rests on the Bible, but also on the Talmud, and is very much rooted in the art of argumentation and debate.
The first of these two moves is the development, in the 1960s, of feminist theology – or, in more general terms, feminist religious studies – in connection with second-wave feminism, which also generated feminist literary criticism. In the wake of the civil rights and anti-war movements, which both created favourable conditions, feminist theology originally blossomed in the United States, first among Protestants – encouraged by the flowering of ordinations of women – and then, from the late 1960s, among Catholic women, due to the impact of Vatican II and the publication of its *Dei Verbum* (1965), which exhorted all Catholics to read the Bible and, as a consequence, prompted many females to study the Scriptures with zeal. The American pioneers of the field – Betty Friedan, Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Ruether, among others – were to be followed, in the 1980s, by European colleagues like Dorothee Sölle, Ursula King and Janet Martin Soskice. As for Jewish feminist interpretations of the Bible, they were instigated by Judith Plaskow, with her 1990 book *Standing Again at Sinai*, and developed by women like Adele Reinhartz, Amy-Jill Levine and Athalya Brenner.

This new field of research raised important new questions and concerns, for, if, as Ogden Bellis points out, until then, “virtually all biblical scholars and interpreters were white males, and rarely did any of them think to ask questions about women’s roles and status,” with the birth of feminist theology, patterns that were perceived to “justify male dominance and female domination,” like exclusive male language for God, were questioned for the first time; the main symbols of God and

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6 J.M. Soskice and Diana Lipton (Eds), *Feminism and Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 11. Second-wave feminism is generally understood to derive from the first wave of feminism that developed between the 1840s and the 1920s, and was organised around the fight for political and legal equality (Susan Watkins, *Twentieth-Century Women Novelists: Feminist Theory into Practice* [New York: Palgrave, 2001], p. 9).


10 “This sacred Synod earnestly and specifically urges all the Christian faithful […] to learn by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures the ‘excelling knowledge of Jesus Christ’ (Phil. 3:8)” (W.M. Abbott [Ed.], *The Documents of Vatican II*, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Chapter VI, Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church [New York: Guild Press, 1966], pp. 125-128).


14 Bellis, in Meyers, *Women in Scripture*, p. 28.
humanity were reconstructed in a “gender-inclusive and egalitarian way”; and positive female images, themes and characters were reclaimed and developed.\textsuperscript{15}

Among the extremely large variety of feminist approaches to the Bible, which range from the complete rejection of what is regarded as texts inherently oppressive to women and the associated generation of alternative religious models to, at the other end of the spectrum, a reaffirmed faith in the Scriptures’ authority coupled with a foregrounding of the favourable representations of women in the Bible, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s model of biblical interpretation, formulated in \textit{Bread not Stone} (1984), is of particular interest to this study, for it incorporates the creative literary dimension among its four mainstays. Next to a “hermeneutics of suspicion” questioning the androcentric nature of biblical texts and their interpretations,\textsuperscript{16} a “hermeneutics of proclamation” evaluating the biblical texts and their “oppressive or liberating impact”\textsuperscript{17} “for the contemporary community of faith,”\textsuperscript{18} and a “hermeneutics of remembrance” recovering “the history of women in biblical religion,”\textsuperscript{19} Schüssler Fiorenza situates a “hermeneutics of creative actualization,” through which women “enter the biblical story with the help of […] artistic recreation”\textsuperscript{20} and retell biblical narratives from a feminist perspective. This last type of biblical interpretation, which emphasises the need for women to actively appropriate the sacred texts through imaginative, artistic activity, not only builds bridges between theology and literature, but also situates in an innovative critical tradition the project of the books studied in the thesis, which have all been influenced by feminism, as will be revealed.

The second phenomenon that made possible the emergence of novels revisiting biblical women is the development of a literary approach to the Bible in the 1970s. Among the first scholars who began to understand the sacred texts of the Judeo-Christian tradition as literature is Robert Alter, Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature, who in the wake of a 1971 conference at Stanford University, published between 1975 and 1980 several articles on the need for a literary

\textsuperscript{15} Ruether, in Parsons, \textit{Cambridge Companion}, pp. 3-4.
\textsuperscript{17} Schüssler Fiorenza, \textit{Bread not Stone}, p. 19.
\textsuperscript{18} Schüssler Fiorenza, \textit{Bread not Stone}, p. 18.
\textsuperscript{19} Schüssler Fiorenza, \textit{Bread not Stone}, p. 19.
\textsuperscript{20} Schüssler Fiorenza, \textit{Bread not Stone}, p. 20.
perspective on the biblical narratives in *Commentary, Critical Inquiry* and *Poetics Today*, challenging thereby the old widespread conviction that the Scriptures are, as he formulates it, “the primary, unitary source of divinely revealed truth.”\(^{21}\) In his first monograph on the topic, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981), Alter defines his method as follows:

> By literary analysis I mean the manifold varieties of minutely discriminating attention to the artful use of language, to the shifting play of ideas, conventions, tone, sound, imagery, syntax, narrative viewpoint, compositional units, and much else; the kind of disciplined attention, in other words, which through a whole spectrum of critical approaches has illuminated, for example, the poetry of Dante, the plays of Shakespeare, the novels of Tolstoy.\(^{22}\)

If, still according to Alter, the first literary studies of the Bible “were rather fumbling,”\(^{23}\) this new wave quickly gathered momentum, so much so that, in the introduction to their 1987 *Literary Guide to the Bible*, Alter and the leading literary critic Frank Kermode claimed that “the Bible, once thought of as a source of secular literature yet somehow apart from it, now bids fair to become part of the literary canon. […] Indeed, it seems we have reached a turning point in the history of criticism, for the Bible, under a new aspect, has reoccupied the literary culture.”\(^{24}\) In the last three decades or so, a profusion of publications about literary approaches to the Bible have appeared on the market, including key works, like Frank Kermode’s *The Genesis of Secrecy* (1979), Northrop Frye’s *The Great Code* (1982), or Meir Steinberg’s *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (1985).

The attention given by literary scholars and theologians specifically to biblical women has constantly been growing, so that in 2001, J.L. Thompson writes of the “veritable eruption of interest in the women of the Bible.”\(^{25}\) As the Professor of literature and theology, David Jasper, points out, literary approaches to the Bible, “with their emphasis on the (woman) reader, their refusal to be constrained by

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\(^{22}\) Alter, *Art*, p. 12.


religious history and tradition, and their challenge to (patriarchal) authority,”26 raise questions that meet and further the interests of feminist biblical scholars. Many literary studies of the Bible, like Phyllis Trible’s God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality (1978) or Mieke Bal’s Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories (1987), are moreover written from a feminist perspective; they expose traces of patriarchal bias in the sacred texts featuring women and suggest alternative readings. Strikingly, it is also in 1987 that the Journal of Literature and Theology was created and, as Elisabeth Jay points out, “[i]t is perhaps no coincidence that [it] […] came into being at very much the same time that novelists […] such as Barnes, Roberts, Winterson, Sarah [sic] Maitland and others, were turning back to the Bible as the imaginative springboard for novels.”27

In brief, the development of feminist theology from the 1960s onwards in America, and the 1980s in Europe, and the blossoming of the literary approach to the Bible since the 1970s, have challenged the perception of the Scriptures as the divinely revealed, infallible Word of God, have drawn the attention of the public and scholars alike to the presence of patriarchal bias in the sacred texts of the Judeo-Christian faith, have disrupted ancient convictions and raised new questions about women’s representation, status and role in the Bible. The many scholars in literary and religious studies – of feminist orientation or not – who have furthered the reflection on these challenging issues, have contributed to create the perfect environment for the massive development of novelistic reconfigurations of biblical women underlined at the beginning of this introduction.

Within this incredibly wide array of novels in English revisiting female scriptural characters of the Bible, six novels have emerged to form the corpus of this doctoral thesis, which cover a period of time spreading from the beginnings of the expansion of biblical rewritings, to the turn of the twentieth century: Michèle Roberts’s The Wild Girl (1984), Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale (1985), Michèle Roberts’s The Book of Mrs Noah (1987), Emma Tennant’s Sisters and Strangers (1990), Anita Diamant’s The Red Tent (1997), and finally Jenny Diski’s Only Human (2000). These works stand out, as will now be explained, firstly, through

their subversive approach to the Scriptures and their mainstream interpretations – both Christian and Jewish –, and, secondly, through the most central role given to the biblical woman.

The careful review of the supply, carried out as preliminary work for this thesis, has quickly revealed that the large majority of novelistic reconfigurations of scriptural female characters belong to what I will call the “historical-educational” trend, or popular fictional (auto)biographies written not only or primarily for the readers’ entertainment, but also for their education – that is, their moral elevation through their discovery or rediscovery of women who are perceived as remarkable. Such novels are often announced as accurate depictions of the lives of the biblical heroines, written on the basis of both the Bible and historical or ethnographic works on the people of the Scriptures. Whenever their authors resort to their imagination to fill the gaps of the Bible and flesh out their characters, it is done, at least in their own opinion, with reverence for the sacred texts. Concerned about the possible objections that their reworking might raise, these authors frequently describe, in a note to the reader, how they researched their topic; they cite their sources, explain their commendable intentions and justify their few more daring artistic choices. For instance, Orson Scott Card, author of The Women of Genesis series, writes in an afterword:

[My] purpose is pious. […] There are a few […] points where some readers might quibble with my choices. […] If I’m wrong, it’s not like I erased the Bible. The story is still there, intact, as written. All I’ve written here is a novel […]. Which is not to say that I take my own work lightly. On the contrary, I take it seriously. […] So if I have erred, it was in the attempt to approach the truth contained in the Bible, and never in disregard of it.

These “historical-educational” fictions are moreover often designed as messages of hope and comfort to the readers. Francine Rivers, for instance, writes in her introduction to Unveiled, her first Lineage of Grace novel, that “[w]e live in desperate, troubled times when millions seek answers. These women point the way.”


The educational slant of such novels is frequently marked by the closing “study section” or “reading group guide” containing extracts from the Scriptures and discussion questions urging the reader to go back to the Scriptures, for, as Rivers argues,

[the ultimate authority about people of the Bible is the Bible itself. I encourage you to read it for greater understanding. And I pray that as you read the Bible, you will become aware of the continuity, the consistency, and the confirmation of God’s plan for the ages – a plan that includes you.]

As the above quotations show, books like these are often rooted in the belief that the Bible conveys an unequivocal meaning that all readers should necessarily agree on, which betrays a monolithic perspective on the Scriptures. It seems that Jasper’s general observation, in his reader’s guide to *The Bible and Literature*, according to which the “seemingly endless stream of ‘historical’ novels, frequently focusing on the biography of Jesus” are “[g]enerally undistinguished,” can also be applied to the greater part of works of fiction based on biblical women.

In comparison with this abundance of “historical-educational” productions, the six novels analysed in this research stand out as works that do not simply supplement what is lacking in the sacred texts, in a celebratory tone, but enter into dialogue, in a subversive way, with the Bible and its prevailing interpretations – both Christian and Jewish, the authors coming from various spiritual backgrounds, which they most freely and often irreverently revisit. The corpus can therefore be seen to belong to what Jasper identifies as “imaginative literature which interacts with, draws upon and

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32 Jasper, in Jasper and Prickett, p. 46.
33 Michèle Roberts was raised a Catholic, but quickly lost her faith, which, as a young woman, she strongly perceived as oppressive; in her two selected biblical rewritings, she reworks, almost obsessively, the main Judeo-Christian myths, from Genesis to Revelation, with the aim of constructing alternative, egalitarian meanings and a new sense of the religious. Emma Tennant, who originally comes from a Christian background, reworks, in her highly derisive and caustic *Sisters and Strangers*, both the Christian tradition and Jewish legends. If Margaret Atwood grew up “a strict agnostic” (Margaret Atwood, in Bill Moyers, “On Faith & Reason,” available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=QmVD7XcRb6Y [accessed July 22nd, 2008]), she however came to read the Bible regularly as a girl, and defines herself as “religious, but not in a sectarian sense” (Margaret Atwood, in Don Swaim, “Interview with Margaret Atwood,” available at: http://wiredforbooks.org/margaretatwood [accessed July 22nd, 2008]). Her *Handmaid’s Tale*, which is packed with references to the Bible, can be seen, from a general point of view, as a denunciation of authoritarian interpretations of the Scriptures. Finally, both Anita Diamant and Jenny Diski were born into non-practising Jewish families and became familiar with the Bible relatively late in their lives, but while Diamant has rediscovered Judaism through her second wedding, and has ever since been reinterpreting her faith through books about the main aspects of a Jewish life and novels like *The Red Tent*, Jenny Diski, by contrast, has chosen a radical form of atheism deriding both Judaism and Christianity, as can be perceived in *Only Human*. 

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‘transfigures’ the biblical text.”  The authors themselves often emphasise their revisionist intentions. Accordingly, Anita Diamant presents *The Red Tent* as “a radical departure from the historical text,”  while Michèle Roberts, in the author’s note preceding *The Wild Girl*, declares: “I wanted to dissect a myth; I found myself at the same time recreating one.”  As for Jenny Diski, she claimed in an interview that “[b]ooks are available for us to play with. I wanted to retrieve the Bible from stupidity, to take it back as an essentially human story.”  These subversive designs largely contribute to the highly challenging literary interest of the six novels, whose quality is attested to by the visibility that they enjoy within the literary establishment. Most of them have been reviewed in the “Times Literary Supplement,” are currently on the reading list of several university courses on the Bible and literature, and are cited as epitomes of contemporary revisionist fiction in reference books.  

In conjunction with the stimulating critical dialogue that they engage in with the Bible, the selected novels also distinguish themselves through the crucial part that the biblical woman is given in them, which permits both in-depth analyses of these characters as well as systematic comparisons within the corpus. Unlike works like Sara Maitland’s *Daughter of Jerusalem* (1978), Timothy Findley’s *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (1984), or Michèle Roberts’s *Daughters of the House* (1992), where the connection with the female scriptural character(s) consists merely of a passing hint rather than a systematic reconfiguration, or where the biblical woman is peripheral and never emerges fully from a larger group of characters, the analysed rewritings very distinctly bring to the fore the figures that they revisit as the main narrators of their own stories.

Accordingly, Roberts’s *The Wild Girl* is the gospel of Mary Magdalene by Mary Magdalene, and Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which revisits the figure of Rachel’s servant Bilhah in Genesis 30, is told by the handmaid herself. In the same

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34 Jasper, in Jasper and Prickett, p. 49.

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way, in Diamant’s *The Red Tent*, Jacob and Leah’s daughter Dinah gives her own version of her story, while in Tennant’s *Sisters and Strangers*, Eve shares the deeply ironic tale of her life with her young granddaughter and her friend, and in Roberts’s *The Book of Mrs Noah*, Noah’s wife recounts her personal voyage aboard her Other Ark. The only exception to the autodiegetic form is Diski’s *Only Human*, but even there, the biblical woman – the matriarch Sarah – is unquestionably brought to the fore by the unidentified narrator that purposefully sets to act as her mouthpiece.

The key position granted to the reconfigured scriptural character, which contrasts with the situation in the Bible, where the six women largely remain in the background and are mostly silent, is at the very core of this doctoral thesis. The present work aims to show how the novels of my corpus give to a female character perceived to be confined to the gaps of the Scriptures, a voice through which she can define herself as speaking subject, a voice that, crucially, rests not only on language, but also on silence – which challenges the traditional Western opposition between both concepts. From the analysis of the corpus, seven types of silence will progressively emerge: *the implicit dimension*, *silencing*, *eloquent silence*, *the ineffable*, *spectral silence*, *voice blurring* and, finally, *reticence*. Importantly, although this study deals with the interface between theology and contemporary literature, my approach will be that of a literary scholar rather than of a theologian. The theological references will therefore always be used as a means to interpret the selected novels, and not as an end.

In the succinct introductory theoretical prolegomena, the two essential terms of *voice* and *silence* will be defined. The second concept will be dealt with at considerably greater length, on account of its deceptive simplicity and of the widespread disregard that it has traditionally met with in the Western world. After these prolegomena, a first part entitled “The Silenced Feminine?” will concentrate on the common starting point of the six novels. Chapter 1 will argue that all the analysed biblical rewritings rest on the same two forms of silence, the *implicit dimension* and *silencing*, and on a complex relation to the Scriptures and the tradition, which combines a fundamental rooting in the Bible with a denunciation of what is seen as the almost systematic confinement of women to the silent background of the sacred texts. Chapter 2 will highlight in concrete terms, through short first explorations of the
novels, how they constitute answers to the Bible, and how they depict their protagonists’ freedom of expression as being threatened or drastically restricted.

In the second, most central – and consequently much larger – part, entitled “Voices Draped in Silences,” which will contain the six detailed case studies, I will show that the selected novels do not simply stop with the condemnation of what is perceived as the limitation of women’s access to speech and representation, but also give a voice to the biblical woman that they reconfigure. I will therefore describe the way in which each protagonist, in response to her original silencing, strives to define herself by playing on the infinite possibilities offered by language and silence. The analyses, whose length will be directly proportional to the abundance of references to, and complexity in the treatment of, silence in each novel, will be presented in pairs, in three distinct sections, to stress how two fictions based on the same forms of silence use them in unique manners. The sections themselves will be arranged according to the evolution in the relation between the protagonists’ voice and authority, in both its divine and maternal aspects.

The first section will be devoted to Anita Diamant’s *The Red Tent* and Michèle Roberts’s *The Wild Girl*, which both rest on the rehabilitation of the goddess, and describe silence – in the form of the *ineffable* for *The Wild Girl*, and of *eloquent silence* in both *The Wild Girl* and *The Red Tent* – as a path to the other and to self-knowledge. While Dinah’s fight for a voice will be envisaged as an ode to the endangered plural (great) mother, *The Wild Girl* will be analysed as Mary Magdalene’s mystical initiation into the ineffable divine.

In the second section, I will focus on Michèle Roberts’s *The Book of Mrs Noah* and Jenny Diski’s *Only Human*, which are both rooted in the silences called *voice blurring* and *spectral silence*. Roberts’ rewriting of the Flood story will be presented as an oneiric voyage into feminine creativity, and Diski’s reconfiguration of Sarah as a great story game of competing voices and rival desires.

In the third section, *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Sisters and Strangers* will be exploited as examples of the silence that I call *reticence*. If Atwood’s dystopia will be scrutinised as a reluctant rebellion associated with tragic and traumatic accents, Tennant’s tale, by contrast, will be explored as Eve’s playfully reticent account of her journey through the seven female (stereo)types believed to be imposed on women in Judeo-Christian societies.
Finally, in the brief third part, “Closing Silences Voicing Openness,” I will examine to what extent the biblical women have really made their voices heard or if the silences chosen or imposed on them by the end of their tales, risk silencing them again.
THEORETICAL PROLEGOMENA
Chapter 1
Voices and Silences

Given the large variety of – sometimes contradictory – meanings attributed to the terms “voice” and “silence” in the various disciplines of social science and religious studies, it seems necessary first to define both what is meant by these words in this doctoral thesis and how the latter relates to and distinguishes itself from previous publications.

It might at first sight seem paradoxical to base a study devoted to written texts on the term “voice,” for, in its most intuitive and concrete interpretation, this concept, as defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, refers to “[s]ound produced by the vocal organs, esp. when speaking or singing, and regarded as characteristic of an individual person. Also: the individual organic means or capacity of producing such sounds.”¹ In this research, “voice” will not be envisaged in its link to the body, in its physical materiality, a facet that plays a crucial role in studies on drama, for instance, and that is characterised through parameters such as tone, volume, pitch, accent, and intonations.

This thesis intends neither to contribute to the debate about the issue of the supposed absence, disappearance or spectral presence of voice in writing, nor to reveal modes of reproduction of orality in literature through a particular rhythm and syntax, or the use of slang and specific punctuation, to cite but a few techniques. Examples of such studies focusing on traces of orality include, for instance, Dominique Rabaté’s *Poétiques de la voix* (1999), or *La bande sonore* (1998), in which Jean-Pierre Martin, after describing voice in the novel as “à la fois un objet de

jouissance et un objet perdu,” “la trace d’une incarnation impossible, le sillage d’une présence évanescente – musique du sens, corps désincarné[,] […] rendu vocal […] interruptif ou […] fluide,”2 examines how novels of the twentieth century try to “reincarnate” a vocal dimension in writing.3

It is a different approach that the present study adopts, in which “voice” is understood as a metaphor appropriately referring to both the “political” and formal – i.e. mainly narratological – aspects of the biblical women’s access to self-definition, which are respectively reflected in a broad and a narrower acceptation of the term. In its broad sense, inspired by Vincent Jouve’s definition of a character’s axiological universe – i.e. relating to values – in Poétique des valeurs,4 “voice” embraces the different means through which a character defines itself, i.e. not only through its words and silences, but also its thoughts and actions. This meaning incorporates, without being restricted to, what feminists mean by “voice,” that is, according to S.S. Lanser, a feminist literary critic herself, “the behavior of […] persons and groups who assert woman-centered points of view.”5 “Voice” has indeed always been a highly popular term in feminist studies. The development of this concept, not only in the feminist field, but in social sciences and the arts generally, is intrinsically linked with the emerging concern, in the last four decades of the twentieth century, for the unheard, invisible minorities. To quote Linda Hutcheon, if

the 1960s […] saw the inscribing into history (Gutman 1981, 554) of previously “silent” groups defined by differences of race, gender, sexual preferences, ethnicity, native status, [and] class […] [t]he 1970s and 1980s have seen the increasingly rapid and complete inscribing of these same ex-centrics into both theoretical discourse and artistic practice as andro- (phallo-), hetero-, Euro-, ethno-centrisms have been vigorously challenged.6

In feminist, postmodern and postcolonial writing, “voice” quickly becomes a keyword in the marginalized and excluded minorities’ fight for visibility. The term is associated with emancipation, empowerment and recognition, as Lanser points out:

Few words are as resonant to contemporary feminists as “voice.” […] [F]ictional figures ancient and modern, actual women famous and obscure, are honored for speaking up and

speaking out. Other silenced communities—peoples of color, peoples struggling against colonial rule, gay men and lesbians—have also written and spoken about the urgency of “coming to voice,” [...] [F]or the collectively and personally silenced the term has become a trope of identity and power.

Thus in feminist literary studies, beside Lanser’s monograph on self-authorizing narrators, itself entitled Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice, one can also cite Liz Yorke’s Impertinent Voices, which analyses female writers’ subversive strategies for “giving voice to [woman as subject,] a largely unlistened-to dimension of experience,”8 or Rebecca Chopp’s exhortation for “[w]omen[’s] voices [to] revise the social and symbolic rules of language”9 in The Power to Speak and Patricia Yaeger’s praising, in Honey-Mad Women, of female authors who “awaken [...] voices that have been repressed.”10 In religious studies, “voice” has also fared extremely well, as demonstrate, to give but a few examples, L.G. Berner’s article on “Hearing Hannah’s Voice,”11 Carol Meyers’s project to “listen to th[e] voice”12 of the first woman in Discovering Eve, or Ilana Pardes’s work “to draw up from the past [...] voices of women” that “put forth other truths” than “the dominant patriarchal discourses of the Bible”13 in Countertraditions in the Bible.

Although the feminist acceptance of the word “voice” certainly does fit the biblical women’s challenging of dominant, patriarchal views and the re-affirmation of the feminine in my novels, its scope is, however, too restricted for my analysis, for two basic reasons. Firstly, in order to understand the protagonists’ voices in their full complexity, my definition necessarily has to take into account the polyphonic quality of the novels, in which voices – described by Mikhaïl Bakhtine as consciences expressed through speech14 – relaying male-centred views, are juxtaposed, confronted

7 Lanser, p. 3.
and enter into dialogue with the protagonists’ voices. Moreover, as Lanser points out, feminists describing a woman as “finding a voice” do not usually take into account “whether or not that voice is represented textually.” This formal aspect of the concept, however, is crucial in my corpus, and brings us to the second, more specific meaning attributed to “voice” in this work, which refers to the traditional narratological metaphor for the instance that “speaks,” viz. the “narrator.” In this sense, the novels studied not only assert women’s right to a voice, challenging “the traditional Church’s position regarding women’s […] access to the ‘Word’” as feminist or genderfair approaches to the Bible do, but also actually give Mary Magdalene, Offred, Mrs Noah and Dinah a voice as narrators of their own stories. This homodiegetic status of the biblical women takes further significance when one considers, like Lanser and Schulz, the difficulties historically met by female authors to use the personal “I” in their writing. If in *Sisters and Strangers*, Eve also tells her own story, her tale is however framed by the narrative of how she recounts her life to her granddaughter and her friend; she moreover purposefully disguises her tale’s autobiographical character as a heterodiegetic narrative until the penultimate page. The only real exception to the homodiegetic status of the biblical woman in the corpus is *Only Human*, where Sarah’s life is told by an anonymous narrator whose omniscience nevertheless gives the reader access to the matriarch’s consciousness almost as directly as with an autodiegetic narrative instance.

The concept of “silence,” because it is so deceptively straightforward and might seem a peculiar, even paradoxical notion to associate to the coming to voice of biblical women, will require longer preliminary investigation. In Western societies, where language has continuously been considered as the specificity of humanity and

15 Lanser, p. 4.
18 The term “genderfair” is used by the German theologian Irmtraud Fischer to designate an approach which equitably takes into account both genders, thereby distinguishing her study from radical feminist readings of the Scriptures.
19 Lanser shows how “until the 1970s personal voice has remained unquestionably a practice chosen less frequently by women than by men. For Marguerite Yourcenar, writing in the 1920s, for example, the representation of female voice was simply unthinkable” (Lanser, pp. 189-190). See also Muriel Schulz, “Minority Writers: The Struggle for Authenticity and Authority,” in Kramarae, Cheris et al. (Eds), *Language and Power* (Beverly Hills/London: Sage, 1984), p. 208.
the embodiment of civilisation, silence has just as systematically been, either disregarded as a field of inquiry, or devalued, reduced to the mere opposite of speech, to an absence that cannot convey meaning and even less make sense of the world and individuals. As the French anthropologist David Le Breton argues in his sociological study of silence, “[l]’idéologie de la communication assimile le silence au vide, à un abîme au sein du discours. […] Plus que le bruit, le silence est l’ennemi juré de l’*homo communicans.*”

Olivier Ammour-Mayeur, a French literary scholar, even writes of the Western negative, quasi-nihilistic point of view on the question of silence, and attributes to Christianity a major role in this devaluation. Basing his argument on the first chapter of the Gospel of John, he writes:

La pensée chrétienne joue un rôle central et moteur dans cette perspective, puisqu’il est dit, dans les prémisses de cette religion: “Au commencement était le Verbe.” Ce Verbe est Dieu, ce Verbe est parole de Dieu. La forme de divinisation dont la parole est, ainsi, l’objet […] ne peut donc entraîner qu’un rejet – sinon un dédain – en ce qui concerne la notion de silence, dans les sociétés chrétiennes. Rejet qui confine donc ce dernier au rôle “passif” ou à la position minoritaire et dominée.

Although the Johannine “Word” cannot be confined to language and its “deification,” and although, as George Steiner justly remarks, the precedence of the word already “characteri[zes] […] the Greek and Judaic genius and carried over into Christianity,” Ammour-Mayeur’s statement is particularly revealing in that it reflects the dominant belief, relayed not least by great historical thinkers of Judaism and Christianity like Philo, Augustine and Maimonides, that the Bible is the word of

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22 Ammour-Mayeur, in Mura-Brunel and Cogard, p. 250.
23 Ammour-Mayeur points out that “la chrétienté n’est pas la seule religion – ou communauté humaine – à avoir ainsi ‘déifié’ le Logos” (Ammour-Mayeur, in Mura-Brunel and Cogard, p. 250).
a God who *speaks*, whose all-powerful divine fiat brings Creation into being and whose masterful verbal injunctions lay down the law; in other words, a sacred text felt to reveal a God completely dissociated from a silence confined at best to some threatening, pre-verbal chaos over which God’s Word triumphs. It is precisely to such a representation of the Judeo-Christian deity that most of the novels of my corpus react.

If it is undeniable, however, that Judaism and Christianity, like many religions, do have a privileged relationship with silence, the particular forms of silence that they value are most frequently perceived to be situated on the human side rather than the divine. It is the believers’ quiet waiting for and receptivity to God and his Word, as in the first verse of Psalm 62 – “For God alone my soul waits in silence”26 – and in Lamentations 3:26-28: “It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD. It is good for one to bear the yoke in youth, to sit alone in silence when the Lord has imposed it.” It is also the silence of awe, an attitude to God prescribed, among others, in Zephaniah 1:7 – “Be silent before the Lord GOD!” – and Ecclesiastes 5:2 – “Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few.” It is, finally, the silence of the worshipper unable to name or describe a God who is well beyond human language and understanding, as in Job 40:3-5: “Then Job answered the LORD: ‘See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but will proceed no further.’” In brief, all forms of silence that can be easily interpreted – and have indeed often been, not only by some feminists, as the case of Ammour-Mayeur proves – as negative and as promoting an image of the believer as passive and submissive hearer of the Word of God. The following chapters will show, however, that many such interpretations of silence tend to conceal the positive potential this complex phenomenon can assume in empowering or self-defining situations.

As Quaker theologian Rachel Muers rightly points out, “from the early centuries of Christian theology we can find examples of reflection on the idea that the one who is himself the Word may keep silent – or may be rendered silent,”27 but such


works remain extremely marginal. Thus in 1970, the renowned French Jewish philosopher André Neher introduces his now famous monograph on silence from the Bible to Auschwitz as a work that appears to challenge the definition that the Bible gives of itself and the general interpretations associated with this definition throughout the ages, as a bet made with the feeling of exploring, mapping out and identifying unknown land, for, “[I]a Bible n’est-elle pas, en effet, le Livre de la Parole, par excellence?” More than thirty years later, the theologian Oliver Davies, in his contribution to the collection of essays on Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation, undertakes to “reflect upon silence as a distinctively religious sign,” and identifies primal silence with God, who is therefore both speech and silence, but quickly falls back onto the traditional idea of a deity who “chooses to break that silence by speaking,” fails to consider silence as truly relational in itself, and eventually seems to reduce silence to “a non-sign [that] […] signifies by other signs” and merely constitutes “the possibility of discourse and utterance.” Today, Rachel Muers’s 2004 Keeping God’s Silence still constitutes an exception in the field of scholarly publications, not only because it actually deals with silence and the Bible, but also because it avoids falling into the trap of a silence that would only exist to increase the prestige of language and argues for a theological ethics of communication based on God’s silent listening, thereby making silence an integral part of God in the same way as speech.

Even such a distinctive feature of the Scriptures as the silences of informational gaps, although repeatedly acknowledged by narratologists, has never been subjected to a thorough analysis. Meir Sternberg and Robert Alter, who each dedicated a chapter to the phenomenon in a monograph, are pioneers in this field. Sternberg’s chapter on “Gaps, Ambiguity, and the Reading Process” in The Poetics of Biblical Narrative (1985) is devoted to the David-Bathsheba story, but centres on

28 It must be pointed out that the issue of silence in the Bible remains largely unexplored, for systematic studies are still lacking. To cite but a few, silences like those of Jesus in front of the high priest or Pilate in the Passion narratives, or of God himself in the story of Joseph in Genesis 37-50 – the Lord only speaks once, to Jacob, in Genesis 46:2-4 –, certainly deserve scholarly attention.

29 Neher, p. 7.


31 Davies, in Davies and Turner, p. 203.

32 Davies, in Davies and Turner, p. 222.
reading as gap-filling activity and on the character of David, leaving the issue of the silences from Bathsheba’s perspective unaddressed. More interesting for my purpose is Alter’s “Characterization and the Art of Reticence,” in which he argues that, although the biblical narrative is essentially more silent than modern Western modes of fiction, “it is selectively silent in a purposeful way: about different personages, or about the same personages at different junctures of the narration, or about different aspects of their thought, feeling, behavior.”

Illustrating his statement with an analysis of the David-Michal relationship, Alter attributes this reticence to the biblical conception of the “unfathomable freedom” of each individual created by God: “The purposeful selectivity of means […] used in the rendering of biblical characters [is] in a sense dictated by the biblical view of man.” In other words, the complete silence around, for instance, Michal’s feelings and fate after 2 Samuel 6:23 – in which Michal’s barrenness is revealed but never explicitly linked to some divine punishment – creates ambiguities that emphasise the Bible’s depiction of humans as “free agent[s].” This interpretation has the merit of combining a reaffirmed human free will with divine omniscience, but it is highly doubtful that it can – and, more importantly, should – be applied indiscriminately to all silences around biblical women, especially in narratives of violence like Dinah’s.

In the social sciences, the negative valuation or disregard for silence long prevented the development of wide-ranging research. Apart from a couple of groundbreaking works, scholarly interest in silence as a complex phenomenon did not develop until the 1970s and mainly 1980s, stimulated – as was research on the concept of “voice” – by the rising awareness of silenced minorities and the expansion of feminist protest against a patriarchal system accused of oppressing women, but also by the large literature on the Shoah. A concise overview of the main publications on silence in philosophy, linguistics, rhetoric, and literature that influenced my

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33 Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 186-229. In the same monograph, Meir Sternberg provides an analysis of the Dinah story. The reader looking for some interpretation of the silence around Jacob’s daughter will however be disappointed. Sternberg does not consider the Shechem-Dinah affair to be the true focus of the story: “Only toward the end […] does the narrative reveal its true focus of interest. It started by giving the impression that this focus lay in the Shechem-Dinah affair. […] As its tortuous progression draws to a close, however, Simeon and Levi emerge as the real heroes” (Sternberg, *The Poetics*, p. 472).

34 Alter, *Art*, p. 115.


understanding of the concept will complete the brief survey in religious studies already carried out above and enable me to isolate the general features of the phenomenon as applied to my corpus.

Philosophy was, historically speaking, one of the first disciplines to consider silence as an object of study, even if, to date, few monographs have been devoted exclusively to the topic. In 1948, Max Picard’s groundbreaking work, *Die Welt des Schweigens* (published in English in 1952 under the title *The World of Silence*), opens new perspectives by regarding silence as a potentially positive phenomenon and a fundamental feature of both humankind and the divine, but gives unconditional precedence to speech. Indeed, Picard’s work hinges on the philosopher’s claim that the hidden dimension of silence must be recovered for the sake, not of silence itself, but of the word, for man is man through the word, and without silence, speech dies down.37 Bernard Dauenhauer, in his phenomenological study entitled *Silence: The Phenomenon and its Ontological Significance* (1980), abolishes this supremacy of language, thereby enhancing the status of silence which becomes “just as much as discourse, […] a type of positive performance. […] Along with discourse, it is an irreducible way in which man expresses his life. As such, it has its own distinctive sense.”38 However, Dauenhauer, who understands silence both as situating all utterances as dependent on a “beyond” that interrupts any attempt to fully determine the world and as opening the way for further utterances, fails to consider the particular occurrences of silence in specific contexts, ignoring, for instance, the silences imposed by censure or oppression.

Taking into account the context in which silences occur is precisely what was done, from the 1980s onwards, by the first studies in pragmatics and discourse analysis that looked beyond the traditional definition of silence as “absence of sound and therefore as absence of communication,”39 and analysed the forms and functions of the phenomenon, from pauses in speech to larger silences performing discourse

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functions like prayers. Drawing from these philosophical and linguistic studies, I will analyse the silences of the biblical women as particular, contextually-determined instances of a meaningful, complex and multifaceted phenomenon. I will not subordinate silence to speech but consider both phenomena as giving rise to, complementing, and nourishing each other.

Rhetorical studies also contribute to my discussion of silence. Even if, as George Kalamaras shows in *Reclaiming the Tacit Dimension* (1994), classical rhetoric distrusted silence, being rooted in binary distinctions that associate language with presence, and silence with absence, and if “the contemporary rhetorical scene, for the most part, [still] assumes silence to be simply an absence of text or voice,” scholars like Cheryl Glenn and Kalamaras have successfully proved that silence constitutes a rhetorical art and genuine mode of knowing. To quote Glenn, “silence resonates loudly along the corridors of purposeful language use. Whether choice or im/position, silence can reveal positive or negative abilities. […] Silence can deploy power; it can defer to power. It all depends.” My analysis will show that in the novels studied, silence can indeed be as eloquent as speech and become an extremely powerful tool, either of oppression, or empowerment.

In the literary field itself, silence has also long been neglected. In 1985, Pierre Van den Heuvel, in *Parole, Mot, Silence*, was still lamenting the glaring lack of any serious study on the issue of silence which, according to the critic, is increasingly acknowledged as fundamental but never thoroughly examined. Van den Heuvel cites the numerous, highly disparate references to silence made in passing by Pierre Macherey, Philippe Hamon, Maurice Blanchot, George Steiner and Gérard Genette, among others. Although certainly accurate, especially in the context of literary criticism before the 1970s, Van den Heuvel’s denunciation of the blatant lack of interest in silences among literary scholars must be slightly qualified, his corpus


42 Glenn, p. xi.

failing to include several groundbreaking monographs and articles published in English, like Ihab Hassan’s *The Literature of Silence: Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett* (1967) and *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (1971), Susan Sontag’s chapter on “The Aesthetics of Silence” in *Styles of Radical Will* (1969) and Leslie Kane’s 1984 study on modern drama, *The Language of Silence*. Van den Heuvel further deplores the fact that silence is almost exclusively seen, in publications, as an aesthetic figure that aims to involve the reader – a point developed by Wolfgang Iser in his reader-response theory – for it overemphasises the reception of the text, to the detriment of the all-important relationship between silence and subject on which he therefore focuses.\(^4\) This centrality of the individual in Van den Heuvel’s definition of silence parallels my approach. Indeed, silence will always be considered in conjunction with the biblical woman’s attempt at self-definition and primarily as a relational phenomenon, that is, as part of some communicative activity – which may, or may not, directly involve language. My analysis, however, will markedly differ from Van den Heuvel’s in that my definition of the term “subject” will not include the author, and that the latter’s life and silences will not be related to the characters’ – as Van den Heuvel does, for instance, in his analysis of the parents’ silence in Camus’s *L’Étranger*.

For the female narrators of the corpus, silence, like language, is a way of defining themselves and the world, but cannot, however, constitute the whole message of the novel, as in the works on which literary research has for the most part concentrated and which centre around the radical form of silence that Ihab Hassan defines as metaphor of the “anti-literature” of the avant-garde tradition ranging from Sade past Beckett. The silence of such artistic creations “conjoins the need both of autodestruction and self-transcendence,”\(^4\) strives for the void, and conveys alienation from the world, the subject, art and language.\(^4\) Such an extreme mode of silence cannot find its place in the novels of my corpus, for if most of the narrators do indeed convey some uneasiness, suspicion and distance towards language, their texts,

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\(^4\) Van den Heuvel defines silence as the non-realisation of an act of enunciation that could or should take place in a given situation, due to the subject’s inability or refusal to communicate (Van Den Heuvel, pp. 66-67).


however, cannot afford to become some form of Beckettian “expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.”

Indeed, resorting to such a radical form of silence would not only be completely antagonistic to the narrators’ forcefully expressed need to find a voice through which they could define themselves, but this “cheerful nihilism,” as Susan Sontag calls it in _Styles of Radical Will_, would also challenge the very _raison d’être_ of their project, if, indeed, there is both “nothing to express” and “nothing from which to express.”

The silence of nothingness also predominates, although in a more tragic form, in the works of Holocaust writers like Elie Wiesel, Paul Celan, Jorge Semprun, or Anna Langfus, which all ask the question formulated by Steiner in his essay on “Silence and the Poet”: how can one write after Auschwitz? Quoting Neher’s words, David Patterson claims in _The Shriek of Silence: A Phenomenology of the Holocaust Novel_ that

> [i]n the Holocaust novel, “Silence – the ‘inert’ silence, great and solemn – comes forward not as a temporary suspension of the Word but as a spokesman for the invincible Nothingness. Thus Silence replaces the Word because Nothingness takes the place of Being.”

These artistic expressions of the collective trauma of the _Shoah_ testify to the simultaneous need to recount and impossibility to describe the horror and inhumanity of barbarity. As Anna Langfus puts it: “Comment peut-on évoquer avec des paroles humaines une réalité qui n’est pas à la mesure de l’homme? Il faut le silence, beaucoup de silence entre les mots pour qu’on entende le bruit des victimes.” Although the experiences described in the studied novels cannot be likened to the world-wide atrocities experienced by the Jewish people – among others – during the Second World War and addressed by Holocaust writers, my analysis will emphasise how the issue of trauma, of the unspeakable and ineffable, also often belongs to the silences of the biblical women.

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48 Sontag, p. 12.
49 Steiner, p. 50.
Finally, in the various disciplines of feminist studies, silence has always been given much attention. The feminist definition of the concept is however all too often one-sided, because reduced to the critique of the silencing of women in different areas of society – to which I will come back in detail in the first part. As the following chapters will show, this imposed silence constitutes but one – albeit important – aspect of a plural phenomenon whose many facets are unveiled in the corpus. In this sense, this thesis explores a largely unexploited area, for while much has been written about the silencing of minorities, about silence and the *Shoah,*\(^{52}\) or about the silent writing of a few key male novelists and playwrights – Camus, Beckett and Kafka mainly –, there seems to be a considerable lack of research on chosen silences in novels written by women and/or with a female protagonist, giving the erroneous impression that eloquent and powerful silences are a predominantly or even exclusively male phenomenon, that silence – except for the silence of the blank page – cannot be constitutive of a woman’s voice, of her way of defining herself.

Along this doctoral research, the following questions will be examined: what kinds of silence do the protagonists use or are confronted with? in which circumstances? how do these silences contribute to, or, on the contrary, hinder, these characters’ coming to voice? On the basis of the general definition of silence given in this chapter, and of the detailed analyses of the six novels selected, seven types of silence will emerge: the “implicit dimension,” “silencing,” “eloquent silence,” the “ineffable,” “spectral silence,” “voice blurring” and, finally, “reticence.”

The varieties of silence highlighted in this study are on no account meant to be taken as neat, tightly closed categories. As the analysis of the corpus will amply show, different types of silence often overlap and complete each other. Some of them are indeed closely related to others by nature, or through the specific circumstances in which they appear. Trauma, for instance, can both provoke unwillingness to evoke painful memories, and leave a subject speechless in the face of an event that defies language and human understanding; in other words, it can be associated with both

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\(^{52}\) To cite but a few examples, apart from Neher’s *L’exil de la parole: Du silence biblique au silence d’Auschwitz* and Patterson’s *The Shriek of Silence: A Phenomenology of the Holocaust Novel,* one can also find Simon P. Sibelman’s *Silence in the Novels of Elie Wiesel,* Anny Dayan Rosenman’s “*Shoah, Silence, Écriture*” and Olivier Ammour-Mayeur’s “Limites des expériences innommables: indicible de la Shoah – silence de la pensée Zen” in Mura-Brunel and Cogard’s *Limites du langage: indicible ou silence.*
what I call the silences of “reticence” and the “ineffable.” Each novel, in its own way, plays on the available range of silences, highlighting some more than others to build a complex, unique picture.

In scholarly publications, silences have frequently been organised into binary categories such as voluntary/involuntary, verbal/non-verbal, or positive/negative. Such dichotomous classifications are, however, problematic for two reasons. Firstly, they often do not reflect the complex reality of silence. Indeed, how can one distinguish in a neat, categorical way, between a deliberately chosen silence and self-imposed silence due to the internalization of enforced rules or stereotypical roles? Similarly, a discourse of reticence can combine verbal and non-verbal silences, gaps and long-winded speeches about one’s unwillingness to witness to a traumatic experience. Silences which, at first sight, seem destructive, may prove to participate in a crucial way to a subject’s development. My second objection to binary categorizations directly arises from the corpus studied. Since the novels vigorously denounce and strive to deconstruct traditional dichotomies governing Western thought, instituting new dichotomies as an interpretative frame would distort – silence, even – their messages.

The seven corpus-based types of silence distinguished in this thesis are not meant to encompass all the possibilities offered by the phenomenon, but rather to do justice to a concept that has too often been oversimplified and, at the same time, to allow for a nuanced reading of each novel that brings to the fore both its specificities and its parallels with the other selected works. It is precisely on these similarities that the first part of this thesis will concentrate, by foregrounding the common starting point of the six novels in the gaps surrounding the female characters in the Scriptures, and perceived as reducing them to silence.

53 See Van Den Heuvel.
54 See Leslie Kane’s distinction between verbal silence and silence as absence of speech in The Language of Silence. On the Unspoken and the Unspeakable in Modern Drama (London/Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1984).
55 See Deborah Tannen’s article “Silence: Anything But,” in Tannen and Saville-Troike.
PART I

THE SILENCED FEMININE?
Chapter 1

Ambivalent Responses to the Bible

The stance on the Bible and the Judeo-Christian tradition which emerges from the corpus can neither be reduced to clear-cut, complete rejection, nor to naïve, uncritical acceptance, but rather situates the novels analysed within the postmodern trend of revision, of “looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction.” Jenny Diski’s statement – about the Abraham and Isaac narrative – that “[i]f we throw out the story as politically inappropriate […] we lose the chance to read it again differently, more carefully, less reverentially,” appropriately illustrates this revisionist perspective that she and the other authors studied adopt in their biblical rewritings.

“Revision,” Adrienne Rich argues, assumes unique significance for female authors: “[it] is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves.” The Bible having had such a momentous impact on the Judeo-Christian psyche and, more specifically, on the definition of women and their status in society, it constitutes a prime, or even inescapable object of revision for writers who, like Roberts, Atwood, Tennant, Diamant and Diski, wish to suggest more positive representations of the female sex.

This process of re-vision involves both the deconstruction of the biblical narratives and the reconstruction of alternative myths. As Ostriker aptly points out, “it

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3 Rich, pp. 18-19.
is typical of women’s rewriting of myth that, when meanings already latent in a given story are recovered and foregrounded by a woman’s perspective, the entire story appears to change.” 4 The novels of the corpus can therefore be seen to combine the two types of revision that Rachel Blau DuPlessis distinguishes in Writing beyond the Ending: the “displacement of attention to the other side of the story,” 5 when “a well-known story is accepted but told from some noncanonical perspective,” 6 and the “delegitimation of the known tale,” 7 which criticises its conventional message and/or structure.

However subversive the revisionist task of the authors studied actually is, it is largely facilitated by the many silences of the biblical narratives that favour, invite even, creative interpretation, for as Ostriker notes:

Scripture has at no single moment in its history been a unified, monolithic text, has always been […] full of fascinating mysteries, gaps, and inconsistencies, a garden of delight to the exegete. Contemporary critics find in Scripture a kind of paradise of polysemy. 8

Midrash, the rabbinic mode of biblical interpretation that questions and fills in the silences of the biblical narratives by retelling them and creatively expanding on them, constitutes one of the most eloquent illustrations of this infinite possibility to play with the scriptural words and silences. Immersed in Jewish culture, Diamant’s The Red Tent and Diski’s Only Human are often described as modern midrashic literature. 9 The Christian and, to a lesser extent, Jewish traditions – Judaism being very much rooted in the art of argumentation and debate – have however regularly tended to confine the Bible to narrower interpretative boundaries, to present it – to quote the Jewish author and critic Alicia Suskin Ostriker – as both “consistent and monolithic” 10 and, thereby, to wall it up in what Bernard Sarrazin calls an artificial monologism. 11

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7 DuPlessis, p. 108.
8 Ostriker, Feminist Revision, p. 62.
10 Ostriker, Feminist Revision, p. 89.
scriptural characters. In our secular Western societies, where few men and women have or seek direct, unmediated access to the Bible, and where traditional, mainstream Judeo-Christian interpretations of it determine most people’s only knowledge of biblical characters and stories, revisionist rewritings are bound to address both the biblical texts and their later interpretations. The novels that are the subject of this study therefore sometimes quote from precise biblical verses, sometimes refer to the prevailing – often misogynistic – conception of the first Jewish and Christian women they reconfigure.

This chapter will concentrate on the common starting point of the six novels – i.e. the depiction of a woman in the Scriptures and the later Judeo-Christian tradition. It will show how these creative rewritings demonstrate a complex, ambivalent relationship with these sources and, more specifically, their silences, both feeding on and challenging them, but also how the corpus uses this revisionist enterprise as a springboard to denounce the past and present restriction of women’s expression in other significant areas, such as mythology, folklore, the literary scene and the family or societal structure.

I. Listening to the Implicit Dimension of the Bible

Every discourse, written or spoken, is the result of a necessary process of selection of information. The Bible is, of course, no exception to the rule. As Philippe Hamon and Pierre Macherey point out, to produce meaning is to exclude. In other words, to make things visible, others inevitably have to be rendered invisible.12 These left out elements form what I will name the “implicit dimension” of a text, also called “the unsaid” or “the unspoken”13 in critical literature. Although these three near-synonyms are often used interchangeably, I have opted for the term “implicit,” for it combines the appreciable advantages of lacking potentially reductive oral denotations and of being widely used in scholarly publications.


13 If the term “unspoken” is sometimes used, as by Leslie Kane, to refer to what “resists our ability to communicate subjective reality and abstract concepts through words” (Kane, p. 180), I will, in this thesis, rather opt for a more intuitive definition of the vocable, which will therefore be understood as the equivalent of the French “non-dit” and as a synonym of “implicit.” The inability to convey a particular experience through language will be associated, on the other hand, with the terms “unspeakable” and “ineffable,” which, unlike “implicit,” unfortunately lack a widespread, neutrally-marked synonym. For a detailed definition of these two terms, see Part Two, Chapter 2.
This implicit meaning constitutes the first crucial type of silence for the analysis of a corpus which, in relation to the Scriptures, represents the perfect illustration of Macherey’s claim that “[c]e qu’il y a d’essentiel à toute parole, c’est son silence: ce qu’elle amène à taire.”

Among the different varieties of implicit meaning isolated by Hamon, one, in particular, is especially suited to the selected works. It is identified through the comparison between a text and its rewriting: “L’absence se laisse voir dans le jeu intertextuel d’un intervalle, dans la comparaison d’un texte originel et de sa réécriture.” Indeed, all the novels of the corpus, by reconfiguring a silent biblical woman, have entered, to borrow Diamant’s expression, that “great open door,” and have used what Laurent Jenny poetically calls “the specific vibration of the unspoken on the threshold of the utterance,” transforming it into the “source of the expression.”

If the implicit dimension of discourse, shrouded in mystery, often invites interpretation and creative exploration, it also proves to be particularly revealing from an axiological perspective. Although the relegation of specific meanings to the tacit facet of a text should not be hastily or automatically equated with a conscious or unconscious ban, or with organised censorship, it certainly does unveil the values that particular text conveys. According to the familiar maxim Hamon relays: “[c]’est l’absence qui est (qui signale) l’idéologie.”

What does the implicit dimension of the Scriptures reveal? This issue, which has (pre)occupied many feminists, is also at the root and core of the second type of

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14 Macherey, p. 105.
15 Hamon, p. 17. According to the French literary critic, the implicit dimension or “absences” can also be identified in the interval between, on the one hand, the text, and on the other hand, either a model, whether prescriptive, rhetoric, or stylistic, or a historical/biographical reality (Hamon, pp. 14-15). The implicit dimension therefore overlaps with Wolfgang Iser’s concept of the text’s unformulated double, called *Negativität*: “der formulierte Text [ist] durch Unformuliertes gedoppelt. [...] Diese Doppelung bezeichnen wir als die Negativität fiktionaler Texte” (Wolfgang Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens: Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung* [München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1976], p. 348). This unformulated double rests on *Leerstellen*, which govern the reader’s involvement in the text (Iser, pp. 264-265).
20 Hamon, p. 11. Although Hamon uses the term “absence” as a synonym of the implicit dimension, this rather confusing term will be avoided in this work.
silence shared by all the novels studied: silencing. As Fischer points out in her second monograph on biblical women, *Des femmes messagères de Dieu*,

> [q]and il est question d’histoires qui concernent des femmes, il faut considérer les textes historiques nés dans une culture patriarcale comme des icebergs: seule une petite partie émerge, le reste le plus important disparait dans la mer de l’oubli.21

Since it is now widely acknowledged that the various books of the Bible, like their later interpretations, reflect the particular prejudices of the cultures in which they were written, this almost systematic confinement of women to the implicit background is interpreted as revealing the patriarchal bias of the biblical narratives and tradition, and is commonly denounced as silencing the female sex.

**II. Challenging Women’s Silencing**

Silencing, which consists in preventing a particular individual or group from expressing themselves, constitutes a *leitmotif* in the novels analysed. This dimension of silence carries, by definition, a wide range of predictably negative connotations, such as passivity and powerlessness, and is described by scholars as “an imposition of weakness upon a normally speaking body,”22 as “a trope for oppression, […] or obedience,”23 but also as “the antithesis of the exercise of power, passive where speech is active; being silenced is having something done to one.”24

Whether in literary, religious, philosophical or linguistic writings – of feminist orientation or not –, the reluctant epitome of “the silenced” has repeatedly been identified as womankind, as in Cheryl Glenn’s *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*, to give but one of countless examples: “Throughout Western social history, all people gendered feminine (or weaker) have been systematically muted if not silenced. Silence has been the ornament of the female sex.”25 Perceived as an instrument consciously or unconsciously used by patriarchy to preserve male supremacy in

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22 Glenn, p. xix.
23 Glenn, p. 2.
24 Muers, p. 43.
25 Glenn, p. 10. Although the issue will not be addressed in this work, such a claim evidently applies to ethnic, religious and social minorities as well.
society, silencing has forcefully been decried by feminist artists and scholars like Adrienne Rich, Tillie Olsen, Alicia Suskin Ostriker, or Rosemary Radford Ruether.

The biblical revisions of the corpus draw in a unique and original way on this long tradition, for they denounce women’s silencing in three forms: “dumb,” “garrulous,” and “deaf silencing.” This will be demonstrated in two phases. In the remainder of this chapter, the different types of silencing will first be delineated; in chapter 2, “Theory into Practice,” they will then be used as tools to successively analyse in the six novels the various ways in which the protagonist’s freedom of expression is seen to be drastically limited.

A. Dumb Silencing

The more conspicuous form, dumb silencing, takes place when women are excluded from discourse in various essential areas of society. It has given rise to the common denunciations that “WOMEN’S STORIES have not been told” or, to quote the renowned philosopher, literary critic and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, that woman is “that which is not represented, that which is unspoken, that which is left out of namings and ideologies.” Importantly, however, this acknowledgment of the exclusion of women in mainstream discourses should not be mistaken for evidence that “[w]omen are the absent,” for as Muers rightly suggests,

the very fact that a continued practice of silencing occurs means that the “silence” of the excluded does not disappear into “absence.” To be recognized as silent a person or group must be present. […] Defining silence as “absence” is part of the pretence by which silencing is maintained – the pretence that there is nothing there to be heard.

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27 These first two types reflect the categories suggested by Muers in Keeping God’s Silence, established on the basis of Eberhard Jüngel’s theory about the silencing of God in God as the Mystery of the World (Muers, p. 32).
28 Muers, p. 32.
30 Julia Kristeva, quoted in Yaeger, p. 84.
31 Elaine Marks, quoted in Yorke, p. 113.
32 Muers, p. 24. It must be pointed out, however, that one of the forms of silence that will be developed later, “spectral silence,” is actually based on an absence, which, unlike the absence described by Muers, does not perpetuate silencing, but contributes to the narrators’ self-definition in a crucial way.
Dumb silencing raises the question of the androcentric character attributed to Western societies, through which man and male values are made normative, while women and their experiences are ignored or rendered invisible:

the limited experience of one sex has been legitimated as the complete human experience, so that those who do not endorse it are marked as not fully human, as the deviants from humanity. [...] [W]omen’s experience is negated, declared to be nonda ta, decreed as nonexistent, as unreal.33

To quote Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who was instrumental in introducing the term “androcentrism” into theoretical debates with The Man-Made World, Or Our Androcentric Culture: “We have taken it for granted, since the dawn of civilization, that ‘mankind’ meant men-kind, and the world was theirs.”34 This androcentrism silencing women can be seen, and is depicted in the novels studied, as pervading many areas of society, including language, religion and the literary world.

Everyday language has indeed been branded as sexist by a large number of feminist linguists, who have therefore undertaken to reveal this bias, in, for instance, the use of male pronouns as generic terms, or of “man” and “mankind” to designate the whole of humanity, which, Cameron claims, “is able to persuade its speakers that women do not exist.”35 In religious studies, feminist readings of the Bible have railed against the androcentric bias of biblical narratives and traditional interpretations of the Bible that has caused women’s widespread exclusion from the Judeo-Christian history, but also, as Ruether contends, the silencing of “the questions about their absence. One is not even able to remark upon or notice women’s absence, since women’s silence and absence is the norm.”36 Here too, language has been given particular attention and its “gender-bias” – to use Irmtraud Fischer’s expression37 – pinpointed in, for instance, the use of male pronouns and “man” in theological works

35 Deborah Cameron, Feminism and Linguistic Theory (London: Macmillan, 1985), p. 84. Cameron also remarks that “[a] rhetoric of silencing, of appropriation and alienation, pervades much recent writing” (Cameron, p. 92). Marlis Hellinger, for instance, argues that “[i]n English, the use of masculine terms perpetuates the morphological and psychological invisibility of women” (Marlis Hellinger, “Effecting Social Change Through Group Action: Feminine Occupational Titles in Transition,” in Kramarae et al., p. 139).
37 “[D]ans le langage, le gender-bias ne met grammaticalement en évidence que les sujets et objets au masculin, il en résulte que la part féminine de la réalité historique est passée sous silence” (Fischer, Des femmes messagères, p. 23).
or, in the Pauline Letters, of the address “brothers,”38 which seemingly excludes females from the intended addressees of God’s Word. Women’s silencing through language in the Bible and the Judeo-Christian faith is further seen to be rooted in the largely predominant use of male images and pronouns to describe God, for, as Mary Daly claims, “when God is male, the male is god”39; the female, on the other hand, is rejected as inadequate embodiment of the divine. Jewish scholar Andrew Vogel Ettin describes this phenomenon as one of the “exiles that have been caused or reinforced by language,” through which believers are “separated from the feminine aspects of the divine in the world because those aspects have been suppressed in the verbal evocations of the deity, the ‘God-He’.”40

Beside language, plots and patterns in biblical narratives have also been perceived as promoting women’s silencing through a marked focus on male characters that relegates females to the margins or shadows of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Thus it has been noted that women are almost systematically omitted in biblical genealogies, and that nearly all the key figures in the Scriptures are male, reinforcing a conception of the Judeo-Christian deity as primarily “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Exodus 3:15).41 Feminist critic and author Alicia Suskin Ostriker, who argues that “the canonizing process throughout our history has rested, not accidentally but essentially, on the silencing of women,”42 also notices how everyone takes it for granted that [in the Bible] women must be rejected in order for the story of male maturity, male leadership, male heroism, to take place. The pattern has promulgated itself so successfully that it has become invisible.43

Women’s irrefutable discretion in the biblical narratives has moreover been accentuated by the later tradition, for as Fischer states at the beginning of her monograph on the first women of the Bible:

38 In the New Revised Standard Version, the word “brothers” has systematically been replaced by “brothers and sisters,” “friends” or “people” to suggest a more neutral reading of Paul’s Letters.
39 Glenn, p. 25.
42 Ostriker, Feminist Revision, p. 31.
43 Ostriker, Feminist Revision, p. 49.
N’ont de pertinence théologique que les textes sur des hommes. On en veut pour preuve non seulement les grandes esquisses des théologies de l’Ancien Testament mais aussi les monographies scientifiques et les programmes de cours de tant de professeurs. Ainsi, tout naturellement, on considère comme importants pour une exégèse théologique les textes suivants: la “vocation d’Abraham” (Gn 12, 1ss), sa foi qui lui est comptée pour justice (Genèse 15), l’alliance de Dieu avec lui (Genèse 17), le sacrifice d’Abraham (Genèse 22); puis, dans le cycle de Jacob, l’apparition de Dieu à Bet-El (Genèse 28) et la lutte de Jacob au Yabboq (Genèse 32). Donc rien que des histoires où, dans le meilleur des cas, les femmes sont sous-entendues.44

This acknowledgment can be applied, not only to the rest of the Old Testament, but also to the New Testament.

In the literary field, Tillie Olsen’s groundbreaking Silences (1978) remains the reference in terms of publications on the dumb silencing of mainly – though not exclusively – female authors or, as Olsen calls it, “the unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being, but cannot.”45 Based on famous and less famous authors’ experiences and testimonies, it bears witness to all the women writers of the past who were not published, and all those books that were “aborted, deferred, denied,”46 by expounding the many social, economic and family circumstances that silence authors: restricted access to education; the wife and mother’s responsibility to care for her family’s well-being and financial survival, which drastically reduces or even forbids the time and concentration creation demands; censorship from the literary establishment, or even self-censorship:

How much it takes to become a writer. […] [H]ow much conviction as to the importance of what one has to say, one’s right to say it. And the will, the measureless store of belief in oneself. […] Difficult for any male not born into a class that breeds such confidence. Almost impossible for a girl, a woman.47

44 Fischer, Des femmes aux prises avec Dieu, pp. 18-19.
46 Olsen, p. 26. Silences is dedicated to “our silenced people, century after century their beings consumed in the hard, everyday essential work of maintaining human life. Their art, which still they made – as their other contributions – anonymous; refused respect, recognition; lost. […] For those of us […] by our achievement bearing witness to what was (and still is) being lost, silenced.” Olsen claims later in the book that there is “[o]ne woman writer of achievement for every twelve men writers so ranked” (Olsen, p. 45).
47 Olsen, p. 46.
B. Garrulous Silencing

The second form, *garrulous silencing*, is, according to Muers, even more difficult to challenge. It occurs when “women do appear in […] discourse – as mute objects of inquiry.” Muers further distinguishes between two types of garrulous silencing. The first refers to the specific construction of women as silent in discourses confining them to the domestic sphere – and therefore excluding them from active communicative participation in the public sphere – but also openly urging them to abstain from speaking, or, I would add, deriding their verbal skills. Le Breton perfectly illustrates this last point. After remarking how, in many societies, women are not allowed the same latitude of expression, he claims that

> [l]e silence a un sexe privilégié, même si nul n’en possède le privilège ou le drame. De façon troublante nombre de références traditionnelles insistent sur le bavardage des femmes, leur insignifiance de propos, leur abus du langage. Même quand la femme ne dit rien, elle dit manifestement encore trop. Posture paradoxaïle qui fait de la langue le monopole d’un sexe.

Glenn, for instance, remarks how “John Bunyan told wives to ‘take heed of an idle, talking or brangling tongue’ and to be silent in the presence of their husbands.” Cameron, in *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*, also confirms Le Breton’s argument, listing a series of everyday terms which she claims belittle the significance of verbal interactions between women – “girls’ talk, gossip, chitchat, mothers’ meeting” – and showing, through references to studies on women’s style, that “[w]hatever style a culture deems appropriate to the public arena, women are said to be less skilled at using; whatever style is considered natural in women is deemed unsuitable for rhetorical use.”

The Scriptures have also been accused of garrulously silencing women, for as biblical scholar Hugh Pyper notes, “[n]owhere is the male claim to power based on the silence of women which lies at the heart of Judaeo-Christian civilization made more manifest than in its canonical texts.” If one finds in the Deuterocanonical Book of Ecclesiasticus the problematic verse “[a] silent wife is a gift from the Lord, and

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48 Muers, p. 33.
49 Le Breton, pp. 32 and 35.
50 Glenn, p. 10.
51 Cameron, p. 155.
52 Cameron, p. 155.
nothing is so precious as her self-discipline” (Sirach 26:14), the two passages that
have most often been castigated in feminist readings of the Bible are, on the other
hand, both attributed to Paul, and have given rise to many diverging interpretations as
to the precise import of the intended restrictions54:

As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not
permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they
desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak
in church. (1 Corinthians 14:34-35)

Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have
authority over a man; she is to keep silent. (1 Timothy 2:11-12)

As M.M. Mitchell points out, these two passages “ha[ve] for most of Christian history
been used to deny women participation and leadership in the Christian community.”55

In Women and the Word, Jeannette King adequately sums up the feminist
grievance against the Bible and the Judeo-Christian tradition: “Since the Word
represents knowledge and power, women have been encouraged to be wordless.”56

Thus Muers, who remarks that women have repeatedly been given the role of the
submissive hearer in all forms of Judeo-Christian discourses,57 shows in “The Mute

54 Many scholars have underlined how complex and delicate the interpretation of these verses is. As
D.E. Garland explains about 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, “[t]his text is validated by some as establishing
the universal norm for women’s role in public worship and vilified by others as deplorably oppressive.
It seems to say, ‘If you want peace rather than disorder in the assembly, do not permit women to
speak.’ It also seems to prohibit women from actively trying to learn in the assembly. […] Does Paul
enjoin absolute silence on all women at all times in the churches, or does this directive apply only to a
particular circumstance?” (D.E. Garland, I Corinthians [Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New
Testament] [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003], pp. 664-665). Garland personally contends that 1
Corinthians 14:34-35 does not enjoin women’s silence permanently and absolutely, but reflects the
historical context in which it was written and applies specifically to the husband-wife relationship:
“Paul disallows speech in the assembly that would suggest that a wife is being insubordinate toward her
husband, whether it is an interruption or a challenge to a prophetic utterance. The delicate relationship
between husband and wife is imperilled by the wife’s public questioning, correcting, or challenging.
[…] Paul’s instructions are conditioned by the social realities of his age and a desire to prevent a
serious breach in decorum. The negative effect that wives publicly interrupting or contradicting their
husbands might have on outsiders (let alone the bruising it would cause to sensitive male egos) could
not be far from his mind” (Garland, pp. 671 and 673). Such a view is also supported by A.C. Thiselton
(The First Epistle to the Corinthians. A Commentary on the Greek Text [Grand Rapids/Cambridge:
however, reject such interpretations restricting the scope of Paul’s words to a specific time and place.
G.W. Knight III, for instance, in his commentary on 1 Timothy 2:11-12, argues that Paul emphasises
how “a woman may not teach in the church, or teach a man” and that his precise choice of words marks
his willingnessness to give “universal and authoritative instruction or exhortation” (G.W. Knight III, The
Company, 1992], pp. 140 and 142).

55 M.M. Mitchell, “1 Cor. 14:33B-36: Women Commanded to Be ‘Silent’ in the Assemblies,” in

56 Jeannette King, p. 28.

57 Muers, p. 112.
Cannot Keep Silent” how theologians like Karl Barth and Hans Urs Van Balthasar objectify woman by defining her as the embodiment of the silence necessary for God’s word to be heard by mankind. More than any other biblical woman, the Virgin Mary has been either celebrated or decried as the perfect embodiment of this prescribed female wordlessness, as the silent, passive vessel of God’s Promise.

The second form that garrulous silencing can take designates the plethora of male writing about “Woman” through, and in which, women have been defined as “the question” or “the issue,” being thereby objectified rather than envisaged as subjects. Linda Alcoff sets out the issue as follows:

Man has said that woman can be defined, delineated, captured—understood, explained, and diagnosed—to a level of determination never accorded to man himself. [...] Whether she is construed as essentially immoral and irrational (à la Schopenhauer) or essentially kind and benevolent (à la Kant), she is always construed as an essential something inevitably accessible to direct intuited apprehension by males. [...] The place of free-willed subject [...] is reserved exclusively for men.

Such is precisely the complaint voiced against the Bible by Jeannette King, in Women and the Word:

Through Scripture, [...] men have constructed not only divinities, but women. [...] Woman [...] has been a text to be written and interpreted by man. In turn, women are induced by education, by ideological structures, by language itself, to internalize the terms in which they are named and accept it in silence as truth. In this lies the basis of their oppression.

Like Judeo-Christian discourses, the literary tradition has also contributed to women’s garrulous silencing. This participation of literature in “the conspiracy of silence, [and] neglect, as to the nature of women’s lives,” to quote Olsen, is skilfully illustrated by Susan Gubar in “‘The Blank Page’ and the Issues of Female Creativity.” In this article, the literary scholar indeed shows how, in literature, man has traditionally been identified as the creator and woman as his creation “who, like Pygmalion’s ivory girl, has no name or identity or voice of her own.”

59 Muers, p. 35.
61 Jeannette King, p. 29.
62 Olsen, p. 203.
C. Deaf Silencing

I wish to distinguish a third type, deaf silencing, which takes place when women do manage to acquire the status of producer of their own discourse, but fail to be heard by their interlocutor. Le Breton in Du silence, evokes this scenario:

Le silence est lié aussi à l’inanité du propos d’un individu qui ne rencontre nul interlocuteur, discrédité déjà à sa source et qui n’a d’autre choix à la fin que de se taire à cause de l’indifférence dont il est l’objet.64

This form of silencing has often been overlooked, for few scholars have envisaged both sides of the communicative situation, that is, not only “who speaks?,” but also “who listens?” Even Muers, whose solution to the silencing of both God and women is precisely rooted in this receptive dimension which she strongly emphasises, does not explicitly develop this third aspect of silencing, but concentrates on situations where listening is, precisely, not refused.65 In the literary world, the widespread exclusion of female writers from anthologies, textbooks, university reading lists, critical works and nominations for prizes, which Olsen still had to unveil and denounce with the support of a great many eloquent statistics at the beginning of the 1970s, can be considered as a form of deaf silencing that prevented women authors from finding their readership and therefore relegated them to oblivion.

64 Le Breton, p. 104.
65 If Muers formulates the questions in terms of “who hears?” and “who is heard?,” I will, for my part, rather use the verb “listen,” which better conveys the active performance of paying attention to the interlocutor’s discourse, as opposed to the mere passive hearing of sounds and words.
Chapter 2
Theory into Practice: So Many Forms of Silencing to Denounce

I. The Demoted, Repressed Feminine: Roberts’s The Wild Girl

_The Wild Girl_ subversively reworks the life of Mary Magdalene, a complex, ambivalent figure that has met a rich theological, critical and literary destiny throughout the centuries – serving by turns feminist or misogynist interests. It challenges not only the most popular, misogynistic representations of the biblical character, but also the mainstream Judeo-Christian conceptions of women’s right of access to the divine and the promulgation of God’s words, which are perceived as silencing the female sex.

Although this is nowadays largely unacknowledged, an attentive reading of the New Testament reveals hints of the positive, even major role this female figure must have played in nascent Christianity. As Régis Burnet points out, the mere presence of her name in all four canonical Gospels, usually sparing with mentions of women, already indicates a significant position in early Christian circles.1 Mary of Magdala moreover epitomises the close, faithful disciple, standing near the cross when the male disciples seem to be absent,2 attending Jesus’ entombment, and returning to embalm the corpse. Most significant, however, are both her presence among the first

2 There are no mentions of the male disciples in Matthew 27:55-56 and Mark 15:40-41. John 19:25 only indicates that “the disciple whom [Jesus] loved” – i.e. John – is present near Jesus’ mother and the other women. Only Luke 23:49 seems to include the male disciples, and indicates that “all [Jesus’] acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee,” watch Jesus’ crucifixion.
witnesses to Jesus’ rising from the dead – in the Gospel of John, she is even granted an individual resurrection appearance – and the instruction she receives in the Matthean, Markan and Johannine Gospels to go and tell the news of Jesus’ resurrection to the other disciples. These two elements, as Ann Graham Brock emphasises, “had profound significance for one’s status as an “apostle.”” Moreover, in some early Christian circles, Mary Magdalene was so highly respected that she even earned the honorific title of “apostle of the apostles” which, according to the bishop of Rome Hippolytus (c. 170 - c. 236), the “risen Christ himself gave her.”

If discreet signs of high regard towards Mary Magdalene can be detected in the New Testament and early Christian texts, one also finds, however, “traces of a choice to reduce the importance of her role,” or, in other words, of both her dumb and garrulous silencing, for although she is elected as first witness to the event that constitutes the foundation of the Christian faith, and although her testimony is crucial, in the canonical Gospels, she is almost completely silent and accorded little recognition compared to her male peers. In other texts, her role “either as an apostle or as an eyewitness of the resurrection is often altered, weakened, or eradicated from the narrative altogether.” In 1 Corinthians 15:5, for instance, Paul states that the risen Jesus first “appeared to Cephas [i.e. Peter], then to the twelve,” never referring to his appearance to Mary Magdalene. The biblical woman therefore seems to be given a lesser and lower place than the one she assumed in Jesus’ circle.

Mary of Magdala’s demotion has further been reinforced by her assimilation, started in the 6th century, with two other biblical figures: Mary of Bethany, the sister


4 Brock, p. 161.


6 Brock, pp. 140-141 and 163. Burnet formulates a similar claim in *Marie-Madeleine: de la pécheresse repentie à l’épouse de Jésus*, when he writes that “le fait reste incontestable: les évangiles accordant aux femmes une place moindre que celle qu’elles semblent avoir occupé dans l’entourage de Jésus” (Burnet, pp. 42-43).

7 Burnet, pp. 42-43.

of Martha and Lazarus,\(^9\) and, most momentously, the anonymous female with an alabaster jar – described as “sinner” by Luke (7:37) – who anoints Jesus.\(^10\) Through this conflation, Mary Magdalene has become the second Eve, “the prototype […] of the sinful sexual woman, […] the sinner who repents.”\(^11\) Although untenable from an exegetical perspective, this composite figure has had an enormous, lasting impact on the image of Mary Magdalene, as Antti Marjanen points out:

> Only in our century have Catholic interpreters begun to question more widely the identification of Mary Magdalene with any of the anointers. The long history of interpretation during which Mary Magdalene has primarily been seen in light of the anointers […] has nevertheless left its traces on the picture drawn of her even in modern times. Even if scholars nowadays very seldom see Mary Magdalene in Luke 7, in more popular – both religious and secular – interpretations of the New Testament texts she is frequently considered to be a penitent woman with a notorious past.\(^12\)

It is also precisely this compound Mary Magdalene, the most widespread, yet also most challenging representation of the first-century woman, that *The Wild Girl* addresses in order to “dissect a myth” (*WG*, p. 9), as Roberts expresses it, accused of silencing not only Mary Magdalene, but also, through her, the whole of womankind and its divine counterpart. Roberts’s novel presents an alternative, egalitarian version of Christianity, on the basis of the few implicit traces of a pivotal Mary Magdalene in the mainstream tradition, and with the help of fringe Christian sources that further that favourable image.

As Roberts acknowledges in her author’s note, *The Wild Girl* is rooted in ancient Gnostic writings such as the Nag Hammadi *Gospel of Thomas* and *The Gospel of Philip*, discovered in 1945, and *The Gospel of Mary*, from the Berlin Codex, found in Cairo in 1896.\(^13\) In these texts, Mary Magdalene appears as a prominent disciple who attracts male jealousy and opposition because of her privileged relationship with Jesus, signalled in *The Gospel of Philip* by her description as Jesus’ “companion” – which indicates spiritual and, possibly, carnal intimacy – and by the special revelations she receives from the Saviour and subsequently discloses to the other disciples in *The Gospel of Mary*.

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\(^10\) See Matthew 26:7-13, Mark 14:3-9 and Luke 7:37-50 for the references to the anonymous anointer.

\(^11\) Jeannette King, p. 115.

\(^12\) Marjanen, pp. 2-3.

\(^13\) For more information on this topic, see Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980 [1979]).
The major influence of these non-canonical sources is already perceptible in the incipit of *The Wild Girl*, which sets the tone of the novel by clearly indicating that Roberts’s Mary Magdalene will not be confined to her orthodox portrayal:

Dearly beloved sisters and brothers in Jesus Christ, here begins the book of the testimony of Mary Magdalene. She who writes it does so at the command of the Saviour himself and of Mary his blessed mother, for the greater glory of God and for the edification of the disciples who shall come after her. She wishes you to know that everything she sets down here is the truth, as she experienced it and as she remembers it. She has been, and she is, a witness to that truth. (*WG*, p. 11)

The heroine has not only received an apostolic mandate from Jesus to spread revelations vicariously experienced through the Saviour, but has also directly and repeatedly encountered the divine, which elevates her to the rank of powerful prophet: “The task I have been given is to set down my own experience of revelation, to bear witness to the manner in which I received God, and received the truths that Jesus spoke” (*WG*, p. 70). The analysis will show how, in *The Wild Girl*, Jesus shares with Mary the unique divine aura that the Christian tradition attributes to Christ, the relationship between the two characters being based on mutual, spiritual and fleshly instruction into God’s mystery, as Roberts’s Jesus readily acknowledges: “Mary is learning from me and I from her” (*WG*, p. 62).

Constantly superimposing Mary’s voice on that of orthodoxy, *The Wild Girl* exhibits a highly polyphonic quality that can be regarded as an example of the feminist critique of the canonizing process, which suppressed alternative (female) voices. The novel moreover specifically problematises how the heroine’s testimony is under the permanent risk of being silenced:

Others among the disciples besides myself, I know, have chosen to write a record and an interpretation of the life of Jesus. I do not want to repeat their words. In any case, I cannot. […] I have been commanded to write down the truth as I, who am not Simon Peter or John or any of the other male disciples, saw it, and 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. That is my belief and my prayer. I think there may be many who will not believe that Jesus chose me, a prostitute, as one of the instruments of his truth. […] I pray that readers of this account will accept that […] I am telling the truth, my truth, as fairly as I can. (*WG*, pp. 69-70)

This extract foregrounds the issue of Mary Magdalene’s association with sexual sin which, as Ruether argues, “was developed in orthodox [Western] Christianity primarily to displace the apostolic authority claimed for women through her name.”

Ruether’s point is most explicitly depicted, in *The Wild Girl*, through the ferocious

14 R.R. Ruether, quoted in Brock, p. 169.
opposition Mary meets in the person of Simon Peter, which is inspired by the struggle for authority between the two disciples related at length in the Gnostic gospels and perceptible in the New Testament, as Ann Graham Brock demonstrates in *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle. The Struggle for Authority*.\(^\text{15}\) Although Roberts’s Jesus repeatedly indicates that he considers both sexes able “to carry God” (*WG*, p. 70) inside themselves and “name[s] us all ministers of his Word, men and women alike” (*WG*, p. 70), the male disciple, who epitomises traditional patriarchal interpretations of the word of God in *The Wild Girl*, denies the validity of the woman’s revelations, referring to her controversial past in an attempt to discredit the female prophet, and associating her with witchcraft, a technique which, Jacqueline Kelen argues, has often been used by male religious authorities throughout the history of the Christian church to silence unorthodox, rebellious female voices, including Mary Magdalene’s:

Les siècles passent, […] et les femmes qui osent prétendre à une quelconque connaissance spirituelle sont aussitôt châtées ou bâillonnées, considérées comme folles ou bien sorcières. Marie-Madeleine est de celles-là. […] Madeleine fait pénitence et se tait: on sait bien que le repentir, l’expiation sont sans voix. Les évangélistes peuvent s’en féliciter: rien n’a filtré de ce que cette femme savait, sentait, prophétisait.\(^\text{16}\)

Simon Peter, moreover, rejects female ministry as a whole, voicing what the narrator calls the “old denunciation we had lived with all our lives so far, and which had constrained us so bitterly, until we had met Jesus. You are unclean. You may not be priests. […] There is a hurt which women carry inside them from birth” (*WG*, p. 59). This accusation of female impurity goes back to the doctrine of the original sin and is forcefully reaffirmed in the construct of Mary Magdalene as second Eve, which is therefore decried by feminists like Norris as “a powerful weapon in the Church’s drive to discredit and suppress female sexuality.”\(^\text{17}\) The case study of *The Wild Girl* will demonstrate how Mary Magdalene’s finding of her own voice is inextricably linked with the question of the revalorisation of the female body and sexuality, regarded as debased in the mainstream Judeo-Christian tradition.

\(^{15}\) Brock, p. 163. According to Brock, texts seeking to push Peter forward and legitimize his authority – the Gospel of Luke, for instance – systematically undermine Mary Magdalene’s position. She remarks, for instance, how Luke is the only Evangelist who claims that Mary Magdalene was possessed by seven demons, who does not name the women at the cross or mention the risen Jesus’ appearance to the female disciple.

\(^{16}\) Jacqueline Kelen, “La passante considérable,” in Alain Montandon (Ed.), *Marie-Madeleine: Figure mythique dans les littératures et les arts* (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 1999), pp. 13-14.

\(^{17}\) Norris, pp. 256-257.
Such a revaluation, moreover, necessarily entails, in Roberts’s novel, a rehabilitation of the – dumbly – silenced divine feminine. As Mary realises in one of her prophetic visions: “We have cut our God in two, and we have cast the female part out into the desert and have called it the devil, and we have tried to bind it and to forget it and to seal it in the abyss” (WG, p. 175). This revelation echoes the popular feminist tenet that the Judeo-Christian faith rests on the supplanting and forcing into oblivion of the multifaceted goddess worshipped in ancient polytheist societies “before the advent of monotheism and the victory of the Father.”

To quote Ostriker, the imperfectly repressed memory of the Great Mother’s murder is among the most profound sources of energy within Judaism, and perhaps Christianity as well. [...] Is it possible that the whole story of canonicity, the whole story of authority in our culture, is intimately bound up with the repressed Mother, shimmering and struggling at the liminal threshold of consciousness, against whom the Father must anxiously defend himself? So it appears to me.

So it is also revealed to Mary Magdalene, whose prophetic vocation appears at a young age, through furtive glimpses of the divine that she catches, without yet grasping them, during solitary moments of star-gazing on the house roof. This calling, however, is refused to her as soon as she reaches adulthood. As a woman, Mary Magdalene is indeed expected to show submission to both religious and familial male authorities who deem her unworthy of unmediated religious education, let alone direct experience of the divine, and to adopt a corresponding attitude of deference and self-effacement which estranges her from her “secret God, the one I knew at night” (WG, p. 13):

> When my menses arrived and I became a woman in my family’s eyes, these visions receded. No more sleeping on the roof. My eyes had to be kept lowered. My brother Lazarus was encouraged to study the ancient books of our religion, but not I. I learned about our faith through the words of men. God was mediated to me, as to my older sister Martha, through the words of my father and brother in the confines of our home, and, outside, through the authority of our village priests and our rulers. (WG, pp. 12-13)

> The heroine unequivocally resents this garrulous silencing and “sulk[s] under this triple yoke” (WG, p. 13). When divinely-inspired songs spontaneously start rising in her, replacing the forbidden nightly visions, the young woman becomes more and more bewildered by the contradictory messages she receives: on the one hand, the patriarchal, misogynist conceptions that male authorities try to inculcate in her, and, on the other hand, her inner cognizance. She admits: “I knew that my brother Lazarus

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18 Ostriker, Feminist Revision, p. 36.
19 Ostriker, Feminist Revision, pp. 49-50.
thanked the Most High daily that he had not been born a woman, and was confused at the unnameable power I felt grow in me” \(WG\), pp. 13-14).

Mary does not rise up against her silencing for many years, until her mother’s death sparks off her rebellion: “I left home when I was fifteen. I was a runaway. Possessed. […] I fled, inhabited by a demon or a god, I don’t know which. […] That was my mourning for my mother: to run, wild and angry” \(WG\), p. 14). As the detailed analysis of the novel will show in the second part of this thesis, this premature death of the maternal figure before Mary Magdalene has, or rather takes, the opportunity to connect with her, constitutes a crucial emotional deprivation. It will subsequently prove to be a determining impediment that she will need to address before she can truly receive God.

The bereaved young woman flees a male rule that no mother can ease anymore, and the life that it has mapped out for her, asserting for the first time her tenacious will:

I believed, with all the foolishness of wilful ignorance, that my strong fleet legs carried me towards freedom and away from the prospect of betrothal and marriage, which I feared greatly, towards a life I could construct myself and call my own. \(WG\), p. 14)

If early in life she refuses the traditional domestic functions attributed to women, which she perceives as oppressive, she also quickly and brutally realizes that she cannot escape so easily from the authority of men when merchants she meets on the road rape her, teaching her that “[t]here [is] only one sort of woman […] who roamed about boldly and alone. I understood them to mean: wild beast, in need of taming” \(WG\), p. 15). This denunciation of garrulously silencing roles, according to which women can only be submissive wives-mothers or wild whores, goes together in The Wild Girl with a radical challenging of the underlying dualistic oppositions that structure Western thought and that Cixous famously exposed, in the wake of the French deconstructionist Jacques Derrida:

\[
\text{Activité/passivité,}
\text{Soleil/Lune,}
\text{Culture/Nature,}
\text{Jour/Nuit,}
\text{Père/Mère,}
\text{Tête/sentiment,}
\text{Intelligible/sensible,}
\text{Logos/Pathos.}
\]
\[
\text{[...]
\text{Homme}
\text{Femme}
\]}

51
The heroine refuses to be confined only to the part of the passive female victim, as her interpretation of the rape episode already indicates:

I was brutalized but I was freed: none of the honourable men at home would ever take me to wife now. At Caesarea we took ship. I paid with my body, the only coin I had. […] The merchants laughed and joked as they used me, telling me how, once we arrived, they would sell me to one of the brothels near the harbour for the sailors to sport with. I have used you too, I thought: to bring me thus far. (WG, p. 15)

Deliberately cloaking herself in her status of outcast, she uses the power and freedom this position lends her and practises, as she trenchantly formulates it, “the art of getting a man to part with his money” (WG, p. 28) to survive. Setting the tone of the novel, this introduction into Mary Magdalene’s strong, rebellious voice reveals how much Roberts’s narrator will be driven by a determination to subvert dualisms and labels silencing her yearnings for wholeness and independence. Her personal maturation will moreover be indissociable from her initiation into the divine that addresses her for, as she later claims, “I accept no guide other than my own conscience, and the voices that speak to me, which I accept as the word of God” (WG, p. 133). Effectively launching this Bildung is her meeting with Jesus, with which she will experience and embody a sacred that transcends traditional dichotomies such as Father/Mother, Virgin/Whore, Spiritual/Material, and Light/Darkness.

II. Amputated Subjecthood: Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale

Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale is the story of Offred, a Handmaid – or forced surrogate mother – in the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian society that systematically legitimises the radical policies it has found to cope with problems such as dropping birth rate or widespread pornography, through distorted interpretations of the Scriptures. As the epigraph from Genesis 30 shows, the concept of Handmaid, in this dystopian world, is rooted in the scriptural story of Jacob and his wives, in which

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Rachel, the sterile matriarch, gives her handmaid Bilhah to Jacob so that she can bear a child in her stead, as was lawful in ancient Israelite societies.

And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die.

And Jacob’s anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, Am I in God’s stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?

And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her.

– Genesis, 30:1-3

In the Bible, Bilhah is given no voice, and is treated as a mere object given to Jacob for reproductive purposes. As Catherine Chalier formulates it,

Bilha […] ne joue d’autre rôle que celui de ‘collaborer’ à la naissance des tribus d’Israël » [sic], sans qu’une interrogation sur ses sentiments soit de mise, sans qu’elle soit convoquée à la parole, jugée digne de la parité d’un dialogue. Pure obéissance et simple ‘reproductrice,’ elle se confond avec la toute passivité et la toute soumission de qui, privé de l’élémentaire droit au langage, révée à une fonction et à un assignation — ici la maternité —, reste dans les marges d’une humanité porteuse et soucieuse de reconnaissance et de respect.22

In the light of its biblical epigraph, Atwood’s novel can be interpreted as a rewriting of Bilhah’s destiny where the handmaid, defying the authority, strives to give herself a voice. Offred’s task, however, proves to be extremely perilous, the Gileadean society being precisely established on the dumb and garrulous silencing of women – especially Handmaids – implemented through a complex blend of severe infringement of their freedom of expression, infantilisation and dehumanisation.

As Offred remembers in one of her numerous flashbacks, the fundamentalist republic of Gilead, which was set up through a violent coup d’état, stripped women overnight of all their rights and freedoms, freezing their bank accounts, forbidding them to hold property or to work, censoring newspapers and establishing roadblocks to prevent them from running away. Caught unawares and destabilised by these sudden, radical measures and the heavy atmosphere they created, the unnerved female population silenced itself, not daring to talk anymore in the streets and being “careful to exchange nothing more than the ordinary greetings. Nobody wanted to be reported, for disloyalty” (HT, p. 189). The narrator, who was back then living with her young daughter and husband Luke, started staying at home and doing “more housework, more baking” (HT, p. 189), thereby unwittingly turning into the perfect “Angel in the

House” and playing the government’s game of garrulous silencing. Gilead’s early policies even succeeded in dividing couples to better rule, as Offred, who could not easily accept becoming dependent on her husband, began suspecting him of enjoying the situation. She however kept silent, never daring to ask him the obsessive question, as she confesses in one of her reveries: “So Luke: what I want to ask you now, what I need to know is, Was I right? Because we never talked about it. By the time I could have done that, I was afraid to. I couldn’t afford to lose you” (HT, p. 192).

Offred articulates the frustration and humiliation she then felt at this drastic limitation of her liberty in physical terms that foreshadow the infantilisation and dehumanisation she will be subjected to: “I still felt numbed. I could hardly even feel [Luke’s] hands on me. [...] I felt shrunk, so that when he put his arms around me, gathering me up, I was small as a doll” (HT, p. 191). The narrator indeed uses the same plaything imagery when describing her submissive attitude during the first meeting with the Wife of the Commander – or high-ranking government official – she has been assigned to: “They used to have dolls, for little girls, that would talk if you pulled a string at the back; I thought I was sounding like that, voice of a monotone, voice of a doll. She probably longed to slap my face. They can hit us” (HT, p. 26).

Even more revealing is Offred’s comparison of her state of mind in the early days of Gilead to the cutting off of her feet, an image which refers to what Hite identifies as a tenet in definitions of femininity in our Western societies: “amputation as the defining feature of female existence: getting one thing always involves giving up another.” Found in Andersen’s The Little Mermaid, where the heroine has to sacrifice her voice in exchange for legs in order to seduce the human prince she loves, or in the 1948 film The Red Shoes – inspired by another of Andersen’s tales of the same name – in which a ballerina torn between her career and her need for love eventually commits suicide, this motif of feminine sacrifice is revisited “with a vengeance” in The Handmaid’s Tale. Indeed, unlike her folkloric and filmic predecessors, Offred will be forced to give up both her love – her husband Luke being taken away from her after a failed joint escape attempt – and her voice. Strikingly, the

24 In Andersen’s story, a young girl who is so obsessed by her pair of beautiful red shoes that she forgets to pay attention at church, is punished for her vanity by being forced to dance continually. In a desperate attempt to end her torment, she has an executioner cut off her feet.
heroine will use the same image of physical mutilation to describe the few illicit conversations exchanged through the headgear of her uniform with her fellow Handmaid during their prescribed walks:

> we continue on our way, heading as usual for some open space we can cross, so we can talk. If you can call it talking, these clipped whispers, projected through the funnels of our white wings. It’s more like a telegram, a verbal semaphore. Amputated speech. (*HT*, p. 211)

The Handmaids are indeed not allowed to exchange more than a few officially sanctioned formulas between themselves, which prevents them from striking up relationships and thus becoming unique individuals with histories of their own.

When it established the function of Handmaid, recruiting by force all fertile unmarried or – like Offred – remarried women, the Gileadean authority immediately set out to obliterate their past, thereby depriving them of their roots, the very source of their individuality. Separated from their families and sent to the Rachel and Leah Centre to be trained in their new role, the Handmaids are brainwashed into forgetting all aspects of their former lives. Forbidden to read or write, they are robbed of an essential means of inscribing themselves into history, of projecting themselves either backward or forward in time, of reconnecting with salutary signs from the past or leaving such traces for a possible better future beyond Gilead. They are stuck in a present of oblivion and imposed mutism from which Offred strives to escape through her narrative, her best weapon of resistance and rebellion in such “reduced circumstances” (*HT*, p. 115), as the analysis will amply demonstrate.

Among those key techniques used by the fundamentalist regime to deny Handmaids their story and identity is the complete and brutal break of the bond between mother and child. Having not seen her young daughter since the day she and Luke tried to run away with her, Offred assumes she has been given to a rich childless couple. The narrator is particularly affected by this separation, and keeps wondering if her child still remembers her or if the government has already succeeded in erasing her from her memory: “Do I exist for her? Am I a picture somewhere, in the dark at the back of her mind? They must have told her I was dead” (*HT*, p. 74). When Serena, the Commander’s Wife, cruelly teases Offred with a recent picture of her daughter, the Handmaid suddenly realises the extent of their dumb silencing, i.e. how easily she and her peers have been wiped off their relatives’ minds and Gilead’s reality in general:
They still make [...] cameras. [...] And there will be family albums, too, with all the children in them; no Handmaids though. From the point of view of future history, this kind, we’ll be invisible. [...] Time has not stood still. It has washed over me, washed me away. [...] I have been obliterated for her. I am only a shadow now, far back behind the glib shiny surface of this photograph. A shadow of a shadow, as dead mothers become. You can see it in her eyes: I am not there. [...] I can’t bear it, to have been erased like that. (HT, p. 240)

Thinking of how lonely and dejected she feels since “[t]here’s nobody here I can love, all the people I could love are dead or elsewhere” (WG, p. 113), Offred ironically puns on the two meanings of the word “miss,” which beautifully conveys both her own feelings of loss, and how she has disappeared from her closest relatives’ lives: “They might as well be nowhere, as I am for them. I too am a missing person” (WG, p. 113).

Gilead evidently wishes to render Handmaids as helpless as infants, and treats them accordingly, making them sleep, during their training, in huge semi-lit dormitories patrolled by older women called Aunts, filled with old army beds spread with “flannelette sheets, like children’s” and “set up in rows, with spaces between so we could not talk” (HT, p. 13). Once assigned to a family, the surrogate mothers are under the authority of patronising Commanders and Wives, confined for the major part of the day to a bedroom devoid of any lock or object with which they could hurt themselves, and wholly dependent on servants called Marthas – in reference to Mary of Bethany’s sister, the epitome of the housewife – for food, baths or any insignificant treat they can beg from them or the Wives. Their days, weeks and months are organised around routine tasks planned for them by the authorities, like the shopping trips and other prescribed outings in pairs, during which, as Offred formulates it, the Handmaids look like “a private girls’ school that went for a walk and stayed out too long” (HT, p. 224).

In its crusade to annihilate the Handmaids’ subjecthood, the totalitarian regime treats the women like animals belonging to the male authorities. Not only are they guarded by Aunts wearing cattle prods, but they are also tattooed on the ankle with what Offred calls “a cattle-brand” (HT, p. 266) highly reminiscent of the numbers marked on the prisoners’ arms in Nazi concentration camps: “Four digits and an eye, a passport in reverse. It’s supposed to guarantee that I will never be able to fade, finally, into another landscape. I am too important, too scarce, for that” (HT, p. 75). If, as the narrator ironically remarks, she is thereby branded as “a national resource” (HT, p. 75), she also belongs, more specifically, to her Commander. The Handmaids, when they are allocated to a family, are given a new name which unequivocally marks them
as the property of their Commander – Of-Fred, Of-Glen, Of-Warren, etc – and are forbidden to remember their former identity.

The effacement of the Handmaids’ individuality and subjecthood is further enforced on them through the uniform that reduces them to a “shape, red with white wings around the face, […] a nondescript woman in red” (*HT*, p. 28). Both its excessively plain, unflattering cut and its hue, “the colour of blood” (*HT*, p. 18), are meant to emphasise how, like the biblical Bilhah, Offred and her peers are defined in the Gileadean society exclusively by their reproductive function:

We are for breeding purposes: we aren’t concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary: everything possible has been done to remove us from that category. There is supposed to be nothing entertaining about us. […] We are two-legged wombs, that’s all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices. (*HT*, p. 146)

Gilead’s silencing indoctrination has already worked its way through the narrator’s mind, as she realises with shock during one of her monthly check-ups, when she catches herself sincerely confessing to the doctor “deal[ing] with a torso only” (*HT*, p. 70) that she wants a child. Quoting Rachel’s famous cry of despair in Genesis 30:1, she reflects on the precariousness of her situation: “Give me children, or else I die. There’s more than one meaning to it” (*HT*, p. 71). This plea indeed not only conveys a hopeless maternity wish, but also refers, in a very literal sense, to the Sword of Damocles hanging above Offred’s head, for if the Handmaid does not provide her Commander with a child, she will be sent to a certain death in the so-called Colonies, where dissidents and Handmaids who failed to fulfil their duty are condemned to clean up highly toxic waste. Each month, she dreads the coming of the blood that will mark her once more as a “failure” (*HT*, p. 83) in the eyes of the Commander’s family and the government, but also in her own, for, as she admits, “the expectations of others […] have become my own” (*HT*, p. 83), completely altering her relationship with this body “that determines me so completely” (*HT*, p. 73):

I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will. I could use it to run, push buttons, of one sort or another, make things happen. There were limits but my body was nevertheless lithe, single, solid, one with me.

Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I’m a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am. (*HT*, pp. 83-84)

The government’s dehumanising techniques have succeeded in making Offred see herself, in moments of discouragement like the one preceding the impregnation Ceremony with the Commander and his Wife, not as a human being with a will of her
own, but as a vicious mechanism centred around a womb that inexorably carries on its own course, ticking away and bringing the Handmaid every month, and with every beat of her heart, closer to an agonising end:

Every month there is a moon, gigantic, round, heavy, an omen. It transits, pauses, continues on and passes out of sight, and I see despair coming towards me like famine. To feel that empty, again, again. I listen to my heart, wave upon wave, salty and red, continuing on and on, marking time. (HT, p. 84)

Atwood’s novel, however, is a narrative of survival and resistance. Despite the silencing she is subjected to or the awfulness of her fate, Offred will keep challenging the authority, its policies and the definition it gives of her. Paradigmatic of her attitude is the following extract, in which Offred, discovering a braided carpet made out of recycled rags in her new bedroom, remembers the proverb advocating the careful use of resources: “Waste not want not. I am not being wasted. Why do I want” (HT, p. 17)? Ironically reflecting on her objectification, the Handmaid notes that her breeding capacities are indeed put to good use by the government; there should, therefore, be no lack; yet, as a subject, Offred cannot help but feel this lack and try to assert her voice against all odds. As will be shown in the second part of this thesis, The Handmaid’s Tale is a novel about the delicate balance between accepting one’s silencing and rebelling against it, between testifying to one’s suffering and deliberately forgetting the most painful events, in order to survive. To quote Offred, “I try not to think too much. Like other things now, thought must be rationed. There’s a lot that doesn’t bear thinking about. Thinking can hurt your chances, and I intend to last” (HT, p. 17). Her rebellion will be in the image of the flowers oozing sensuality in the Wife’s garden, onto which Offred projects her own mutinous thoughts:

There is something subversive about this garden of Serena’s, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to point, to say: Whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard, though silently. (HT, p. 161)

III. Boarding the Ark of the Refusées: Roberts’s The Book of Mrs Noah

Roberts’s multi-layered, polyphonic rewriting of the Flood narrative, The Book of Mrs Noah, centres around its eponymous heroine’s dream journey aboard her own, highly personal version of the Ark during a trip to Venice with her husband. It recounts the woman’s search for her voice, which appropriately takes, for a revision of a biblical (re)creation story, the form of a voyage to the source of female creativity.
Like the other fictions studied, Roberts’s novel is rooted in the implicit dimension of the Scriptures, where the anonymous wife of Noah is barely mentioned. She is indeed merely said to board the Ark along with her husband and sons (Genesis 7:7 and 7:13), and to get out of it once the waters have subsided (Genesis 8:18), thereby embodying, according to Pamela Norris,

the approved model for wifely behaviour: obedience to her husband’s wishes and the ability to give birth to viable sons. She seems not to have protested at Noah’s ark proposals, abandoning herself without recorded complaint to God’s will.25

*The Book of Mrs Noah* responds to the dumb silencing of Noah’s wife in the Scriptures, but also to her later Christian representations. The biblical epitome of wifely submission experienced a radical reversal of fortune in the Middle Ages when she was turned, in mystery plays like “The Fysshers and Marynars” of the York cycle, into a “disobedient termagant”26 who jibs at boarding the Ark:

I SON  Mother, certain  
       My father thinks to flit full far.  
       He bids you haste with all your main  
       Unto him, that nothing you mar.

WIFE  Yea, good son! Hie thee fast again  
      And tell him I will not come near.

I SON  Dame, I would do your bidding fain  
       But you must wend, ere worse things are.

WIFE  “Must”? That would I wit—  
      We wrangle wrong, I ween. […]

NOYE  Come hither fast, dame, I thee pray.

WIFE  Trows thou that I will leave dry land,  
       And turn up here in such array?  
       Nay, Noye, I am not bound  
       To trudge now over these fells. […]

I ask no more, nor will remain.  
Thou art nigh mad. I am aghast.  
Farewell! I will go home again.27

In the Newcastle *Noah* play, Noah’s wife even becomes the devil’s associate, the latter instructing her to make her husband drunk and to thereby thwart his plans.28 As its *incipit* indicates, *The Book of Mrs Noah* can also be interpreted as challenging the mystery plays’ garrulously silencing images of the evil woman who strives to prevent men from accomplishing their designs, or the shrew, who by definition is incapable of calm, constructive speech.

25 Norris, p. 44.
26 Norris, p. 45.
28 Norris, p. 45.
Noah died last night. Surely I should have prevented it, but did not. We stand on the riverbank, quarrelling. […] I argue that it is time to board the Ark, to make the voyage. Noah promised to accompany me. Now he says he has changed his mind. It is too soon. He is not ready. He’s not sure he’ll ever want to come with me. In the end I leave him behind. I teeter across the slippery gangplank into my wooden shelter, hastily closing the door after me as thunder and lightning begin to surround me. (BMN, p. 7)

In this introductory dream, Noah’s reluctance to go aboard the Ark and “make the voyage” can be seen as symbolising his disinterest in, and fear of his wife’s creative capacity, both from a biological and an artistic point of view. Indeed, as the reader discovers through hints scattered throughout the novel and, most explicitly, in the second chapter, which sets the Venitian frame for the heroine’s oneiric journey, the couple are drifting apart. For several years, Mrs Noah has repeatedly been entreat ing Noah to build a family with her, and the latter has as systematically turned a deaf ear to his wife’s maternity wish: “He sighs, sags, looks tired. I wear him out with my demands. […] Don’t start again, his silence pleads: I know what you want to say. We’ve been through it all before. Every month for the last two years” (BMN, p. 9). If Noah is not ready to become a father, neither is he willing to support and encourage Mrs Noah in the literary career she dreams of, his thoughts, energy and time being almost entirely devoted to his all-important research on the Italian health service.

While Mrs Noah’s conscious self endeavours to come to terms with her frustration, her unconscious, on the other hand, expresses more rebellious thoughts at Noah’s attempts to deaf-silence her, as indicates the outcome of her dream, which revisits Genesis 2:21-22:

A silver pin sizzles down from the heavens, fallen from the quiver some god of destruction rattles at us so viciously. It strikes Noah between the shoulder blades with a fizz of blue light, and cracks him in two. Flames burst up from what was his spine and is now a long split, gaping emptiness. Flames form him. […] For a moment he wavers, and is still upright, and has shape; and then he crumples, sinks to the ground, a small heap of black ashes that the wind lifts and scatters on the river. Noah has been wiped out. (BMN, p. 7)
Whereas in the Bible, God splits the first (hu)man in two\textsuperscript{29} to allow for companionship, sexual reproduction – “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24) – and, through it, new life, in Mrs Noah’s nightmare, the god’s “crack[ing] [Noah] in two” (BMN, p. 7) brings death instead, to a man who precisely refuses to father the descendants expected from him. At the end of Mrs Noah’s radical fantasy of silencing of this man who does not share her creative aspirations and therefore makes her doubt them, the heroine finds herself in Adam’s place:

I am alive, and [Noah] is not. I put my hand to my side, which is seared and raw, as though my skin has been torn off, as though Noah has been unpeeled from me by the fire. I am burning too. Loss is more than absence: it is the fire. (BMN, p. 8)

If Mrs Noah is “burning too,” it is not with the fire of annihilation, but of inspiration. The “loss” that Noah’s unpeeling and death represent seems to have freed Mrs Noah from the stagnation imposed on her by her husband, and she is now ready to start writing. The first sentence of the next chapter appears to attest to this liberation: “My story begins in Venice” (BMN, p. 9). Could this dream foreshadow an insurmountable incompatibility between Mrs Noah’s creative aspirations and her marriage? The concluding words of this extract can also be interpreted in the light of one of the key types of silence in the novel, which I will call “spectral silence.” As the analysis will show in detail in Part II, this concept refers to an absence of the maternal figure which contributes in a crucial way to the heroine’s process of self-definition. “Loss is more than absence: it is the fire” (BMN, p. 8) would then warn the reader against mistaking this spectral silence of the lost mother for a mere absence, by hinting that it constitutes the very source of Mrs Noah’s literary creativity.

This “false start,”\textsuperscript{30} as the French literary scholar Vanessa Guignery calls it, is therefore particularly revealing. Not only does it set the subversive revisionist tone of the novel and introduce the main motif of the Ark, but it also immediately draws the

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{29}Although the traditional interpretation of Genesis 2:21-22 refers to God creating Eve out of Adam’s rib, recent, purposefully egalitarian exegeses have pointed out that the Hebrew sələ’ can also be translated as “side.” According to this view, the first human was initially an androgynous being, whom God subsequently split into male and female. For more information on that point, see Mary Phil Korsak, “Genesis: A New Look,” in Athalya Brenner, A Feminist Companion to the Bible. Genesis (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997 [1993]), p. 48, and Ruth Adler, “Rereading Eve and Other Women: The Bible in a Women’s Studies Course,” in B.N. Olshein and Y.S Feldman (Eds), Approaches to Teaching the Hebrew Bible as Literature in Translation (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1989), p. 95.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{30}Vanessa Guignery, “The Book of Mrs Noah (1987) de Michèle Roberts: un roman aux sentiers qui bifurquent,” Études britanniques contemporaines 28 (June 2005), p. 3.}
reader’s attention to dreams as the privileged path to hidden knowledge and creativity, and identifies Noah’s silencing of the heroine as the mainspring of her oneiric voyage. Destabilised by this dormant crisis in her couple, Mrs Noah seems to have reached a turning point in her existence, where she needs “to think about [her] li[fe] and question [it]” (BMN, p. 21). The aim of her journey will therefore be to “discover how other women survive; to sail towards, and explore, the Western Isles, in order to arrive at a solution” (BMN, p. 32).

The second *incipit* of the novel already unmistakably marks Mrs Noah’s search for identity essentially as a quest to reconnect with her maternal roots – whether in a biological, mythical or literary sense, as will be emphasised in the case study in Part II of this thesis. Sitting at the terrace of a *café* with her husband, the narrator thinks she sees her deceased grandmother and starts running after her along the Venetian streets. Faced with her husband’s – by now predictable – denial of her spectral vision and attempts at dissuasion, Mrs Noah, as in her introductory dream, forcefully asserts herself:

– How can it be your grandmother? protests Noah: you know she’s dead.
He glances at his watch.
– Time for me to get back to the hotel. I want to put in a bit more work before going to bed.
– It is her, I insist: I must speak to her. (BMN, p. 11)

Mrs Noah’s grandmother, however, is nowhere to be found in the conscious realm, for at the issue of her wild chase, the heroine can just “peer at her absence, the pitch-black night at the end of the raft” (BMN, p. 12). For her journey to start, the librarian must plunge into the “waters of the unconscious,”31 to borrow Hillger’s expression: “The Ark is moored there, way out somewhere in the lagoon. I know it. […] I launch myself forward and down. Noah’s cry behind me is cut off as I enter the water. It […] can’t hold me back” (BMN, pp. 12-13).

Feeling the need for her grandmothers’ blessing before she can “leave for the Ark without too much fear” (BMN, p. 14), Mrs Noah imagines two different scenarios of her encounter with her female ancestor. In the first, she meets a supportive figure who encourages her to “[b]ecome a journey-woman. Build your Ark. Sail off in it. Get going. […] When I’m on my own, she says: I make whatever I like. […] Hop it. Be off with you. You’ve got to invent your own life. It’s up to you” (BMN, p. 14). As her

star-gazing activity symbolises, the second grandmother epitomises a diametrically opposite attitude of bitter aloofness and radical withdrawal into oneself adopted, it seems, in reaction to a systematic or prolonged exposure to deaf silencing:

My other grandmother is perched on a stool, eyes clamped to the telescope she has trained upon the distant stars. She swings around to face me, and sighs irritably.

– Well? What do you want?

She’s as remote and indifferent as snow piled on a Himalayan peak that no one has ever climbed: that’s the cold place she’s won for herself in her old age. […]

– I’ve spent my life in the pursuit of wisdom, but none of you cares for that, or listens to me. […] You’re still children, all of you, playing your silly games of sex and politics. Why can’t you grow up? Why can’t you leave me alone? […] I have nothing to say to you except this: […] you have never listened to me or taken my advice; and so now I wash my hands of you. […] Get out of my house! (BMN, pp. 14-15)

This scene introduces the motif of choice in the novel. By presenting Mrs Noah with two extreme life orientations, it indicates how she can take advantage of the freedom her dream voyage offers her to eventually decide on any course of action, ranging from a life lived exclusively according to her own aspirations, as the benevolent grandmother prompts her to do, to the stifling of her creative yearnings through a retreat into self-silencing. As the study of the novel will reveal, the various female figures the heroine will meet along her journey will add to and refine this picture of female possibilities.

With such personal, female-oriented concerns in mind, Mrs Noah can only conceive an Ark that radically departs from its scriptural antecedent and the many speculative representations given of it by male authorities like Origen, St Augustine or Tertullian who “spend their time squabbling over how to interpret the specifications laid down by the great Client in the Sky” (BMN, p. 16). Firmly convinced that “[i]t’s certainly no good relying on Arkitects to design it for [her] ready-made” (BMN, p. 16), the narrator trusts no authority but her own imagination to devise a version of the mythical refuge in her image. As a librarian who “depend[s] on books to help [her] out when [she is] stuck” (BMN, p. 18), finding in them comfort and security, and as a woman in search of her identity and female roots, what better floating shelter could Mrs Noah imagine than a library, the place of memory par excellence?

This “Arkive” (BMN, p. 96), as the narrator punningly calls it, must be understood as a response to what The Book of Mrs Noah denounces as women’s dumb and garrulous silencing, which has continually sought to erase them from mythical, folkloric, religious or literary history, and has condemned females refusing to conform to definitions of the so-called “weaker sex” to a multifaceted monstrous identity, this

The Ark of Women is the Other One. The \textit{Salon des Refusées. Des Refusantes}. Cruise ship for the females who are only fitted in as monsters: the gorgons, the basilisks, the sirens, the harpies, the furies, the viragos, the amazons, the medusas, the sphinxes. 

Where shall we go, the women who don’t fit in? Those of us who are not citizens but exiles? Those of us who are not named as belonging, but as outcasts, as barbarians? 

Into this Ark of Women. (\textit{BMN}, pp. 19-20) 

Mrs Noah’s description of her “Other” Ark, by foregrounding how it “contains all the varied clashing aspects of women’s imaginations expressed in books” (\textit{BMN}, p. 20), emphasises how much it is also meant, more specifically, as a corrective to the perceived androcentrism and monologism\footnote{The word “monologism” is used here in the context of feminist rewritings of biblical stories emphasising and denouncing the fact that the Bible is, to borrow M.A. Getty-Sullivan’s words, “the story told by men to men and about men” (M.A. Getty-Sullivan, \textit{Women in the New Testament} [Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2001], p. ix), and that the later tradition has often accentuated this aspect. It has often been pointed out that the Bible can equally be described as “dialogic” in many respects, through the multiplicity of books, narrators and accounts of the same events that characterises it, from the two versions of the creation of humankind to the four Gospels. For a discussion on Bakhtin and the Bible, see T.R. Wright’s “The Word in the Novel: Bakhtin on Tolstoy and the Bible,” in Mark Knight and Thomas Woodman (Eds), \textit{Biblical Religion and the Novel, 1700-2000} (Aldershot/Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 25-38.} of the Bible or the mainstream Judeo-Christian tradition, through which female voices have been edited out. 

Mrs Noah’s project seems to be placed under the very aegis of one of these \textit{Refusées}, for hanging above the desk at which the narrator is sitting to write these lines is “an enormous oil painting of Judith slaying Holofernes, donated by Artemisia Gentileschi” (\textit{BMN}, p. 19), a talented 17\textsuperscript{th}-century Italian painter who sank into oblivion.\footnote{Pascale Beaudet, “Artemisia Gentileschi, artiste peintre et femme libre” (March 6\textsuperscript{th}, 2004), available at: http://sisyphe.org/article.php3?id_article=995 (accessed March 11\textsuperscript{th}, 2009).} The artwork itself also assumes highly symbolic significance, for it represents a strong biblical warrior-woman cutting off the enemy’s head. By deliberately choosing to inscribe the genesis of her undertaking under the auspices of this oil, Mrs Noah seems to indicate her willingness to create, like Gentileschi, an empowering and empowered artistic double. The painting moreover unconventionally depicts a Judith assisted – unlike in the Bible – by her female servant, symbolising thereby an efficient female bonding which prefigures Mrs Noah’s experience aboard the Ark. Indeed, in the hope of finding an answer to the question that has prompted her adventure, the narrator invites five sibyls to share her dream voyage. As she writes
them: “I need companions. [...] I need to hear your stories” (BMN, p. 32). These words clearly reveal the necessity for Mrs Noah to meet and confront other voices and, more particularly, their narratives, to construct her identity as a woman and an artist, which not only reaffirms the novel’s celebration of polyphony, but also echoes literary scholar Patricia Waugh’s belief that women’s writing – in this case, both Roberts’s and her narrator’s – typically addresses “the construction of identity in relationship,”35 a phenomenon called “empowering collectivity”36 by Lindsey Tucker.

Not content with making up for the dumb and deaf silencing of female authors of the past, Mrs Noah also resolves to prevent the nipping in the bud of present and future artistic careers due to hindering circumstances in women’s lives. Indeed, beside its role as a site of memory preserving and promoting female works of all eras, Mrs Noah’s Ark is also meant to further creation by functioning as a “temporary retreat for women who need time to write away from their families and domestic cares” (BMN, p. 20). As evidence their brief presentations in their everyday environments, the sibyls themselves desperately need such a shelter, each one of them being stuck with her writing and embodying a variation on Tillie Olsen’s theme of “the unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being, but cannot.”37 The Deftly Sibyl, author of avant-garde novels, personifies the woman unable to reconcile her family with her career:

Living with George, in George’s space, at George’s rhythm, it is impossible to concentrate properly on her writing. [...] [H]is needs have to come first. Since he works freelance, his hours are unpredictable. [...] She can never plan her own work, can never be sure of a long stretch of hours ahead into which she can slowly sink, submerge herself, reach that level, far down, where she makes contact with what wants to get written today. [...] Then the children. Off at school all day now, giving her clear limits of time, but still needing to be fed cleaned up after cared for listened to played with accommodated. (BMN, p. 24)

The absence of punctuation in the last sentence adequately conveys the continuous nature of her family’s demands leaving the Deftly Sibyl no pause to write. Such a situation is described by Olsen in Silences as the lot of almost any author who is also – and primarily – a mother:

Motherhood means being instantly interruptible, responsive, responsible. Children need one now. [...] The very fact that [...] there is no one else to be responsible for these needs, gives them primacy. It is distraction, not meditation, that becomes habitual; interruption, not

36 Tucker, p. 136.
37 Olsen, p. 15.
Desperate for “uninterrupted work, for silence and solitude” (BMN, p. 25), the Deftly Sibyl acutely feels, like her literary foremother Virginia Woolf, the need to have “a house that is hers. That she pays for with her own money. A place in which only she lives, where no one else enters unless invited to do so” (BMN, pp. 23-24). Her frantic, noisy escape into the nearby fields to voice the blend of frustration and guilt that plagues her, far from dispelling her sense of stifling confinement, gives her but the freedom of a caged animal: “she screams into the wind. […] Better to do it out here, where no one can hear her, where she can’t hurt those she loves. […] Around and around she runs. Running away. Around and around” (BMN, p. 25).

Closely akin to the Deftly Sibyl’s stalemate is the Babble-On Sibyl’s balancing act between a career that is not taken seriously by her relatives, and a willingness to live up to her husband and his family’s expectations:

[I]t is inconceivable to Neil’s mother that a real woman could ever do such a thing [as staying at home to write] on a Sunday morning. Real women either go to church, or get the dinner on. Preferably both. And the Babble-On Sibyl very much wants to be loved by her mother-in-law, very much wants to be a real woman. So she will cook the lunch. Her new family regard her hobby with affection, amusement. She’s an authoress, you know, they say at drinks parties. (BMN, pp. 27-28)

Roberts’s Babble-On Sibyl perfectly typifies the wife silenced by labels reducing women’s writing to “charming, entertaining, ‘small,’ [or] feminine” material, and by the stereotypical ideal that Woolf named – after Coventry Patmore’s famous poem – the “Angel in the House,” who lives to content her husband and charm her guests, “excel[s] in the difficult arts of family life [and] […] sacrifice[s] herself daily.”

This “phantom” who, still according to Woolf, haunts female authors, tries to prevent them from freely writing what they “think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex” by whispering to them how “they must charm, they must conciliate.” The Correct Sibyl, an appropriately named perfectionist, has fallen prey to the Angel in the House’s silencing chimera. This “old pro” (BMN, p. 30) with her self-imposed, exacting routine of a “thousand words a morning come what may”

38 Olsen, pp. 52-53.
39 Olsen, p. 275.
(BMN, p. 30), who has managed until recently “to produce a meaty piece of socialrealist fiction every two years” (BMN, p. 30), now feels “dried up” (BMN, p. 30), her eagerness “to please everybody” (BMN, p. 179) having backfired on her and inhibited her creativity:

The empty white space of the paper rolled into the typewriter terrifies her. [...] But she cannot afford this self-indulgence. Packets of words circulate in the bookshops like packets of Cornflakes in the supermarkets. She must stay on the production line. [...] Or she will be discarded, obsolete. (BMN, p. 30)

In response to similar social pressure, Mrs Noah’s fourth guest, the Re-Vision Sibyl, has come to silence her real self through hiding behind the mask of the perfect single mother:

Don’t let on how interested she has recently become in feminism, how her current lover, to her own surprise, is a woman, lest Kitty be taken away from her, in her best interests of course. Work hard, yes, get on with her writing, yes, but never forget to put Kitty first, prove to the school and the social workers that single mothers can cope. [...] One day someone will find out that she augments her meagre maintenance and social security payments with writing stories for women’s magazines under a false name, and then, she’ll be for it. [...] What would it be like to produce great novels? Real art? (BMN, pp. 25 and 27)

If, faced with a society perceived as imposing stifling roles and patterns on women, the Re-Vision Sibyl decides, in order to survive financially, to play along, publishing disposable romantic stories “which upset nobody and which cloak her conflicts” (BMN, p. 129), the Forsaken Sibyl, for her part, resolves to “keep [...] quiet” (BMN, p. 208). Fearing that the experiences of mystical union with nature which sometimes seize her will earn her labels such as “priggish, neurotic, repressed and reactionary” (BMN, p. 207), she refuses herself to bring out her spiritual writing or share it with her friends.

Throughout The Book of Mrs Noah, the reader thus discovers not only one, but six women searching for their voice, six consciousnesses trying to evolve, now individually, now collectively – as a writers’ group – from the acknowledgement of their frustrated creativity, to some resolution. This polyphony of voices is moreover reinforced by the introduction into the debate of the voice of God himself. Although relegated to the status of “red-faced middle-aged” (BMN, p. 49) novelist looking for a few good tips to write a sequel to his bestseller, and subversively re-named “Gaffer” – “[m]eaning one who makes gaffes” (BMN, p. 54) – by Mrs Noah, Roberts’s representative of the divine instance still claims for himself supreme, unquestionable authority, being convinced that he is “truth incarnate” (BMN, p. 55) and “his own book [...] the last word on the subject” (BMN, p. 235). He moreover constitutes the
perfect—while often openly ludicrous—embodiment of misogynist, androcentric bias, imposing his company on his female travelling companions, and trying to do the same with his opinions silencing women and their creative abilities:

I’m damned if I’ll lie down and hand over my creative function to any pipsqueak thinking that her garrulous confessions or streams of consciousness constitute a proper act of creation. […] I am the Creator! […] It’s all a question of imagination, you know. And mine’s the best. […] I did all right when the Bible first came out: I collected a lot of royalties and retired to a tax-free haven. […] But now, having published one big blockbuster going from the beginning of the universe right through to the end, I’m not sure how to go about writing a sequel. […] To put it frankly, I’m stuck. Writer’s block. […] I was just passing and I saw the notice saying Writers group this way. So I nipped on down. I do think you could have waited for me, though, before you got going. […] I’ve never crossed my mind that women, and certainly not mothers, could create whole new worlds. […] Women are receptive, yes. They’re great at listening for my Word and taking it in. Take Mary, for example, this girl I knew years ago. She was this terrific incubator of my ideas. […] But she was empty to start with. […] It’s the male who represents humanity, creativity, spiritual quest, after all. How could a woman possibly do that? How could a mother know anything about human growth? Any fool can give birth. Writing a book is labour.

(BMN, pp. 54-56)

As will be shown in the case study, the heated discussions between the seven characters give to The Book of Mrs Noah a distinctive metanarrative dimension through which the central issue of women’s silencing is reduplicated, for, in this novel about a silenced scriptural female, each of Mrs Noah’s companions tells an embedded story giving a voice to a woman forgotten in the Bible or reduced to silence in the Judeo-Christian tradition and societies.

Although she structures the entire novel, Mrs Noah does not, importantly, stand above the other voices. As King rightly remarks, The Book of Mrs Noah offers “a ‘female’ alternative to patriarchal authoritarianism without slipping into authoritarianism itself.”42 This highly polyphonic quality is largely achieved thanks to the second type of silence that—beside spectral silences—dominates Roberts’s biblical rewriting and that gives it its distinctively open, fragmented form: the blurring of the narrative voice through the shifting from one instance to another without explicit or directly recognisable markers to indicate a change.43 The image used by Mrs Noah to describe the place to which her wild run along the Venetian streets has led her unmistakably reflects and, as Guignery points out,44 functions as proleptic sign

42 Jeannette King, p. 52.

43 This form of voice blurring is also pointed out by Mura-Brunel when she writes that silence can be perceived in the space created by the hesitation concerning the character who conveys meaning (Aline Mura-Brunel, Silences du roman. Balzac et le romanesque contemporain [Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2004], pp. 77-78).

of this structural organisation: “The campo is a kaleidoscope, [...] offering seven times seven ways of experiencing it, seven ways in and seven ways out, a crystal constantly changing”\(^{45}\) (BMN, pp. 11-12). Faced with this interlacing of sometimes blending, sometimes clashing voices, and with this long succession of seemingly loosely connected chapters, the readers are entrusted with the task of making their own pattern out of the “web of dream images that shift and turn like the radiant bits of glass in a kaleidoscope” (BMN, p. 68).

IV. Beware of the Big Bad Lies: Tennant’s *Sisters and Strangers*

Tennant’s *Sisters and Strangers* revisits Eve, the biblical figure that has had the most pervasive negative impact on the definition of women’s character and place for centuries, contributing greatly to what is denounced as the – garrulous – silencing of the female sex in the Judeo-Christian world. For more than two thousand years, the Eden narrative, with its portrayal of Eve’s creation from ‘\(\text{\'adām}\)\(^{46}\) and eating of the forbidden fruit, has in fact been used as a “prooftext”\(^{47}\) by advocates of both woman’s inferiority to man and full responsibility for human misery, as illustrates, within the Bible itself, 1 Timothy 2:12-14: “I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.” If a few early references to the first woman’s association with guilt and sin can already be found before Christ, as in the apocryphal Book of Sirach – “From a woman sin had its beginning, and because of her we all die” (Sirach 25:24) – they have mostly spread, however, since the early centuries of this era with, for instance, the pseudo-epigraphical *Books of Adam and Eve*, which not only assigns fault to Adam’s partner,

\(^{45}\) My emphasis.

\(^{46}\) If the traditional interpretation of Genesis 2:21-22 refers to God creating Eve out of Adam’s rib, some exegetes, on the other hand, argue otherwise, as Meyers points out: “[t]he traditional translation of ‘\(\text{\'adām}\) as ‘man’ (NRSV and most English versions) at the beginning of the Eden story can be contested. The Hebrew word ‘\(\text{\'adām}\) can indeed mean a male and even be the proper name Adam; but it can also be a generic term for a mortal, or a human being. [...] [A]ccording to some current feminist readings of biblical inclusive language as well as some medieval Jewish commentaries, [...] the original human was androgynous and [...] God had to divide it into two gendered beings in order for procreation and continued human life to begin” (Carol Meyers, “Eve,” in Meyers, *Women in Scripture*, p. 80). Such interpretations therefore rule out any notion of secondary or inferior female birth. See also Adler, in Olshen and Feldman, p. 95.

but also repeatedly makes her blame herself: “‘O Lord my God, […] it is I who sinned.’ And Eve said to Adam: ‘[…] this has come to you from fault of mine.’”

The figure that has probably been most instrumental in the development of Eve as sexually guilty is Saint Augustine, who “made the doctrine of original sin central to the Western Christian vision; and since it was Eve who was the first to pluck the forbidden fruit, women, sex, and sin became fused in the Christian imagination.”

As many scholars have pointed out, however, in Genesis itself, Eve is never said to “tempt” or “seduce” Adam, who equally transgresses God’s command, nor are the words “sin” and “Fall” ever used to designate, respectively, the biting of the fruit and the first couple’s subsequent expulsion from Eden:

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. (Genesis 3:6-7)

Moreover, in some contemporary exegetical studies such as Ellen van Wolde’s “Facing the Earth,” the Eden narrative is “more and more accepted as […] a story of maturation,” and Eve depicted as “a seeker after wisdom and knowledge:

By eating from the tree of knowledge the man and the woman become aware of their differences and acquire insight, […] which turns out to be the start of their adult life. The acquisition of discriminating knowledge functions consequently as a prerequisite for adulthood. One might infer from this that in Genesis 2-3 the eating from the tree of knowledge and the woman’s and the man’s becoming aware of their nakedness represents their growth towards maturity.

Despite such attempts to rehabilitate the first woman, Eve’s popular image, like Mary Magdalene’s, remains “more strongly colored by postbiblical culture than by the biblical narrative itself.”

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48 The Books of Adam and Eve, quoted in Meyers, Discovering Eve, p. 75.
49 Haddad and Esposito, p. ix.
51 Meyers argues that the notion of Fall “is a later Christian application of Plato’s idea (in the Phaedrus) of the fall of heavenly beings to earth in order to express the idea of departure from divine favor or grace” (Meyers, in Meyers, Women in Scripture, pp. 79-80).
54 van Wolde, in Davies and Clines, p. 33.
55 Meyers, in Meyers, Women in Scripture, pp. 79-80.
Tennant’s novel precisely castigates and subverts, in comic fashion, the mainstream image of Eve – the traditional Judeo-Christian paradigm of Woman – as essentially guilty. By interweaving, in a typically postmodern mixture of high and popular culture, reworked scriptural material with fairy tale references, it both debunks the authority of the Bible and its later tradition, demoting the sacred texts of the Jewish and Christian faiths to the status of any other myth, and simultaneously broadens the scope of its revisionist enterprise, the biblical narratives becoming one source among others of garrulously silencing “lies” about women.

*Sisters and Strangers*’ subversive version of Eve’s story is told by Grandmother Dummer to her granddaughter Elsie and her friend, the anonymous narrator, during a summer spent at the old woman’s house in the highly appropriate Cornish setting of Zennor, which, with its local church’s carving of the “resident mermaid” (S&S, p. 7), neatly encapsulates what the novel denounces as the Christian – or, more broadly speaking, patriarchal – appropriation and displacement of female creative power and its ancient pagan symbols:

– You see, said Grandmother Dummer […] [,] this poor mermaid – and she went over to stroke the head of that laughing nymph with guiltless, pagan eyes – […] this lass was taken over by the Christian Church when they had no right to lay hands on her at all. Before the Church elders pronounced on the wickedness of Eve, this goddess of the sea and the stream, this nereid, was worshipped as the sole progenitor and giver of life. (S&S, pp. 56-57)

Transposing to fiction Pamela Norris’s contention that “in Eve’s many faces we have a unique record of the male imagination at work [about the nature of Woman],” Tennant’s novel constitutes Grandmother Dummer’s lesson to her two young protégées in the seven stereotypical roles to which women are traditionally confined in Christian societies, or the seven silencing “pitfall[s]” (S&S, p. 58) into which Eve successively gets trapped:

– There are seven ways, she said. And nothing’s changed since the very first woman was plucked from Adam’s rib-cage. Seven ways and seven women, and you’ll be all of them in your time. (S&S, p. 8)

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56 As Hutcheon argues, “postmodernism […] does indeed ‘close the gap’ that Leslie Fiedler (1975) saw between high and low art forms, and it does so through the ironizing of both” (Hutcheon, *Poetics*, p. 44).


58 Norris, p. 403.
Grandmother Dummer’s young audience are already indoctrinated into what the old woman regards as “one of the worst lies of all” (S&S, p. 136), the Prince Charming chimera. Like all little girls, Elsie and her friend have been brought up to believe that life is all fairy tales and to “long for that moment […] when [they are] chosen, singled out” (S&S, p. 136). They hope that the frog coming to their pillows at night will turn, like in the brothers Grimm’s tale of the Frog King, into a beautiful young man, and sleepwalk to the thick bushes where the prince lies asleep to try, in a subversive reversal of the traditional roles of Sleeping Beauty, to wake him with a kiss, thereby showing, despite their internalisation of the “happily-ever-after,” some uncommon sense of initiative and dissent.

The girls having apparently not yet reached affective and sexual maturity, as symbolises their failure to “get through the bramble” (S&S, p. 8) to drag the prince out of his slumber, Dummer is firmly determined to open their eyes to the dangers lying ahead while it is still time, and to teach them how “the lies will go on until the day you die, unless you really take care to identify a lie when you hear one” (S&S, p. 134). She therefore launches into “a fairy story for grown-ups” (S&S, p. 8), taking up the traditional pedagogical function of the genre highlighted by Marina Warner: “Fairy tales exchange knowledge between an older voice of experience and a younger audience, they present pictures of perils and possibilities that lie ahead.”

By using as a subversive didactic tool the type of stories with which the girls are most familiar, Grandmother Dummer makes sure that she will have the utmost impact, but also revives the original association between fairy tale and dissent:

And because utopian ambitions beat strongly in the heart of fairy tale, many writers have hidden and hide under its guileless and apparently childish façade, have wrapped its cloak of unreality around them; adopting its traditional formal simplicities they have attempted to challenge received ideas and raise questions into the minds of their audience: protest and fairy tale have long been associated.

Dummer can more specifically be regarded as the spiritual heiress of late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century French “grandes dames fairytale writers” like Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy and Marie-Jeanne L’Héritier, who furthered the cause of

60 Warner, From the Beast, p. 411.
61 Warner, From the Beast, p. 163.
women’s rights through their writing, as Warner points out in *From the Beast to the Blonde*.

Tennant’s old narrator, however, distances herself from the folk stories tradition through the mordant irony that she adopts towards the genre, as the beginning of her tale most explicitly demonstrates:

There once was a woman who was so ridiculously happy that she hardly dared to go out into the world.
She had found love, you see.
And she knew that all the sad, bitter women out there would stab her with their glances of envy and reproach.
If she went to a supermarket, she would be handed an apple that was red one side and green the other, and as she bit into it she would die.
If she went to a party […] her dress would turn to tatters at midnight and the car on the way home would lose its wheels and roll as helpless as a pumpkin to certain death.
And if she had a best woman friend (God forbid!), that friend would seize a wand from the *batterie de cuisine* that Eve kept so gleaming in her brand-new kitchen and turn her into a little mouse or a shrew.

So Eve was very careful. (*S&S*, p. 10)

By depicting an Eve fearing that she might meet a fate similar to Snow White’s poisoning by her wicked stepmother, and that resentful women might sabotage her car to break, like the twelve strokes of midnight in Perrault’s Cinderella, the spell of her perfect love story, or might turn her into the Mouse Princess, this passage denounces the overwhelming predominance of representations of relationships between women based on competition, rivalry and envy, both in the Bible and in fairy tales. Indeed, if in the Scriptures, depictions of harmonious cooperation and love between female relatives or friends are virtually inexistent, in fairy stories, as Patricia Duncker argues,

[o]ne of the aspects of relationships between women […] is cruelty, brutality and hatred of woman against woman. […] [T]he uncompromising message in tale after tale is women beware women, as one woman after another plots her rival’s destruction.62

Implicitly referring to the title, Dummer’s *incipit* conveys the novel’s fundamental idea that the garrulously silencing stereotypical roles imposed by men on women set up barriers between the latter, turning sisters into strangers: “The worst is, too, that many women can’t see each other when they’re placed in different categories. And that suits our Prince Charming fine. It’s called […] Divide and Rule” (*S&S*, p. 139).

Dummer’s portrayal of the biblical first woman as the personification of the passive fairytale princess eagerly “waiting for the key in the door, the moment of

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Adam’s return from another busy day as managing director” (S&S, p. 11) moreover attacks exhortations to women’s subordination and submission to man. Such silencing enjoinders are frequently rooted, in the Christian tradition, in Genesis 2:20-22, which describes the Lord creating the first woman as man’s “helper,” and in the mainstream understanding of Genesis 3:16 as God’s announcement to Eve that Adam “shall rule over you,” but also deeply permeate the world of the “happily ever after.” Indeed, as Paulina Palmer contends, fairy stories encode a reactionary gender ideology of male assertiveness and enjoyment of adventure, and female subordination and passivity. […] Traditionally employed to acculturate young girls into accepting codes of conventional femininity, the fairy tale frequently relegates the heroine to the conventional hetero-patriarchal role of trophy and object of exchange.

Ironically pushing fairy-tale exaggeration to the extreme, Dummer describes the heroine feigning to be, like any self-respecting princess, sound asleep, so that Adam, when coming back home, can savour “his one great joy” (S&S, p. 17), that is, “pretending to have difficulty in waking” (S&S, p. 17) his “priceless” (S&S, p. 19) Eve purposefully draped in her peignoir of seven thousand, seven hundred and seventy-seven rose petals, each petal strengthened with gold thread spun by the Lulworth royal silkworms and each petal taken from the roses Aurore and Albertine that grow in Eve’s beautiful garden. (S&S, p. 13)

This perfect illustration of the fairy tale ethos that Duncker wittily sums up as “all we can do while we are dressed up as the princess is sit still and wait,” is characteristic of the first stereotypical identity that defines Eve. The young woman, however, will not be able to remain for long the carefree lover showered with gifts in her “palace of dreams” (S&S, p. 15), however hard she may try “not to take responsibility for herself” (S&S, p. 21) or wish, as Dummer expresses it in an image blending a biblical reference to Eve’s creation and sexual undertones, to “grow straight from the recumbent body of Adam, a twig, a rib shooting high and bursting into leaf at the sheer joy of feeding off the income and life of Adam” (S&S, p. 19).

Hinging on the subversion of the first woman’s mainstream representation as inherently sinful, *Sisters and Strangers* ironically describes the heroine as overly curious and therefore bound to succumb to temptation, and portrays her as all-

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64 Duncker, p. 152.
culpable on account of her very existence, before she can even commit any misdeed or original sin. As Dummer reveals to her audience, relaying Norris’s claim that “[t]he myth of Adam, Eve and the serpent was a key text for the founders of the Christian church, anxious to establish a link between the redemptive powers of Christ and the origins of human bad behaviour”\(^65\):

- Everything in the world is her fault, and poor Jesus had to die to atone for her terrible wickedness.
- But what did she do? Elsie asked. […]
- She just was, Grandmother Dummer said. That was enough. And she was too inquisitive, of course. She should have known not to ask questions. (S&S, p. 24)

The lure to which Eve yields, leading her to her inexorable fall, is rooted in Judeo-Christian definitions of motherhood castigated for silencing the female sex, and is seductively presented to the heroine by the charming, versatile figure of Adam’s old schoolmate Frank Blake. Faithful to the later tradition that turned the serpent in the garden of Eden “into God’s cosmic opponent, the overreaching angel Satan,”\(^66\) the tempter in \textit{Sisters and Strangers} combines serpentine and demonic features. Undulating like a snake animated by his charmer’s music, “Old Nick” (S&S, p. 151), as Dummer later mockingly calls him to reaffirm his devilish identity,\(^67\) seduces Eve, not with the promise of godlike knowledge, but “with the idea of a child” (S&S, p. 42):

- Adam will love you so much if you give him a child, Frank Blake said. Just think of the joy for the child, to be brought up in such a lovely home. And by such wonderful parents, the Serpent added unctuously.
- For there was no doubt in Eve’s mind […] that Frank Blake seemed to have turned in front of her eyes into a polite, balding, super-sleek snake.
- You think I’d make a good enough mother? says poor Eve.
- Perfection, says the python, who is now swaying dangerously in his basket chair as if inaudible harmonies are moving him in his wicked ways. (S&S, p. 42)

If for Paul, it is precisely through childbearing that the daughters of the “transgressor” Eve “will be saved” (1 Timothy 2:14-15), in \textit{Sisters and Strangers}, by contrast, motherhood is depicted as imprisoning the heroine and, more generally, women, for the Judeo-Christian tradition and its creator “God-He,”\(^68\) symbolised in the novel by the Serpent, by usurping pagan fertility goddess cults, appropriated

\(^{65}\) Norris, p. 4.

\(^{66}\) Norris, p. 85.

\(^{67}\) “Old Nick” is indeed an old-fashioned name for the Devil.

\(^{68}\) Ettin, p. 45.
female creative power and, importantly, the positive representations associated with it:

People […] worshipped the Mother Goddess and Earth was the mother of them all. If it hadn’t been for the Serpent telling Eve that the man in the Garden of Eden could father children, the natural balance of things would have gone on forever.

But you can’t blame Eve for listening to the Serpent.

Once she did, though, she gradually came to lose more and more power. (S&S, p. 57)

Punning on the meanings of the word “responsibility,” Grandmother Dummer explains to Elsie and her friend how, by becoming a mother, Eve “will lose it all” (S&S, p. 43), for it will inevitably condemn her to assume, not only the duty to take care of her children, but also the blame for any incident, misfortune or difficulty that might happen as a consequence of this maternity: “when you are [ready to bear children], you’ll see that the responsibility will lie fair and square with you. It will, in short, be all your fault” (S&S, pp. 43-44). Dummer’s caustic vision of motherhood voices feminist discontent with what is perceived as the negative or stifling images of the female parent conveyed in Judeo-Christian texts, like Lilith, the monstrous bad mother of the Jewish tradition, or her diametrical opposite, the saintly, self-sacrificing Madonna, both of which Eve will come to momentarily embody, as the case study will show.

Tennant’s novel can therefore be regarded as a narrative of initiation into adult sexuality, in the image of its scriptural and folkloric ancestors. The heroine’s path indeed mirrors that of the biblical Eve for whom, as Ellen van Wolde points out, “[a]dulthood is implying procreation,” God mentioning childbirth for the first time immediately after the first human transgression, in Genesis 3:16. By depicting an Eve inveigled into leaving her guise of spoiled princess, Tennant’s novel equally reproduces the most common message of fairy tales, which inculcate “the lessons of sexuality,” and more specifically of Snow White, which shares major thematic elements with the Eden narrative, and teaches children that we all have to be expelled from the original paradise of childhood, where all our desires are fulfilled without any

69 For a detailed study of the motif of Lilith, see Jacques Bril’s Lilith ou la mère obscure (Paris: Payot, 1991 [1984]).
70 van Wolde, in Davies and Clines, pp. 33-34.
71 Duncker, p. 152.
effort, and be confronted with the temptations of desire to eventually reach maturity, as the Freudian critic Bruno Bettelheim shows in *The Uses of Enchantment*.72

*Sisters and Strangers*, however, amply subverts this narrative scheme of initiation, reversing, for instance, the motif of the biting of the apple – the traditional symbol of love and sexuality.73 Indeed, whereas Snow White and the biblical Eve are tempted into eating the apple that leads them to acquire new knowledge – the forbidden fruit of Genesis being commonly identified as an apple in Western Christian countries –, Tennant’s Eve, by contrast, is persuaded by the Serpent to stop ingesting and throw away the “tiny apples dusted with silver and gold” (*S&S*, p. 44) that are her pills, thereby accomplishing the decisive gesture that will turn her into the all-responsible – that is, all-guilty – mother. The heroine’s customised oral contraception moreover provides the basis for a radical questioning of the Christian code of sexual ethics – rooted in Saint Augustine’s claim that sexuality outside of marriage and procreative purposes is a sin74 –, for it is described as keeping Eve “pure and chaste each night for Adam to bite into, to consume” (*S&S*, p. 44). The underlying ideology that praises sexuality for the sole sake of pleasure and condemns maternity for tainting women, clearly satirises Christian morals, according to which the – married – couple’s openness to procreation constitutes a necessary condition for sexual relationships to be deemed good by the Church, and artificial contraceptive methods, since they precisely preclude this possibility, are largely prohibited.75

The detailed analysis of Tennant’s *Sisters and Strangers* in the second part of this thesis will further develop Eve’s postlapsarian initiation, and demonstrate how, contrary to Grandmother Dummer’s purposefully deceptive claim that Adam’s partner “has [...] little choice when it comes to the category in which men place her” (*S&S*, p. 139), the heroine manages to constantly oscillate between, on the one hand, subjection and silencing and, on the other hand, self-assertion, subverting thereby the stereotypical roles to which she is successively confined. The case study will also highlight how Dummer’s narrative revolves around a silence of reticence – based

73 Bettelheim, p. 267.
75 Banner, in Lacoste, pp. 1333-1334.
mainly on allusions and on the dissimulation or delaying of information – which is reminiscent of fairy tales’ subtle teaching through hints.  

V. “The Voiceless Cipher in the Text”: Diamant’s The Red Tent

Diamant’s The Red Tent is a rewriting of the story of Dinah, Jacob’s daughter with Leah, a narrative that, as the theologian Didier Luciani points out in *Dina (Gn34)*. *Sexe, mensonges et idéaux*, is permeated with gaps and ambiguities, and has, from the outset, given rise to the most various, even contradictory exegeses. According to the most widespread interpretation, supported by scholars like Scholtz, Schneider and Nunnalli-Cox, to cite but a few, the young girl is raped and abducted by Shechem, the son of the local prince, during a visit to the women of the neighbourhood. The New Revised Standard Version also adopts this explanation making of Dinah the first victim of rape in human history: “Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, prince of the region, saw her, he seized her and lay with her by force” (Genesis 34:2). In retaliation, when Shechem and Hamor ask for Dinah’s hand, Jacob’s sons deceive them, pretending to accept the marriage on the condition that the prince and his people get circumcised, so that when he and all his male subjects are still weak from the ritual, they slaughter them and plunder the city. In the *incipit* of The Red Tent, Dinah herself mentions this popular explanation of the obscure biblical reference to her fate and, setting the tone of the novel, challenges its reductive side:

> On those rare occasions when I was remembered, it was as a victim. Near the beginning of your holy book, there is a passage that seems to say that I was raped and continues with the bloody tale of how my honor was avenged. […] There was far more to tell. (RT, pp. 1-2)

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77. Didier Luciani, *Dina (Gn34)*. *Sexe, mensonges et idéaux* (Bruxelles: Safran, 2009), pp. 10-11. “Depuis l’origine, […] celui-ci a été compris de façons diverses et même contradictoires, comme l’attestent aussi bien l’exégèse ancienne que l’abondante littérature contemporaine. […] À peu près tous les auteurs […] sont […] d’accord, qu’elles soient leurs opinions herméneutiques, pour souligner l’ambiguïté particulière et le caractère fortement indéterminé de nombre de détails de ce texte. Autrement dit, si tous les récits bibliques sont, par essence, ouverts, on doit reconnaître que certains le sont plus que d’autres et que Gn 34 appartiennent manifestement à cette seconde catégorie.”
In the absence of explicit narratorial judgment on any of the parties, what particularly intrigues the reader of Genesis 34 is the confusing contrast between Shechem’s controversial act and his attitude of affection after the event: “And his soul was drawn to Dinah daughter of Jacob; he loved the girl, and spoke tenderly to her” (Genesis 34:3). If the advocates of the rape hypothesis argue that the verb ‘inna (“defile”), used to describe the prince’s action, leaves no doubt about the sexual abuse, others, like Luciani or Frontain, point out that this word, while undoubtedly carrying a negative connotation, cannot prove for certain that what happens between Shechem and Dinah actually constitutes a rape, but might simply refer to the impurity or dishonour entailed by a sexual relationship taking place with an uncircumcised foreigner, outside of the legal framework and without the families’ consent. The three subsequent verbs connoting fondness – seen by the proponents of the rape theory as Shechem’s shameful “attempt to make Dinah compliant” – and the marriage proposal made by the prince and his father, would then support the interpretation of the scene as “consensual sexual misconduct,” to borrow Julie Kelso’s expression. Scholars who question the rape hypothesis moreover emphasise how the terms “disgrace” and “defiled” in Genesis 34:14 and 27 are the brothers’, and therefore convey their personal, male point of view, that is, their strong disapproval of an exogamic relationship – according to Frontain and Bechtel – or their anger at the humiliation that their sister’s illicit loss of virginity represents:

The brothers are proud; they are not to be trifled with. Shechem has tampered with their property. Their use of the term “defiled” to describe their sister lends support to this understanding. The term represents a male point of view: “defile” is not, in this instance, a synonym for “rape.” She is not defiled because she has been raped, but because she is no longer a virgin.

Diamant’s novel makes a similar point. Fully exploiting the ambiguity of the biblical narrative, it turns Dinah’s alleged rape by Shechem – renamed Shalem in the novel –

83 D.N. Fewell and D.M. Gunn, “Tipping the Balance: Sternberg's Reader and the Rape of Dinah,” Journal of Biblical Literature, Vol. 110, No. 2 (Summer 1991), pp. 206-207. Naomi Graetz points out how “[t]he daughter’s monetary value is a function of her sexual purity. If she violates the sexual code by losing her virginity prior to marriage, this transgression constitutes a loss of face to the family” (Naomi Graetz, “Dinah the Daughter,” in Meyers, Women in Scripture, p. 306).
into a love story tragically thwarted by her father’s weak nature and her brothers’ unquenchable thirst for social recognition, which makes them contemplate the prospect of their sister marrying a prince as a threat to their status:

Simon and Levi wanted wealth and the power it would bring them, but they had no hope of inheriting those from Jacob […], so they were determined to carve out their own glory, however they could. […] When they heard that Hamor had offered my father a king’s bride-price for me, they raised their voices against the marriage, sensing that their own positions would be diminished by such an alliance. […] They and their sons would remain shepherds, poor cousins, nobodies. […] Levi ripped his clothing as though mourning my death, and Simon warned, “This is a trap for the sons of Jacob. […] This marriage displeases the god of our father,” he said, challenging Jacob to disagree. (RT, pp. 197-198)

The most crucial source of ambiguity in Genesis 34 is, however, from the point of view of Diamant’s rewriting, Dinah’s complete silence. As Sternberg rightly remarks, the woman is cast in a passive role from violation through negotiation to extrication: acted on for good or ill without herself acting, spoken to and about without ever speaking, thought of without thinking. Nor does the tale offer the least clue to her thought and action, or any other invitation to inference. […] In terms of plot dynamics, she is […] not an agent proper; in terms of voice and viewpoint, an object, not subject, of consciousness.84

This marginalisation or passivity has often been replicated and even intensified in the critical history of the narrative, scholars having almost systematically concentrated on Jacob’s and his sons’ responses – whether to justify or to condemn them. Sternberg’s commentary, for instance, is emblematic of this trend, as the following extract demonstrates:

In artistic light, again, Dinah's heart is irrelevant since it would disturb the tale's focus of interest. The clashes among sides (Israelites versus Hivites, brothers versus father) or issues (e.g., idealism versus pragmatism, solidarity versus favoritism), with the rhetoric geared to them, all originate but do not center in her misfortune. That is why we find her cast in a passive role. […] And so she must stay, on pain of throwing the given narrative and its narrative art out of focus.85

In her article responding to similar male-oriented exegeses, Susanne Scholz particularly denounces interpretations defining the Dinah narrative as a love story since, she argues, it amounts to condemning the biblical female as a liar and denying the very existence of women’s rapes.86 She however fails to realize that her analysis, in which she claims to read Genesis 34 through Dinah’s eyes, can equally be regarded

as relaying what she calls “the perspective of the powerful,”

for Dinah’s voice is still mediated through the biblical narrator, whose male truth is not questioned by Scholz, and Leah’s daughter remains confined to the unenviable, passive role of “the subjugated, that is the raped victim-survivor.” As Cheryl Exum notes,

[s]o long as we remain within the boundaries of the literary text itself, the study of women in ancient literature cannot become anything other than the study of men’s views of women. Thus the first step in constructing versions of women’s stories from the submerged strains of their voices in men’s stories is to subvert the men’s stories.

Had Dinah been given the opportunity to speak for herself, her version of the story might have taken a totally different shape. Diamant’s The Red Tent is precisely rooted in this revisionist hypothesis. In a midrashic fashion, it fills the gaps of the Bible and invents a life for Dinah, transforming the silent victim into a self-assertive woman who tells us how she took control of her own destiny when, after the brutal murder of the man she chose for herself, she decided to sever all links with her family. Genesis 34 itself might actually discreetly hint at such a strong heroine behind its silence, for the one action Dinah performs, “going out” to see the local girls, constitutes for an ancient Israeliite woman a rather unconventional behaviour that can be read, as Naomi Graetz contends, as “a desire for freedom or self-fulfilment that is alien to the times and threatening to the patriarchal structure of biblical society.”

Dinah’s first words, in which she addresses her narratees, show to what extent the heroine conceives her tale as a response to the Scriptures, which relegated her to the shadow of her male kinsmen, exemplifying Ostriker’s claim that “[in the Bible] women must be rejected in order for the story of male maturity, male leadership, male heroism, to take place”:

WE HAVE BEEN lost to each other for so long.
My name means nothing to you. My memory is dust.
This is not your fault, or mine. The chain connecting mother to daughter was broken and the word passed to the keeping of men. […] That is why I became a footnote, my story a brief detour between the well-known history of my father, Jacob, and the celebrated chronicle of Joseph, my brother. […]
Maybe you guessed that there was more to me than the voiceless cipher in the text. Maybe you heard it in the music of my name: the first vowel high and clear, as when a mother calls to her child at dusk; the second, for whispering secrets on pillows. Dee-nah.[…]

90 Graetz, in Meyers, Women in Scripture, p. 312.
91 Ostriker, Feminist Revision, p. 49.
Nothing remained except a few mangled details about those weeks in Shechem. There was far more to tell. (*RT*, pp. 1-2)

Dinah’s marked emphasis on her name can be construed as a criticism of the Scriptures’ more specific neglect of the young woman in genealogies. Indeed, it has often been pointed out that in Genesis 30:21, Jacob’s only daughter is “introduced in almost an aside,” as a disdainful note. Her name only appears at the very end of the long enumeration of male births on Leah’s side, stretching from Genesis 29:32 to 30:21, and is not provided with an explanation from the mother, whereas the names of all the brothers are: “Then Leah said, ‘God has endowed me with a good dowry; now my husband will honour me, because I have borne him six sons’; so she named him Zebulun. Afterwards she bore a daughter, and named her Dinah” (Genesis 30:21). If in the Bible “Dinah’s name has no story,” in *The Red Tent*, on the other hand, the heroine herself provides this lacking interpretation, thereby both rectifying the androcentric bias that, as a rule, marginalises women in the lineage of the promise, and drawing attention to a relationship that is also widely overlooked in the sacred texts of the Judeo-Christian faith, the mother-daughter bond. As King remarks,

> [t]he kind of love shared by Demeter and her daughter is not acknowledged between women in Christian cultures, and is only rarely and indirectly present in the Old Testament, as in the story of Naomi and Ruth, where the relationship between a woman and her daughter-in-law provides a rare model for sisterhood.

The fact that Dinah’s name evokes in her eyes maternal accents already unmistakably testifies to the crucial role accorded to the link with the female parent in the novel, which is powerfully pleaded for and elevated to an essential constituent of a woman’s identity by Dinah:

> Had I been asked to speak of [...] [my life], I would have began with the story of the generation that raised me, which is the only place to begin. If you want to understand any woman you must first ask about her mother and then listen carefully. [...] The more a daughter knows the details of her mother’s life – without flinching or whining – the stronger the daughter. (*RT*, p. 2)

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92 Nunnally Cox, p. 19.
93 Fischer, *Des femmes aux prises avec Dieu*, p. 133.
94 Schneider, *Mothers of Promise*, p. 143.
95 Fischer, *Des femmes aux prises avec Dieu*, pp. 149-150.
97 This marked emphasis in a novel written by a Jewish author is undoubtedly deeply rooted in the fact that Jewishness is transmitted through the mother.
Whereas in the Bible the complete absence of Dinah’s mother from the narrative of her daughter’s purported rape constitutes a loud silence, in Diamant’s *The Red Tent*, by contrast, it is to Leah, together with her sister Rachel, but also Bilhah and Zilpah – who leave their biblical status of handmaids to become the matriarchs’ half-sisters – that the first part of the novel is entirely devoted; it is revealingly called “My Mothers’ Stories” (*RT*, p. 5). This title moreover evidences *The Red Tent*’s celebration of plurality, embodied not only in a quadruple maternal figure, but also in the multifaceted great goddess worshipped by the women of Dinah’s clan, who radically contrasts with and challenges the image of the unique, jealous God venerated by the men, i.e. the God of the Hebrew Bible.

The analysis will highlight how *The Red Tent* is primarily a narrative about the preservation and transmission of a collective female memory under the constant threat of oblivion. If Dinah’s life as a whole can be seen as a tribute to her mothers and their tales, the heroine’s own voice, however, is in perpetual danger of being silenced, precisely because the events at Shechem have interrupted the all-important “chain connecting mother to daughter” (*RT*, p. 1). As Dinah expresses it, “the stories of [her] life [are] forbidden to [her]” (*RT*, p. 3). Dinah being nevertheless driven by an overpowering need to share her experience after the traumatic loss of her lover, her narrative simultaneously attests to the “healing […] value of testimony”\(^8\) in the (re)construction of her identity.

**VI. Battling Against God: Diski’s *Only Human***

Jenny Diski’s *Only Human: A Divine Comedy* is a subversive, polyphonic rewriting of Sarah’s story that indiscriminately, and irreverently, draws on both the Jewish tradition – into which Diski was born – and Christianity. Through its intertwining of two strong voices – an unidentified narrator focusing on the biblical woman and God himself – it gives a complex picture of Abraham’s wife, turning the barren matriarch whom God provides with a child in her old age, into a paragon of tenacity in the face of adversity and of fierce resistance against a God who seeks to deprive her of the most crucial aspect of her life, the love that unites her with the first patriarch.

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In the Scriptures, Sarah is defined first and foremost by her reproductive capacities which are, precisely, lacking, as the first mention of her in Genesis 11:29-30 clearly indicates: “the name of Abram’s wife was Sarai. [...] Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.” She moreover seems to be disregarded by God, who, between Genesis 12:2 and 17:14, repeatedly addresses Abraham, promising him innumerable descendants, making a covenant with him, blessing him and his future offspring, without ever speaking to or including the matriarch. Only in Genesis 17:15-16 does God remember Sarah, yet still does not address her directly:

As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.

The closest semblance of a conversation between the Lord and Sarah takes place when the matriarch, after overhearing the three messengers’ renewed announcement of her imminent pregnancy to Abraham, is rebuked by the Lord because she denied laughing at the remarkable news. Finally, although Sarah does utter more words than most of her fellow biblical women and can show – as in the Hagar story – uncommon initiative and influence, her complete absence from the Akedah episode, during which her most precious son’s life is dangerously threatened, constitutes one of the loudest and most tragic silences of the Scriptures. Diski’s Only Human revisits this incident and, midrash-like, imagines its terrible consequences for Sarah, the woman’s life prior to it, and how the couple has come to that extreme situation.

Scholars like Schneiders and Fischer have endeavoured to redress the scriptural androcentric bias silencing Abraham’s wife and to give her a more prominent place in God’s covenant by depicting a positive, reciprocal relationship between a Sarah who wholly acknowledges the Creator’s control over her destiny and

99 See Genesis 12:2 and 7, 13:14-17, 15:5 and 18-21, and finally 17:2-14.
100 Following Genesis 17:5 and 15, Diski’s God renames Abram “Abraham,” and Sarai “Sarah.” As an unmistakable sign of disregard for, and opposition to, Abram and his divinity, however, both the human narrator and the matriarch stick to the original names. In this thesis, “Sarah” and “Abraham” will be used when referring to the biblical characters in their scriptural context – according to the most widespread use in the Judeo-Christian tradition. On the other hand, “Sarai” and “Abram” will be applied to designate the characters of Diski’s novel, to better foreground the distinction between the studied fiction and the original scriptural material.
101 Sarah’s first utterance in the Scriptures combines an undisguised reproach to God with a rather bold order that her husband is depicted to follow meekly: “Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, and Sarai said to Abram, ‘You see that the LORD has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.’ And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai” (Genesis 16:1-2).
acts “in full compliance with the Deity’s promise,” and a godhead that elects, supports and protects the barren woman. Diski’s *Only Human*, on the other hand, takes the opposite direction. Stressing Sarai’s exclusion from both men’s religious rituals and God’s plans, but also her own forceful refusal to acknowledge the existence of Abram’s invisible guide, it depicts an open war, fought over Abram’s love, between a highly perceptive matriarch and a very much “only human” godhead constantly confounded by his creatures. The celebration of Sarai, presented as the epitome of human resourcefulness, therefore goes hand in hand, in Diski’s fiction, with the subversive debunking of the Judeo-Christian authority.

Sarai’s position as an outsider in religious matters can be traced back, in *Only Human*, to her childhood, and the systematic omission of her name in the begettings during the family prayers to the Mesopotamian moon god Nanna:

Of course, there was always a pang at the final name that was never spoken. No mention of Sarai. Of the youngest, newest addition to the list. Of her. She knew, of course, that the women were not counted in the begettings, that she couldn’t be there. But there was always a split second when she half hoped, waiting in the breathing space after “Haran,” for her father to pronounce the name Sarai. Naturally, he couldn’t. He wouldn’t even have thought of it. (*OH*, p. 23)

The heroine begrudges this practice on two accounts. Sarai first resents being excluded from the divine blessings and the community of worshippers. Her childhood carving, in the family workshop, of wooden goddesses who specifically take care of her, and whose leader she subversively calls by her own name, symbolises her secret rebellion against this obvious instance of dumb silencing, while foreshadowing at the same time her adult conviction that gods are but human creations shaped in our image. This early barring from the sacred rituals will mark Sarai for life. Indeed, many decades later, when Abram laments its childlessness and the extinction of his name that it inevitably implies, she bitterly points out to him that all women, mothers or not, are systematically erased by men from the religious collective memory: “no one has ever recited my name in the begettings, and nor would they. I would have been

102 Schneider, *Mothers of Promise*, p. 28.
103 Abram indeed spontaneously conceives of his God as a “He,” which does not fail to confirm Sarai in her scepticism: “I saw him, but what I saw can’t be described. […] [H]e was a presence more than a figure, an air; a quality of light. There are no words, no picture that I could make of him.’ ‘Him?’ ‘Of course’” (Jenny Diski, *Only Human: A Divine Comedy* [London: Virago, 2001 (2000)], p. 132. All references are to this edition. Further cited in the text and abbreviated to *OH* in the quotations). Mocking Abram’s description of his allegedly invisible, ineffable God who just happens to be visibly masculine, the narrator sarcastically comments: “Of course. That much of this unpicturable vision would have been blindingly obvious. Of course” (*OH*, p. 132).
forgotten soon enough after my death, even if we had had children” (OH, p. 106). She thereby echoes Cheryl Exum’s denunciation of the “omitting [of] women’s names in genealogical lists,” which the religious studies scholar describes as a widespread scriptural strategy that “affirm[s] the paternal claim to offspring […] [and] entail[s] suppression or denial of the woman’s importance.” Speculating on the adult Sarai’s lack of implication in religious matters – which will turn into a fierce opposition when Abram converts to monotheism, his God happening to address him only –, the narrator explicitly roots this attitude in the woman’s ritual exclusion:

Religion did not go very deep with Sarai. She went along with the rituals and the regular worship, but she was always on the periphery. […] Perhaps because she was never fully part of the ritual, because her name was never included in the incantations, she found the world itself enough to account for life. (OH, pp. 116-117)

If, at night, the young girl often recites the begettings to herself and “add[s] a final ‘Sarai,’ like a sigh, to the list of Terah’s children” (OH, p. 23), filling in the silence where her name failed to be pronounced, it is not so much out of spiritual yearnings as out of the need to reaffirm her highly insecure sense of belonging to her family. Following the rather perplexing claim that Abraham makes about Sarah to king Abimelech in Genesis 20:12 – “she is […] my sister, the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife” – Diski’s Only Human portrays the matriarch as Abram’s half-sister. Born of an anonymous slave-girl whom Abram’s father, Terah, took as a concubine when she became pregnant, and who did not survive her daughter’s birth, Sarai secretly fears that she might not have as rightful a place as her brothers in the family, and might therefore not be loved as deeply as them by the people dearest to her:

Sarai was all the more eager to add her name to the latest generation of the descendants of Shem, because she knew she wasn’t entirely entitled to. Not just because she was a girl, but because she was not a full, proper sister to Nahor, Haran and her chosen Abram. Their mother, Emtelai, was not her real mother. […] Sarai called Emtelai mother, and believed herself to be completely accepted into the family. Even so, children think their thoughts. In her heart, she always knew that a line, as fine as the rarest silk, but a line nevertheless, existed between her brothers and herself. (OH, pp. 25-26)

Genesis 20:12 has often been overlooked in commentaries, categorized as one of the Bible’s numerous inconsistencies, or regarded as a lie that Abraham formulates to protect himself from any potentially deadly harm that the king might inflict on the patriarch in reprisal for his deception concerning Sarah’s marital status. However, in

104 Exum, p. 111.
her monograph on the four matriarchs, Catherine Chalier highlights the critical implications of the biblical woman’s in-between position for her identity construction:

Ainsi Sarah, à la fois soeur et épouse, […] tiendrait-elle les fils d’une difficile vérité: son absence d’assurance quant à sa place dans la généalogie et dans l’alliance – serait-elle plutôt sœur qu’épouse, ou l’inverse? – la vouant à une impossible certitude sur son identité.105

While for Chalier, Sarah’s doubts about her self and her perpetual uncertainty about her place, which preclude the possibility of defining anything or anyone as truly or absolutely “her own,” grant her the mobility that makes her receptive to her election by God,106 in Only Human, on the other hand, it precisely constitutes the breeding ground for Sarai’s rejection of religion. Indeed, for Diski’s heroine, the arbitrariness and insecurity of her situation rule out the possibility of divine intervention or even existence:

[As a young child alone in her bed in the dark, […] [s]he would think of Terah and Emtelai near by, and her brothers and of how she belonged to them, but then she would recall that she only nearly belonged to them, that by some accident she had been born to another mother, a woman without a name. And following this thought was the possibility that she might have been born into an entirely different family. Beggars, perhaps, or courtiers. The arbitrary nature of who she was had gripped and terrified her, […] and soon not just she but everything seemed quite accidental, and she sensed we were all lost, even adults, in a vast black purposeless place. […] She tried to think about the gods, and how they had ordered the world. […] But she knew it was nonsense. A story for children. Deeply, she knew that those gods didn’t exist. (OH, pp. 103-104)

If, as the human narrator formulates it, “in the process of growing up, of living in the way of the world, these thoughts […] stop […]” (OH, p. 104) for several decades, Sarai repressing her nihilistic certainties and adopting received behaviours and beliefs out of conformity, the analysis will nevertheless show how deeply and secretly the woman remains marked by the loss of her nameless mother. Only Human indeed depicts a Sarah haunted by the spectral silence of the absent mother, making her more vulnerable to the subsequent losses which inevitably punctuate her life. Yet, when God’s own desperate need for love threatens the only semblance of meaning that Sarai has managed to create for herself – her bond with Abram –, it is also that primal trauma and the atheistic convictions that it has engendered, which represent her best weapons against the divine menace. Mirroring, on the discourse level, this fight between the characters of Sarai and God to silence the other and erase him/her from

105 Chalier, p. 52.
106 Chalier, p. 52.
the love equation, is the fierce “story game”\textsuperscript{107} – as the editor of the sequel to \textit{Only Human} puts it – played by the two narrative instances who, contending for dominance, constantly interrupt each other in a great blurring of voices permeated with still more pregnant silences.

As these first explorations of the novels have emphasised, the corpus amply draws on the feminist theses developed in the previous chapter, by depicting silencing as a reality of the protagonists’ lives and a constant threat to be fought against. As a transition from this first part of the thesis to the second, which will analyse how the heroines struggle to give themselves a voice in reaction to their initial silencing, I will now briefly describe the major traditional feminist responses to the denounced limitation of women’s freedom of expression, and give a few early, general indications of how the novels, while being inspired by these theories, also seek to go further and suggest more nuanced answers.

\textbf{VII. Feminist Responses to Women’s Silencing: A Tradition Simultaneously Drawn on, and Challenged}

The manifestations of the silencing of women in discourse have had a profound impact on women’s self-understanding, for being excluded from the definition of humanity, being objectified and denied access to the position of speaking subject, or meeting systematically with one’s interlocutor’s indifference, necessarily hinders one’s process of self-definition. The essential role played by language and the formulation into stories of one’s experience in the construction of subjectivity – albeit unstable, fragmented, and in process – has continually been stressed.\textsuperscript{108} To quote Carol Christ:

\begin{quote}
without stories there is no articulation of experience. […] Without stories [a woman] cannot understand herself. Without stories she is alienated from those deeper experiences of self and world that have been called spiritual or religious. She is closed in silence. […] If women’s stories are not told, the depth of women’s souls will not be known. […] Since women have
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{108} Liz Yorke’s \textit{Impertinent Voices}, for instance, is devoted to the female poets’ coming to subjectivity through language. See also Rebecca Chopp: “language is also the site where our subjectivity is formed; we think and feel, we experience the world according to the categories given to us by language” (Chopp, p. 12).
not told their own stories, they have not actively shaped their experiences of self and world […] from their own perspectives.109

Feminists have therefore suggested various strategies to put an end to this silencing of women. These mostly fall into two main trends.110 Some argue that the solution is to be found in emphasising both genders’ common humanity and equality, and in furthering women’s access to expression and visibility in all areas of discourse. The advocates of this approach champion non-sexist, neutral language based on the systematic use of feminine terms beside the usual, masculine ones, or of morphologically unmarked nouns. In theological discourse, scholars adopting this approach strive to reintroduce women into the divine by alternating between male and female terms in descriptions of the deity, by drawing attention to female metaphors for God in the Bible, and by suggesting, like Irnintraud Fischer and Elisabeth Schüßler Fiorenza, genderfair interpretations that show how God’s promise includes women as fully as men.

Other feminists adopt an approach based on some form of separatism. They contend that foregrounding similarities between both genders stifles women’s distinctive voices, and that language, being too intrinsically or institutionally linked to patriarchy, is both alienating and inappropriate to convey the specific experiences and subjectivities of women. As Luce Irigaray formulates it, “[a] language which presents itself as universal, and which is in fact produced by men only, is this not what maintains the alienation and exploitation of women in and by society?”111 Such a view is defended, for instance, by Cheris Kramarae who, drawing on anthropologists Shirley and Edwin Ardener’s theories, argues that women belong to a “muted group” and, as such, are prevented by the dominant model from expressing their experience linguistically.112 Women therefore have, according to Kramarae, no option but to translate their experience into the dominant mode of communication or remain

109 Christ, Diving, pp. 1-4.
110 For a more detailed analysis of the debate in contemporary feminism about women’s alienation from language, see, for instance, Cameron. Julia Kristeva could be seen as embodying a third trend, since she rejects both the liberal feminist demand for equality and the separatist emphasis on women’s distinctiveness, and advocates a subversion of the whole masculine, phallocentric order of discourse and its gendered identities.
111 Luce Irigaray, quoted in Cameron, p. 128.
112 See, for instance, Kramarae et al. and Cameron.
silent.113 This predicament is summed up by Xavière Gauthier: “As long as women remain silent, they will be outside the historical process. But, if they begin to speak and write as men do, they will enter history subdued and alienated.”114 The solution to this silencing or alienation is claimed to reside in an emphasis on women’s distinctiveness, situated outside mainstream language. According to Hélène Cixous,

> [s]i la femme a toujours fonctionné “dans” le discours de l’homme, signifiant toujours renvoyé à l’adverse signifiant qui en annihile l’énergie spécifique, en rabat ou étouffe les sons si différents, il est temps qu’elle disloque ce “dans,” qu’elle l’explose, le retourne et s’en saisisse, qu’elle le fasse sien, le comprenant, le prenant dans sa bouche à elles, que de ses dents à elles elle lui morde la langue, qu’elle s’invente une langue pour lui rentrer dedans.115

Whether located in a different syntax conveying incompleteness and fluidity, in a language of the body, or even in some emphasis on plurality and connectedness, this distinctive voice has the merit of aiming at a revalorisation of feminine attributes and experiences deemed as denigrated in patriarchy. However, since, as Cameron states, “meaning [being] complex, plural and ultimately perhaps impossible to pin down, […] [t]here will never be a perfect fit between private experience and linguistic expression,”116 this “other voice” has often been described as a utopia. Moreover, it paradoxically risks reinforcing women’s silencing, precisely because it is so different from commonly accepted language, and therefore stands a chance of not being listened to or understood.

If these feminist theories have contributed in a highly significant way to the unveiling and denunciation of androcentric bias and of the causes, workings and harmful consequences of females’ silencing in various areas of society, they, however, fail in two important ways. Firstly, feminist theory, being often rooted in the widely held premise that “men control language and language controls us,”117 frequently seems to consider silencing as a fatality for women. The studied novels do not subscribe to such linguistic determinism or adopt such a defeatist attitude. They

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113 Dale Spender’s “man-made language” theory is rooted in similar premises and reaches the same conclusions: since men negate women’s experience through language, which they control, women either cannot speak or are forced to speak like men (Spender, in Kramarae et al., p. 195).
114 Xavière Gauthier, quoted in Glenn, pp. 28-29.
115 Cixous, in Clément and Cixous, p. 177.
116 Cameron, p. 141.
117 Cameron, p. 134. Cameron rejects this premise on which most feminist theories of language are based and argues that “the nature of communication is such that men cannot appropriate meaning nor completely control women’s use of language” (Cameron, pp. 143 and 161). Yaeger, in Honey-Mad Women, thinks along the same lines, and shows how, for instance, since males too can feel alienated from language, the assumption that language is male is simplistic.
portray female protagonists that strive to challenge oppression by appropriating language in a playful and critical way, thereby adopting the form of radical or emancipatory discourse Cameron and Yaeger celebrate, a discourse that “calls into question the common-sense transparency and fixedness of meaning.” They moreover often acknowledge and pay tribute to actual or symbolic literary foremothers, thus avoiding the flaw Yaeger regrets in much French feminism, which consists in “not look[ing] to the writing of the past for an understanding of the struggles that are either ongoing or have been won in women’s texts.

Secondly, if feminist criticism, by focusing almost exclusively on women’s silencing, highlights an essential aspect of female texts, it also artificially orients their reading towards reductive or at least partial interpretations, as Cameron and Yaeger deplore:

we have grown accustomed to noticing how socially imposed silences are figured in women’s texts, and we have begun to read these “unnatural silences” as an essential part of women’s plots, to emphasize the vulnerabilities, fragilities, interruptions, the absences in women’s writing, and to valorize these absences as the most characteristic aspect of women’s scripts. Translated into feminist theory, Olsen’s poignant discoveries [in Silences] have achieved the status of feminist myth, and this myth has begun to legislate what we see when we read women’s texts.

Feminist readings, in other words, tend to hide the more liberating aspects of female texts rooted not only in subversive language use, but also, and most importantly, in silences used as a powerful strategy of self-definition, empowerment or subversion. Even Yaeger, who challenges mainstream feminist thinking, and champions emancipatory discourse, fails to recognise the potentially empowering aspect of silence nourished by, giving birth to, or eloquently substituting for language.

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118 This, interestingly, corresponds to Cameron’s ideal of a feminist programme: “feminism cannot afford a theory that tells women only how they are oppressed as speakers: it must convince them also of ‘the strength and potential of their own language’” (Cameron, p. 161).
119 Cameron, pp. 171-172. Cameron draws on Trevor Pateman’s argument that people are encouraged to use “idle discourse” – which considers meaning as static and closed – and that changing the way one speaks, taking control of language, is a highly “politically progressive” and liberating act that can have important consequences on a person’s relationship to the world (Cameron, pp. 172-173).
120 Yaeger, p. 15. Yaeger, for instance, celebrates Mary Wollstonecraft and Emily Brontë, whom she sees as having already started “a discourse of inscriptive social change” through an aesthetic of play (Yaeger, p. 16).
121 “In many respects, […] women’s language has been treated as if it were a type of restricted code. And this evaluation has come both from feminists (who speak of the silence and inarticulacy of women and their culture, and of the inauthenticity with which they have been forced to express themselves) and by old fashioned gallants and chauvinists” (Cameron, p. 160).
122 Yaeger, p. 154.
Gubar’s analysis in “‘The Blank Page’ and the Issues of Female Creativity” can be seen as a first step towards the re-valuation of silence. It indeed scrutinises women’s blanks, not as a sign of vulnerability, but of rebellion, celebrating, in particular, Isak Dinesen’s subversive transformation of the male trope of the female blank page into “a mysterious but potent act of resistance” against male appropriation of the female body through writing. In Gubar’s article, however, woman’s voice, although subversive, remains confined to the blank page, and never reaches verbal expression. Muers’s *Keeping God’s Silence* represents another noteworthy attempt to redeem silence, which however does not concentrate primarily on women, but on God, and revalorises only one aspect of the phenomenon – the deity’s listening silence – as an answer to the silencing of both God and women.

Finally, Patricia Laurence’s “Women’s Silence as a Ritual of Truth” can be interpreted as merging Gubar and Muers’s reflections on silence, for it analyses the silences of listening, dreaming, observation or meditation of Austen, Brontë and Woolf’s female characters as strategies of resistance and ways of conveying truths.

My thesis, through concentrating on the self-affirmation of six biblical women, will attempt to demonstrate that silencing is not all there is to silence, and that more of its aspects deserve revalorisation than most studies tend to imply. I will also investigate how, since the traditional dichotomy between language as both meaningful and constitutive of identity, and silence as an obstacle to meaning making, is deconstructed in the studied novels, language and silence can be depicted at the same time as oppressive for women and as instrumental in their emancipation and construction of identity.

The analysed novels themselves carry on where most feminist texts dealing with female silences stop. Instead of leaving the silenced woman to her status of victim by rejecting the discourses containing oppressive silences as irredeemably

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123 Gubar, p. 259. Hugh Pyper published in his *Unsuitable Book* a related text, in which he analyses the silences in Dinesen’s story in conjunction with those of the Bible, and concludes with a plea to listen to the silences that betray male conspiracies and “that may evoke speech from those silenced by repression or betrayal” (Pyper, pp 47-48).

124 Muers argues that “[s]aying of the text that God hears it […] undercuts any claim that the text as such performs the decisive and final silencing of women. […] God’s act of hearing encompasses what is not explicitly said or named here, and to hear these silences is also to “hear with God’s ears” (Muers, p. 222).

patriarchal, or of valorising some reductive, essentially silent female identity, they show how the formerly mute female biblical characters can speak with a strong voice made of both empowering words and silences, as will now be emphasised.

The second part of this doctoral thesis will be divided into three sections presenting the case studies in pairs to better highlight how two novels based on the same forms of silence exploit them in unique ways. The sections themselves will be organised according to the evolution that can be perceived in the relationship between, on the one hand, the protagonists’ voice, and on the other hand, authority, in both its divine and maternal aspects, from Dinah’s and Mary Magdalene’s perception of their self-definition as hinging on a rehabilitation of the divine archetype of the great mother, to, in *The Book of Mrs Noah* and *Only Human*, the dissociation of the – still foregrounded – maternal dimension from God – depicted as partial, useless and laughable, if not utterly destructive – to, finally, *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Sisters and Strangers*, in which any form of authority is approached with suspicion and, as a consequence, not only God, but also the mother, are depicted – respectively in a tragic and a highly ironic manner – as being of little or no help, power or comfort to Offred and Eve.
PART II

VOICES DRAPED IN SILENCES
SECTION 1

ENCOUNTERING THE OTHER THROUGH SILENCES

Diamant’s *The Red Tent* and Roberts’s *The Wild Girl*
Il s'agit de lui redonner la vie, à cette mère, à notre mère en nous et entre nous. [...] Nous avons aussi à trouver, retrouver, inventer les mots, les phrases, qui disent le rapport le plus archaïque et le plus actuel au corps de la mère, à notre corps.

Chapter 1
“Far More to Tell”: Dinah’s Fight for a Voice as an Ode to the Plural Mother

In Diamant’s The Red Tent, which will be analysed in the following pages, as in Roberts’s The Wild Girl – which will be the object of the next chapter –, the heroines’ struggle against their silencing is tightly interwoven with a defence and rehabilitation of the goddess, whose name is equally in danger of being forgotten. This first pair of case studies will show that, although Dinah and Mary Magdalene both determinedly rebel against the silence imposed on them, they do not reject this complex phenomenon and its multiple facets en bloc. On the contrary, in liberating or empowering circumstances, they expressively experience silence – in the form of the ineffable for The Wild Girl, and of eloquent silence in both The Wild Girl and The Red Tent – as a path to communication and communion with the other – whether divine or human – and, thereby, as a means of self-knowledge.

Anita Diamant’s rewriting of Genesis 34 revolves around the reconfiguration of Dinah, the subjugated “victim” and “voiceless cipher” (RT, p. 1) in the Bible – to quote the words of Diamant’s protagonist – as a self-assertive heroine who speaks in a voice epitomising and forcefully celebrating as a source of power the realities and corresponding images that, in the traditional hierarchical binary oppositions of Western thought, are conventionally associated with the female sphere and debased,

such as nature, the moon and, most importantly, the body and the mother. In a grateful introductory address to her specifically female narratees – “you […] women with hands and feet as soft as a queen’s, with more cooking pots than you need, so safe in childbirth and so free with your tongues” (RT, p. 3) – the heroine of The Red Tent voices her sense of frustration that her “memory [has been] […] dust” (RT, p. 1) since the events of Shechem, through which “[t]he chain connecting mother to daughter was broken and the word passed to the keeping of men” (RT, p. 1).

As she clearly signals in the prologue, rejecting her unenviable, silencing victimization, and forcefully claiming that “[t]here was far more to tell” (RT, p. 2), Dinah will correct the “few mangled details” (RT, p. 2) recorded in the Bible about her alleged rape. She will fill in the blanks surrounding them by re-situating herself as a unique, beloved link in the essential female genealogy, that is, as both the long-awaited descendant of her mother Leah and her “mother-aunties” (RT, p. 3), who “filled [her] […] ears” (RT, p. 3) with their stories, “offerings of hope and strength poured out […] not for any god or goddess” but for her who was their “memory” (RT, p. 69), and as the lost ancestor that the narratees have been seeking to reconnect with:

The more a daughter knows the details of her mother’s life – without flinching or whining – the stronger the daughter. […] I can still feel how my mothers loved me. I have cherished their love always. It sustained me. […] And now you come to me. […] You come hungry for the story that was lost. You crave words to fill the great silence that swallowed me, and my mothers, and my grandmothers before them. […] I am so grateful that you have come. I will pour out everything inside me so you may leave this table satisfied and fortified. (RT, pp. 2-3)

In this passage answering Luce Irigaray’s call for women to assert that there is a genealogy of women – “pour ne pas être complices du meurtre de la mère”3 – and to situate themselves within this genealogy in order to conquer and keep their identities,4 Dinah empowers both herself as the guardian of some form of female collective memory, and her narratees, whom she believes will be “fortified” (RT, p. 3) by this rediscovery of their forgotten foremothers. To relate to her audience how “the stories of [her] […] life were forbidden to [her]” (RT, p. 3), Dinah therefore first launches – since it “is the only place to begin” (RT, p. 2) – into the tale of “the generation that raised [her]” (RT, p. 2), a tale of multiple mothers mirroring a plural goddess that

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2 See, for instance, Cixous, in Clément and Cixous, pp. 116-118.
tallies with the following contention by Irigaray: “[l]e mot mê me de déesse […] semble toujours impliquer un plusieurs, jamais l’unique. L’Un restant, depuis des siècles, confié à Dieu.”5

I. A Universe of Mothers and Goddesses: Femininity Plural

“I had four mothers, each of them scolding, teaching, and cherishing something different about me” (RT, p. 2). With these words, Diamant’s protagonist announces the strong emphasis on a maternal sphere characterised by plurality that she will place in the first part of her narrative, called “My Mothers’ Stories” (RT, p. 5), which revealingly stretches over as much as sixty-four pages. In the Bible, Rachel and Leah are divided by their opposite natures as the beloved, beautiful but barren wife, and the plain, unloved but extremely fertile partner, and by their rivalry for Jacob’s affection and for the larger male progeny. Relaying the common feminist argument that multiplicity lies “at the basis of the feminine […] while the basic drive of the ‘masculine’ is to unify, to rationalize, and to stabilize,”6 The Red Tent, by contrast, depicts the two matriarchs as sisters who, despite the inevitable tension caused by the sharing of Jacob’s love, build with Bilhah and Zilpah a strong sense of sisterhood and shared motherhood predominantly based on “the great mother […] who goes by many names” (RT, p. 157), around which their lives and identities revolve.

Basing her novel on the conception that Rachel, Leah and their relatives “were no Jews, [but rather] […] the proto-ancestors of the Jewish people, […] [who] weren’t necessarily monotheists,”7 Diamant depicts Jacob’s four wives as worshippers of the great goddess, which the French anthropologist Gilbert Durand describes as the most universal religious and psychological entity in his well-known introduction to archetypology.8 Such an artistic and spiritual choice situates The Red Tent within the

7 Anita Diamant, quoted in William Novak, “A Conversation with Anita Diamant,” Kerem: Creative Explorations in Judaism, Vol. 9 (2004), available at: www.kerem.org (accessed February 22nd, 2009). This belief is rooted in the biblical reference to household gods in Genesis 31, and “the prophets’ bitter denunciations, as well as […] the historic records of Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings, that [indicate that] popular worship of Asherah and Anath [was] not eradicated before the fall of the second temple” (Ostriker, Feminist Revision, p. 36).
feminist trend, started in the early 1970s, that intends to promote a female form of spirituality by reclaiming the idea of “some original, pro-woman, great goddess who goes back to Paleolithic times,” and through whom the female was symbolised “within and beyond humans,” women were “valued and promoted [...] as a gender group,” and “their particular interests as females” were addressed, until this “original matriarchy” “was overthrown by patriarchy and its female deity repressed, replaced by [...] male monotheism.” As the pioneer of goddess spirituality, C.P. Christ, defines it: “The re-emergence of the Goddess [...] is a new naming of women’s power, women’s bodies, women’s feelings of connection to nature, and women’s bonds with each other.”

Although none of Diamant’s female characters utters any bitter denunciation of monotheism, Dinah and her mothers all lament that the great mother, upon whom some have “turned their backs” (RT, p. 158), “is in danger of being forgotten” (RT, p. 157), and emphasise how important the preservation of her ancient, sacred ways is. They moreover consider with scepticism Jacob’s choice to bow down only to El, “a jealous, mysterious god, too fearsome (he said) to be fashioned as an idol by human hands, too big to be contained by any place” (RT, p. 61), a “cruel” (RT, p. 62), “alien and cold” (RT, p. 13) deity “of thunder, high places, and awful sacrifice” (RT, p. 13) that the women identify with “the glinting knife” in the “terrible story” (RT, p. 61) of how He demanded of Abraham that he kill his son, and only sent “rescue [...] at the last possible moment, when the knife was at Isaac’s throat” (RT, p. 62), a tale that Jacob revels in telling to his sons when he brings them “far from the tents of their mothers” (RT, p. 61), into the hills, to teach them fighting skills.

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10 Ruether, p. 300.
11 Ruether, p. 301.
12 Ruether, p. 274.
13 Ruether, p. 299. Ruether conveys her incredulity at this belief in the “primacy of a female deity” (Ruether, p. 274) that would have been worshipped “possibly worldwide, for most of human history” (Ruether, p. 299). The theologian rather believes that the powerful goddesses of Mesopotamia, Egypt and Greece developed with the first urban hierarchical societies, to establish the authority of new rulers (Ruether, pp. 301-303). In the Hebrew world itself, Ruether points out that the Canaanite goddess Asherah was also worshipped by men, and that nothing indicates that women specifically related to the goddess because it provided a divine counterpart to their condition as females (Ruether, p. 301).
14 Christ, *Diving*, p. 128.
In sharp contrast to this male divinity associated with elevation and weapons – that is, images and symbols linked to a heroic posture and what Durand calls the Diurnal Regime – the goddess venerated by the heroine’s four mothers goes together with images of connectedness, of intimacy with the mother and cyclical rhythms – which Durand classifies as Nocturnal.\(^{15}\) Such a polarized depiction coincides with Irigaray’s contention that “[e]n régime patriarcal, la religion s’exprime par des rites sacrificiels ou réparateurs. Dans l’histoire des femmes, la religion se confond avec la culture de la terre, du corps, de la vie, de la paix.”\(^{16}\) This (re)integration of the goddess into the history of Judaism can moreover be understood in the light of Irigaray’s claim that women need a divine counterpart to construct themselves both individually and collectively:

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\text{Si les femmes manquent de Dieu, elles ne peuvent communiquer ni communier entre elles. Il faut, il leur faut, l’infini pour partager un peu. […] Si je ne me rapporte pas à quelque horizon d’accomplissement de mon genre, je ne peux partager en protégeant mon devenir. […]
[S]ans divin qui lui convienne, la femme ne peut accomplir sa subjectivité selon un objectif qui lui correspond. […] Pour devenir femme, pour accomplir sa subjectivité féminine, la femme a besoin d’un dieu qui figure la perfection de sa subjectivité.}^{17}
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Rachel, Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah are united in and by their belief in the great mother, which celebrates the female body, sexuality and maternity,\(^{18}\) but they also build and value their individual selves as human reflections of the goddess. Each of Jacob’s wives can be analysed as an embodiment of, and symbolic variation on the traditional attributes of the female divinity.

Leah, for instance, perfectly incarnates “the power of the Goddess as the nurturer of life.”\(^{19}\) Jacob’s highly fecund first wife, who is constantly either pregnant, or nursing, is associated with the belly as both the stomach and the womb, which refer to sustenance and comforting intimacy, but also sexuality and procreative power: “Leah […] smelled of the yeast she handled daily, brewing and baking. She reeked of bread and comfort, and – it seemed to Jacob – of sex. He stared at this giantess, and his mouth watered” (\textit{RT}, p. 12). Finding fulfilment in both sexuality and maternity,

\(^{15}\) Durand, p. 59.
\(^{16}\) Luce Irigaray, “Une chance de vivre,” in Irigaray, \textit{Sexes et parentés}, p. 204.
\(^{17}\) Luce Irigaray, “Femmes divines,” in Irigaray, \textit{Sexes et parentés}, pp. 74 and 76.
Leah mirrors the two main facets of Inanna – spelt Innana in *The Red Tent* –, the Sumerian goddess of desire and fertility,\(^{20}\) and most important deity in the four sisters’ pantheon, whom Jacob’s first wife describes as “the center of pleasure, the one who makes women and men turn to one another in the night” (*RT*, p. 158). The eldest sister’s symbolic identity is moreover indissociable from one of the prime images of Inanna, the moon,\(^{21}\) for, emphasising the traditional association between women and the night star – based on “the lunar pattern in the female menstrual cycle”\(^{22}\) – Leah claims that she lives in complete harmony with the satellite:

> [s]he told […] how much she loved the white light, and […] spoke to the moon and called to her by name every month. […] [T]he moon was the only face of the goddess that seemed open to her because of the way the moon called forth the filling and emptying of her body. (*RT*, p. 57)

In the hands of Diamant’s narrator Dinah, even the barren Rachel is in the image of the great mother, and given a symbolic maternal identity. If the biblical story of Rachel already requires the key motif of water,\(^{23}\) in *The Red Tent*, this association with the element that, in goddess imagery, symbolises the female deity as giver of life, becomes an integral part of the selfhood of Jacob’s second wife. Not only does Diamant’s novel keep the scriptural motif of the well; it expands on it by highlighting how, when Rachel recounts her first meeting with Jacob, “her words spill […] out like water into sand” (*RT*, p. 7). It also connects the beauty of the woman’s “surprisingly dark” eyes to “the depth of” (*RT*, p. 8) the cavity that, in this arid environment, is synonymous with life, and attributes to her a remarkable liquid fragrance that carries maternal accents of intimacy and echoes Bachelard’s claim, in his study of the imagination of matter, that water lulls like a mother:\(^{24}\):

> Rachel smelled like water. Really! Wherever my aunt walked, there was a scent of fresh water. It was an impossible smell, green and delightful. […] Whenever one of the babies went missing, more often than not the little stinker would be found fast asleep on her blankets, sucking his thumb. (*RT*, pp. 9-10)


\(^{22}\) Jeannette King, p. 12.


Rachel’s divine-like maternal dimension is moreover reinforced by a constellation of other symbols of intimacy. The matriarch’s skin is not simply “golden” but “honeyed” (RT, p. 8), which evokes the bees’ nectar that, according to Durand, is the symbolic equivalent to breast milk and, as such, stands for the sweetness of regained intimacy. Her cheeks are “high and tight on her face, like figs” (RT, p. 9), these fleshy receptacles containing seeds that, through their resemblance to the womb, constitute one of the epiphanies of Inanna and, more generally, of the archetype of the mother. Beside this impressive array of images, Rachel’s association with the great mother is emphasised through her taking up of the symbolically significant function of midwife, thanks to which she becomes “a tenderhearted healer in the service of mothers” (RT, p. 47), and “a servant of women in the name of Anath, the healer” (RT, p. 48), another of the prominent Canaanite deities.

This literal and symbolic universe of the four sisters’, which so insistently rests on what the Western dichotomies identify as typically female – the body, the moon and the mother –, challenges the traditional equation of the feminine with passivity and subjugation. These women who pride themselves in their bodies reflecting the goddess’s creative power and who reaffirm their connection to nature and its cyclical rhythms, are highly determined, active daughters, wives and mothers who are repeatedly portrayed to question the authority of their male relatives and to know how to impose their will.

Accordingly, among the sisters, one of the favourite pastimes consists in “raking […] over the coals” (RT, p. 18) their father who, out of meanness, never acknowledged two of his daughters – Bilhah and Zilpah – born of his famed unbridled sexual urges, who beat and gambled away his last wife and whom his granddaughter Dinah consequently describes as a cowardly, superstitious, lustful “stingy pig” (RT, p. 2). In this context, Diamant’s reconfiguration of Genesis 31:19-35, which relates the theft of Laban’s household gods by Rachel, carries even deeper accents of defiance and empowerment than the original scene. It is carefully premeditated as a punishment for Laban’s wrongs – “Our father will suffer as he has made others suffer” (RT, p. 90) – and leads to a face-à-face between Laban and his daughter, in

26 Baring and Cashford, p. 195.
27 Durand, p. 296.
which Rachel manages to permanently deprive her father of his teraphim not only through trickery disguised as obedience, as in the Scriptures – “And she said to her father, ‘Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the way of women is upon me.’ So he searched, but did not find the household gods” (Genesis 31:35) –, but through a bold, direct confrontation:

I took them, Father. I have all of the teraphim. All of your gods. They are here. I sit upon them. The teraphim of our family now bathe in my monthly blood, by which your household gods are polluted beyond redemption. [...] Their magic has been turned against you. (RT, p. 118)

As she brandishes menstrual blood as a weapon, in ironic reference to the widespread taboo on what is considered as the harmful liquid element and the frightening femininity that should be avoided or exorcised by all means, Diamant’s Rachel stops Laban, like in the biblical source. But she also gives credit to that monthly blood for transferring control out of her father’s hands, into hers and her sisters’, which presents the feminine fluid as a powerful ally. If, as critics like Howard Eilberg-Schwartz or J.C. Exum emphasise, the traditional “designation of menstrual blood and the blood of parturition as unclean and polluting” or even deadly, “symbolically undermine[s]” “the potential connection between women and procreation,” in The Red Tent, by contrast, these substances are repeatedly depicted as purifying and as symbolising the female procreative capacities. Thus the birth blood is believed to be a “river of life” (RT, p. 41) possessing fertilizing properties, while the menses are regarded as Inanna’s “gift to woman” (RT, p. 158) which “cleans[es] the body of last month’s death, [and] prepar[es] the body to receive the new month’s life” (RT, p. 158). Such an emphatic positive outlook on blood contributes to the novel’s programmatic rehabilitation and empowerment of the female body and the feminine.

If Rachel, Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah do not submit to their father, they are not governed by their husband either. The relationship between the patriarch and his wives being largely based on mutual respect and equality, the only scene of wifely submission that Dinah ever witnesses between her parents – justified by Leah’s need for Jacob to purposefully sap Laban’s authority to redeem the old man’s last wife Ruti from the slavery he has sold her into – provokes complete amazement in the narrator,

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29 Durand, p. 120.
30 Exum, pp. 126-127.
who deems it contrary to nature: “Watching my mother submit like this was like a sheep hunting a jackal or a man nursing a baby” (RT, p. 85). Consequently, Ruti’s subservience and choice to commit suicide shortly afterwards is met with incomprehension and disapproved of by the heroine: “Why did she submit to Laban? Why did she not demand her sons’ respect? How could she find the courage to kill herself when she had no courage for life” (RT, p. 98)?

While they refuse to be dictated to, the four sisters do not hesitate to objectify their partner. Inspired by biblical passages which seem to indicate that the matriarchs did exercise some authority over their husband, Diamant depicts four sisters who on several occasions clearly reduce the patriarch to an object of sexual and reproductive desires. For instance, unlike in the Bible, the exchange of brides is not orchestrated by Laban to marry off the eldest daughter first, but by the sisters themselves, after Zilpah, who, as she revealingly formulates it, “want[s] to make th[e] river flow in a direction of her choosing” (RT, p. 30), manages to frighten her younger sister so much about her wedding night that the latter begs Leah to take her place – realising in this way the eldest sister’s wildest longing. As for Rachel’s setting up of the first sexual union between Jacob and Bilhah, which answers Bilhah’s wish to “become part of the great mother-mystery” (RT, p. 51) as much as Rachel’s own yearning for a child, it is represented as the wife’s indisputable prerogative, even more explicitly and emphatically than in the Bible:

Rachel sought out Jacob and asked that he sire a child upon Bilhah, in her name. This was not a request, for it was Rachel’s right to have a child of Jacob. There was no permission to seek or get. Jacob agreed. (Why would he not? Leah nursed her latest son and Rachel’s back had been turned to him for long months.) (RT, p. 52)

It is in this environment of empowered women deeply connected to their bodies, the micro- and macro-cosmic cycles, nature and the divine feminine of which they are reflections, that Diamant’s Dinah is born and evolves in complete harmony and fusion with her multiple maternal figures, until the events of Shechem precipitate her silencing, but also her indissociable fight to find her own voice, and to make it heard.

32 Like Rachel and Leah’s rather blunt requests to Jacob to sleep with their maids Bilhah and Zilpah in Genesis 30:3-4 and 9, and the episode in which Rachel sells Jacob away for a night to Leah, who claims her due by declaring to her man “‘You must come in to me; for I have hired you with my son’s mandrakes.’ So he lay with her that night” (Genesis 30:16).
II. “I Gave Voice to My Life”: On the Bliss and Burden of Silence, and the Healing Value of Testimony

A. “My Mothers’ Breath on Every Word”: In the Image of the (Great) Mother(s)

The story of Dinah, strictly speaking, which starts on page seventy-five, originally constitutes first and foremost a continuation of, and tribute to, her mothers’ and their own female ancestors’. She who describes the first years of her existence as evolving in a “world […] filled with mothers, […] new moons and good food” (RT, p. 83), where she “was caught up by strong arms every time […] [she] stumbled” (RT, p. 75), begins the account of her life by noting “I AM NOT CERTAIN whether my earliest memories are truly mine, because when I bring them to mind, I feel my mothers’ breath on every word” (RT, p. 75). This opening statement, which blurs the boundaries between generations and powerfully foregrounds again the chain connecting mothers to daughters, supports Cixous’s claim that

[dans la parole féminine comme dans l’écriture ne cesse jamais de résonner ce qui de nous avoir jadis traversé, touché imperceptiblement, profondément, garde le pouvoir de nous affecter, le chant, la première musique, celle de la première voix d’amour, que toute femme préserve vivante. La Voix, chant d’avant la loi, avant que le souffle soit coupé par le symbolique. […] Dans la femme il y a toujours plus ou moins de “la mère” qui répare et alimente; et résiste à la séparation.]

Accordingly, like her mothers, the heroine of The Red Tent is largely defined by her association with goddess imagery and her eagerness to reflect the great mother in the orientation that she gives to her early life. Not only does Dinah quickly learn to master and “enjoy” (RT, p. 140) the skills that honour the goddess as nurturer of life – “the alchemy of turning flour into bread, meat into stew, water into beer” (RT, p. 140) –, emulating in this way her biological mother Leah, but she is also depicted as being, as the old midwife Inna formulates it, “a child of water” (RT, p. 112) – not the sweet, gentle well water so closely linked to Rachel, but river water –, which draws Dinah “like a storyteller” (RT, p. 110), “lull[s]” her (RT, p. 111), holds her in its “embrace” (RT, p. 112), and whose “heady […], heavy and dark” scent she “recognize[s] […] the way [she knows] […] the perfume of [her] […] mother’s body” (RT, p. 110). This bond with the great mother as “the queen of the ocean and the patron of the rain” (RT,

33 Cixous, in Clément and Cixous, p. 172.
p. 158) is moreover combined in Diamant’s narrator with yet another, through Dinah’s entering upon midwifery as a young girl. Initiating her niece-daughter into medicinal herbs and taking her as her apprentice, Rachel gives Dinah the opportunity to mirror Anath the healer-goddess, like she herself does. This connection with the goddess’s water imagery and protective role for women is dramatically highlighted and reinforced as, in the passage that is probably the most representative of the novel’s emphasis on a rehabilitated human and divine feminine, the heroine is received into the circle of women through a menarche ritual performed in honour of Innana. The specific likeness of the goddess that Dinah sees in the dream crowning this celebration – and supposed to reveal the deity under whose aegis her life is placed – is Taweret, the Egyptian “water horse”-goddess (RT, p. 222) who protects children and women in labour, and “gives mothers their milk” (RT, p. 173).

The central scene of “the Opening” (RT, p. 159) describes how Dinah is “welcomed into the woman’s life with ceremony and tenderness” (RT, p. 159) by her mothers, who lovingly prepare her with henna, perfume and wine, and greet her in the red tent, this welcoming enclosed space where they gather for the duration of their menses to rest, “rejoice in the dark of the moon, […] [and] join [their] […] body’s cycle with the repetition of life” (RT, p. 45). Through this initiation, Diamant’s novel echoes Irigaray’s belief in the need for women to be able to rediscover their faithfulness to the micro- and macrocosmic rhythms34 and to get together in order to free themselves from the roles, gestures and rivalry that society assigns them.35 It also indirectly responds to the feminist philosopher’s call for the religious representation and celebration of the main steps in a woman’s existence,36 and for such ceremonies to be collective:

> Ne manque-t-il pas aux femmes […] d’avoir connu et vécu ensemble l’initiation à leur sexualité? […] La petite fille devient femme et mère seule. […] Ce poids de solitude reste aux femmes. […] Elles s’initient peu ensemble à leur devenir femmes.37

Performed with a frog dagger-teraphim blending the goddess’s lunar aspect – the frog swelling like the moon and metamorphosing in distinct phases38 – and a

pronounced maternal side – she holds in her “wide mouth […] her own eggs for safekeeping” ([RT], p. 172) –, this “sacred business of women” ([RT], p. 159), as Leah calls it, can be analysed as a euphemised sacrifice. The hymen of the young woman is offered up to the great mother and her “first blood […] return[ed] […] to the earth” ([RT], p. 159), “the womb of Innana” ([RT], p. 158), so that the goddess grants the heroine fertility:

My mothers gathered around. […] Rachel’s voice behind me broke the silence. “Mother! Innana! Queen of the Night! Accept the blood offering of your daughter, in her mother’s name, in your name. In her blood may she live, in her blood may she give life.” ([RT], p. 172)

This ritual, revealingly designated as the “ancient covenant of earth, blood, and the sky” ([RT], p. 174), is meant as a female counterpart to the circumcision marking the alliance between God and men. It characteristically associates not only procreativity, but also sexuality, with the sacred, for this Opening is experienced by Dinah as an introduction into sensual pleasure: “it seemed to me that the Queen herself was lying on top of me, with Dumuzi her consort beneath me. I was like a slip of cloth, caught between their lovemaking, warmed by the great passion” ([RT], p. 173).

Such words, inspired by the myth of the sacred marriage between Inanna and her divine partner Dumuzi,39 “whose love ensure[s] an abundance of dates and wine and rain” ([RT], p. 81), testify to the “religious sanction for sexual desire”40 traditionally provided by the rites related to goddesses such as Inanna – a sanction inexistent or, according to the feminist argument, lost, in Judaism41 —:

Sexual intercourse and giving birth were two channels through which the divine energy of the goddess poured into life. […] Sexuality was the vehicle of bringing life into the world and was a sacred act. It was also sacred because the ecstasy that accompanied it was the nearest experience to the state of bliss associated with the divine existence of the goddesses and gods.42

38 Durand, p. 363.
39 Baring and Cashford, pp. 145-146.
41 Although, as Howard Eilberg-Schwartz points out in an article devoted to the body in the Jewish faith, “one generally does not find the tendency toward sexual asceticism within Judaism as in other traditions such as Christianity” and “[n]or does the Hebrew Bible or subsequent rabbinic tradition treat sexuality as a consequence of ‘a fall’” (Eilberg-Schwartz, in Beal and Gunn, p. 36), commentators, including Eilberg-Schwartz or T.R. Wright, highlight a form of suspicion or, as Tikva Frymer-Kensky formulates it, a “desacralization of sexuality” (Tikva Frymer-Kensky, quoted in Wright, *The Genesis of Fiction*, p. 125) in the history of Judaism, perceptible, among others, in “the impurity laws, requiring all evidence of sexual activity to be removed before approaching the Temple” (Wright, *The Genesis of Fiction*, p. 125).
42 Baring and Cashford, p. 197.
This life hinging on a particularly intense relationship with the multiple maternal figure, in which the “days [take] […] shape in relation to the waxing and waning of the moon” (RT, p. 175), however, abruptly comes to an end when Dinah, discovering another form of intimacy – the silent complicity between lovers –, is led to put between herself and her mothers a distance that, while threatening to silence her, also ultimately enables her to find her own voice.

**B. From the Eloquent Silence of Intimacy to the Silencing of the Victim**

If Irigaray, like Cixous, asserts that women always speak with the mother, she also specifically foregrounds that “[c]et avec elle […] doit tendre à mettre la parole entre, non à rester dans une fusion indissociable: tissées ensemble. Cet avec doit chercher à devenir un avec soi.”43 Such is precisely Dinah’s trajectory in *The Red Tent* as soon as, during a trip to Hamor’s palace to assist the king’s labouring concubine, the protagonist meets prince Shalem, and the two young people, experiencing love at first sight, lay the foundation for their story with “eloquent silence.”

Conveying the unconventional message that “parfois c’est la parole qui est la lacune du silence,” eloquent silence either is deliberately chosen because it is perceived as more eloquent than words, or – as in the first meeting between Dinah and Shalem – simply arises as the only possible response in a specific situation.45 If, as will be illustrated in the analysis of *The Wild Girl*, eloquent silence can take the more restricted form of meaningful pauses46 in speech fighting wordiness and pretences at completeness, it can also, often in connection with “speaking” body-language, totally supplant the linguistic code in an interaction when, through deep bonding and

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44 Le Breton, p. 13.
45 Michal Ephratt has devoted an article to this form of silence, which he defines as “an active means chosen by the speaker to communicate his or her message” (Ephratt, p. 1913). In this article, he suggests an analysis of the roles of eloquent silence in Jakobson’s model of the communicative functions of language. Ephratt’s definition of eloquent silence, however, is much broader than mine. It includes, for instance, the morphological zero sign – that is, the meaningful omitting of morphological material –, silences marking turn-taking, or the silence expected as an answer to a rhetorical question.
46 The eloquent pauses mentioned here have to be differentiated from other types of pauses which, although they may also convey some meaning – studied, mainly, by linguists – are not relevant for this study: the micro-pauses necessary for the speaker to draw breath or for the differentiation and intelligibility of sounds into words, sentences and ideas, and the turn-taking pauses in conversation.
intimacy, words are rendered useless, or even perceived as a hindrance to communication:

He was golden and beautiful as a sunset. […] 
[H]is eyes sought the answer to a question I did not fully understand. 
[…] I wanted to run, and yet I did not wish to end this strange agony of confusion and need that came upon me. I said nothing. 
He was disconcerted, too. […] 
It amazes me to think of all that happened in the space of a silent breath or two. […] 
Shalem […] made me dumb and weak. […] 
He saw me color and his smile widened. My awkwardness vanished and I smiled back. And it was as though the bride-price had been paid and the dowry agreed to. It was as though we were alone in our bridal tent. The question had been answered. (RT, pp. 183-184)

Plunging headlong into her newly discovered, overpowering longing for a man, Dinah starts to sever the umbilical cord with her mothers: “I discovered that I was separate, opaque, and drawn into an orbit of which they had no knowledge. I delighted in the discovery of my solitude and protected it” (RT, p. 185). While the heroine spins out love’s sweet dream in Shalem’s arms, thanks to the intervention of the prince’s Egyptian mother Re-nefer, who takes “care that [the young lovers] […] should know nothing of the world and that the world should give [them] […] peace” (RT, p. 191), tragedy brews between Jacob’s clan and Hamor’s house. Simon and Levi’s jealousy combines with Jacob’s reluctance to allow his daughter to take her fate into her own hands – to quote Hamor, the patriarch “does not like to lose control of his family’s fate” (RT, p. 196) –, and with Leah’s blind opposition to Dinah’s union, caused by fear of abandonment, as Dinah clearly perceives: “I wonder if [my mother] […] thought of me at all then. […] [H]er words spoke only of the loss of a daughter, gone to the city where she would […] forget her mother” (RT, p. 195).

When, after slaughtering Shalem, but also Hamor and all their male subjects, Simon and Levi bring a Dinah gagged and bound “like a sacrificial goat” (RT, p. 204) back to her mothers, thereby snatching their sister from the eloquent silence of lovers and initiating her silencing within her own family, the protagonist forcefully voices her rebellion against the status of helpless victim imposed on her. This status largely contributes to Dinah’s experiencing her partner’s loss as trauma, defined by Laurie Vickroy as “a response to events so overwhelmingly intense that they impair normal emotional or cognitive responses and bring lasting psychological disruption.”

According to B.A. Van der Kolk and Onno Van der Hart, “a feeling of helplessness,

47 Vickroy, p. ix.
of physical or emotional paralysis, is fundamental to making an experience traumatic: the person was unable to take any action that could affect the outcome of events.\footnote{B.A. Van der Kolk and Onno Van der Hart, “The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma,” in Cathy Caruth (Ed.), Trauma: Explorations in Memory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 175.}

Driven by a “hatred” and “rage” (RT, p. 206) specifically sparked off – as she purposefully remarks – by her confinement into passivity, Dinah faces her male relatives in a pivotal scene where her usual nocturnal symbols of intimacy and connectedness give way to diurnal, heroic images of division, fire, thunder and even a “wolking down” of her traditional ally, the moon:

> Fire shot from my eyes. I might have burned them all to a cinder with a word, a breath, a glance. [...] “Jacob,” I howled, summoning him by name, as though I were the father and he the wayward child.  
> Jacob emerged from his tent, trembling. [...] I saw his guilt before he had time to deny it.  
> “Jacob. [...] You have lied and connived, and your sons have murdered righteous men.” [...]  
> “Jacob,” I said, in a voice that echoed like thunder, [...] “Jacob,” I howled, and the moon vanished. [...]  
> “You are unclean and you are cursed,” I said. [...] Then I turned my back upon him, and he was dead to me.  
> I cursed them all. [...]  
> I walked away from [...] everything that had been home. I walked away from love as well, never again to see my reflection in my mothers’ eyes. But I could not live among them. (RT, pp. 206-207)

As Ann Finding comments, “with these words Dinah is transformed into an almost godlike agent of retribution”\footnote{Ann Finding, Anita Diamant’s The Red Tent: A Reader’s Guide (New York/London: Continuum, 2004), p. 40.} whose power is amply demonstrated when she relates how, following her curse, calamities relentlessly hit her family.\footnote{Jacob’s gift with animals deserts him; Rachel expires “in agony” giving birth to Benjamin “on the highway” (RT, p. 208); Leah progressively loses the use of all her limbs and dies “mortified” (RT, p. 210); Zilpah is carried off by fever and her body breaks into pieces when Jacob smashes the last of her beloved household gods; and Dinah’s father disinherits “the most deserving of his sons” (RT, p. 209) before beating his youngest wife – who becomes smaller and thinner every day, until she simply vanishes one morning – when Reuben and Bilhah yield to their love for each other.}

The remarkable reversal of symbolism in Dinah’s anathematising speech foregrounds the protagonist’s temporary rejection of the female sphere in which she has always evolved, a female sphere that has let her down by allowing both violence, fear and jealousy to supplant love, and men to turn blood, the very element of life, around which Dinah’s existence used to revolve, into a harmful “river” that stings and burns Dinah’s breasts and thighs, and in which the heroine “drown[s]” (RT, p. 203) literally, as she discovers her dead lover by her side, and oneirically, in the nightmares that keep haunting her. Walking away from her silencing by Jacob, who decrees that...
his daughter’s name is taboo\textsuperscript{51} in his house, Dinah actually gets trapped into another. As she decides to join Re-nefer and follow her to Egypt to start a new life in the house of the older woman’s brother, the pregnant heroine discovers that her “new mother” (\textit{RT}, p. 215) has erased Shalem from their history:

> She was kind and I loved her, and yet something seemed wrong. [...] I realized that [...] [she] had not named her son, my husband, saying nothing of his murder, nor of my brothers and their deception. We never wept or mourned over Shalem, nor did she tell me where my beloved was buried. (\textit{RT}, p. 215)

By forbidding Dinah to give voice to her trauma or even to simply mention her dead lover – out of fear of letting herself be overwhelmed by grief, but also of possible reprisals –, Re-nefer foists on her daughter-in-law a burden of secrecy. She thereby denies Dinah access to a central part of her memory and identity – as Derrida formulates it, “[l]e secret, c’est la cendre même de l’archive”\textsuperscript{52} – and, as a consequence, drastically silences her: “The horror was to remain unspoken, my grief sealed behind my lips. [...] I was bound to the emptiness of the story she told” (\textit{RT}, p. 215). If the tragedy of Shechem has eventually shattered the sense of belonging that used to be at the root of Dinah’s subjectivity, and consequently filled the narrator with an acute feeling of loneliness and exile, Diamant’s heroine seizes the opportunity to (re-)inscribe herself as a unique link into the chain connecting mother to daughter, through her experience of maternity, the resuming of what she believes to be her vocation – midwifery –, and testimony, finding in this way her own voice.

\section*{C. At One with the Mothers: Maternity, Midwifery, Testimony}

Illustrating Irigaray’s claim that “[l]a mère, la fille l’a en quelque sorte dans la peau, [...] dans le mystère de sa relation à la gestation, à la naissance et à son identité sexuelle,”\textsuperscript{53} \textit{The Red Tent} depicts how, while missing more than ever her mothers’ comforting faces, hands and voices as her labour comes, Dinah saves both her life and

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item As Allan and Burridge define it, taboo “refers to a proscription of behaviour for a specifiable community [...] in specifiable contexts” (Keith Allan and Kate Burridge, \textit{Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language} [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], p. 11). Taboos include bans on the naming of “powerful earthly persons,” which is believed to put “[p]eople [...] at physical risk” (Allan and Burridge, p. 1). Jacob’s forbidding his family to name Dinah can be understood in this sense, for the patriarch’s conduct is motivated by his fear that summoning the memory of the daughter who cursed his entire house will unleash – or aggravate – her malediction.
\end{enumerate}
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her son’s by reviving her female parents’ know-how and instructing the local midwife Meryt to carry out an episiotomy when the baby comes feet first. It also emphasises how the heroine feels the presence of her mothers when she holds her baby in her arms for the first time, and is, in a dream, saluted as an accomplished midwife and handed on the torch by Rachel and Inna, who present her with the tools of the midwife’s kit, “a pair of golden bricks” and “a silver reed,” which she accepts “solemnly, proudly” (RT, p. 227). Through her baby boy Re-mose, Dinah becomes, like her mothers before her, the cosy, protective, nurturing lap, a woman who is “one and the same” (RT, p. 228) with the goddess, and whose “heart ha[s] grown in wisdom, for [she] […] underst[ands] what it [i]s to be a mother” (RT, p. 233).

After eight years exclusively centred “around [her] […] son” (RT, p. 229) and predictably described by the narrator as “filled with purpose and pleasantness” (RT, p. 233), when Re-mose is “welcomed into the world of men” (RT, p. 229) and taken away from the heroine to start his training as a scribe, Dinah is suddenly ashamed of having “turn[ed] [her] […] back on the lessons taught to [her] […] by Rachel and Inna, and thus upon their memory” (RT, p. 238). She decides to reconnect with her mothers by teaching Meryt “Inna’s methods, her way with a knife, her tricks at manipulation […] [,] her use of herbs […] [and her] mothers’ ways with nettle, fennel, and coriander” (RT, pp. 238-239), and by attending upon women giving birth with her, becoming, through her ancestors’ wisdom and her personal skills, a famed midwife.

Equally enabling Dinah to symbolically relate again to her mothers while shaping her life away from them, is her striking up of bonds through which she finds the “empathic listener[s]” who enable her to free herself from her silencing by Re-nefer, and to come to terms with her traumatic past – that is, to experience what Vickroy calls “the healing […] value of testimony”54 –, for, according to the American literary scholar,

trauma fragments memory and identity, thereby alienating individuals from their own experience and from others. For traumatic memory to lose its power as a fragment and symptom and be integrated into memory, “a process of constructing a narrative […] has to be set in motion” (Felman and Laub 69).55

54 Vickroy, p. 6.
55 Vickroy, p. 174.
As Dori Laub and Judith Herman argue, such a process must precisely be envisaged “within the context of relationships.”

The first of Dinah’s salutary relations can be analysed as an encounter with the female counterpart of Osiris – the Egyptian god of the dead, cut to pieces by Seth and revived by Isis –, thanks to which Dinah understands that the story of her life remains to be created and told. Meeting up by chance with her grandmother Rebecca’s old messenger Werenro, who was declared dead many years ago – when a few bones were sent to Rebecca –, and who now appears as a veiled blind singer rumoured to have “escaped the jaws of Anubis and won a second life” (RT, p. 251), Dinah hears from this echo of her youth the account of how, since she was raped, beaten and left for dead by three strangers, she has been “dead,” for “[t]here is nothing in my heart. I care for no one, and for nothing” (RT, p. 255). Encouraged by Werenro’s poignant confessions and sincere eagerness to know her younger friend’s past, Dinah shares her story, breaking the bondage of silence with a testimony that she experiences as profoundly freeing:

Without hesitation, I told her everything. I […] gave voice to my life. In all of my years, I had never before spoken so much or so long, and yet the words came effortlessly, as though this were something I had done many times before. […]
It was not difficult. Indeed, it was as though I had been parched and there was cool water in my mouth. I said “Shalem” and my breath was clean after years of being foul and bitter. I called my son “Bar-Shalem,” and an old tightness in my chest eased.
I recited the names of my mothers, and knew with total certainty that they were dead. I leaned my face into Werenro’s shoulder and soaked her robe in memory of Leah, Rachel, Zilpah and Bilhah. (RT, p. 255)

Mourning for her lost mothers, Dinah re-inscribes herself in her female lineage, as can be perceived in both Werenro’s response, and the heroine’s interpretation of it: “‘You are not like me. Your grief shines from your heart. The flame of love is strong. Your story is not finished, Dinah,’ she said, in the accents of my mothers. Not ‘Den-ner’ the foreign midwife, but ‘Dinah,’ a daughter beloved of four mothers” (RT, p. 256). The protagonist of The Red Tent then carries on her journey towards the retrieval of speech and the finding of her own voice with the midwife Meryt, who comes to regard Dinah as a daughter. Receiving the heroine’s testimony with profound gratitude for having been chosen as “the vessel into which [she] […] pour[s] this story of pain and strength” (RT, p. 298), the older woman liberates the narrator from “the weight of the past” that used to “crush […] [her] heart” (RT, p. 299).

56 Dori Laub and Judith Herman, quoted in Vickroy, p. 22.
Finally, it is also with a man that Dinah reawakens to voice. If the relation with Shalem was characterised by the shyness and hotheadedness of youth, the protagonist’s second love, by contrast, is defined by the assurance and tranquillity of maturity. The narrator’s story with the carpenter Benia however shares with her first, tragic passion its rootedness in eloquent silence, for not only does Dinah reply to the craftsman’s advances with a silence that betrays her responsiveness – “I said nothing. […] Although I had not said a word, the sound of his voice and the gentleness of his words had moved me” (RT, p. 245) –, but the lovers also seal their union without a word:

We stood like that, hand in hand and smiling like fools without speaking. […] I was surprised by my own certainty, but I did not hesitate. We walked through the streets, side by side, for what seemed a very long time, saying nothing. […] As we walked, I recalled my mothers’ stories about hennaed hands and songs for the groom and bride on their way to the bridal tent. I smiled to think of myself as […] walking toward my own marriage bed. (RT, p. 270)

The physical union with Benia “unties secret knots created by years of loneliness and silence” and makes Dinah feel like “a new soul, reborn in the taste of his mouth, the touch of his fingers” (RT, p. 272), so that when the heroine “give[s] voice to the full story” for the third time in her life, it becomes “only a story from the distant past” (RT, p. 299).

As Dinah reaches the autumn of her existence, she prides herself on having found stability and contentment in a domesticity rooted in a “house of […] [her] own” (RT, p. 277), in which she “cho[o]se[s] and […] serve[s]” (RT, p. 273), a domesticity revolving around Benia, “the rock upon which [her] […] life [stands] […] firm” (RT, p. 300), and her activity as a midwife, thanks to which the protagonist enjoys “the feel of newborn flesh, the smiles of new mothers” (RT, p. 277) and the satisfaction of transmitting her mothers’ skills to Meryt’s daughter-in-law Shif-re and granddaughter Kiya, who become “sister and daughter” (RT, p. 302). As Dinah’s four mothers were present by their daughter’s side to celebrate her menarche, so they are when, with her friend Meryt’s death, she becomes “the wise woman, the mother, grandmother, and even great-grandmother of those around” (RT, p. 302) her, for Zilpah, Bilhah, Rachel and Leah all successively appear to the heroine to honour her, in dreams reflecting one last time their individual symbolic identities. Accordingly, Rachel leads Dinah “through a warm rain that wash[es] [her] […] clean as a baby” and makes her wake up “smelling as though [she has] […] bathed in well water” (RT, p. 301), while Leah,
the quintessence of fertility and maternal warmth, specifically comes to Dinah at the time of her menopause:

It was the first time my body failed to give the moon her due. I was past giving life, and my mother, who had borne so many children, came to comfort me.

[…] “You are the grandmother, giving voice to wisdom. Honor to you,” my mother Leah said, touching her forehead to the ground before me, asking forgiveness. I lifted her up, and she turned into a swaddling baby. Holding her in my arms, I begged her pardon for ever doubting her love, and I felt her pardon in the fullness of my heart. (RT, pp. 301-302)

This oneiric reconciliation completes the heroine’s spiritual reconnection with her mothers and her reaffirmation of her place in the ancestral female genealogy, as a unique link, with her own history and voice. The concluding metaphorical reversal of roles moreover conveys Dinah’s feeling that she now is the one responsible for the survival, growth and transmission of the memory of her female lineage. This housewifely peace that Dinah believes she has found, however, actually hides further suffering and unrest, as the heroine still needs to address her silencing within Jacob’s house, where her “name [i]s blotted out, as though she ha[s] never drawn breath” (RT, p. 290). When her brother Joseph resurfaces to beg her to go with him to their father’s deathbed, Diamant’s protagonist is precisely given this opportunity, which she can be seen to only partly seize, as will be shown in the third part of this doctoral thesis.
Chapter 2
Another Relationship with the Word: Mary Magdalene’s Quest for Identity and God

After exploring how Diamant gives in The Red Tent a strong voice to Dinah through the rehabilitation of the female sex and the (re)introduction into the Jewish faith of the archetypal entity of the great goddess, I will now examine Roberts’s The Wild Girl, which applies an analogous project to the Christian tradition and rests on similar forms of silence, yet adopts a different tone and a more nuanced, subversive approach to the divine in its feminine and masculine manifestations.

The title of this chapter announces the many ways in which Mary Magdalene’s account of her life – which focuses on her divine revelations and meeting with Jesus – revises the Bible from the Creation to John’s apocalyptic visions in Revelation, testifying to the heroine’s subversive voice. First, appropriating two genres canonically or traditionally restricted to men, the Gospel and the narrative of personal development, Roberts’s female narrator shares with her reader her initiation into the sacred and her quest for selfhood, both of which being tightly interconnected and

1 Luce Irigaray, “Préambule,” in Irigaray, Sexes et parentés, p. 7.
2 At the beginning of her 1991 monograph on the representation of female subjectivity in fiction, Sally Robinson observes that narratives of selfhood “are culturally coded as male” (Sally Robinson, Engendering the Subject: Gender and Self-Representation in Contemporary Women’s Fiction [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991], p. 31).
reflecting thereby the Gnostic belief that “self-knowledge is knowledge of God.”
Moreover, distinctive mystical accents in the protagonist’s spiritual initiation convey a unitive experience with God not only in the soul, but also in the body, that displaces both reason and language, and foregrounds a positive valuation of silence. Finally, the chosen title also refers to Mary Magdalene’s portrayal of her spiritual and carnal union with a Word incarnate fully embracing the feminine – in the image of God his “Mother and Father” (WG, p. 109) – and as much in need of salvation as any other human, which challenges the orthodox depiction of the life and teaching of Jesus as well as the widespread distrust of the (female) body and sexuality in the Christian world. The following analysis of The Wild Girl will hinge on these various points, and demonstrate how Mary Magdalene’s strong prophetic voice, through both words and empowering forms of silence – especially experiences of the “ineffable” and eloquent silences – suggests representations of the female and the divine that question and transcend traditional dualisms.

In the first part, I have shown how the young, rebellious Mary Magdalene flees from what she perceives as women’s silent and submissive destiny in matrimony and, refusing to be silenced into any monolithic, stereotypical identity, deliberately plays with and subverts the pure/impure, silent virgin/wild whore dichotomies. The relative freedom and power that the narrator claims to enjoy at that time conceal, however, a form of self-negation, Mary Magdalene hiding behind a “cloak of indifference” (WG, p. 45) and pretence in order to satisfy her clients’ needs, and disregarding her body and sexuality. Dealing with this issue in Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un, Luce Irigaray argues that, in their traditional societal roles of mother, virgin and prostitute, women are systematically denied access to their pleasure:

\[ \textit{Mère, vierge, prostituée, tels sont les rôles sociaux imposés aux femmes. Les caractères de la sexualité (dite) féminine en découlent: valorisation de la reproduction et du nourrissage; fidélité; pudeur, ignorance, voire désintérêt du plaisir; acceptation passive de l’”activité” des hommes; séduction pour susciter le désir des consommateurs, mais s’offrant comme support matériel à celui-ci sans en jouir; … Ni comme mère, ni comme vierge, ni comme prostituée, la femme n’a droit à sa jouissance.} \]

Moreover, because of her artificial, distorted relationship with men, whom she despises for their need “to be managed and spoilt” (WG, p. 32) and “their quick satisfaction” (WG, p. 32), Mary Magdalene regards being on the receiving side as a

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3 B.A. Pearson, quoted in Marjanen, p. 21.
demonstration of weakness and passivity. The defensive, trenchant behaviour that she permanently adopts as a consequence repeatedly results in conflicts with her foil and sister Martha – the embodiment of tranquil strength – and makes the narrator consider Jesus with suspicion when she first beholds the young man who, with his womanly manners, challenges her conceptions of genders and of sexual difference:

I looked at the man who was speaking. He seemed to me quite ugly. […] Then I became aware of his energy. […] His gestures disconcerted me at first, and I realized why: he had the grace of a woman. The way he bent forward to listen, the way he used his hands, letting them point and fall and gesticulate, seemed to me the way of a woman; the way he leaned his head first on one side and then the other, the way he reclined at will, letting his arms drop and his mouth relax, was utterly feminine. He was like me, and I was not sure I approved. I thrust up my chin, squared my shoulders, took a step forward. (WG, pp. 33-34)

This extract, which prefigures the Saviour’s teaching about the marriage of the male and female in each human, is emblematic of Mary Magdalene’s original state of ignorance and need to be awakened to the true nature of her self, creation and the divine – “awakening” suggesting, as C.P. Christ remarks in her study of female spiritual quest in women writing, “that the self needs only to notice what is already there […] [i] that the ability to see or to know is within the self, once the sleeping draft is refused.”

Mary Magdalene’s initiation with Jesus will entail a rediscovery of, and renewed respect for, her corporeal dimension, the resacralization of the body and the feminine being as programmatic in The Wild Girl as in Diamant’s The Red Tent. Through her relationship with Christ, Roberts’s heroine will rise above the stereotypical functions in which women are felt to be traditionally trapped and, getting access to sensual pleasure, both find the divine in her and move on to a new affirmation of her selfhood. She who ran away from matrimonial life will discover another form of marriage governed by no outside authority, but based exclusively on total equality as well as reciprocal giving and receiving between the two beneficiaries.

5 Christ, Diving, p. 18.
I. Mary Magdalene’s Introduction into the Ineffable Divine

A. A Voluptuous Dissolution of the Self and Bittersweet Feeling of Exile

That Jesus’ arrival in Mary Magdalene’s life unmistakably marks the decisive turning point which will enable the protagonist to attain resurrection, is made particularly clear by the sudden reappearance of her childhood spiritual experiences on the very same day that the Saviour is about to set foot in Mary’s house for the first time. After long years of silence, during which she is often seized by a feeling of “loss, […] a sense of some mystery I had once understood and which I had now completely forgotten” (*WG*, p. 28), the heroine is suddenly gripped by a trance that echoes the resurrected Christ’s appearance to John in *The Apocryphon of John* 1:30-32 – “the [heavens opened and] the whole creation [which is] below heaven shone, and [the world] was shaken”⁶ –:

[S]uddenly, with no warning, the world was utterly transformed.
The earth began to pulsate, every tiny part of it separately and clearly. […] The sky was affected the same way: it became the way through into a series of pictures that used colour and clouds to express themselves. (*WG*, p. 29)

Completing these cosmic images is “a picture, come to life, of women dancing with the utmost sensuality, undulating their shoulders, breasts, bellies, hips” (*WG*, p. 29). The scene possesses a highly rhythmic and physical quality that is strongly reminiscent of Mary Magdalene’s discovery of her gift for divinely-inspired songs at the age of ten when, after watching her mother beat eggs like “God beating the copper air with a spoon” (*WG*, p. 13), the young girl turns her basket of eggs into “a splendid gold mess” (*WG*, p. 13) to take part in this divine dance, and receives a good hiding for this, the cadence of which sparks Mary’s inspired singing:

My mother […] slapped at my backside with the same regular rhythm that she used for beating the eggs, then sent me inside. I crawled up to the roof and lay there, unable to cry as I usually did after punishment. The rhythm of the spoon and the slaps went on echoing on my flesh and in my heart, drumming on my tongue until I found I was singing a song whose words and music I did not know. (*WG*, p. 13)

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The physical and spiritual dimensions are therefore inextricably linked in these episodes – as in Mary Magdalene’s subsequent union with Jesus –, the body becoming a route to the divine.

At the same time, the narrator’s description of her trance testifies to what Kalamaras calls, in his study on the rhetoric of silence, the “dissolving of a sense of ‘I-ness’” in union with God:

Then I did not know any longer that earth and sky were earth and sky. The universe breathed in and out and I dissolved in it, no longer I. […] Every tiny seed of space joined up with every other to make the physical reality we call the world, but was also joined in a different pattern, many-faceted as a jewel sparkling in sunlight, to create another world whose harmony and complexity is inexpressible. This world shimmered and danced and changed constantly, and I, the not-I, was part of it, and understood it, and was it. […] The only awareness of my separate self that remained was an occasional thought, but I cannot say for certain that it was I who thought it, because I, in so far as I existed any more or could persuade myself there was an I, seemed to be no more than a thought passing through a mind. I did not think. God thought me. I was a thought passing through God’s mind. (WG, pp. 29-30)

Such an extract roots The Wild Girl in a long tradition of mystical writing characterized by the fundamental ecstatic experience of being carried out of oneself and breaking free from “the more narrow definitions of conceptual consciousness” through the fusion with some transcendent, boundless entity. More specifically, Mary Magdalene’s account of her altered state of consciousness can be seen as echoing the work of female mystics who revered the biblical woman as a model of contemplative and ecstatic life, such as the sixteenth-century saint Teresa of Ávila’s depiction of the soul’s progress to God, entitled Interior Castle:

the soul really seems to have left the body; on the other hand, it is clear that the person is not dead, though for a few moments he cannot even himself be sure if the soul is in the body or no [sic]. […] When the soul, as far as it can understand, is right outside itself, great things are revealed to it.
Mary’s vision attests to the divine disclosure of the existence of a multifaceted world hidden from the great majority of humanity. This revelation unmask{es her everyday reality as a deception and awakens her to her status of spiritual exile:

All I knew, as I awoke to my old self again, was that I must remember, as I moved through my daily life in the world, that the other world was always there, as close as my breath, and that this world we called real in fact represented the seeds of creation brutalized, and mis-assembled, a travesty of truth. (WG, p. 30)

Earlier in The Wild Girl, the narrator recalls experiencing this very same sensation as a young child during her nightly vigils on the roof, which made her acquire the certainty “that life involved intense suffering consequent on infrequent moments of intense joy and their passing. […] There, beyond the black night, lay my true home. From there I had come and back there I longed to return” (WG, p. 12). This intuition is closely akin both to the Gnostics’ fundamental feeling of not belonging to the world, of being divine sparks trapped in a reality that stands in the way to their true transcendental essence,12 and to the mystic’s experiences which, via a vision, a song or a word coming from elsewhere, characteristically open up a dimension without which the recipients cannot live anymore,13 as Teresa of Ávila again illustrates:

When the soul […] returns to itself, it finds that it has reaped very great advantages and it has such contempt for earthly things that, in comparison with those it has seen, they seem like dirt to it. Thenceforward to live on earth is a great affliction to it, and, if it sees any of the things which used to give it pleasure, it no longer cares for them. […] The Lord’s wish seems to have been to show the soul something of the country to which it is to travel, so that it may suffer the trials of this trying road, knowing whither it must travel in order to obtain its rest.14

The Wild Girl, however, significantly diverges from its Gnostic and mystic sources, in that it does not promote a denigration of the sensible world. On the contrary, Roberts’s novel advocates a celebration of our embodied lives on this planet in all its aspects. Thus, when getting out of her trance, Mary Magdalene becomes aware of, and rejoices in, the earthly beauty surrounding her: “I returned home, suddenly realizing that it was the springtime, so brief and so precious. It was impossible not to be joyful, seeing the young green shooting up everywhere, the leaves fresh and glossy, the fruit trees in bloom” (WG, p. 30). God’s messages to Mary Magdalene are

meant, not to paint in glowing colours an idyllic afterlife in comparison to which her terrestrial fate loses all interest, but rather to show her the true, complex nature of this physical and spiritual existence, hidden behind the imprisoning “travesty,” and to urge her to actively seek and find it again, the resurrection constituting, as will be shown below, a reality to be attained in this life.

B. “I Cannot Remember the Experience”: A Reality of Ineffable Beauty and Harmony

Most importantly, the revelatory and ecstatic dimensions of Mary Magdalene’s trance come together with an acute sense of ineffability that gives to the protagonist’s subversive voice a powerful silent quality. The notion of “ineffable,” like its near-synonym “the unspeakable,” refers to the keenly perceived inability to convey a particularly intense experience through language, reflecting playwright Harold Pinter’s belief that “the more acute the experience, the less articulate its expression.”

Although the two terms regretfully carry a somewhat reductive oral denotation, like many words traditionally associated with discourse, they have nevertheless been favoured over unmarked synonyms like “indescribable,” “inexpressible” or “indefinable” – which remain largely or totally unused in the critical literature – for the sake of clarity and visibility in relation to previous studies on the topic. While both the ineffable and the unspeakable raise the question of the limits and/or potential dangers of words, a distinction has to be made between the two concepts in terms of emphasis. I will use “unspeakable” in situations where the incommunicability is fundamentally attributed to the failings of the linguistic code, whereas “ineffable” will be reserved for instances in which the experienced phenomenon is perceived not only as exceeding language, but also, and crucially, as stretching or transcending the limits of human comprehension, because of its elusive religious, ethical or ontological quality.

Such is precisely the case for Mary Magdalene’s divinely-inspired trance, whose images the heroine describes as both “inexpressible” (WG, p. 29) – their beauty and complexity being situated past words – and as surpassing her understanding:

As the vision faded, and I returned to myself, I wept for sadness, for it seemed to me that to speak, to put words together in patterns and lines, was to accept a crudity and rawness that

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15 Harold Pinter, quoted in Kane, p. 180.
mocked the beauty, now incomprehensible, of the world I had dwelt in briefly and was now exiled from. (WG, p. 30)

This lack, or loss, of confidence in words – which can culminate in open distrust – has been a recurring feature in human history. William Franke, in the introduction to his extensive historical overview of apophatic discourses, writes of the “cyclical collapse of verbal assurance” which has been formulated in each chief civilisation and whose first important manifestation he situates in the Hellenistic Age, with its plethora of “Hermetic philosophies and Gnosticisms”17: “[d]iscourses in many disciplines and fields suddenly become dubious and problematic as language enters into a generalized crisis and the currency of the word goes bust.”18 The postmodern expression of this discontent, which had a substantial impact on literature,19 is often claimed to originate from French poststructuralism and from German post-Holocaust writers, who despaired of a language perceived as complicit in the horror and inhumanity of the Shoah.20 Throughout intellectual history, this grievance against the linguistic code has basically been twofold, combining theoretical and practical issues. It first resides in the foregrounding of the arbitrary relation between sign and thing, but also in the dissatisfaction with the collective, impersonal nature of a language experienced either as “hardened into […] fossilized clichés, […] imprecise, obtuse, and obscure,”21 or, to quote Vincent Jouve, as directive and authoritarian, as imposing on its users a set point of view on the world and a voice that are never their own.22 In Roberts’s novel, occurrences of the ineffable relay such complaints, emphasising the lack of appropriate terms to describe Mary Magdalene’s unique experiences, but also the potentially lethal hazard that words pose when misused, especially by people asserting their spiritual authority.

19 Linda Hutcheon points out, for instance, that “historiographic metafiction often teaches that language can have many uses – and abuses. It can also, however, be presented as limited in its powers of representation and expression” (Hutcheon, Poetics, p. 183).
20 For more details on this point, see Steiner, pp. 49-54, and Franke, On What Cannot Be Said. Volume 2, pp. 9-11.
21 Kane, p. 19. Lapacherie, in his article on silence in rhetorical treatises, makes a similar observation (J.G. Lapacherie, “Silence et indicible dans les traités de rhétorique,” in Mura-Brunel and Cogard, p. 15).
Beside these code-related difficulties, the ineffable also raises extra-linguistic issues related to the object of the discourse. The protagonist of *The Wild Girl* undergoing, and struggling to bear witness to, a union with the divine, Roberts’s novel is firmly embedded in the very historical cradle of the ineffable, that is, religious and, more specifically, mystical discourse. As Le Breton points out,

> [p]our le croyant, et davantage encore pour le mystique, Dieu est au-delà des mots ou de la pensée, il n’est pas à la mesure de l’homme et toute parole à son propos en réduit la dimension. […] Le saisississement qui fait l’expérience du mystique est un dessaisissement de la parole, il naît d’un excès de sens, d’une hémorragie intérieure de la foi et de l’amour, dont le débordement met la langue en échec. L’arrachement à soi rend dérisoire les moyens humains ordinaires de dire la puissance de l’événement.

Although, or rather because, it is impossible to speak or write both the unspeakable and the ineffable, various techniques are used to somehow describe it indirectly, for, as William Franke remarks,

> [w]hile what is experienced remains inaccessible to speech, there is no limit to what can be said about this experience which, nevertheless, in itself cannot be described except as experience of … what cannot be said.

A series of denominations has been given to these tactics through which a discourse “attenuates and takes back or cancels itself out,” such as Mura-Brunel’s avoidance procedures, Iser and Budick’s “languages of the unsayable,” or Georges Molinié’s negative description. The ultimate expression of what I will personally call, in a more generic way, “the rhetoric of the ineffable and unspeakable,” is the gap in the story, where the event that cannot be said remains untold. I will endorse Leona Toker in defining gaps as missing information whose content is perceived by the reader as of import for the story. Illustrating Sontag’s famous maxim, according to which “as the

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23 Sontag, p. 31. As the analyses of Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Diski’s *Only Human* will demonstrate, the ineffable is also closely related to the fragmentation of the subject and trauma.
24 Le Breton, p. 200.
27 Mura-Brunel, p. 18.
30 Toker indeed states that “a touch of indeterminacy is perceived as an informational gap only when the reader expects the content of the missing information to be of some consequence” (Leona Toker, *Eloquent Reticence: Withholding Information in Fictional Narrative* [Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1993], p. 6). With the notable exception of narratological studies concentrating on reception, the term “gap” has often been used – rather indiscriminately – as some kind of generic term that refers to or encompasses all types of silence, and whose origins and functions remain unaddressed.
prestige of language falls, that of silence rises,”31 silence is perceived, in such contexts, as making up for the limitations and inadequacy of the linguistic code, as translating what words are unable to convey or would misrepresent – “[o]nly this negation of saying by silence ‘says’ … what cannot be said,”32 Franke writes. Beside gaps, the rhetoric of the unspeakable and ineffable includes periphrases, metaphors and negations – “[o]ne falls back on saying what it is not, since whatever can be said is not it”33 –; in other words, strategies that “manage to intimate or enact, by stumbling, stuttering, and becoming dumb—sometimes with uncanny eloquence—what they cannot as such say.”34

Such techniques are repeatedly at play in The Wild Girl, as exemplifies Mary Magdalene’s recourse, in the account of her trance on the day of Jesus’ arrival, to negations and paradoxes, conveying the overpowering ontological uncertainty created by the experience and the feeling of complete freedom that breaks down traditional boundaries between inside and outside, same and other, human and divine:

There was no I to know that I was not there. […] I, the not-I, was part of it. […] I no longer knew why I was not a speck of dust, a grain of sand. I was a speck of dust, a grain of sand, and there was no I to know it. The only awareness of my separate self that remained was an occasional thought, but I cannot say for certain that it was I who thought it, because I […] seemed to be no more than a thought passing through a mind. I did not think. […] I was both centre and periphery; the world contained me, and I contained the world. And there was no I to know this. (WG, pp. 29-30)

The heroine eventually concludes her depiction of “what cannot be said” by giving way to silence in the form of a gap, claiming that she “cannot remember the experience, for to live it again would be to dissolve again, and to have no words” (WG, p. 30), and leaving to the reader the task of imagining what remains only outlined or untold.

Behind what appears to be an acknowledgment of powerlessness or failure to express, such experiences of the ineffable conceal a highly empowering aspect, for, as Cogard rightly points out, saying that there are no words conveys the extreme nature of the reported event.35 Accordingly, these encounters enhance the status of Mary

In this study, it will be employed to refer to the concrete, context-bound manifestation of an informational lack in a narrative.
31 Sontag, p. 21.
35 Cogard, in Mura-Brunel and Cogard, p. 61.
Magdalene, who is granted access to a reality far beyond common language and humanity, and bestow unique prophetic authority on the narrator’s voice, through which, in turn, the female is redeemed, both in its human and divine manifestations, as I shall now try to demonstrate.

II. Regaining Primeval Wholeness: Mary Magdalene’s Journey to the Repressed Feminine and the Masculine in Herself

A. The Bodily and Spiritual Spheres Reconciled: Sexuality as a Route to the Divine

This rehabilitation of the feminine in The Wild Girl is indissociable from the deconstruction of the most fundamental tenets and sacraments of the Christian faith, from baptism to the Eucharist, from the genesis of the created world to Jesus’ crucifixion, or from the doctrine of original sin to that of the resurrection. This is illustrated by, among others, the following extract, in which Mary Magdalene and Jesus first fuse as one through sexual intercourse, enabling the heroine, who previously could only get a fleeting glimpse of the divine within and without her, to truly attain – without yet fully comprehending it – the highest degree of involvement in the sacred, the mystery of eternal life:

That night I lay with Jesus. […] Separated from the others only by the wall of the cloak he cast about us, we touched each other in the darkness. As we drew closer and closer towards each other we entered a new place. […] I felt us taken upwards and transformed: I no longer knew what was inside and what was outside, where he ended and I began, only that our bones and flesh and souls were suddenly woven up together in a great melting and pouring. I was six years old again, lying on the roof looking up at the stars, at the rents in the dark fabric of the sky and the light shining through it. Only this time I rose, I pierced through the barrier of shadow, […] for a moment, till I was pulled back by the sound of my own voice whispering words I did not understand: this is the resurrection, and the life. (WG, p. 67)

The depiction of an eroticized Jesus in this scene sharply contrasts with the orthodox portrayal of the Saviour, which obliterates any trace of sexuality and thereby seems to suggest, as Irigaray observes in Amante Marine de Friedrich Nietzsche, that God’s coming on earth never takes place through the incarnation of a love relationship with the other.36 The Wild Girl, like its Gnostic sources before it – mainly The Gospel of Mary and The Gospel of Philip – therefore restores the possibility of intimacy

between Christ and women through the privileged relationship he entertains with Mary Magdalene.

This extract can moreover be understood as an answer to Cixous’s well-known call for women to write their bodies in order to reconnect with that part of their individuality that has been censored or identified as the very cause and locus of inhibitions, and from which they have consequently been estranged, losing thereby their relation to language:

A censurer le corps on censure du même coup le souffle, la parole.
Écrire, acte, qui non seulement “réaliserà” le rapport dé-censuré de la femme à sa sexualité, à son être-femme, lui rendant accès à ses propres forces; qui lui rendra ses biens, ses plaisirs, ses organes, ses immenses territoires corporels tenus sous scellés.

In The Wild Girl, Roberts does not content herself with portraying a female protagonist who learns to respect and enjoy her physicality through love and who frees herself from traditional religious and social bonds thanks to the all-important act of writing. More subversively, still, Roberts accomplishes in the early Christian context the integration of the body and sexuality with the sacred that Diamant has been shown to suggest in the early Jewish setting of The Red Tent, for her Mary Magdalene and Jesus attain resurrection through orgasm.

This positive stance on eros in The Wild Girl rests on the underlying belief that “[t]he body is the mirror of the soul, and through the body, not by denying it, we enter the other world, the world of eternity which coexists with this temporal, fleshly one. How else can we know God except through the fullest knowledge of our humanity” (WG, pp. 108-109)? In words echoing goddess worship and Irigaray’s plea – in Je, Tu, Nous – for the representation and religious celebration of the main stages in a woman’s existence, Jesus therefore enjoins his disciples to revere and honour the turning points of our embodied lives, these rituals constituting the prescribed, holy sacraments of Roberts’s alternative Christianity:

we must celebrate the birth of children; their passage, through the signs given by the body, into adulthood; their joining one another in love and in bodily union; their flourishing and their maturity; their passage into wisdom and old age; their production of children; their meeting, terrible as it is, with death. We […] must celebrate the action of the spirit and of matter in ourselves, through dance and song, through meals shared, through conversation. These acts of every day become holy, and become our sacraments, the way we meet God in

37 Cixous, in Clément and Cixous, p. 175.
38 Cixous, in Clément and Cixous, p. 179.
ourselves and in each other. Cherishing each other’s bodily life in this way, we care also for the spirit. (WG, p. 109)

The orthodox Christian tradition, on the other hand, has always had considerable difficulties with such a positive, unconditional integration of the bodily with the spiritual. Deploring the dissociation of the physical and spiritual spheres in Christianity, Irigaray notes in *Ethique de la différence sexuelle*:

Tout est bâti pour que ces réalités demeurent séparées, voire opposées. Qu’elles ne s’allient pas, ne se mélangent pas, ne s’épousent pas. Leurs noces toujours reportées au-delà, dans une vie future, ou dévalorisées, senties et considérées peu nobles au regard des noces entre l’esprit et le Dieu dans un transcendantal qui aurait coupé les ponts avec le sensible.

In the age-old Western debate opposing soul and body, Christianity has thus sided with the former, to the detriment of the latter. As the theologian Alison Jasper remarks, Christianity, without being “implacably hostile,” has always been particularly equivocal about the body, uncomfortably oscillating between, on the one hand, the celebration of God’s human incarnation in Christ and the resurrection of the body, and, on the other hand, denigration, suspicion or fear of the flesh:

Men and women of the Christian era have been taught […] to distrust their […] bodily impulses as guides to wisdom and well-being because, in their connection to death, these […] are thought to bear the traces of an ineradicable tendency to sinfulness.

Augustine’s doctrine of original sin having irrevocably associated sexuality with lustfulness and distraction from the search for good in the Christian psyche, throughout history, the virgin body has commonly been presented as “the supreme image of wholeness,” and virginity has often been prescribed to believers – especially to women – as a way of “reduc[ing] the special penalties of the Fall.” Signs of this Christian philosophy of the body can be detected in the Catholic dogmas of Mary’s perpetual virginity and her Immaculate Conception, which set Christ and his mother apart from the ordinary physical condition of humanity, or in the widespread image of Mary Magdalene as an ascetic, who willingly renounces all

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40 Haddad and Esposito, p. ix.
44 Banner, in Lacoste, p. 1332.
physical pleasures and comfort in her old age to atone for her early carnal sins. Such an ethic of sexual chastity, based, according to the feminist cultural historian Marina Warner, on the “fear and loathing of the female body’s functions, in identification of evil with the flesh and flesh with woman,” was adopted not only by Augustine, but also Ambrose and Jerome, among others, and is championed, in The Wild Girl, by Simon Peter. The male disciple firmly believes that “[i]t is only by abjuring the pleasures of the flesh that the soul is liberated and can reach contemplation of the true world hidden from us” (WG, p. 52). He exclaims, echoing Tertullian’s “Do you not realize that Eve is you? […] You are the devil’s gateway, […] you first betrayed the law of God. […] You deserve death”:

Don’t you know? That women are the gateway to evil and to death. It’s written in the sacred texts: the creation of man followed that of the earth, and the woman followed the man, and marriage followed the woman, and reproduction followed marriage, and death followed reproduction. Therefore we should shun all intercourse with women and become virgin again, so that we may be resurrected and conquer death and have eternal life. Don’t you see? It’s logical. (WG, p. 62)

The vision of Christianity that issues from the preaching of Roberts’s Jesus and Mary Magdalene, by contrast, operates a complete reversal of the orthodox negative valuation of the sexual act and a breakdown of the dualisms between virgin body and erotic body, between the spiritual and the carnal. Drawing on female mystics’ frequent descriptions of their total opening up to God in sexual metaphors, and daringly turning them into literal physical experiences, The Wild Girl foregrounds a sexuality that no longer destroys virginal wholeness but, on the contrary, constitutes a path to it. As Jesus explains to his disciples, when he and “Mary […] marry each other in the body and then find the marriage happening in [their] souls,” they “are becoming virgin again, for [they] […] are becoming whole” (WG, p. 63).

48 Warner, Alone, p. 77.
49 Warner notes: “When Augustine, Ambrose, and Jerome endorsed virginity for its special holiness, they were the heirs and representatives of much current thought in the Roman empire of their day. And in this battle between the flesh and the spirit, the female sex was firmly placed on the side of the flesh. For as childbirth was woman’s special function, and its pangs the special penalty decreed by God after the Fall, and as the child she bore in her womb was stained by sin from the moment of its conception, the evils of sex were particularly identified with the female. Woman was womb and womb was evil: this cluster of ideas endemic to Christianity is but the extension of Augustine’s argument about original sin” (Warner, Alone, p. 57).
50 Tertullian, quoted in Warner, Alone, p. 58.
51 Lenglet, in Danziger, p. 211.
B. “*This Is the Resurrection*”: Rebirth as the Marriage between the Inner Man and the Inner Woman

The spiritual fusion created by the physical union between Jesus and Mary Magdalene precisely represents the marriage of female and male that is the key to the resurrection as envisaged in *The Wild Girl*, a resurrection that restores our primeval, Edenic unity and, subversively, takes place “in this life, now, not after death” (*WG*, p. 110):

> We have forgotten, in our exile from paradise, how to put ourselves back together again. [...] If a man or a woman [...] becomes complete again, and attains the fullness of his or her former self in paradise, can he or she experience eternity and the Kingdom. The separation of the inner man and the inner woman is a sickness, a great wound. I, Christ, came to repair the separation and to reunite the two and to restore life and health to those in danger of dying of this sickness of the soul. And I do this through offering you rebirth. What is this rebirth? How is it to be achieved? The image of this rebirth is [...] the marriage between the inner woman and the inner man. You must go down deep, deep into the marriage chamber, and find the other part of yourself that has been lost and missing for so long. Those who are reunited in the marriage chamber will never be separated again. *This is the restoration. This is the resurrection. (WG*, pp. 110-111)

This passage is directly inspired from the Gnostic *Gospel of Philip*, according to which original androgynous unity was broken when Eve was separated from Adam, bringing the curse of death upon humankind, yet significantly deviates from it in that it does not postulate any real prelapsarian physical androgyny, but only perfect spiritual communion between the masculine and the feminine in the first humans. This psychic harmony of the two gender principles is closely akin to Virginia Woolf’s own version of Carl Gustav Jung’s *animus-anima* theory in *A Room of One’s Own*. In this text that has largely influenced Roberts’s writing, Woolf’s alter ego, the I-narrator Mary Beton, sees a young man and a girl getting into a taxi beneath her window, a scene which induces in her a musing on the possibility of there being two sexes in the mind corresponding to the two sexes in the body, and whether they also require to be united in order to get complete satisfaction and happiness. And I went on amateurishly to sketch a plan of the soul so that in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female. [...] The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually cooperating. If one is a man, still the woman part of the brain

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52 “If the woman had not separated from the man, she should not die with the man. His separation became the beginning of death. Because of this Christ came to repair the separation which was from the beginning and again unite the two, and to give life to those who died as a result of the separation and unite them. But the woman is united to her husband in the bridal chamber. Indeed those who have united in the bridal chamber will no longer be separated” (*The Gospel of Philip* [70:9-20], in J.M. Robinson, p. 151).
must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. [...] It is when the fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilised and uses all its faculties.53

Through the marriage effected between their inner selves, Roberts’s Jesus and Mary not only become “the new Adam, […] and […] the new Eve,” but also “bear witness to the fullness of God” (WG, p. 82) for, in The Wild Girl, as in many of the Gnostic texts in which it is rooted, the Godhead combines a masculine and a feminine aspect. The latter, however, has been relegated to oblivion by humankind, which has, as Roberts’s Jesus puts it, “driven out the Mother completely by cleaving to the Father Alone,” thereby making “God who is in Heaven grieve” (WG, p. 63). Unlike Diamant’s The Red Tent, in which the heroine worships the multiform goddess and rejects the jealous God of men, The Wild Girl thus challenges any dichotomous construal that stifles one aspect of divine androgyny. Therefore, the mission of Roberts’s prophetic couple – besides acquiring spiritual wholeness, the “saviours” needing to be themselves saved in The Wild Girl – resides in awakening humanity to the silenced female divine principle and, thereby, in unveiling the real, androgynous nature of God, most eloquently revealed to Mary Magdalene in a dream about the creation of the world.

C. Genesis Revisited, Or the Rehabilitation of the Female Divine Principle

This particularly bold rewriting of Genesis, which hinges on the (re-)establishment into the Christian cosmogony of what feminists like C.P. Christ or Alicia Ostriker perceive as the repressed archetypal great mother, dramatically reconciles the feminine and women’s creative capacity with the sacred within a tradition that has tended to obliterate or denigrate them. Challenging the supremacy that has often been granted to God’s Word and the masculine in Christianity, Roberts’s creation myth suggests an alternative explanation of the beginning, not only of humanity, but also of the divine, that brings a balance between language and body, rational order and passion – especially love –, masculine and feminine.

Right from the start, this oneiric vision attests to the displacement, not merely of the linguistic code and reason, but also of the senses, Mary being only able to convey “with much fumbling and clumsiness with words” (WG, p. 78) the “music

[that] [is] like a light[,] […] the image [that] beat[s] in [her] heart like a drum” (WG, p. 77), and the “sound of the voice of God, which d[oes] not speak in words but which c[o]me[s] to [her] like an explosion of sweetness or heat” (WG, p. 81). In the manner of mystics, who claim to experience the world “without the filter of conceptual awareness, that is, without the thinking and categorizing capacity of the intellect,” and to whom reality therefore appears “as undivided, indistinct, unified,”54 Roberts’s narrator describes what she perceives not with her “bodily eyes and ears, but with those of the soul”55 (WG, p. 77) as transcending time, being simultaneously in the instant and eternal:

What is so hard to express is how, as I dreamt it, the entire vision unfolded itself to me like a flower that unceasingly grows and blooms and seeds and dies all in a single moment, as it were in a single stroke of time, yet one full and rich and seemingly never-ending; yet when I came to recount it to the Lord on the following morning it took me a long time to tell it. […] As though I possessed a robe of dazzling beauty, woven complete without any seams or joins, which was the entire and whole consistency of its excellence, and yet sought to unravel it thread by thread and could not, not knowing where to find the beginning or the end. (WG, pp. 77-78)

In the Christian tradition, as already pointed out, “creation is to be thought first and foremost as divine speech,”56 each step being “represented as a verbal fiat, bringing form and meaning where there had been only formlessness and void”57; the Godhead uttering these “disembodied” performative injunctions “remains excluded or ‘protected’”58 from the material world and shows a clear propensity for the binary, “a desire to divide, differentiate, categorize.”59 In The Wild Girl, by contrast, language, while still playing a significant role, loses its hegemony, for love – which in the Christian cosmogony is somehow eclipsed by God’s spoken Word – is established as the ultimate, founding value of a Creation no longer resting on hierarchical dichotomies:

If I must talk of beginnings, I will talk of Chaos. I was taught that in the beginning there was nothing but Chaos. In my dream I understood that Chaos was simply a darkness, teeming with the promise of complicated life. […] It existed in close relation to a work or action which took shape, and which was seen to take shape because light shone upon it and was reflected in it. So

54 Kalamaras, p. 59.
55 These words recall again Teresa of Ávila’s Interior Castle: “This is not an intellectual, but an imaginary vision, which is seen with the eyes of the soul very much more clearly than we can ordinarily see things with the eyes of the body” (of Ávila, in Franke, On What Cannot Be Said. Volume 1, p. 358).
56 Davies, in Davies and Turner, p. 203.
57 Jeannette King, p. 10.
58 Jasper, in Hass et al., p. 777.
59 Fewell and Gunn, in Beal and Gunn, p. 17.
in the beginning there was light, and there was also darkness, the one the sister of the other. This chaos and this shape together made the image of a mighty egg, its shell gleaming in the blackness. Both expressed God: masculine and feminine, darkness and light. The egg cracked open, and there were words spoken: love breaks the universe apart, and love will join it back together again. (WG, p. 78)

This simple first statement, which significantly contrasts with the orthodox “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3), links humanity’s birth with the rebirth which Jesus preaches about earlier in the novel, and which is achieved through the renewed knowledge of our original wholeness: “the way to this knowledge is through love. Love is this knowledge. This knowledge is love” (WG, p. 62). Further challenging the biblical representation of the beginning, Roberts’s rewriting of Genesis excludes a creation ex nihilo or out of formless, empty chaos, depicting instead a darkness that contains all the germs of life. Such a resacralisation of light’s traditional sinister opposite, which is already heralded by Mary Magdalene’s fondness for the night as a young girl, is rooted in the ancient understanding of gloom as a place of transformation in goddess-centred religions.

This darkness is moreover tightly linked with another highly significant image of creative metamorphosis, the cosmic egg. Found in Orphic and Chinese texts, among others, this cosmological imagery inscribes at the very heart of the sensible and spiritual worlds the values promoted by The Wild Girl, for this womb-like “symbol of […] totality” reintroduces the biological dimension into a creativity that does not seem anymore to constitute the prerogative of the male sex. The primordial egg furthermore questions the Christian belief that God is outside of and distinct from Creation, and provides the basis for Roberts’s rehabilitation of the female divine, for flowing out of it is the first “likeness of God” (WG, p. 78), Sophia – also called, as Mary Magdalene indicates, Wisdom – who sets the earth into motion by breathing

60 Roberts’s narrator later reaffirms her privileged relationship with darkness: “So often it’s at night that the truth finds me. […] Darkness my mother. […] Without this darkness pressing down on me and wrapping me round I’d never be aware of those points of light-needles that prick it” (WG, p. 91).

61 Christ, Rebirth of the Goddess, p. 30. Such a breakdown of traditional dichotomies can also be found in The Gospel of Philip: “Light and darkness, life and death, right and left, are brothers of one another. They are inseparable (The Gospel of Philip [53:14-19], in J.M. Robinson, p. 142).

62 David and Margaret Leeming, in the introduction to their Dictionary of Creation Myths, isolate five main symbolic structures in creation myths around the world: “1) from chaos or nothingness (ex nihilo), 2) from a cosmic egg or primal maternal mound, 3) from world parents who are separated, 4) from a process of earth-diving, or 5) from several stages of emergence from other worlds” (David Leeming and Margaret Leeming, A Dictionary of Creation Myths [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995 (1994)], p. viii).

upon it. If, according to Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, the idea of Wisdom used to be connected with the goddess in the pre-Christian world,\textsuperscript{64} in the Bible, by contrast, this connection is lost. Indeed, Proverbs 1-9, although it personifies Wisdom, does not deify her,\textsuperscript{65} and appears to depict her as God’s first creature and collaborator\textsuperscript{66}:

\begin{quote}
I, wisdom, live with prudence./and I attain knowledge and/discretion./…

The LORD created me at the/beginning of his work./the first of his acts of long ago./Ages ago I was set up,/at the first, before the beginning of/the earth./…/When he established the heavens, I was there./…/I was beside him, like a master/worker;/and I was daily his delight,/rejoicing before him always. (Proverbs 8:12, 22-23, 27 and 30)
\end{quote}

As Maurice Gilbert explains, the meaning of Wisdom in Proverbs and other Sapiential Books remains extremely ambiguous and controversial. Consequently, Wisdom has variously been interpreted, throughout the ages, as a person, a poetic personification of a divine virtue, God’s presence to his creation or, on the basis of The Wisdom of Solomon 8:1 – “[s]he reaches mightily from one end/of the earth to the other,/and she orders all things well” – as the world order.\textsuperscript{67} In the later Christian tradition, Wisdom becomes integrated into the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit – translated in Latin as the masculine \textit{spiritus sanctus} – and, therefore, “wholly identified with the masculine archetype.”\textsuperscript{68} This absence of a female likeness of God in Christianity has repeatedly been denounced, among others, by Irigaray, who – as has already been pointed out in the analysis of \textit{The Red Tent} –, contends that, without a divine that suits them, women lack a model and representation of themselves to contemplate or venerate, and, consequently, cannot construct their subjectivity according to an ideal that corresponds to them\textsuperscript{69}: “Il manque à la femme un miroir pour devenir femme.”\textsuperscript{70} Irigaray therefore pleads for the valorisation of a feminine sensible transcendental against which women could measure themselves, and that would reconcile the

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{64} Baring and Cashford, p. 610.
\item \textsuperscript{67} Gilbert, in Viller \textit{et al.}, p. 80.
\item \textsuperscript{68} Baring and Cashford, p. 611.
\item \textsuperscript{69} Irigaray, “Femmes divines,” in Irigaray, \textit{Sexes et parentés}, p. 76.
\item \textsuperscript{70} Irigaray, “Femmes divines,” in Irigaray, \textit{Sexes et parentés}, p. 79.
\end{itemize}
spiritual and the bodily spheres, which is precisely what Roberts does in *The Wild Girl* by depicting Sophia as a female godhead.

Not content with delineating a Sophia awakening the earth, Roberts also has her goddess, in her “Mother aspect of God” (*WG*, p. 78), give birth to other divine beings. While her daughter Zoe – “also called Eve of life” (*WG*, p. 79) – is endowed with the life-giving breath traditionally attributed to the Judeo-Christian deity, with which she raises up Adam and gives him a soul, her son, by contrast, is never shown to demonstrate any creative power, although he does claim all the merit of Creation for himself. Gazing, Narcissus-like, “upon the mirror of the waters encircling the earth, and [seeing] his own face” (*WG*, p. 78), he declares, ironically echoing Yahweh’s first Commandment “I am the LORD your God […] you shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:2):

I am perfect, and I am God, and there is no other God but me. For he believed that he had created himself and forgot that he was born of God. So Sophia named him Ignorance, because he forgot who made him. And his children became the adversaries of the fullness of God and of the full knowledge of God. (*WG*, pp. 78-79)

Derived from Gnostic texts such as *The Apocryphon of John* and *On the Origin of the World*, in which the earth is ruled by a jealous Demiurge who pretends not to know about other divinities and therefore provokes a scission between the sensible and the transcendental worlds, these words introduce *The Wild Girl*’s parodic version of the Judeo-Christian God and its representatives. Subversively using as a creative springboard Yahweh’s “I the LORD your God am a jealous God” in Exodus 20:5, Roberts turns the male godhead’s self-confessed envious nature into the interpretative key to the Eden narrative and her rewriting of it.

The traditional teaching that Eve was created out of Adam’s rib, which has often been used – as I have already pointed out in connection with *Sisters and Strangers* – to support misogynist representations of women as inferior beings, is indeed depicted in *The Wild Girl* as a lie generated by Ignorance and his children out

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72 This scene, like the rest of Mary Magdalene’s dream about Creation, is largely inspired from the Gnostic text entitled *On the Origin of the World*.
73 In *The Apocryphon of John* 11:19-22, the Demiurge exclaims: “I am God and there is no other God beside me,’ for he is ignorant of his strength, the place from which he had come” (in J.M. Robinson, p. 111).
of their jealousy of Eve-Zoe, and spread by them to simultaneously silence the voice of the divine feminine and enslave women:

The children of Ignorance [...] saw Eve-Zoe speaking to Adam and said to one another: who is this female full of light? Let us seize her and enter her by force so that she will no longer be able to ascend back to her light-source, wherever or whatever that is, but will be forced to bear our children and to serve us. But let us not tell Adam. Let us bring a stupor upon him, and let us teach him in his sleep that she came into being from a rib of his body and that therefore the purpose of her being is to serve men and to be ruled over by them. (WG, p. 79)

Eve-Zoe, however, manages to thwart the plot of Ignorance’s children by secretly leaving her likeness in her stead next to a sleeping Adam who, when waking up, proves that – unlike Ignorance – he has not forgotten where he comes from, and solemnly acknowledges female creativity, declaring to his partner: “you gave me life” (WG, p. 80). The ironic contrast between this account and the Scriptural version of humanity’s early history, effectively draws the reader’s attention once again to what The Wild Girl denounces as the silencing of the goddess, of Eve and, together with them, of womankind as a whole in the mainstream Christian tradition.

Equally fallacious, according to Mary Magdalene’s dream in The Wild Girl, is the orthodox belief that Eve transgresses God’s will when eating the fruit, thereby irrevocably causing humanity’s Fall from Eden. Rehabilitating the serpent as the symbol of divine wisdom that it used to represent in goddess worshipping cultures and Gnostic literature,75 Roberts’s creation myth depicts the biblical tempter as possessed by Eve-Zoe and benevolently urging the couple – whose shining blackness reflects the sacred marriage of light and darkness – to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge, in accordance with the goddess’s wish:

So the man and the woman took the apple that Eve-Zoe had infused with power and ate it and gained her divine wisdom and knowledge. Then, when they looked at one another, their eyes were opened to the meaning of their shining and beautiful black skins, and they embraced one another.
Well pleased with her work, Eve-Zoe departed back to the realm of Sophia. (WG, p. 80)

As in goddess cults, the female godhead in The Wild Girl willingly bestows her wisdom through her emissary the serpent, unlike the jealous male divinity, who seeks to forbid Adam and Eve from accessing knowledge and life. If the first man and woman are eventually driven out of Paradise, it is by the children of Ignorance, who,

like Yahweh in Genesis 3:22-24, fear that Adam and Eve might eat of the fruit of the tree of life, gain immortality and challenge their authority:

Adam and Eve, they said to one another, have already eaten of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, which is bad enough. We cannot afford to let them also eat of the fruit of the tree of life, lest they become immortal and try to rule over us. [...] Let us act swiftly before they gain any more power and seek to depose us.
So saying, they seized Adam and Eve and carried them to the gates of paradise and cast them forth, setting a wall of fierce fire in front of the gate to seal them out for ever. And Adam and Eve walked away into exile, weeping, and each blaming the other for their loss of paradise. (WG, pp. 80-81)

This revelatory dream, which Mary Magdalene shares with the other disciples, unveils the lies of Ignorance and therefore restores the voice of the female divine principle that is stifled in the mainstream, patriarchal tradition. It moreover crucially teaches that there is no original sin and, thus, no fault for which Eve and her sex can be blamed. As Jesus explains to his disciples, invalidating Simon Peter’s argument that “women are the gateway to evil and to death” (WG, p. 62): “[e]vil is not femaleness, [...] how could it be? It is hatred, which means a place of exile, of coldness and stiffness. It is the absence of the fullness of God in you. It is the forgetting of the male joined to the female within yourselves” (WG, p. 63). Finally, this oneiric vision of the origins radically questions the representation and meaning of the Eucharist and Jesus’ death on the cross, for if there is no fault on the part of humanity – only an illusion spread by the male godhead, from which humankind has to be awakened –, there is, consequently, no need for the canonical redemptory sacrifice of Christ.

D. Ruling Out Sacrifice as a Path to Salvation: Celebrating Life and the Eloquent Silence of Intimacy

In The Wild Girl, the Last Supper thus takes on totally new accents, which foreground the sacredness of our embodied life on earth. Contrasting the ancient Greek myth of Persephone, who after being tricked by her abductor Hades into eating pomegranate seeds, is doomed to stay in the underworld for a season each year, with the story of Adam and Eve’s biting of the fruit as related by Mary Magdalene, Jesus teaches his disciples that food – symbolizing our material needs as humans – is as holy as the bodies that it nourishes:

– Don’t you remember the stories of immortals being trapped into human existence through being offered fruits and seeds and eating them? So that to be godlike is not to eat and hence not to die? [...] We eat and defecate and make love and some of us make children, he said:
and then we die. Yet I have come to offer you eternal life. […] What is the way there? Is it enough not to eat, not to defecate, not to make love, not to make children? Will that bring about the Kingdom of God on earth? […] How did it happen that the man and the woman gained divine knowledge and wisdom?

– They ate of the fruit, I said: that the serpent offered them. […]
Jesus pointed at the half-empty platters and goblets, the remnants of our feast, which we had not yet cleared away. His voice deepened.
– So too God is hidden in these fruits of the earth. (WG, pp. 89-90)

Building on this reiterated rejection of asceticism, Christ then denounces the most extreme form of violence against the body, the bloody sacrifices practised by the pagans, before he proposes his new ritual of communion with him and with God. Behind this criticism of heathen rites, Roberts’s harsh condemnation of the crucifixion is already unmistakably perceptible:

He picked up a crust of the unleavened bread in one hand and a cup of wine in the other.
– The pagans believe that their gods and goddesses demand a blood sacrifice. […] That is not necessary. Never let anyone tell you that bloodshed or martyrdom open a sure route to heaven. […] God wants us to live. […]
He raised his hands, holding out the bread and wine towards us, while we held our collective breath and listened.
– God lives in me, and I desire that you should become one flesh with me and with God. He or she who will not receive my flesh and blood will have no life. No resurrection, and no eternal life. […] Join with me in this new rite, even though you cannot yet understand the mystery it celebrates. And when I am gone, do this in memory of me. (WG, p. 90)

The ritual suggested by Roberts’s Jesus is meant exclusively as a celebration of life on earth, of the love and sharing that lead to the resurrection. It therefore dramatically contrasts with the orthodox – especially the Catholic – interpretation of the Eucharist that, besides being a ceremony of thanksgiving, also commemorates, to borrow McGrath’s formulation, “the breaking of Christ’s body and the shedding of his blood”76 as an offering and sacrifice for humanity’s redemption. As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 11:26: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” For Roberts’s Saviour, there is “no virtue in denial, nor in suffering”77; no salvation can be brought by violence and death, as demonstrates his confession to Mary Magdalene after this farewell speech, Jesus voicing “his grief and despair” (WG, p. 92) over his impending death at the hands of his enemies:

Sooner or later they will have me put to death, and the killings will go on. I came to bring a new life, but men will go on believing in murder as the way to change hearts, and will cite my

77 Duncker, p. 145.
death as proof that God willed it as necessary, and that God wants us to kill each other. I’m so afraid. (WG, p. 92)

In such a context, Christ’s death on the cross is essentially depicted as an absurd and sadistic desecration of Jesus’ bodily and spiritual integrity, as “a scene of horror, unrelieved by a sense of necessity or the sacred.” Most powerfully conveying the ineffable atrocity of the crucifixion is Mary Magdalene’s speechlessness when standing at the cross:

How often had he and I said to one another: the body is the mirror of the soul. They wanted to destroy his soul and so they tried to destroy his body. I wanted to call to him, to awaken him from his trance of pain, but could not. No words came. […] [H]e and I were alone together and I could not speak to him. (WG, pp. 96-97)

This numbness stands in sharp contrast with the positive forms of eloquent silence which, as in Diamant’s The Red Tent, used to punctuate the relationship of intimacy and complicity between the two lovers – Jesus knowing what Mary thought “without my telling him” (WG, p. 42) – or which characterised Jesus’ preaching:

[H]e was also often silent, and into this welcoming space people entered, pouring out their hearts, telling him all their thoughts. It was this, I thought, which made him different from our other visitors, and it was this which constituted him as a threat to the way of life our priests and rulers urged on us. Jesus was teaching us new ways. (WG, p. 37)

This more restricted type of eloquent silence, which does not totally replace language in specific interactions, but takes the form of meaningful pauses in speech, largely contributes to Jesus’ oratory and appeal, confirming Le Breton’s claim that “[l’]éloquence n’est pas seulement affaire de mots, mais aussi affaire de silences qui en disent long.” These meaningful pauses, carefully chosen and staged, fight verbosity as well as pretensions to completeness, for if speech can have the power to compel the other, to impose meanings and “close […] off thought,” eloquent pauses punctuating language, as Mary Magdalene’s comment demonstrates, are often felt to convey openness – to interpretation, exchange, critical distance or meditation – and to help their user touch the addressee more deeply than a continuous flow of words, as Le Breton again highlights:

78 Sarah Falcus, Michèle Roberts: Myths, Mothers and Memories (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 60-61.
79 Le Breton, p. 79.
80 Le Breton, p. 80.
81 Sontag, p. 19.
82 Sontag conveys this idea in Styles of Radical Will when she writes that “[silence] provid[es] time for the continuing or exploring of thought. […] Silence keeps things ‘open’” (Sontag, pp. 19-20).
By unequivocally ruling out sacrifice as a medium for God’s grace or sign of his alliance with humankind, *The Wild Girl* challenges head-on one of Christianity’s most fundamental tenets and relays the subversive question formulated by Irigaray in *Amante Marine de Friedrich Nietzsche*: “pourquoi fallait-il que le Christ meure et ressuscite pour qu’il soit cru Dieu? Sa présence charnelle ne pouvait être perçue comme divine?” Roberts’s novel can be regarded as a criticism of what Irigaray’s essays depict as the supremacy of the sacrificial in patriarchal religions – evidenced in Catholicism by the all-pervasive representations of Christ on the cross in churches – and the temporality associated with it, which, still according to Irigaray, supplants natural rhythms and prevents humankind from paying attention to the instant. The alternative suggested by *The Wild Girl*, salvation reached in this life through care for our bodies and union in love, mirrors Irigaray’s belief that all societies need not be based on a sacrifice if one cultivates natural rhythms and the body.

Profoundly destabilized by Jesus’ “violent and unjust death” (*WG*, p. 114), and overwhelmed by grief, Mary is confronted more than ever with her old demons and has to fight obstacles to the full blossoming of her voice, enemies coming from both without and, as she bitterly realizes, within: her old thick-skinned armour, which protects her against her guilt and regrets, her love for Jesus, “compounded of selfish need and self-regard” (*WG*, p. 91), and her unconscious reluctance to fully open up to the resurrection and its meaning.

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83 Le Breton, p. 227. Sontag, in her reflection on modern art’s quest for silence, expresses a similar idea when she writes that “[p]erhaps the quality of the attention one brings to bear on something will be better (less contaminated, less distracted) the less one is offered” (Sontag, p. 13).


III. The Mystical Bride’s Harrowing of Hell and Resurrection in the Marriage Chamber

A. Meet Ignorance: Mary Magdalene’s First Trip to the Nether Realm

Reworking the archetypal motif of the hero(ine)’s descent to the underworld in search of his/her lover, most famously featured in Psyche’s desperate roaming and journey to Hades’ realm to find Cupid, or in Orpheus’ travel to the netherworld to fetch his newly deceased young bride Eurydice, *The Wild Girl* depicts a Mary Magdalene who cannot stand the physical separation from her beloved Jesus and, blinded by this loss, oneirically harrows hell. If the narrator’s dream starts in the sensuousness with which Mary and Jesus used to reach God, it quickly becomes, however, a nightmare that turns the famous metaphor for sexual pleasure, *la petite mort*, into a literal experience of descent to the nether regions. Through the reference to her traditional symbols – the snake and darkness –, this scene subtly foreshadows the central role that the goddess is about to play in Mary’s initiation:

I dreamed that I died with him, that at the very moment when I cried out and began to dissolve in him and so made him equally cry out and begin to melt in me, so we died together, falling down through our bed which opened up like a great crack in the ground and became a spiral staircase, coiled like a serpent’s back, leading down into darkness. (*WG*, p. 99)

In words recalling Matthew 9:14-15, the Saviour then steps away into the darkness, saying to Mary: “Can the sons and daughters of the bride-chamber mourn […] as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the day has come when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then will they mourn” (*WG*, p. 100). These lines eloquently reveal that Mary Magdalene, who has not yet completed her mourning, is haunted by the selfishness and exclusivity of her love for Jesus that prevented her from fully living her relationship with Christ when he was still alive, but also impelled her to try and dissuade Jesus from accomplishing his prophetic mission to the end in order to keep him safely with her – “You’re not to leave me. […] I couldn’t bear it. I’ll never forgive you” (*WG*, p. 87).

88 “Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, ‘Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?’ And Jesus said to them, ‘The wedding-guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.’”
Jesus’ words could equally be interpreted as denouncing the narrator’s own ignorance of the real significance of the resurrection, as the remainder of the nightmare seems to confirm, in which Mary Magdalene, looking for her Lord, turns for help to the “tall figure” sitting on a throne in the centre of the dark hall, “a jewelled crown on his head and a cloak of cloth of gold spread about his shoulders and a gold sceptre in his hands” (WG, p. 99). This richly adorned silhouette poses as Jesus, declaring himself to be Mary Magdalene’s “bridegroom” (WG, p. 101). The heroine, however, identifies him as Ignorance or one of his children as soon as he says, like the Antichrist in 2 Thessalonians 2:4, 89 “I am the Lord of this vast realm. And there is no other God besides me” (WG, p. 100). Faced with the very embodiment of the negation of the goddess and the denigration of the feminine, Mary forcefully reasserts her voice and willingness to rise above the degrading stereotypical identities she “had previously borne, or had awarded [her]self: the slut, the bad sister, the exile, the profligate” (WG, p. 49), by introducing herself to the keeper of hell as a woman of many talents invested with a mission:

I am […] Mary the free woman, Mary the traveller, Mary the singer of songs, Mary the healer and the layer-out of the dead, Mary the sister of Martha and the friend of the mother of Jesus, Mary the disciple and the apostle, she who is sworn to spread the word of the Saviour to those who know him not. (WG, p. 100)

The Master, however, challenges Mary Magdalene’s liberating self-definition and, reasserting the traditional exclusionary belief in the connection between female sexuality and the fire of damnation, claims the narrator as his faithful assistant:

I shall tell you […] who you really are. […] You are a woman damned by your desires and by your freedom. […] You will burn, Mary, […] Little prostitute, […] You are the false bride of every man on earth, in order to bring me the souls I hunger for. And so you are mine. This is my judgment on you, which shall endure as long as the Law of the Father prevails, which shall be until the end of the world. (WG, p. 101)

The nightmare, which ends with Mary’s burning, leaves the young woman “consumed by a heat of longing and desire” (WG, p. 101) for Jesus that is not associated with pleasure as before, but with tormenting bitterness. This uneasiness, together with Mary’s revealing realisation that the Master in her dream “had had my face” (WG, p. 101), gives particular significance to the scene, for it conveys Mary’s newly awoken doubts about the actual sacredness of the female body and of the physical facet of her relationship with Jesus, and indicates that Mary, like Ignorance, does not truly know

89 “He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God.”

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the goddess – although she rather smugly believes she does –, and has not yet come to terms with her past humiliations and guilt. The narrator too closely associates rebirth with the person of Jesus. Now that he has been taken from her, Mary Magdalene is unconsciously moving away from the knowledge of the resurrection and the wholeness that she was reaching to with her companion. She therefore needs further divine instruction – first in the form of an oneiric meeting with Jesus outside his tomb, and then through a second harrowing scene – in order to truly acknowledge both the power of the Mother and the continued presence of Jesus by her in the spirit, but also to genuinely find the male in her.

B. Jesus’ Special Revelation by His Tomb: On the Erroneous Belief in the Bodily Resurrection

The first part of Mary Magdalene’s main initiation rewrites the resurrected Jesus’ appearance to Mary Magdalene in John 20. Although the sequence of events remains, broadly speaking, faithful to the biblical account, since it describes Mary’s discovery of the empty tomb and her original failure to identify Jesus, followed by the Lord’s giving of an apostolic mandate to his female disciple, Roberts’s vision of the scene significantly diverges from the canonical version in its repeated, emphatic denial of a resurrection of the body. The purely spiritual character of Mary’s experience is subtly announced by the specific time at which it takes place, breaking dawn – and not, as in the Bible, “while it was still dark” (John 20:1) –, a highly symbolic moment of in-betweenness and transformation when, as Mary remembers her mother telling her, “the spirits of the dead walk abroad”^90 (WG, p. 102). Accordingly, the absence of Jesus’ corpse in the tomb is interpreted by the narrator as a highly regrettable theft that will lead “plenty to believe him resurrected in the body and immortal, that error he had so often warned against” (WG, p. 103) – Mary Magdalene’s belief is, however, neither confirmed nor infirmed in the novel, preserving the ambiguity that can already be detected, according to Christian Duquoc,^91 in the biblical appearance narratives. Moreover, following Gnostic texts like The Gospel of Mary which exclude a resurrection of the body^92 and interpret “the resurrection appearances as visions

^90 My emphasis.
^92 Pasquier, p. 5.
received in dreams or in ecstatic trance,” 93 The Wild Girl depicts a Mary Magdalene who sees the Lord “with the eyes of the spirit and not of the body” (WG, p. 129). Roberts’s Jesus himself tells Mary Magdalene that he is “not in the body” (WG, p. 104) and, echoing the Gnostic Gospel of Philip, 94 declares: “[t]here are those who will say of me that I died first and then rose up, but they are in error, for first I was resurrected and then I died” (WG, p. 111). Such words sharply contrast with the orthodox Christian view on the resurrection, which does not simply consist of an immortality of the soul, but also includes the body, as is very well illustrated in Luke’s account of the risen Jesus’ appearance to his disciples 95:

“Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence. (Luke 24:39-43)

This rejection of a resurrection involving the body in The Wild Girl might appear to contradict the novel’s strong emphasis on the rehabilitation of the physical sphere. Mainstream Christianity, which, Paul Beauchamp notes, has never renounced seeing in the body the place of salvation, 96 would then seem to offer a more positive valuation of our corporal dimension – although, as André Dartigues points out, the emphasis has often been placed on the immortality of the soul from the late Middle-Ages onwards. 97 Yet the fringe stance adopted in Roberts’s novel can be interpreted as a refusal to envisage a flesh disconnected from the material world and time, and as a further powerful profession of the import of this life. Jesus’ insistence on the necessity to celebrate the turning points of our human existences in his teaching by the empty tomb unequivocally points in this direction.

Through this new vision, Mary Magdalene receives from the deceased Christ a special revelation that “has been hidden” (WG, p. 108) from the others and that, consequently, further enhances her status as disciple, apostle and prophet. She is also granted the revived assurance that Jesus’ “grace is entirely with us” (WG, p. 107) and

94 “Those who say that the lord died first and (then) rose up are in error, for he rose up first and (then) died” (The Gospel of Philip [56:15-18], in J.M. Robinson, p. 144).
95 Although not necessarily under the same appearance, as Mary Magdalene’s and the male disciples’ deferred recognition of Jesus seems to indicate.
96 Paul Beauchamp, “Âme-coeur-corps,” in Lacoste, p. 33.
that “[t]he understanding of sacred matters […] has […] been given back to [her] by him to be passed on” (WG, p. 108) to the other disciples. However, when Mary does transmit Jesus’ teaching – in accordance with the Lord’s will –, she encounters Simon Peter’s silencing scepticism and his denial of the validity of her words. Although the narrator forcefully asserts her voice, claiming that “[e]ach of us is a disciple. Each of us is therefore an authority. […] Each of us can receive revelation. None of us has power over the others to decide what is the truth” (WG, p. 112), she feels “doubtful” (WG, p. 114) in the face of opposition, and when Peter purposefully challenges her word by conspicuously praying to the Father “that the resurrection of the body of his Son be revealed to us” (WG, p. 113), he unwittingly launches the second phase of Mary’s instruction.

C. Mary Magdalene’s Second Harrowing Scene

This initiation scene, which constitutes the climax of the novel, starts with a Mary going in search of her lover again, from whom she still cannot stand physical separation, and being once more misled by the men who cross her path:

The marriage chamber in me was noisy and disordered, the bride weeping and crying out: my husband, my husband, they have taken his body away and I cannot find him. I was that bride, my clothes torn and my hair dishevelled, my body wasted with nights of watching and weeping. I […] rushed out into the street. Here, my wits almost gone, I wondered [sic] up and down, plucking at the sleeve of each passing man and asking: are you my husband? are you he? For I did not know how I should recognize him. And each man in turn answered yes, and took me in his arms and kissed me, and from the taste of the kiss I knew that this was not he whom I sought, and so turned away. And the men, angered and hurt by my wild invitation and equally wild rejection, called after me: whore; profligate woman. (WG, p. 114)

As the following biblical extract shows, Roberts’s heroine is, significantly, identified with the bride of the Song of Solomon, whose union with the bridegroom has frequently been interpreted as the symbol of the relationship between the human – whether as the Church, the people of Israel, the individual soul or, even, Mary Magdalene herself98 – and the divine – either understood as God or Christ:

I sought him whom my soul loves;/I sought him, but found him not;/I called him, but he gave no/answer./*I will rise now and go about the city,/in the streets and in the squares;/I will seek him whom my soul/loves.*/I sought him, but found him not./The sentinels found me,as they went about the city./"Have you seen him whom my soul/loves?"/[…]/*[T]hey beat me, they wounded me,/they took away my mantle,/those sentinels of the walls./[…]*/What is your

98 As Pamela Norris notes, the bishop of Rome Hippolytus (c. 170 - c. 236) was the first to associate Mary Magdalene with the Song of Songs, initiating a tradition that will consider the first century Christian as the spiritual bride of Christ (Norris, p. 254).
beloved more than/another beloved,/O fairest among women?/What is your beloved more
than/another beloved,/that you thus abjure us? (Song of Solomon 3:1-3, 5:7 and 9)

Mary Magdalene’s quest among the living remaining fruitless, she turns to hell
again, which, wiser for her experience with Ignorance, she recognizes this time as the
realm “of the lost Mother,” “of the dark side of God” (WG, p. 115), thereby
acknowledging the terrible destructive facet of the divine feminine that is
indissociable from the creative motherly side Mary saw at work in her dream about
the origin of the world. This scene represents a real eye-opener for the narrator, who
has, up to this point, “complaisantly sung” and talked about the female godhead
“before [she] knew her properly” (WG, p. 115). Ironically, Mary Magdalene can be
seen to unknowingly foreshadow this pivotal encounter with the angry goddess in an
early prophecy about the all-encompassing power of the Mother that is strongly
reminiscent, in its circumstances, of God’s gentle breathing in Elijah’s ear in 1 Kings
19:12, and in its reproachful tone, of Wisdom’s cry to humanity “‘How long, O
simple ones, will you/love being simple?/How long will scoffers delight in
their/scoffing/and fools hate knowledge?/Give heed to my reproof;/[…] I will make
my words known/to you’” in Proverbs 1:22-23:

I could contain myself no longer. Something had breathed and moved in me as I listened to
these words, someone whose name I did not know had whispered at my ear. […] I leapt to my
feet and began to prophesy.

– I will show you the power of the woman, I cried: both to create and to destroy. Through the
gateway of the woman we come to life. From the Mother we come, struggling and bawling
into the light, and to her we return, choking and crying, as helpless as infants, our breath
rattling, as we are sucked back into death, her darkness. […] If men do not revere the power of
the female in their works and in their acts and in their speech, if they forget from whom they
came and to whom they will return, then she will exact vengeance. She will descend and
slaughter all her children. She will erupt, causing famines, plagues and drought, and terrible
wars in which all her creation will be destroyed. And we shall die too, her withered unloving
progeny, and shall be taken back into her to be re-nourished by her blood, to grow once more
inside her womb, to be fed on her wisdom until we are ready to be reborn. (WG, p. 60)

This image of humankind as children incurring the goddess’s Yahweh-like wrath for
their forgetfulness and dying to better be reborn to the knowledge of the godhead
closely mirrors Mary Magdalene’s journey in the underworld.

1. Baptismal Purification in the Mother's Womb

The narrator’s descent to hell first takes the form of a fall into the fierce black waters
of the female divinity that can be interpreted, in Kristevan terms, as a meeting with
the abject mother who is both other and part of us, as a terrifying and disorienting
return to the womb that simultaneously appeals to and disturbs Mary Magdalene’s
sense of self.\(^9\) The heroine is beset by an overpowering loss of connections and control which she conveys through her identification with a “rudderless boat” wildly drifting on “unutterable wastes of black seas” (WG, p. 115) and through the repetition of negative words emphasising the notion of absence:

> My life was not my own: I tossed up and down at the mercy of currents and winds and could not steer. I lacked a tiller; I had no sail. I was a baby, thirsting and starving and dying, and nobody came. Nobody knew my name and nobody touched me. Nobody needed me. Nobody knew I was alive. I knew it, and that was my distress. I did not want to know that I lived, and that I was alone, but I could not refuse the knowledge. […] I kept on swimming. (WG, p. 115)

Also effectively communicating Mary Magdalene’s state of helplessness and forsakenness in this extract is the ambivalent motif of the baby that recurs throughout Roberts’ novel in connection with the protagonist, simultaneously symbolising her lack of knowledge and the promise of new life within her. It is tightly linked with the protean likeness and emissary of the goddess, Salome, who, as a female reconfiguration of the ancient archetypal figure of the “wise old man”\(^100\) described by Jung in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, guides Mary Magdalene, bringing enlightenment and the knowledge needed to compensate for her protégée’s deficiencies. She initially appears on the heroine’s first day on the road with Jesus as a malicious, massive old midwife with breasts and hips like a young woman, who leads a reluctant Mary into a wild dance inspired from the ritual celebrations of Dionysus’ death and resurrection, while singing a cradle song\(^101\):

> Lullaby, my pretty, I sing you a lullaby/Snug in your cradle, swing low, swing high/Sleep now my pretty one, baby don’t cry.
> […]
> Rock a bye baby, on the tree-top/When the wind blows, the cradle will rock/When the wind stills, the cradle will too/Sleep will my baby, and all of you. (WG, pp. 54-55)

This scene explicitly situates Roberts’s Salome in the contemporary feminist effort to rethink the traditional negative figure of the witch, best illustrated by Xavière Gauthier’s opening statement in the first issue of her journal about women’s creativity and language, *Sorcières*\(^102\):

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\(^101\) Salome’s song is directly inspired from a nursery rhyme describing Native American mothers rocking their babies in cradles suspended from branches so that the wind can rock them to sleep.

Why witches? Because witches dance. They dance in the moonlight. Lunar, lunatic women, stricken, they say, with periodic madness. Swollen with lightninglike revolt, bursting with anger, with desire, they dance wild dances on the wild moors. […] Why witches? Because witches sing. Can I hear this singing? It is the sound of another voice. They [i.e. men] tried to make us believe that women did not know how to speak or write; that they were stutterers or mutes. […] In reality, they croon lullabies, they howl, they gasp, they babble, they shout, they sigh. […] Why witches? Because witches are alive. Because they are in direct contact with the life of their own bodies and bodies of others, with the life force itself. […] They were the caretakers, the healers of the people. They were midwives helping women to give birth, to give life. […] Why witches? Because witches are rapturous. […] Witches are bursting; their entire bodies are desire; their gestures are caresses; their smell, taste, hearing are all sensual.103

Salome’s teaching to the ignorant and resentful Mary that “[t]here are many things you think you know, […] are there not? I tell you, there are some other things you should know, and that you resist knowing. Where are your wits, girl? Lose them in order to find them” (WG, p. 54), announces the female guide’s decisive role, while the striking contrast between the frantic dance recalling the bloody Dionysian rituals and the calming, motherly words of the cradle song effectively foreshadows the variant of the lullaby that Salome performs later in the novel:

Lullaby, my pretty, I sing you a lullaby/The day of your birth brings the day you will die/Sleep now my pretty one, baby don’t cry. […] Rock a bye, baby, on the tree-top/When the wind blows, the cradle will rock/When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall/Down will come baby, cradle and all. (WG, p. 83)

These ominous lyrics, together with Mary’s “vision of Salome, tall and strong as an oak, her face serene while her knees open […] wider and wider to let the baby cradled there slip to the ground and crack its head open” (WG, p. 83), most graphically depict the deadly facet of the goddess who wants to exact revenge on her children for forgetting her, and therefore herald Mary’s life-threatening confrontation with the Mother’s dark waters at the outset of her second journey to hell.

When, after what seems an endless struggle for her life, Mary believes that she can no longer fight against the angry waves, she is eventually thrown onto the shore and sinks into a deep sleep from which she is awoken by none other than Salome. Having undergone in the Mother’s womb a baptismal purification that has washed away her old certainties, creating in her a sense of emptiness and restoring her to her original spiritual innocence, the moment has come for Mary Magdalene, if she wants

to “penetrate the heart of the mystery” (WG, pp. 117-118) of rebirth, to come to terms with her past and the loss of her beloved ones.

2. Mourning for the Dead Lover and Mother

Dressed in black and “more wrinkled than ever” (WG, p. 117), Salome therefore incites the young woman to express her pain and carry out her mourning for Jesus through a wild outburst of dancing and wailing:

And then, when she opened her mouth wide and howled long and hard, I howled too, feeling this a great release of my agony.
– That’s how a woman howls when her labour is upon her, she panted, […] and how a mother howls for the child she has lost, and how a bride howls for the bridegroom who is gone. […] [T]here was a comfort and a freedom in it, all restraint gone. I hurled my sadness and my grief upwards, towards the moon, and sideways, towards the sea, and downwards, towards the earth, and tossed myself and my wild cries into the air, unravelling a banner of longing and distress with the animal music I sang. (WG, p. 118)

Leading Mary Magdalene deep into the heart of the nearby coastal cliffs in an arduous walk that mirrors the heroine’s difficult process of self-analysis, Salome gives to the younger woman the rather ambiguous instruction “not [to] look back” (WG, p. 119). If, from a literal point of view, Mary avoids making the same mistake as Lot’s wife, and despite the temptation to turn back, keeps following her old guide along the dark tunnels, she must, in order to be able to truly leave her former life behind without regret, symbolically look back on her past mistakes to accept and overcome them, as indicates the final destination chosen by Salome for her apprentice: the cave in which Mary Magdalene has previously met her own Ignorance of the Mother. The time is now ripe for Jesus’ companion to deal with her guilt and regrets in connection with her mother and sister, whose loss she acutely feels. Describing her sense of abandonment, she uses traditional female domestic images of sewing and weaving, in an attempt to symbolically reconnect with and re-inscribe herself in the feminine sphere that she fled as a girl:

I felt sick, and utterly dreary, and I was unable to care any more whether I should ever see Jesus again. It was my sister and my mother who possessed my thoughts. I had travelled so far away from them that I could not believe I should ever be reunited with them; yet how I longed for their company. I felt like a frayed length of cloth hacked from the bale to be sold to strangers. I was a mass of loose threads dangling, no longer belonging to the pattern I formerly knew and was part of. Newly ripped from my mother, the cord cut and knotted, I sat in that dark room which was fitfully lit by the fire, and I wept. […] Oh my mother and sister, I thought: why did I ever leave you, and leave home? (WG, p. 120)

The heroine rues the pride and foolishness of her youth, her former belief in being “an exile from heaven, […] different from all the other women” (WG, p. 120), which led
her to despise the material world and leave her home in search of God: “I had wanted
the sun and the moon and the stars, and what lay beyond them, and had sought them
through running away” (WG, p. 120). She contemplates the possibility, which has
always been available to her, as she now realizes, to find God in her while staying
with her family, and is overwhelmed by a pain that assumes the emblematic form of
“a crying child who would not sleep” (WG, p. 121): “The Lord was gone from me,
and my mother and my childhood had been taken away. […] I hugged my self-pity to
me, and rocked it, and crooned it, and my mother’s face swam before me, misted by
tears” (WG, p. 121). Listening to the advice of Salome, who has turned into a
“queenly mother, her black hair plentiful and her cheeks unlined” (WG, p. 121), Mary
Magdalene casts the infant personification of her sentimental bonds with the past into
cleansing flames to enable her new self, “the divine child,” to “be born” (WG, p. 121).

3. Mary Magdalene’s Hierogamy: The Ultimate Ineffability of Pristine
Unity

Having undergone spiritual and emotional purification, Mary is washed, anointed,
dressed and adorned like a bride by Salome, for she is finally ready to become whole
again in the marriage chamber, as indicates the metamorphosis of what used to be
Ignorance’s inhospitable throne room into a pavilion “shaped like a beehive or an
oven” (WG, p. 121). This transformation restores to the cave not only its traditional
form as “a womb-shaped enclosure,”104 but also its function as a “secret and often
sacred”105 “place of female power, […] [as] one of the great antechambers of […]
transformation.”106

By interweaving references to Mesopotamian and Greco-Latin mythology with
mainstream and fringe Christian elements, the ritual taking place in this sanctuary
reconfigures the Christian mystery of the resurrection as a hieros gamos,107 i.e. the
“sacred marriage” between a divinity and a human, or a goddess and a god – typically
Zeus and Hera, or, as in The Red Tent, Innana and Dumuzi – which symbolises the
union of traditional opposites. In this holy drama, Mary Magdalene is joined in the

104 Gilbert and Gubar, p. 93.
105 Gilbert and Gubar, p. 93.
106 Gilbert and Gubar, p. 95.
107 W.P. Harman specifies that the term “was probably used earliest in Western scholarship to describe
the union of Zeus and Hera in Greek mythology” (W.P. Harman, The Sacred Marriage of a Hindu
darkness, not by Jesus himself, as might have been expected, but by a mysterious god whom the narrator feels she has “always known” (WG, p. 122) and who therefore personifies the male in her.

The bridegroom is bedecked with a crown of vine leaves and a leopard skin, which constitute traditional attributes of the Greek god of wine and ecstasy. Such Dionysian touches appropriately suffuse the entire scene, the ancient Greek godhead being closely associated not only with rebirth – as a “twice born” and a harrower of hell\textsuperscript{108} – but also with the feminine. Dionysus is indeed characterised by his androgyne,\textsuperscript{109} as his epithet “the man-womanly”\textsuperscript{110} indicates, and frequently depicted with female worshippers and partners “without whom [he is] incomplete.”\textsuperscript{111} The mysteries that re-enact his birth, death and rebirth are moreover often associated or even merged with those held at Eleusis in honour of the powerful goddesses Demeter and her daughter Persephone\textsuperscript{112} which, as Mara Lynn Keller argues, aimed “to bring an experience of love to the most important life passages: birth, sexuality and death/rebirth”\textsuperscript{113} – probably through some form of sacred marriage, among others. This blend of mythical Dionysian and Eleusinian elements therefore provides Roberts with highly valuable images of initiation, of descent to the nether regions and rebirth, and of union between the masculine and the feminine which counterbalance the predominantly masculine Christian imagery of the divine.

Instructing Mary not to look at him in the light, for he is, like Cupid to his lover Psyche, her “husband in darkness only” and “[i]t is in the shadows that [they]

\textsuperscript{108} According to the myth, Dionysus is born twice, for he is rescued out of his dead mother Semele’s body by his father Zeus, who keeps him in his thigh until he is ready to be born. The divinity of ecstasy and intoxication moreover experiences rebirth after being torn to pieces by Titans and resurrected by the god of gods (R.J. Thibaud, \textit{Dictionnaire de mythologie et de symbolique grecque} [Paris: Dervy, 1996], pp. 206-207). Dionysus also belongs to the numerous mythological visitors of hell, either because he wants to rescue his mother or, according to an Orphic Hymn, because he is himself abducted and taken to Persephone’s realm (W.F. Otto, \textit{Dionysos: Le mythe et le culte}, Patrick Lévy [Tr.] [Paris: Mercure de France, 1969 (1960)], p. 122).

\textsuperscript{109} Otto, pp. 184-185.


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shall embrace” (*WG*, p. 122), the god presents his bride with “strange wine seemingly fermented from barley” (*WG*, p. 122) inspired from the *kykeon* drunk at Eleusinian mysteries,\(^{114}\) and with a typical piece of Dionysian/Eleusinian paraphernalia, the sacred basket\(^{115}\) filled with both pastries and highly symbolic fruit associated with fertility and sexuality, such as figs\(^{116}\) and pomegranates.\(^{117}\) This ceremonial marks the end of Mary’s fast and the beginning of their “wedding feast” (*WG*, p. 122), as indicates the bridegroom’s litany, whose words are strongly reminiscent of the Eleusinian initiates’ as reported by Clement of Alexandria: “I fasted, I drank the *kykeon*, I took from the chest, I put back into the basket and from the basket into the chest”\(^{118}\):

– Now, he said: you have fasted, and you have drunk the barley drink. You have taken the things from the sacred basket, and having tasted thereof you have replaced them. You have touched the sacred vessel, and you are ready to go deeper into the marriage chamber.
– I have fasted, I repeated: and I have drunk the barley drink. I have taken the things from the sacred basket, and having tasted thereof I have replaced them. I have touched the sacred vessel, and I am ready to go deeper into the marriage chamber. (*WG*, pp. 122-123)

If the narrator’s initiation carries on at first with the lovers’ joyful enumeration in songs of their partner’s past, present and future names, it however quickly takes on marked Gnostic and mystical accents again. Echoing both the Gnostic belief that names are necessary in this world but “have an end in the eternal realm,”\(^{119}\) and Teresa of Ávila’s profession that the riches and delights of her unitive experience with God would better be left untold for “the understanding is unable to comprehend them and […] earthly things are quite insufficient” to explain them,\(^{120}\) Mary Magdalene’s words give way to the ineffable of regained pristine unity, leaving the core of the resurrection mystery as a compelling gap in the female disciple’s testimony:

> Words are for the waking world, to establish the distance and separation we need between ourselves and between us and the rest of creation. […] Every age in history has invented, invents and will invent copious names for all the forms of the partners in the couple. Body and

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\(^{114}\) Keller, p. 52.

\(^{115}\) In Dionysian rites, the basket, called *liknon*, is traditionally filled with fruit and a phallus, symbolising fertility (Maurice Olender, “Phallus,” in Philippe Sollers [Ed.], *Dictionnaire de la psychanalyse* [2nd Edition] [Paris: Encyclopaedia Universalis/Albin Michel, 2001], pp. 600-601).

\(^{116}\) Otto, p. 167.

\(^{117}\) According to the legend, the first pomegranate tree grows from Dionysus’ blood, shed when the god is killed by Titans. Although it traditionally belongs to the realm of the dead, the pomegranate symbolizes fecundity (Thibaud, pp. 206-208 and 276-277).

\(^{118}\) Keller, p. 52.


\(^{120}\) of Ávila, in Franke, *On What Cannot Be Said. Volume 1*, p. 357.
soul. Woman and man. Darkness and light. Matter and spirit. Nature and culture. Death and life. She and she [sic]. Devil and God. […] But this meaning, of him and me, will change, and will continue to change. This is part of the mystery; the dance and the change linked to what always exists. I cannot explain it. This is where words will not do. In the beginning, there was a unity, and so there were no words. […] So we reached the point where we undressed ourselves of language as we had done of clothes. I could no longer say him or you. We went out of the waking world of time and words, into the other one. Love fused. Love fused us. There was knowledge that I cannot, and shall not, speak of. (WG, p. 123)

4. The Goddess's Blessing of Her New Initiate

When she awakens with, stuck between her teeth, a seed reinforcing her identification with Persephone, the resurrected Mary Magdalene feels “as feeble and helpless as a newborn baby must” (WG, p. 124). She is greeted and comforted by a Salome who now assumes the appearance of a “great queen” (WG, p. 124) and who blesses her new initiate in the name of a female holy trinity of virgin, mother and crone corresponding, as King notes, to “the three phases of the moon goddess.” Wiser for her experience of the sacred marriage, Mary Magdalene is now truly receptive to the divine in all its manifestations. Like the Grail Knight who eventually asks the Fisher King the healing question he has desperately been waiting for, Roberts’s narrator finally enquires about Salome’s identity:

– Who are you? I whispered: what is your true name?
  Now she smiled at me, as though I had asked the right question at last.
– I am the Queen of Heaven, she made answer to me. […] I am the Ancient One. I am She who has many names. (WG, pp. 124-125)

From the Canaan Astarte or the Mesopotamian Ishtar/Inanna “who descends from heaven to marry the shepherd Dumuzi” (WG, p. 125), to the Egyptian Isis or the ancient Greek Artemis, Aphrodite, Demeter and Persephone “borne off by Pluto into the underworld, there to […] bring the human and the divine together again” (WG, p. 125), Salome reveals the multiple identities of the lunar – hence multifaceted – great goddess who, across cultures, invariably reconciles opposites as a virgin and mother, as a divinity of love and fertility, but also of war. It is precisely on this last facet that Mary’s guide insists at the issue of her apprentice’s sojourn in the underworld, not simply to denounce her silencing, which confines her, like Persephone in Hades’ hell, to a one-dimensional realm, but also to announce her triumphant return and to promise retribution to humanity:

121 My emphasis.
122 Jeannette King, p. 110.
Then her face changed, and became sorrowful.
– And I am She who is ignored. Men have forgotten me. I am exiled from my house on earth, though my mother roams ceaselessly over the face of the world seeking me and calling for me. Men fear me, and try to keep me here in the land of darkness and unconsciousness, though my home is equally among the living and in the light. Now she stood up, and stretched out her arms.
– But I shall rise. I shall not let myself be divided and reviled. For I am She who is three in one. For I am Martha the housewife and I am Mary the mother of the Lord and I am Mary the prostitute. I am united, three in one, and I shall rise. And I shall sing around the ears of the irreverent like a whip, like a flail, like a scourge. (WG, p. 125)

With this vision of terror, Mary emerges back to reality, to be – again, Persephone-like – finally reunited with her beloved female relative, Martha, who announces to her sister that she has “been lying as one dead for three nights and three days” (WG, p. 126). The identification with the Greek goddess and the subversive transposition of Christ’s resurrection through his Father’s grace to a mother-daughter dyad are complete when Mary Magdalene discovers her own stigmata of her journey to death: fierce, yet non-painful bee-stings covering her palms, which refer to the priestesses of Demeter123 and the “Goddess as Taker and Regenerator of Life,”124 both symbolised by the pollinating insect, and, under her fingernails, crescents of wax that associate the bee with another goddess symbol of rebirth, the moon.

Having received divine instruction and experienced resurrection in the same way as Jesus, whom she is subversively portrayed to survive, Mary Magdalene feels invested with the task to further transmit God’s teaching to humanity, which the Saviour himself was unable to complete before he was killed. The authenticity and significance of her spiritual vision of the Saviour outside the tomb, of her entire experience in the bridal chamber and alternative stigmata, are however eclipsed and denied by Simon Peter’s and ten other male disciples’ competing claims to have seen Jesus, “[n]ot as a vision. Real. In the body. They saw his wounds” (WG, p. 126). Through the depiction of a particularly animated debate between Simon Peter and Mary Magdalene over the organisation and future of the Church, The Wild Girl brings back to the fore the issue of whose voice(s) can be heard and whose cannot in early Christianity and the later tradition, the novel “provid[ing] a […] demonstration of the process by which […] the Gospel according to Mary Magdalene […] is suppressed in favour of […] patriarchal interpretations.”125

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123 Magnien, p. 135.
124 Christ, Rebirth of the Goddess, p. 55.
125 Jeannette King, p. 114.
IV. The Voice of Female Dissent

A. “Each of Us Is the Rock, and Each of Us Is the Shepherd”

Neglecting Jesus’ egalitarian views and repeated warnings against the erroneous belief in the bodily resurrection, Simon Peter rejects Mary’s vision of the Lord under the pretext that it was only perceived with the spirit, and exclusively acknowledges the eleven eyewitness accounts of the risen Christ. He also uses these alleged appearances to establish the supremacy of the eleven over all the other disciples, which foregrounds what Pagels identifies as the “essential political function” of “the doctrine of bodily resurrection […] [that] legitimizes the authority of certain men […] over the churches”126:

there are eleven of us here who have seen the risen Lord and have walked and talked with him. We have been specially blessed. […] Though there are many of you, my brethren, who will desire to become our priests and embody the love and authority of Christ as you baptise in his name, yet I suggest that the eleven of us are well placed to act not only as priests but, additionally, as guardians of the faith and of the faithful, to take responsibility for ensuring that we direct our actions and teaching in the most fruitful way. (WG, p. 129)

Among these elected, Peter sets himself up as leader by putting forward how Jesus declared him to be the rock on which he would build his Church. This statement, which refers to Matthew 16:18 – a highly debated verse that has often been understood by Catholic commentators as instituting the disciple as the head of the Church127 and, in his wake, papacy – is however not shown in The Wild Girl to be spoken by Christ in his lifetime, as in the Bible, but claimed by Peter to have been uttered by the resurrected Lord when he appeared to him. This purposefully leaves room for doubt about the veracity of his election – an election that precisely represents what Peter needs to justify his self-proclaimed power.

Simon Peter’s speech can therefore be seen to mirror what Brock denounces as the “[c]xclusionary traditions” at work for instance in Luke-Acts, which, by

127 D.L. Turner, for instance, argues that in Matthew 16:18, Jesus makes “a pronouncement of Peter’s foundational authority in the Church that Jesus will build. […] Although some Protestants disagree […], Jesus plays on the nickname Peter in speaking of him (as spokesman for the disciples) as the foundation of the nascent church. […] This more natural understanding of Jesus’s [sic] words is preferable to other views that take the rock to be Jesus or Peter’s confession of Jesus” (D.L. Turner, Matthew [Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament] [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008], pp. 404-405).
“concentrat[ing] apostolic authority into the hands of […] the ‘twelve,’”128 “ensure […] that it is precisely their version of the whole life and teachings of Jesus that is the correct one,”129 and which “tend to discount the role of women as witnesses receiving the resurrection announcement, especially Mary Magdalene.”130 Roberts’s Peter indeed specifically excludes any possibility of female priesthood, arguing that “[t]he fact that God became Man, that the Word took flesh as Man, means that it is for men to come after him and baptise others and offer the bread and wine. It is as simple as that” (WG, p. 131). Adapting to The Wild Girl’s doctrine of the androgynous God the feminist argument – summarised by McGrath – that “the maleness of Christ is a contingent aspect of his identity […] [which] cannot be allowed to become the basis of the domination of females by males, any more than it legitimates the domination of Gentiles by Jews, or plumbers by carpenters,”131 Roberts has her Mary Magdalene retort:

And was not the man […] stretched out on the cross to bleed and die? Was not the image of man put to death? Do you not remember what Jesus taught us about the incompleteness of the Father alone? (WG, p. 131)

Like The Gospel of Mary by which it is inspired, The Wild Girl thus describes views excluding women and “divid[ing] the world neatly into those who fully reflect […] God and those who d[o] not” (WG, p. 137) as but one side in the power struggle within the early Christian community. Championing the other side, in accordance with the voice of God in her and in memory of her union with Jesus, Mary Magdalene virulently challenges Peter’s rule. She asserts her belief that the beneficiaries of the resurrected Christ’s appearances should not exploit their experience to claim special authority, and that “[e]ach of us is the rock, and each of us is the shepherd. […] There can be no hierarchy among us” (WG, p. 130). Internally raging against the other women, who do not dare to rise up and “claim their right to the Lord’s mission as our brothers do” (WG, p. 131), Mary feels impelled to represent the voice of dissent, proclaiming that “because I have gone through baptism and resurrection in my soul, I desire to become a priest and to baptise others as you brethren will do. Surely all of us should become priests” (WG, p. 130).

128 Brock, p. 152.
130 Brock, p. 159.
131 McGrath, p. 89.
In order to silence this disturbing opposition, Peter adopts a different strategy, attacking Mary Magdalene personally to discredit her and lose her the support of the other women and more progressive male disciples. When Simon Peter accuses her of exposing their “mission […] [to] the taint of witchcraft […] [and] the practices of the heathens” (WG, p. 132) through her visions and trances from which she emerges with “tale[s] of pagan gods” (WG, p. 132), the heroine exposes what she perceives as the new leader’s hidden condemnation of her way of living outside of the traditional female roles and masculine authority:

What you really mean, Simon Peter, is that because I am unmarried and have chosen to live and love freely I am a threat to your ideas of what a woman disciple should be. […] Do you really mean that there can be no place for me in your company if I am neither virgin nor wife? You call me a witch, but I know what you mean. Free woman. Whore. (WG, pp. 132-133)

B. Sailing in and to Silence

Despite her strenuous attempts to promote a faith rooted in egalitarian principles, Mary Magdalene is powerless to prevent the organisation of the Christian movement around Simon Peter’s creed, which uncompromisingly entails the garrulous silencing of women through the limitation of their freedom to speak in the name of God and their confinement to menial, domestic missions:

It became decided that the Son of the Father would be reflected in a male priesthood, and that the Daughters of the Father could continue to preach and to prophesy, within certain carefully established limits, and to serve the new church in the many and important ways in which women served their husbands and families. (WG, p. 134)

The narrator can but acknowledge the inevitability of a chasm and is torn between the grief caused by what she perceives as the beginning of “a new exile” (WG, p. 134), and a growing sense of mission within her that she metaphorically associates both with a pearl – referring thereby to Jesus’ “[t]he kingdom of heaven is like a pearl, which is hidden in each of you, and which you must seek, and find” (WG, p. 73) – and with the traditional image of new life in The Wild Girl, a baby thriving in her: “I felt heavy and full, the pearl of my vocation as poet, prophet and priest big and swelling within me. Would I have to kill it? I wanted it to be born” (WG, p. 134).

Together with her most faithful allies, her sister Martha, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Salome, Mary Magdalene leaves for Alexandria, a place where she lived for a few years as a young girl after leaving home and where she now aims to spread God’s word to the large Jewish community. As will be shown in the third part of this thesis, this journey, however, will not lead the narrator to her anticipated destination,
but to new geographical, spiritual and personal territories – through, among others, motherhood. In her relentless quest for voice and for God, she will sail in and to silences that reflect her doubts about her mission and specific distrust of words.

While this first pair of case studies has emphasised how in *The Red Tent* and *The Wild Girl*, the heroines’ voice is indissociable from the rehabilitation of the silenced great mother, the archetype of the divine feminine, in the next two chapters, I will concentrate on Michèle Roberts’s *The Book of Mrs Noah* and Jenny Diski’s *Only Human*, two novels that still foreground the maternal dimension, but completely dissociate it from a divine depicted as, at best, partial and useless, and at worst, utterly destructive for humans, and will demonstrate that both novels hinge on the two types of silence called “voice blurring” and “spectral silence.”
SECTION 2

BLURRED VOICES AND SPECTRAL SILENCES

Roberts’s *The Book of Mrs Noah* and Diski’s *Only Human*
Chapter 3
Blurred Voices for an Encounter with the Lost Mother: Mrs Noah’s Journey to Creativity

I. Setting the Tone: On the Polyphonic, Subversive and Silent Use of Epigraphy in The Book of Mrs Noah

“‘That floating Colledge, that swimming Hospitall—’” (BMN, p. 5). With this rather enigmatic epigraph inspired by Donne’s The Progresse of the Soule (1601), the readers of The Book of Mrs Noah are, even before reaching the incipit, immediately immersed in the aquatic oneiric universe of Michèle Roberts’s novel. Although this paratextual material provides extremely precious cryptic clues to the understanding of Mrs Noah’s voyage, and announces, in particular, the blurring of voices that, together with spectral silences, distinguishes The Book of Mrs Noah as a silent novel, it has, so far, never been scrutinised in critical texts. Only the Indian literary scholar Jayita Sengupta refers to this borrowing in her Refractions of Desire. She however confines her analysis of it to a single sentence describing it as “an extended metaphor of Mrs. [sic] Noah’s psyche,” and investigates neither its origin, nor its potential complex connections with, and relevance to The Book of Mrs Noah. For behind the manifest

metaphorical connection between Donne’s words and Roberts’s re-vision of the Ark, which functions as both a library – “[t]hat floating Colledge” – and a refuge for women whose creativity is dangerously frustrated by their living conditions – “that swimming Hospitall” –, this citation hides not only a series of more subtle yet highly significant links with the studied novel, but also a partial forgery that heralds Roberts’s postmodern, playful stance on the concepts of voice and authority.

A. Echoing Donne’s Erratic Progress of a Multiform, Eternal Soul

Describing the evolution of a “deathlesse soule”3 from Eve’s apple through various organisms of the vegetable and animal kingdom until its incarnation in human form in the person of Cain’s sister and wife Themech,4 Donne’s *The Progressse of the Soule* is most distinctly mirrored in the basic outline of *The Book of Mrs Noah* as a spiritual journey and in the heroine’s oneiric embodiment of her complex psyche, her beliefs, doubts and contradictions in seven different personalities, from a hard-line lesbian feminist – the Forsaken Sibyl – to the Gaffer, the typical male personification of traditional patriarchal views on women and creation. Such a diversity of sometimes blending, sometimes clashing consciences precisely characterises polyphonic narratives in which – as Bakhtine’s analysis of Dostoïevski’s novels shows – characters speak with their doubles, their alter egos, or their caricatures, rendering thereby the individuals’ inner conflicts and development.5

Moreover, the seemingly chaotic structure of *The Book of Mrs Noah* parallels, and might be seen to be inspired by, the carefully orchestrated disorder of *The Progresse of the Soule*. As J.A. Thomas argues, Donne, whose “paradoxical mind […] delighted in the witty argument of opposing ideas,”6 stresses in *The Progresse of the Soule* that

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5 Bakhtine, *Poétique*, p. 65.
the soul’s transmigratory steps are taken aimlessly […][to] create […] the illusion of a random movement, thereby achieving superficial imbalance that helps to counteract what might otherwise have become too predictable or orderly a progress.7

Thus his multiform protagonist moves freely from Eve’s apple to beings as different as a mandrake, a bird, a whale, an ape, or, ultimately, a woman. By positioning, through her epigraph, her novelistic rewriting of the flood in the wake of Donne’s *The Progresse of the Soule*, Roberts cryptically announces the apparently loose and erratic story line to which this analysis will return in detail.

Pervading both works is also the notion of spirits transcending human finiteness. As Donne explains in his second stanza, his rather unconventional protagonist surpasses time and its agent the sun, for even though the day star’s “male force” has created “all wee have,,” and, from morning to night, “[i]n the first East […] beginst to shine” to “[a]t Tagus, Po, Sene, Thames, and Danow dine,/And see at night thy Westerne land of Myne,”8 he has “not more nations scene then shee” – that is, the soul – who “shall long, long out live/Thee.”9 In the image of Donne’s immortal spirit, Mrs Noah, as paradigm of the silenced female, is potentially present in each woman, resonating beyond temporal boundaries, like her double in the first embedded story, who, after having survived the Flood and found a new spiritual and emotional equilibrium, welcomes death “[u]ntil I’m reincarnated, born again into the next story” (*BMN*, p. 89).

**B. In the Image of … Donne’s Soul: Outshining Noah’s Ark**

In the third stanza of *The Progresse of the Soule*, from which the epigraph to *The Book of Mrs Noah* is taken, Donne carries on describing how all-encompassing is the soul about which he is singing, by claiming that it has taken on board more beings than Noah – metaphorically designated as Janus,10 the Latin god of doorways, who

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7 Thomas, p. 113.
9 Donne, in Milgate, p. 27.
10 Thomas, p. 114.
has one face turned to the past, and another to the future\footnote{Myriam Philibert, \textit{Dictionnaire illustré des mythologies celtique, égyptienne, gréco-latine, germano-scandinave, iranienne, mésopotamienne} (Paris: Lodi, 1997), p. 153.} – and his Ark, which Donne uses as “types for Christ (the door) and the Church”\footnote{Thomas, p. 114.}:

Nor, holy Janus, in whose soveraigne boate  
The Church, and all the Monarchies did floate;  
That swimming Colledge, and free Hospitall  
Of all mankinde, that cage and vivarie  
Of fowles, and beasts, in whose wombe, Destinie  
Us, and our lastest nephewes did install  
(For thence are all deriv’d, that fill this All,)  
Did’st thou in that great stewardship embarke  
So diverse shapes into that floating parke,  
\hspace{1.25cm} As have been mov’d, and inform’d by this heavenly sparke.\footnote{Donne, in Milgate, pp. 27-28}  

Mrs Noah herself seems to appropriate Janus’ function as opener of doors and his perspective embracing both times gone by and to come. This is revealed by the comparison that she makes between herself and an Advent calendar in chapter 12 to describe her quest for identity and creativity, which entails the remembering of past memories in search for answers for her future:

I am a house with many windows and many doors. Each day I must pull one open and peer inside. […]  
I’ll start with today’s door. I’ll reach for it.  
It bursts open. Memories of my last conversation with Noah, on the train going to Venice, leap out. (\textit{BMN}, p. 63)

Each chapter of \textit{The Book of Mrs Noah} can therefore be understood as another step towards the last window of the Advent calendar, behind which the heroine hopes to find the child Jesus, symbol of new life and creation. Like Donne’s eternal soul, the product of Mrs Noah’s psyche, her own version of the Ark, is moreover depicted as outshining its biblical antecedent and the Church for which it symbolically stands. It is designed to redress what the novel denounces as the underlying patriarchal bias silencing women in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and to provide a welcoming shelter for the female outcasts – “the women who don’t fit in […] who are not named as belonging” (\textit{BMN}, p. 20) – and their work: “Every women [sic] who has ever lived has deposited here her book. […] [A]ll the stories, from past, present and future, are here, rubbing shoulders in the dark” (\textit{BMN}, p. 20).
In this respect, Mrs Noah’s choice of travelling companions is also particularly pertinent, for sibyls are emblematic of female voices transcending time, space and silencing. These ancient divinely-inspired prophetesses are indeed traditionally “imagined to have prophesied from every corner of the known earth”\(^\text{14}\) and, as the Greek philosopher Heraclitus formulated it already around 500 BC, to “penetrate […] through a thousand years with […] [their] voice[s].”\(^\text{15}\) In inviting five sibyls to help her “discover how other women survive […] [and] arrive at a solution” (BMN, p. 32), Mrs Noah appeals to the female seers’ customary function as providers of answers, for Books of Sibylline prophecies, which were kept in Roman temples before and during the Empire, used to be consulted in times of crisis “to offer a diagnosis and maybe a remedy.”\(^\text{16}\) Although these highly significant predictions were eventually lost in the fifth century, the sibyls have survived to the present day in the collective imagination through a variety of other sources,\(^\text{17}\) including the Judeo-Christian Sibylline Oracles, a collection of twelve books and eight fragments\(^\text{18}\) rooted in the pagan prophetic traditions and believed to have been composed between the mid-second century BC and AD 300.\(^\text{19}\) Of particular importance for this study is Book III, in which the sibylline narrator introduces herself as a guardian and speaker of both past and future knowledge, and claims to be Noah’s nymphé – that is, his daughter-in-law\(^\text{20}\) –, establishing the connection between the sibyls and the biblical Flood narrative that Roberts revisits in The Book of Mrs Noah:

For when the world was deluged with a flood
Of waters, and one man of good repute
Alone was left and in a wooden house
Sailed o’ver the waters with the beasts and birds,
In order that the world might be refilled,
I was his son’s bride and was of his race
To whom the first things happened, and the last
Were all made known; and thus from mine own mouth

\(^{14}\) Warner, From the Beast, p. 66.
\(^{15}\) Warner, From the Beast, p. 67.
\(^{16}\) Warner, From the Beast, pp. 67-68.
\(^{17}\) Warner, From the Beast, pp. 67-68.
\(^{19}\) Warner, From the Beast, p. 69.
\(^{20}\) As Valentin Nikiprowetzky points out, although the word nymphé can designate either a young wife or a daughter-in-law, the second translation is generally preferred, for the sibyl is supposed to be both contemporaneous with Noah and younger than him (Nikiprowetzky, in Dupont-Sommer and Philonenko, p. 1096).
Let all these truthful things remain declared.21

The reception of the sibyls in the Christian tradition illustrates how they symbolise strong women who make their voices heard against the odds, exactly like their doubles in *The Book of Mrs Noah*, as my analysis will show. If in the first centuries of this era, many Church Fathers saw the sibyls as “gifted seers who had enjoyed foreknowledge of the Messiah”22 – Augustine himself called the Erythraean Sibyl “a citizen of the city of God”23 – and their oracles as “veritable Holy Scripture,”24 by the sixteenth century, the female diviners had become associated with witches and the devil.25 Yet, as Warner remarks, they still represent today “the only group of female figures from paganism to survive in the Christian Pantheon,”26 and are therefore linked with the remembering and the constant, yet hidden presence of things “forbidden, forgotten, buried.”27 Such an image of the sibyls as the silenced who challenge and manage to overcome their condition has also frequently been conveyed by secular authors, from the Latin poet Ovid to the French 15th-century satirist Antoine de La Sale, who both relate how the renowned Cumaean Sibyl “is exiled [in a cave], even abandoned, her voice is muffled, even muted. Yet from inside the ‘manacle’ of the monument, she goes on speaking.”28

Although Roberts’s sibyls must be understood as symbolic heiresses of these ancient figures, they nevertheless significantly differentiate themselves from their predecessors as depicted in the Judeo-Christian tradition through their relation to the source of their creativity. The narrator of Book III of the *Sibylline Oracles* in fact declares that she is inspired by God:

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For he showed me what happened formerly
To my ancestors; what things were the first
Those God made known to me; and in my mind
Did God put all things to be afterwards,
That I might prophesy of things to come,
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22 Warner, *From the Beast*, pp. 68-69.
23 Warner, *From the Beast*, p. 70.
24 “Preface to *The Sibylline Oracles*,” in *The Sibylline Oracles*, pp. 9-10.
26 Warner, *From the Beast*, p. 66.
27 Warner, *From the Beast*, p. 11.
28 Warner, *From the Beast*, p. 11.
And things that were, and tell them unto men.29

The Sibyls of The Book of Mrs Noah, by contrast, are struggling to free themselves from any – traditionally male – authority that does, or might, fetter their imagination. Exemplifying this attitude is the first dialogue between the six members of the writers’ group, in which the Forsaken Sibyl retorts to a Gaffer calling himself “the speaker of the Word of God” (BMN, p. 51) that “[a]ll men think that, […] pull the other one” (BMN, p. 51). She thereby nips in the bud the Gaffer’s covert attempt to impose his leadership on board the Ark and unequivocally signals that for her and her companions, contrary to what their patriarchal environment might want them to believe, “the male generative power is not […] the only legitimate power”30 or the Judeo-Christian God the only possible model, inspiration and authority for writers.

If the sibyls and Mrs Noah do ask for inspiration during their first meeting, it is through the ritual burning of the highly symbolic laurel leaves, which precisely teaches them that female imagination really does exist, but has been partly silenced, and that women should listen to this silenced voice of female creativity to find artistic stimulation – this message mirrors the re-visionary enterprise on which The Book of Mrs Noah rests as a whole. Presiding this ceremony is Mrs Noah, who, entranced by the fumes of the brazier, “become[s] a sibyl too” (BMN, p. 51) and starts prophesying. She first tells the story of the laurel leaves as it is found “in the library, in the books written by men” (BMN, p. 52), according to which Apollo, who is in love with the young Daphne, is rejected by her. When she is turned by Mother Earth into a laurel tree to escape from Apollo’s embraces, the god of divination and art makes himself wreaths from Daphne’s branches to console himself. This is how the laurel becomes the emblem of Apollo and male poetry – “the male poets […] [being] crowned with laurel wreaths” (BMN, p. 52).

The possessed Mrs Noah then reveals to her fellow travellers the “earlier version” (BMN, p. 52) of this story, which “has been almost erased […] [by] the male scholars’ sentences, [but] yelp[s] in their elegant pauses, poke[s] through the gaps between their graceful lines” (BMN, p. 52). In this tale, Daphne is “the priestess of the women’s mysteries” (BMN, p. 52). Each month, she leads maenads up to the hills,

29 The Sibylline Oracles, p. 95.
30 Gilbert and Gubar, p. 7. In the course of the same conversation, the Gaffer moreover asserts that he does not “accept inspiration coming from anyone but God the Father” (BMN, p. 51).
where they cut young shoots from laurel trees and chew the leaves “to release the fierce spirit, to find their power, express it; hunting for images and tales” (*BMN*, p. 53) which they then sing to their men and the villagers.

By appropriating Daphne’s symbol, Apollo “has locked up her version of the story inside his, has pretended she is captive and silent inside the tree, has claimed that women do not make poets and storytellers, that poets and storytellers make women” (*BMN*, p. 53). As King remarks, “[b]y such revisions women are doubly silenced – their stories are stolen from them by men so that there can be no female tradition, and the male versions that survive serve only to confirm the non-creativity of women.” Females, however, must listen to the laurel tree, put their “ear to the trunk and press it to the bark, which is Daphne’s book, Daphne’s body, and hear her speak,” for her mouth is “full of green sap, of green words” (*BMN*, p. 52) – symbolising regeneration and the promise of new inspiration – and she can “infuse” new generations of women with her “power” (*BMN*, p. 53).

Appropriately concluding this prophecy is Mrs Noah’s liberating injunction to her female audience to refuse to “be bound” by “the male god” (*BMN*, p. 53) which, as the Gaffer’s offended outburst indicates – “Me? […] What nonsense!” (*BMN*, p. 53) –, can be understood as transcending the frame of Daphne and Apollo’s story and containing yet another, hardly veiled challenge to the authority of the Judeo-Christian God and his images on earth, the male authors that have traditionally dominated the literary establishment. As will be developed at greater length later in this chapter, the five sibyls’ experience aboard the Ark precisely hinges on their freeing themselves from their own “male god(s)” and finding creativity in themselves. If in the image of the eternal spirit in *The Progresse of the Soule*, Mrs Noah and her Ark are depicted as surpassing the floating refuge of Genesis 6-8 and the Church which it symbolises, by embarking a wider diversity of beings and welcoming the “Refusées” (*BMN*, p. 19) and “Refusantes” (*BMN*, p. 20) of the Judeo-Christian tradition and societies – like the Deftly Sibyl, the Babble-On Sibyl, the Re-Vision Sibyl, the Correct Sibyl and the Forsaken Sibyl –, neither Donne’s nor Roberts’s protagonist genuinely or ultimately positions itself as some kind of supreme, infallible or unquestionable authority.

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31 Jeannette King, p. 43.
C. Sharing a Playful, Ironic Distance towards Authority

At first sight, the grandiose beginning of Donne’s *The Progresse of the Soule* seems to situate it in the noble tradition of Renaissance epics. It is pretentiously presented as designed not only to cover the whole history of “the great world t’his aged evening,/From infant morne, through manly noone,”\(^{32}\) but also to “outwear Seths pillars, bricke and stone,”\(^{33}\) and to be unrivalled except, maybe, by “holy writt”\(^{34}\) – yet even this single exception is brushed aside, the superior status of the Bible being gently challenged in the third stanza, as has just been shown. On closer inspection, however, Donne’s introductory claims – like the rest of his work – appear not to be entirely serious. They convey some degree of parodic exaggeration for, as Milgate remarks, Donne was undoubtedly aware that his project was completely unrealisable: “it would have taken a huge number of cantos, through any plausible sequence of human incarnations, to bring the soul from Themech down to the modern age.”\(^{35}\) Moreover, the soul’s announced progress up the ladder of being actually proves to be a descent into “ever more sinful bodies being made ‘perfect’ in three kinds of sins—lust, violence, and fraud.”\(^{36}\) Donne’s piece of writing therefore contains a parody of the pretensions to grandeur of the Renaissance epic, which aimed to “elevate […] man’s achievement in the high style.”\(^{37}\) According to Thomas, these ironic elements punctuating the whole text never totally eclipse, however, the pervading solemnity.\(^{38}\) Oscillating between seriousness and mockery, and blending high and low, *The Progresse of the Soule* constitutes a highly ambivalent work that both establishes and undermines even its own authority.

*The Book of Mrs Noah* exhibits a similar position towards authority. If in Roberts’s earlier novel *The Wild Girl*, Mary Magdalene presents her visions as revelations from the divine and transmits her alternative Christian message as a gospel, claiming thereby a certain degree of legitimation, Roberts’s rewriting of the Flood story, by contrast, mainly takes the form of a dream, of a sheer product of Mrs

\(^{32}\) Donne, in Milgate, p. 27.
\(^{33}\) Donne, in Milgate, p. 27.
\(^{34}\) Donne, in Milgate, p. 27.
\(^{36}\) Thomas, p. 113.
\(^{37}\) Milgate, in Milgate, p. xxvii.
\(^{38}\) Thomas, p. 114.
Noah’s unconscious. Moreover, as Falcus notes, *The Book of Mrs Noah* situates “mythical re-vision […] within a metanarrative debate which questions the whole politics of writing and literary creativity,” but also and most importantly of voice and authority. Mrs Noah rejects the traditional association between literary and divine creation, and the historical pretences to the a-temporal, infinite nature of literature that Donne subversively endorses in *The Progresse of the Soule*. Making no such claims to authority for her own art, she revealingly associates it in the *excipit* with the domestic, the here and now, the subconscious and the oneiric:

> I was taught that art is supposed to last, to be preserved in libraries and museums, to defy rotting and perishing, to contain eternal meanings that transcend history, that survive the time-span of the body. My art won’t be like that. The creation of the world happened in seven days and seven nights. [...] My creation will be as daily as dusting, or dreaming. *(BMN, p. 288)*

*The Book of Mrs Noah* goes further than Donne’s mock-epic in its playful challenging of authority and voice, as the very epigraph to Roberts’s re-creation story most eloquently reveals. If epigraphy, since it brings into dialogue two voices, is by definition dialogic, and therefore constitutes a most appropriate and logical introduction to the polyphonic *Book of Mrs Noah*, Roberts’ use of it shakes up its conventions, announcing thereby the highly postmodern quality of the novel and its innovative blend of voices and silences.

**D. Tempering with Donne’s Voice**

The epigraph to *The Book of Mrs Noah* is a partial fake on two accounts. First, Roberts playfully diverts her reader’s attention from her original source by claiming that her epigraph “‘That floating Colledge, that swimming Hospital–’” *(BMN, p. 5)* is taken, not from Donne’s *The Progresse of the Soule*, but from another of the metaphysical poet’s works, referencing it as: “John Donne, *Elegies*” *(BMN, p. 5)*. Roberts has moreover rearranged the words of line 23 of *The Progresse of the Soule* – “That swimming Colledge, and free Hospital!” –, substituting a second demonstrative adjective “that” for the original coordinating conjunction, shifting the adjective “swimming” to the second half of the line, and accentuating the emphasis on

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39 Falcus, p. 76.
40 Donne, in Milgate, p. 27.
the element of water – omnipresent in *The Book of Mrs Noah* – through replacing “free” with the adjective “floating” borrowed from line 29.41

As Lanser points out, epigraphs have historically constituted, especially for the early female novelists who were in search of discursive authority in a literary world dominated by male writers, a means of “suggesting the scope of their knowledge […], and lending external authority to their textual stance.”42 Roberts, by pretending to refer to Donne in a purely traditional, reverent way, but in reality purposefully misquoting one of the most prominent English poets – thereby appropriating his words and voice –, subverts the conventions of epigraphy and unmistakably roots her novel in what Linda Hutcheon calls “[t]he basic postmodernist stance [… of a questioning of authority,”43 truth, certainty and origin.44

In brief, the epigraph from Donne’s *The Progresse of the Soule* can be understood as a reference to a model, and cryptic proleptic sign, of a multifaceted psyche’s journey. Not content, however, with simply quoting from a text that is already highly ambiguous, plural and polysemic because parodic, Roberts, who adopts the contradictory postmodernist ethos that “uses and abuses, installs and then subverts,”45 adds another layer of ambivalence and confusion by altering Donne’s voice, thereby re-creating it – like she re-creates the Flood narrative –, reviving it, and simultaneously concealing it, making it more distant and harder to locate for the readers. Ironically enough, although Roberts could not possibly foresee the reception of her partly fake epigraph among scholars, the general lack of attention given to this paratextual citation in critical material, together with Sengupta’s unquestioning acceptance of Roberts’s reference to her source as a “quote from Donne’s *Elegies*,”46 could not illustrate more perfectly how easily voices can be tampered with, a point that *The Book of Mrs Noah* emphasises. These six seemingly innocent words, “‘That floating Colledge, that swimming Hospitall–,’” thus not only foreshadow the broad lines of the story of *The Book of Mrs Noah*, but also hide a complex, subversive

41 “So diverse shapes into that floating parke” (Donne, in Milgate, p. 28).
42 Lanser, p. 98.
44 Hutcheon, *Poetics*, p. 57.
45 Hutcheon, *Poetics*, p. 3.
46 Sengupta, p. 99.
relation to voice that precisely mirrors what Roberts creates in her novel structured – or rather de-structured – around what I call “voice blurring.”

II. “Like the Radiant Bits of Glass in a Kaleidoscope”: A Great Web of Blurred Voices

“Voice blurring,” which represents a form of silence rarely touched upon in scholarly literature, mainly relates to the discourse level – that is, to quote Suzanne Keen, “the words of the narrative as they are actually presented, including—as they occur page by page—any digressions, repetitions, omissions, and disorderly telling.”47 Overlapping with the French literary scholar Aline Mura-Brunel’s definition of silence as cropping up in the moments of interruption, transition or hesitation48 in a text, voice blurring can first be discerned in the unavoidable distance with, and alteration of, the characters’ words – their content, tone or register – entailed by the narrator’s mediation of their voices in the narrative.49 In The Book of Mrs Noah, this form of voice blurring is related to the issue of women’s silencing by men and can be observed, as will be shown, in the fourth of the embedded stories shared between the seven travelling companions. In this tale, a would-be journalist in need of money describes how, after “coaxing” (BMN, p. 192) an illiterate infanticide woman into telling him her story, he intends to take complete possession of her voice or, as he formulates it, “make her up” (BMN, p. 192), and create a testimony blending sensationalism and the sentimentalism of confessional writing.

More often, voice blurring refers to situations where the narrative authority itself cannot clearly or easily be situated, either because it remains largely unidentified – that is, basically, anonymous and asexual –, or because it constantly shifts, or, still, because the narrator’s assumed or declared position vis-à-vis its story ultimately proves to be deceptive – the reader discovering, in the last pages of the novel, that, for instance, the main narrator was actually a second-degree narrator, or that a

48 Mura-Brunel, p. 17.
49 Aline Mura-Brunel mentions that “la transformation des paroles rapportées en récits risque […] d’effacer quelques bribes de discours, une tonalité particulière, en somme l’ethos qui accompagne ce qui est écrit et dit. Silence probable là encore” (Murà-Brunel, p. 18).
The homodiegetic narrator was hiding behind the heterodiegetic narrator.\footnote{This third scenario, which requires the readers to re-evaluate the distance between themselves and the narrative authority, can also be observed in The Handmaid’s Tale or Sisters and Strangers, as I will show in the third part of this thesis.} In The Book of Mrs Noah, these three scenarios are combined. Although the readers progressively discover some of the most intimate details of the main narrator’s life, her actual name is never revealed. Being known as “Mrs Noah,” the heroine is identified and therefore defined only by her marital relationship, a bond that she precisely calls into question throughout her journey, the couple’s apparently irreconcilable yearnings and views on the desirability of parenthood having made her life unbearable and urged her to embark on her oneiric experience. Besides reinforcing Mrs Noah’s association with her silent scriptural alter ego, this anonymity also symbolises her lack of a personal identity and underlines her vital need to search for her-self.

Voice blurring, however, most noticeably and importantly takes in The Book of Mrs Noah the shape of nearly constant changes of narrative voice from chapter to chapter or within a chapter. Heterodiegetic narrators succeed homodiegetic narrators and vice versa, primary narrators give way to secondary and tertiary narrators, more often than not without explicit or directly recognisable indications to guide the readers along the narrative – this lack of information can then create an occurrence of the third type of blurring: the late revelation of a narrator’s deceptive position.\footnote{This form of voice blurring is also pointed out by Mura-Brunel when she writes that silence can be perceived in the space created by the hesitation concerning the character who conveys meaning (Mura-Brunel, pp. 77-78).} In other words, The Book of Mrs Noah is an extremely complex, confusing and disorientating narrative with stories within stories, within stories. It is a great symphony – or rather, at times, cacophony – of first-person and third-person voices taking over from one another, interweaving both horizontally to form intricate chains and vertically in completely de-structured hierarchies; it is a novelistic brain-teaser in which a seemingly straightforward narrating “I” can hide several voices belonging to different narrative levels, and in which it is sometimes simply impossible to identify whose voice hides behind an embedded tale.

A. Who Is/Are I?: On Voice Blurring across Narrative Levels

The first, but also most extensive occurrence of voice blurring created by a change of narrative voice is introduced in the initial chapters of The Book of Mrs Noah and loses
the readers across narrative levels. If with the *incipit* – Mrs Noah’s tragic re-vision of Genesis 7:6-16, in which Noah is burnt to cinders when he refuses to board the Ark – we are plunged a first time into the heroine’s oneiric world, it is to immediately leave it on the second page, when Mrs Noah wakes up with a jump and realises with relief that her husband is peacefully sleeping beside her. After this false start, in chapter 2, Mrs Noah begins with the most glaringly unimaginative sentence “My story begins in Venice” (*BMN*, p. 9) what appears to be the rather traditional, realist tale of a couple staying for a few days in the romantic Italian city, when the events suddenly take on an unexpected turn, and Mrs Noah launches into her crazy run after a grandmother that she knows to be dead. Ending with a heroine who gets into the canal despite her husband’s desperate cries, this second chapter then gives way to a third, in which Mrs Noah imagines her meeting with her two deceased female ancestors. As Guignery points out, if the initial chapter is clearly presented as a dream from which Mrs Noah emerges to be back to her present reality in her Venice hotel room, the protagonist’s discussion with her grandmothers is not. 52 Nor are the protagonist’s creation of her Ark and choice of her five sibylline travelling companions in chapters 4 and 5, which mark the beginning of a voyage that stretches to the antepenultimate chapter of the novel.

In the absence of textual clues indicating that Mrs Noah’s journey is – like the first *incipit* – an oneiric experience, and faced with a tale in which the dead converse with the living, in which rooms can be conjured up by the mere power of the imagination and books joyfully jump out of their shelves, the readers are led to interpret *The Book of Mrs Noah* as a novel belonging to the genre of fantasy. It is only four pages before the end, when Mrs Noah suddenly declares that she “wake[s] to a room full of darkness” (*BMN*, p. 285) and is joined by Noah, who explains to his confused wife that she banged her head plunging into the canal, was escorted by him back to her bed, and has been sleeping ever since, that the readers can retrospectively identify the narrative of Mrs Noah’s adventures on the Ark as a long dream.

A blurring of the frontiers between reality and illusion – or, as Guignery formulates it, ontological hesitation53 – therefore comes together with a blurring of the narrative voice. The readers quickly find out that the fictional world they initially

52 Guignery, “*The Book of Mrs Noah,*” p. 3.
53 Guignery, “*The Book of Mrs Noah,*” p. 3.
come across is actually a secondary narrative level, and that the true primary narrative level corresponds to Mrs Noah’s experience in Venice – which I will call “frame story,” since it mainly describes the circumstances that lead Mrs Noah to dream her own Ark and only briefly reappears for four pages to close the novel. By contrast, the second entry into the secondary narrative level – which, due to its length, complexity and import, I will consider as the main narrative – is not indicated. It is even presented as the logical continuation of Mrs Noah’s wild plunge into the Venetian canal, for chapter 2 ends with “I launch myself forwards and down. Noah’s cry behind me is cut off as I enter the water” (BMN, p. 13), and chapter 4 starts with “I swim out along the Grand Canal” (BMN, p. 16). As a consequence, the readers mistakenly identify the autodiegetic narrator of the primary narrative level with the principal autodiegetic narrator of the secondary narrative level; they confuse and merge into one, on the one hand, the unhappy wife who feels misunderstood and deserted by her husband during their Italian trip, and on the other hand the product of this dissatisfied woman’s unconscious, the dream character of Mrs Noah, cruise organizer for authors out of inspiration.

To complicate things further, the same type of voice blurring also occurs between the secondary and tertiary narrative levels when the seven members of the writers’ group decide to tell each other tales. These embedded stories are each time clearly introduced by one of the characters, who formulates a request such as the Forsaken Sibyl’s “[s]omeone tell a story […] about one of the characters the Gaffer completely forgot to put in? Fill in one of his gaps?” (BMN, pp. 69-70) or Mrs Noah’s “[s]o what would a mother’s history be? […] [C]an one of you tell us a story about a mother?” (BMN, p. 141) which are “signe[s] de décrochages narratifs, déclencheurs d’histoires, bifurcations aisément repérables par le lecteur.” These, however, represent the sole indications given to the readers, for the only verbalised form of answer to these pleas that are systematically formulated at the end of a chapter is the embedded story itself, which immediately follows in the next chapter. The readers are therefore each time directly brought face to face with yet another voice – the instance in charge of the narration in the tertiary level, which is autodiegetic in the first three cases, homodiegetic in the fourth and heterodiegetic in the last two – and are never told which of the travelling companions narrates which story to the others.

Since the unique clue that is given is found in the last scene aboard the Ark, when the Deftly Sibyl identifies Mrs Noah as the only one who “hasn’t told a story yet” (*BMN*, p. 268), one can only speculate retrospectively and try to find, for instance, connections between a particular tale and the Gaffer’s or a sibyl’s predicaments, personal interests or usual style. Behind the first embedded story recounting how Jack’s wife, after submitting for most of her life to her husband’s rule, finds through the confinement in the Ark the strength to claim new independence and language for herself, could hide the voice of the Deftly Sibyl, who desperately longs for a room of her own to be able to momentarily escape from her family and create, but also that of the Re-Vision Sibyl, who needs to free herself from the labels that constrain her and to learn to choose her own words. The second embedded tale, which describes a young Cistercian’s attempts to connect with God, could have been authored by the Forsaken Sibyl, who experiences moments of mystical union with nature and the divine, or by the Re-Vision Sibyl, who, like the nun in the story, lets other people’s words and expectations alienate her from her own body and feelings or, still, by the Babble-On Sibyl, who is afraid to write honestly about sexuality and has been “a wife with ice inside” (*BMN*, p. 28) ever since she had a miscarriage. As for the male journalist’s account of Meg Hansey’s infanticide, it both corresponds to the Correct Sibyl’s social realist vein and the Deftly Sibyl’s passionate plea for literary works about “real oppression” (*BMN*, p. 48). If one takes as identification criterion the links between the tales and the confessed preoccupations of the characters aboard the Ark, each story has at least two potential authors. Moreover, the requests of the members of the writers’ group also already reflect their interests. The Deftly Sibyl, who tries to repress the anger and frustration that she feels as a wife and mother, wants to hear a story about an unmarried woman; Mrs Noah, who yearns for maternity, would like one of her companions to depict a mother’s life; and the Re-Vision Sibyl, who associates literary creation with cooking, asks for a tale about food and punishment. Since the same person does not in general formulate a request and answer it, the suggested criterion is shown not to prove anything categorically. The attribution of any of the six embedded stories to a specific character on the exclusive basis of correspondences in terms of style or concerns is therefore highly hypothetical, if not utterly impossible.

Another potential avenue to approach this riddle is the sequence of chapters of *The Book of Mrs Noah*. The five sibyls and the Gaffer being successively depicted, in
six individual chapters, as engaging the mechanism that frees their creativity, each embedded story might then be attributed to the traveller who has just overcome his/her writer’s block, as further proof of his/her regained inspiration. This hypothesis can be seen to match up with and refine the first that I explored, for it relates, for example, the story about Jack’s wife to the Deftly Sibyl – who overcomes her writer’s block through being confined in the Ark’s sickroom –, the Cistercian nun’s difficult relation with her body to the Babble-On Sibyl’s, and Meg Hansey’s tragic fate to the social realism typical of the Correct Sibyl’s writing. Since *The Book of Mrs Noah* defies any definite truth on this point – as on many others in Roberts’s highly ambivalent novel –, this conjecture, however plausible or appealing it might seem, remains but one possibility among others, leaving the silence created between the secondary and tertiary levels to resonate loudly.

Beside its relevance for the analysis of the shifting narrative instance across levels, this second hypothesis, since it rests on the structural organisation of the novel, also draws attention to yet another, closely interwoven occurrence of voice blurring, which hinges on the alternation of voices within the main narrative – Mrs Noah’s oneiric journey.

**B. Handing Over to Fellow Voices: Blurring within the Main Narrative Level**

If, as I have just shown, readers can easily get lost in the maze created by the many, and often unannounced, changes in narrator across the novel’s various strata, the narrative situation proves to be equally complex and packed with silences in the principal story alone, which can be divided into two main sections, both of which contain instances of voice blurring.

The first part of Mrs Noah’s dream covers chapters 3 to 10 and can be regarded as an introduction to the actual cruise. If the initial three chapters, which depict Mrs Noah’s meeting with her grandmothers, but also the heroine’s design of her Ark and selection of travelling companions, are all narrated by the autodiegetic Mrs Noah-cruise organiser, this original coherence and continuity is shattered in chapter 6, in which an unidentified heterodiegetic instance takes over to give a snapshot of each sibyl’s life in her own environment. The narrative voice therefore unexpectedly changes from Mrs Noah’s
I get up, and prowl along the bookshelves until I find the leatherbound brass-cornered volume that is the index to the sibyls and their work. […] The Babble-On Sibyl, the Correct Sibyl, the Deftly Sibyl, the Forsaken Sibyl, the Re-Vision Sibyl. I’ll try them. […] They are the companions I want (BMN, pp. 21-22)

to

[t]his morning the Deftly Sibyl has woken up hating her husband. Lying rigid, a foot away from him, she feels her heart pump with anxiety. […] She’d better get out. Run away. […] If she runs fast and long enough, perhaps she can sweat out the hate, […] return to the house a kind mother and wife. […] Running away. Around and around.

The Re-Vision Sibyl needs to be careful. Don’t quarrel with Jim. […] Work hard, yes, get on with her writing, yes, but never forget to put Kitty first, prove to the school and the social workers that single mothers can cope. (BMN, pp. 23-25)

As the second extract shows, the heterodiegetic narrator makes its presence barely perceptible and the sibyls’ perspectives dominate, giving to the readers the impression that they stand directly in the consciousness of the five female characters that are thereby granted as much substance and individuality as the protagonist. The secondary narrative level of The Book of Mrs Noah constituting a dream, this anonymous narrative authority that keeps in the background can be identified with the sleeping Mrs Noah’s unconscious, which possesses so-called omniscient knowledge of the whole oneiric experience. This is unlike the narrator Mrs Noah-cruise organiser who, being a character like the sibyls and the Gaffer, necessarily has a limited perception of the events aboard the Ark. This limitation is underlined, for instance, when, towards the end of the cruise, the heroine discovers to her great surprise that her six companions have regularly been going down to the hold.

In the remainder of the introductory section, this alternation of voices is repeated. Chapter 7, which brings the readers back to Mrs Noah with her account of her drawing-up and sending of her invitation to the sibyls, is followed by a second series of glimpses into the sibyls’ everyday lives, which itself gives way to two chapters having again the character of Mrs Noah as narrator: the description of the chapel of the Ark and the account of the first meeting – in that very same room – of the writers’ group. Significantly, in this tenth chapter, Mrs Noah shares her privilege of self-expression with her fellow travellers and therefore opens up her narrative to their voices by adopting the collective first-person plural pronoun – “We introduce ourselves to each other” (BMN, p. 45) – and by literally quoting their discourse in direct speech, proposing a lively and sometimes heated confrontation of divergent views.
In the second section of the main narrative, which deals with the cruise itself, voice blurring becomes even more complex but also more systematic, for it is associated with the repetition of a fixed succession, from chapters 11 to 39, of five heterogeneous and seemingly loosely connected chapter-types. The series systematically starts with the depiction by the heterodiegetic voice of how an individual sibyl or the Gaffer frees him/herself, in the strictest privacy, from his/her personal inhibitions. Then comes back the character-narrator Mrs Noah, with what I will call a refrain, due to both the recurrence of set phrases and its fixed structure. This highly polyphonic chapter begins with a memory of Mrs Noah’s childhood or training as a librarian in which the heroine adds to the confusion of voices, for she purposefully revives her younger self by switching from the past to the present tense after the first sentence. She thereby blurs the distance between her present, narrating I and her past, experiencing I:

> When I was twenty I started my librarianship training, in the Department of Printed Books in the British Library. My bunch of keys enables me to unlock the hidden doors in the walls of the public galleries. […] I am Alice. My bed has paper sheets. The unconscious of the library is held in the bookstacks. […] I peer down through the open grille-work rungs at the floors falling away under me, six layers, a transparency of books. I clamber about Western culture’s brain. I find the locked room of uncatalogued, inaccessible and forbidden erotica, and I read these books too. (BMN, p. 96)

If after this reminiscence Mrs Noah briefly returns to her situation on the Ark with a variation on the phrase “[h]ere on the Ark, in my Arkive” (BMN, p. 96), it is to then better give the floor to yet another voice. She does this by directly quoting one of Noah’s hackneyed objections to procreation, based on the basic belief that it is totally irrational to bring a child into this world. She finally concludes with a riddle taken from a volume dedicated to the Sphinx, and introduced by a sentence of the type “I consult the book of riddles” (BMN, p. 97). Hinging on the polysemy of words associated with the maternal experience – such as “confinement,” “bear” or “conceive” –, these riddles are, in the image of the characters’ requests for stories, punctuated by a question mark and invariably end the refrains, giving to the readers the impression that the raised issue remains suspended in silence and, therefore, unexplored.

55 Out of the six refrains that punctuate Mrs Noah’s dream journey, only the first offers a slight variant, for Noah’s lines precede the heroine’s return to her present situation aboard the Ark, and the riddle is exceptionally not introduced by the sentence indicating that Mrs Noah searches through the riddle book.
In the third chapter-type of the series, Mrs Noah seems to take the readers to totally different grounds, both from a thematic and a spatial point of view. Momentarily leaving her Ark, she relates her solitary visit of, in the first case, Atlantis, and in the five others, the island on which the Ark is moored at that particular moment. These chapters often carry strong ecological accents, the heroine’s tour rapidly turning into a rather distressing lesson in the consequences of humankind’s irresponsible exploitation and destruction of its natural and human resources through wars, unbridled consumption, or the careless handling of radioactive technology. Entering into dialogue with, and leaving the floor to, the islands’ inhabitants when she starts reading their testimonies preserved in the form of an article, a pamphlet or a poster, Mrs Noah opens up, in three of these chapters, a third narrative level that further intensifies the blurring of voices:

I unfurl the Italian newspaper that someone has left lying there. […] Leaping over words and phrases I don’t understand, leaving gaps in my reasoning, I make my own translation.

I am a citizen of this proud city; and my ears are clotted with wax. Better that way. Then I can’t hear what the wind is saying. […] A strong, harsh wind […] bringing […] insistent warnings hinting at the imminent outbreak of yet another war rooted in the spiralling greed of the great empires for money, profits and power. More lands and villages bombed and burnt, […] more people starving and thirsting in refugee camps. […] I’m responsible. What have I ever tried to do to prevent the rulers of my country from waging war and death? […] I am beginning to forget how to speak, because, with my gummed-up ears, I can no longer listen. I am beginning to die, because I am no longer listened to. I can’t write: the only word I can spell is death.

Folding up the newspaper, I shiver. […] It is conceivable that the world will suddenly end, that the Bomb will fall. (BMN, pp. 99-100)

Switching back to the collective voice already heard during the first meeting of the writers’ group, Mrs Noah, in the fourth chapter-type, renders, mostly in direct discourse, the metanarrative discussions about what it means to be an author, and the difficulties of writing as a woman, that the seven travelling companions share around a meal.56 Concluding each of the six strings of chapters, the voices of the embedded stories add to the large, bewildering chorus of narrators.

56 The only exception to this organisation in five distinct chapters is found in chapter 13, which contains both Mrs Noah’s exploration of an island and her first conversation with the other members of her writers’ group.
C. A Mixture of Chaos and Rhythm Celebrating Plurality

The many shifts in narrating instance that punctuate *The Book of Mrs Noah* inevitably create a pervasive impression of chaos. In a novel as deeply rooted in postmodernism as Roberts’s, voice blurring probably constitutes the most fundamental and encompassing postmodern feature, for it testifies to the basic critical stance on the liberal humanist concepts of “unity, totalization, […] continuity, teleology, […] homogeneity, uniqueness, [and] origin,” but also to the associated experimentation with form – frequently characterised by a revival of the aesthetics of fragmentation – that both distinguish the art movement. Voice blurring certainly gives to Roberts’s rewriting of the Flood a highly fragmentary quality, where discontinuity and polyphonic openness deeply resonate, and where “[l]’espace qui sépare les éclats de discours, ajustés ou non, afin de former un dessin d’ensemble, est fait de silence.”

Yet, voice blurring can simultaneously be seen as imparting a certain rhythm and therefore contributing to the original structure of Roberts’s fiction, for as Jean-Paul Goux remarks:

> changer de voix, changer de point de vue, […] c’est surtout construire les conditions d’une tension rythmique tout à fait particulière, c’est poser ici encore les conditions d’un élan dont la retombée assure en même temps la relance de cet autre élan qui survient au prochain changement de voix ou de point de vue.

But what exactly does the structure of *The Book of Mrs Noah* rest on? Described by Kenyon as a novel “with no plot and no story line,” *The Book of Mrs Noah* is organised neither on reason, nor on the traditional Judeo-Christian *telos* – that “linear view of time, with the arrow flying from creation to the Last Judgement,” as Paul Fiddes defines it. Like in most postmodern fictions, rational unifying coherence and narrative continuity, which Mrs Noah depicts as “a clear design” (*BMN*, p. 68), “a

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57 Hutcheon, *Poetics*, p. 57.
58 Mura-Brunel, p. 93.
59 If my analysis almost exclusively concentrates on the specific chaos – and order – created by the blurring of the narrative voice, there exists, however, many other forms of disorder in *The Book of Mrs Noah*, as Vanessa Guignery shows in “The Book of Mrs Noah (1987) de Michèle Roberts: un roman aux sentiers qui bifurquent.” In this article, she demonstrates that Roberts’s novel is a complex mixture of entropy – understood as chaos, regression and blurring of information, including patriarchal codes – and structuring principles – such as repetitions and circular patterns (Guignery, “The Book of Mrs Noah”).
61 Kenyon, p. 171.
grid placed over chaos so that it can be read in descending lines from left to right, if that’s what you want to do” (BMN, p. 67), are undoubtedly contested.

Roberts’s novel rests instead on an alternative form of logic that I will call, to borrow Sarah Kofman’s word, the “archo-logic” of dream, based on the workings of the unconscious – an unconscious that, as Jacques Lacan argues, appears to us first as discontinuity. Mrs Noah’s description of the subversive organisation of the Ark’s library can be read as a proleptic clue to this challenging structure, for if the books in her Arkive can be “called up by a classification system of great subtlety, based on the […] thought processes of the unconscious” (BMN, p. 20), so do the chapters relating Mrs Noah’s oneiric experience appear and assemble according to the intricate, enigmatic and fragmented archeo-logic of the heroine’s subconscious which, in the main part of the novel – the cruise –, seems to hinge on the heroine’s free association of words and meanings linked with motherhood. It is my contention that each string of five chapters can be seen as revolving around the – typically postmodern – polyphonic treatment of the polysemous term highlighted by the riddle that concludes its refrain.

Thus chapters 11 to 14 all explore the question “When is a confinement […] not a confinement?” (BMN, p. 63), which can be translated as “does giving birth to a child necessarily entail losing one’s freedom?” but also as “can physical enclosure prove liberating in specific circumstances?” in chapters 15 to 19, the riddle “Does want also mean want?” (BMN, p. 97) raises the issue of women’s difficult relationship with desire, their lack of words for it or their repression of it. The third series of chapters plays, by contrast, not on a unique word, but on a connection – “Life. Sentence. Life-sentence?” (BMN, p. 132) – evoking the domestic and the linguistic, two spheres that can be extremely difficult for women to reconcile, or whose association may prove to be imprisoning. “Does to bear mean also to bear?” (BMN, p. 183) is at the centre of the fourth group of chapters which examine if motherhood automatically means becoming all-responsible – a point that is also crucial in another of the novels studied, Sisters and Strangers –, but also how much a woman, especially the creative woman, can or should stand in terms of stereotypical labels or criticism tinged with misogyny or androcentrism. The fifth riddle, “So why does to conceive

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also mean *to conceive*?” (*BMN*, p. 211), launches a reflection on the traditional body/mind dichotomy and the patriarchal bias of Western societies that prevents women from combining physical and intellectual creation. Finally, Mrs Noah’s sixth and last borrowing from the volume dedicated to the Sphinx, “Can he *come to terms with my coming to term*?” (*BMN*, p. 244), behind its immediate reference to Noah’s reluctance to see his wife (pro)create, also provides the pun connecting chapters 35 to 39, which show different characters dealing with their lacks or their past and literally coming to terms, that is, reaching literary creativity.

Thanks to the silence of voice blurring, Mrs Noah’s meditation on the issues cryptically formulated in the riddles is constantly relaunched and given new impetus, for it is approached, in each new chapter-type, through a different voice, that is, from a fresh angle: that of a sibyl or the Gaffer, as recounted by the heterodiegetic narrator, that of the six heroines in the shipmates’ embedded stories, or that of the protagonist-narrator Mrs Noah, in dialogue with her guests around the preparation of their common meals, with echoes of her younger self and Noah in the refrains, or of an islander during her walks on dry land. It is precisely these (ex)changes that help the heroine make progress in her cogitations, by bringing supplementary questions which add to her doubts, but also suggest possible solutions. What might at first glance appear to the readers as mere digressions or interruptions\(^65\) and as incessant misleading switches in narrator that break the narrative dynamics, can therefore actually prove, on closer inspection, to be an integral part of the intricate archeo-logic and of the unconventional dynamics of *The Book of Mrs Noah*.

Moreover, voice blurring transcribes both on formal and ontological levels the celebration of plurality thematised through the riddles, since the critical, yet ludic exploration of the polysemy of terms like “bear”, “want” or “conceive,” which, as will be shown, goes together with a reflection on the ability of language to describe a woman’s reality, is mirrored by a multiplicity of voices that reflects Mrs Noah’s plural self. As words are shown to unveil numerous meanings, so is the heroine portrayed through narration to possess multiple facets. By creating a highly heterogeneous and unstable narrative authority, voice blurring fittingly foregrounds the heroine’s fluid, de-centred and fragmented identity – “I am a house with many windows and many doors” (*BMN*, p. 63), she says. It thereby challenges, in a

\(^65\) Guignery, “*The Book of Mrs Noah,*” p. 5.
resolutely postmodern way, the traditional humanist view of the subject as stable, centred and unified. As Hutcheon formulates it, in postmodernist fiction, “[t]he centre no longer completely holds.” This depiction of Mrs Noah’s self highlights the protagonist’s sense of insecurity, associated with what Roberts calls in an interview “the psychic dismemberment of the female in this culture: whore/Madonna, [...], you can’t be a mother and an artist, etc” – this issue connects The Book of Mrs Noah with Roberts’s earlier novel The Wild Girl. Mrs Noah’s de-centred self also conveys the postmodern positive outlook on fragmentation as a liberating force “symptomatic of our escape from the claustrophobic embrace of fixed systems of belief.” It can moreover be understood as challenging essentialist definitions of Woman and drawing on the Jungian feminist vision of the female psyche as a composite reconciling the archetypes of “mother (creating babies and art); lesbian (lover of women who may also be mother); companion to men (lover, comrade); [and] sibyl (woman who gives birth to poetry and art).” Mrs Noah’s multiple facets, exactly like the chapters of her story, “shift and turn like the radiant bits of glass in a kaleidoscope” (BMN, p. 68).

Precisely because the main narrative of The Book of Mrs Noah reproduces the workings of a kaleidoscope, which possesses a set number of elements situated in a limited space, yet permits an infinite amount of combinations, the pattern discovered in this analysis is by no means meant to be understood as the sole interpretative key to the novel. Roberts’s seemingly chaotic “web of dream images” (BMN, p. 68) liberated from the constraints of logic and the traditional telos in fact challenges any unique, final meaning, and invites its readers to participate in a creative way, to make their own pattern. My interpretation, based on the quintuple, polyphonic – yet also silent – treatment of a riddle related to motherhood, therefore constitutes but one of the many possibilities offered by the multiform and ever-changing Book of Mrs Noah, one that specifically sheds light on the complex interaction between voices and silences. To illustrate it, I will now concentrate, in the remainder of this second point, on the detailed analysis of the three strings of chapters – since space does not allow me to

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66 Hutcheon, Poetics, pp. 11-12.
67 Hutcheon, Poetics, p. 12.
69 Peter Barry, Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002 [1995]), p. 84.
discuss them all – that best exemplify both the diversity of experiences lived by the various characters and how the silence of voice blurring, while creating fragmentation and a pervasive impression of chaos, simultaneously makes Mrs Noah’s search for her voice progress with each new chapter.

D. Delivered from Confinement, Delivered through Confinement?

“How does a woman survive” (BMN, p. 288)? In her search for answers to this specific question situated at the root of her oneiric journey and betraying the dead end that she has reached as a woman, a wife and an artist, the heroine turns to conundrums. Such a choice not only proves to be highly symbolic, but also extremely appropriate, for as Gilbert and Gubar remark in The Madwoman in the Attic, the message of the Sphinx’s riddle represents “the key to existence.”71 By placing her quest under the aegis of the Sphinx, Mrs Noah therefore asserts her will and hope to find answers for her own life. Moreover, by adopting riddling, which “means to defy logic in peculiar couplings of like and like”72 and forbids any univocal signification, Roberts’s protagonist challenges what Irigaray denounces as men’s rejection of plurality in language,73 and adopts a form of feminine writing, in which, according to the French linguist and psychoanalyst,

> [a]t each moment there are always […] at least two meanings, without one being able to decide which meaning prevails. […] For a feminine language would undo the unique meaning, the proper meaning of words, of nouns, which still regulates discourse.74

The ability of words to describe women’s – and more specifically, Mrs Noah’s – experience is therefore playfully and subtly questioned through these riddles that supplement the seven shipmates’ slightly theoretical debates about terms connected with writing and gender, during which the Sibyls, Mrs Noah and the Gaffer formulate their divergent opinions explicitly. The collective discussion in chapter 23, for instance, revolves around the word “feminine” and sets the arguments of the Forsaken Sibyl, who denounces men’s definition of the vocable as “worse” (BMN, p. 141) and pleads for its reinvention so that it “could mean whatever the life of a particular

71 Gilbert and Gubar, p. 79.
72 Warner, From the Beast, p. 330.
73 Cameron, p. 128.
74 Luce Irigaray, quoted in Cameron, p. 128.
woman made it mean” (BMN, p. 141), against the more deterministic view of the code expressed by the Correct Sibyl, who advocates dropping the term altogether – any modification being impossible “given the structure of language” (BMN, p. 141). These debates reveal that, if the sibyls are stuck with their writing when they board the Ark, it is not only due to the stifling roles that society assigns them, but also to their difficult relationship with a language that has traditionally been associated with the male sex. As the Forsaken Sibyl formulates it, “[m]en have […] invented their phallic language to silence us and put us down, they’ve constructed a ridiculous grammar based on male subject and female object, denying the body and repressing the female point of view” (BMN, p. 49). At the beginning of the journey, the linguistic code is typically felt by the sibyls either to “falsify” or to simply be inadequate to describe female experience, which is therefore largely perceived as unspeakable. Although the creation of a “whole new female language” based on “[i]ncoherence and irrationality and syntactical violence and multiple word-orgasms” (BMN, p. 49) is initially suggested as a solution by the Forsaken Sibyl, this extreme type of separatism is immediately shown to represent a double-edged weapon that risks reinforcing women’s silencing, and is ultimately abandoned even by its proponent. The Book of Mrs Noah is therefore critical of any feminist radicalism. As the analysis will show, it can nevertheless be regarded as promoting a gentle form of feminine writing, the Sibyls being all portrayed to find aboard the Ark their own new way with words through some form of playful appropriation of the code mostly based on images linked with fluidity, water, food and the female body.

If the heated metanarrative conversations among the writers’ group originally give rise to “disagreement and conflict […] [t]he taking up of positions as in a war, no ambiguity allowed” (BMN, p. 57), as Roberts’s heroine bitterly remarks, Mrs

75 These words are closely akin to Rosi Braidotti’s claim that the “feminine” should “cease to be the effect of male fantasies” and be “that which ‘I, woman’ invent, enact, and empower in ‘our’ speech, our practice, our collective quest for a redefinition of the status of all women” (Rosi Braidotti, “The Politics of Ontological Difference,” in Teresa Brennan [Ed.], Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis [London: Routledge, 1989], p. 102).

76 Jeannette King, p. 53.

77 The Re-Vision Sibyl indeed clearly informs the Forsaken Sibyl that she does not understand a word of what she and the others are talking about, and invites her companions to “try and use ordinary language” (BMN, p. 49).

78 In chapter 30, the Forsaken Sibyl is depicted as searching for a language that would simultaneously be anchored in her “bodily existence” (BMN, p. 208) and rest on “rigorous systems of understanding; no despising of logical language. […] To be understood by the rational mind” (BMN, p. 208).
Noah’s riddles, by contrast, do not yield any direct, explicit meanings – because of the very nature of conundrums, but also because they are framed, as I have pointed out, by instances of voice blurring. It therefore falls to the readers to follow Mrs Noah’s archeo-logic, to decode each chapter and its silences as the heroine’s cryptic progress towards answers. The first of these riddles interrogates the association, through the polysemy of the term “confinement,” between what usually constitutes one of the most significant moments in a woman’s life, the birth of a child – understood both literally and as a metonymy for motherhood –, and the negative experience of imprisonment, of the loss of one’s freedom. This association, beyond its purely linguistic level or what might sound like a mere feminist catchphrase, reflects the sibyls’ reality, as their testimonies reveal. The mothers in the group indeed experience this restriction of their liberty personally, like the Deftly Sibyl, who cannot find the time and quiet she would need to create because of her family life, or the Re-Vision Sibyl, who has to sacrifice her writing and wear a mask to keep the custody of her daughter, while the childless Babble-On Sibyl acutely perceives it in her everyday relationships with her intimates:

At college we sat up half the night talking about the books we read. Now my friends are walled in by children. […] Our conversation is broken. […] Mothers are not available. […] If I go and baby-sit to give my friend some free time for herself, then I don’t see her. (BMN, p. 139)

The sibyls’ lives thus raise the issue of the silencing of mothers in our Western societies. As the Correct Sibyl formulates it: “The voice of the angry daughter […] is the only one heard in our land. What of the mother” (BMN, p. 139)? Yet, as her riddle indicates – “When is a confinement […] not a confinement?” (BMN, p. 63) – the heroine is willing to take her reflection further and examine if, and when, the picture can be different for female parents. In connection and parallel with this meditation on the difficulties of mothers – and, in particular, of mothers who are also artists –, Mrs Noah also explores to what extent physical enclosure necessarily goes together with oppression, or if it can prove, in certain circumstances, to be spiritually liberating.

1. A (Sick)Room of Her Own

First dealing with the question of confinement – even before it is formulated as a brain-teaser on page sixty-three – is chapter 11, which focuses on the Deftly Sibyl. This mother of two who in the heterodiegetic narrator’s initial snapshots runs away on
“the muddy track circling the [nearby] field” (*BMN*, p. 25) in a desperate attempt to "sweat out" (*BMN*, p. 23) her frustration with being constantly responsible for the household and trapped in “their (George’s)” (*BMN*, p. 23) home – that is, denied any privacy –, is portrayed as finding again inspiration through being confined to bed in the sickroom she imagines for herself. As soon as the Ark leaves Venice, the Deftly Sibyl is indeed gripped by a searing backache through which she somatises her need to be momentarily allowed to loosen her grip, to stop being the straight and solid spine on which her children and husband can constantly rely:

She is a ruined column, toppling. [...] Her bones wrench apart. [...] At home it is impossible to be ill. The children wouldn’t understand, would fret. George wouldn’t be able to cope. She wouldn’t be able to cope with him not coping. Bad mother. Bad wife. She likes it here in bed. She doesn’t have to hold everything together. She doesn’t have to hold anything. One by one the burdens topple to the floor: shopping, cleaning, cooking. All the responsibilities. (*BMN*, pp. 58-60)

The Deftly Sibyl’s sickroom is the perfect embodiment of her needs, the answer to her lifelong Woolfian desire to have a room of her own. If throughout her existence she has lived in houses that “are not designed to accommodate mystery, the unconscious” (*BMN*, p. 60), she has now given herself the unprecedented possibility to combine “both silence and speech: choice” (*BMN*, pp. 60-61). Through what I will call the eloquent silence of meditation and artistic nourishment, which she associates with uncluttered blank spaces, white bare walls and curtains that radiate calm and sobriety, she finds her voice. From her own microcosm of secrecy, of female power and transformation – the cave that she has built with her duvet – the Deftly Sibyl comes to link creativity with the unconscious and Cixousian female imagery of fluidity and water as she fishes for words79:

Images begin to emerge, diving up from the deep to break the surface of her mind, turning over and lolloping in the green waves, showing the flick of a fin, of a tail. She’s fishing for them, casting her line, waiting patiently for a bite. [...] Quilt pulled up over the head, a soft cave. Bed is a good place for writing: why did she never realize that before? Hesitant scratch of pen on paper, the loose sheets scattered across her stomach as she tries out two words at a time, rejects them, starts again. [...] The deepest pleasure there is, this certainty that the words are there, hidden underwater, and will come

79 Such “feminine” aquatic imagery can be observed throughout Roberts’s rewriting of the Flood story. In chapter 2, for instance, Mrs Noah describes herself as “plung[ing] down [the] crowded passages” (*BMN*, p. 10) of Venice, “the city that floats,” “this labyrinth of water” (*BMN*, p. 10); in the pensione, “[t]he waiter […] sweeps through the watery green” (*BMN*, p. 11) restaurant flooded with “[g]reen light from the canal […] [that] ripples in green waves across the white walls and floor” (*BMN*, pp. 10-11), the chandelier of her bedroom is “frilled and floppy as a giant squid” (*BMN*, p. 10), and her bed is “a four-poster sailing along the canals though the afternoon, and we on it are lulled by the rocking of the water” (*BMN*, p. 10).
when she calls, when she stops still and listens for them. [...] Later she’ll re-read and sort and discard her gleaming catch. She’s tired now, needs to sleep, to dream her way into the next shoal of images. It doesn’t do to hurry, or you lose it, that new meaning that gleams, phosphorescent, in the ocean lapping her body, her bed. She floats between her scrawled drafts, sinks down to the seabed of words, lets sleep quench her and turn her loose. (BMN, pp. 61-62)

This confinement, since it provides privacy and silence, therefore both delivers the Deftly Sibyl from her writer’s block and enables her to symbolically deliver, from the “womb-shaped enclosure” of her cave, her long-awaited new piece of writing.

2. “I Am a House with Many Windows and Many Doors”

The refrain that follows the Deftly Sibyl’s liberation from her writer’s block switches back to the character-narrator Mrs Noah and her own search for inspiration and meditation on motherhood and creativity. Recollecting the first time she received an Advent Calendar, at the age of seven, the heroine metaphorically associates her opening the paper doors or windows of the calendar along the four weeks – that is, twenty-eight days – preceding Christmas, with her quest for voice and creativity, which, from this memory on to the climax in the hold of the Ark, precisely stretches over twenty-eight chapters. The parallelism between both experiences is intensified through the protagonist’s use of the present tense throughout and of the syntagm “Each day I (must) pull open” (BMN, p. 63). There remains, however, a striking contrast between, on the one hand, the young Mrs Noah’s cautious and linear movement around the paper house to discover the images neatly enclosed in its boxes, and on the other hand the older Mrs Noah’s confession of her total lack of design or direction, and the uncontrolled outbreak of the memories that she has been trying to repress – that is, confine to the back of her mind:

The four weeks before Christmas are represented by numbers printed on the doors and windows of the façade of a paper house, one opening for each day. [...] Each day I pull open a new door or window, carefully moving around the house according to the dates on the paper casements. Inside each one I find an image printed. [...] When at last I open the door marked 25 December I find the Child inside. I am a house with many windows and many doors. Each day I must pull one open and peer inside. [...] I have work to do. If only I knew what that work is. I’ll start with today’s door. I’ll reach for it. It bursts open. Memories of my last conversation with Noah, on the train going to Venice, leap out.81 (BMN, p. 63)

80 Gilbert and Gubar, p. 93.
81 My emphasis.
Giving a voice to her husband, Mrs Noah directly quotes his latest argument against their having a child: “In any case, he asks: what makes you think you’d be able to be a good mother? Are you really sure you want a baby? It’s not just a passing whim” (BMN, p. 63)? In the face of Noah’s attempt to make her see herself merely as a temperamental child and reduce her deep-seated maternity wish to a simple fancy, Mrs Noah turns for the first time to the book of riddles. She thereby symbolically counters her partner’s simplistic and monolithic perspective on motherhood as either good or bad, with the perfect verbal expression of the celebration of plurality.

3. Confined to the Depths by God the Father

Although chapter 13 is not originally or explicitly presented as such, it undoubtedly further examines the conundrum about the polysemic term “confinement” formulated and seemingly put on hold at the end of chapter 12. Peering through the trap door of her Ark, Mrs Noah suddenly wonders “[w]hat happens to the sun when I can’t see it, sunk in darkness, traversing the land of the dead, the underworld” (BMN, p. 64). To find out, she plunges to the quintessence of engulfed, forgotten civilisations – like the pre-Flood world of Genesis –, “Atlantis: also called the house of memory and of forgetting” (BMN, p. 64), and explores the mythical and biological origins of humanity, in what can be interpreted as a lesson in the Judeo-Christian God’s perceived usurpation and confinement to oblivion of both pagan and female power. In the course of her peregrinations through Atlantis, which takes the form of a palace whose architecture is strongly reminiscent of the structure of Mrs Noah’s narrative – the countless rooms forming “a labyrinth of revelations turning over and sliding like the inside of a Chinese puzzle box” (BMN, p. 65) –, Mrs Noah indeed comes across the “room of metamorphoses” (BMN, p. 66). It accommodates the liberated carnivalesque chaos of the old pagan world, of frolicking naked nymphs, of heroes and heroines freely engaging in amorous embraces, of goddesses bathing with their maidens and young athletes voluptuously massaging each other, of “men turning themselves into gods and gods into men” and of “creatures that are half-beast and half-man” (BMN, p. 66):

Here all the rules are broken, joyfully. […] Shrieks and laughter. Games of kiss and chase. Gestures that beckon and repulse. […] You may look, you may touch, you may tease, you may bite. […] You may invent any game you like, for three or four or more to play. (BMN, p. 66)
According to Mrs Noah, if this world has been relegated to the submerged depths of Western history, it is because “God the Father didn’t approve of this state of affairs. [...] God the Father wanted order. So he invented heterosexuality, monogamy, and the family” *(BMN*, pp. 66-67). Mrs Noah associates this divine introduction of the Judeo-Christian sexual ethics with the Flood, for she remarks that “[i]t’s all there, in chapter six of the Gaffer’s novel” *(BMN*, p. 66). She thereby refers in a parodic way to Genesis 6, which relates, in terms that strangely recall ancient pagan epics and myths, how human beings start to reproduce themselves and how the Lord, disapproving of the way his creatures have been developing, decides to deluge the earth to start anew:

> When people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that they were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose. [...] The Nephilim were on the earth in those days – and also afterwards – when the sons of God went in to the daughters of humans, who bore children to them. These were the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown. The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, “I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created.” (Genesis 6:1-2 and 4-7)

This denunciation of how the Judeo-Christian faith imposed its ethos – depicted, through the contrast with the joyful pagan chaos, as rigid, arbitrary and oppressive – gives way, as Mrs Noah reaches the “hall of the expectant mother” *(BMN*, p. 67), to an encounter with the frightening abject mother. This meeting confronts the protagonist – like Mary Magdalene in *The Wild Girl* – with the consequences of the appropriation of female creativity by God the Father and the patriarchal Judeo-Christian tradition. At first, Mrs Noah is both seduced and amused by the impressive wall painting of a naked goddess that “turns, and turns, and turns, keeping [the heroine] [...] always in the circle of her [outstretched] arms and eyes”

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82 Commentators unanimously point out that this extract “discouragem[s] confident interpretation” (E.A. Speiser, *Genesis. The Anchor Bible* [New York/London: Doubleday, 1979 (1964)], p. 45) and makes use of elements from “[n]ear Eastern and classical mythology” (J.D.G. Dunn and J.W. Rogerson [Eds], *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* [Grand Rapids/Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003], p. 43). The words “the sons of God,” for instance, are generally meant to refer to lesser gods or superhuman beings, and Nephilim to “beings of gigantic stature” (John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1969 (1910)], pp. 141 and 146). As Skinner explains, “[t]his obscure and obviously fragmentary narrative relates how in the infancy of the human race marriage alliances were believed to have been formed by supernatural beings with mortal women [...], and how from these unnatural unions there arose a race of heroes or demi-gods. [...] It is implied, though not expressly said, that the existence of such beings, intermediate between the divine and the human, introduced an element of disorder into the creation which had to be checked by the special interposition of Yahweh” (Skinner, pp. 139-140).
(BMN, p. 67) as she moves along the gallery and is “desired by her, sought by her, reached for by her” (BMN, p. 67). The scene however quickly takes on nightmarish tones when, as the heroine tries to get out of the palace, the mother’s protective, loving embrace changes into a suffocating “hold” (BMN, p. 68) that prevents her from finding the exit. The use of the term “hold” in this context constitutes a veiled reference to the climax of the novel in the hold of the Ark which, unlike the mother’s, is first perceived as dangerous by Mrs Noah, and is subsequently revealed to be liberating. Atlantis, “the fossil of the old world” (BMN, p. 64), has therefore become the symbol of the womb, “le dedans désirable et terrifiant, nourricier et meurtrier, fascinant et abject, du corps maternel,” as Kristeva defines it, from which the child has to differentiate itself to acquire its identity and autonomy:

The palace broods over and around me, tightening its grip, chuckling: I’ve got you now, and I’ll never let you go. [...] I’m running, but I can’t escape the palace: it’s swallowed me up, and I rattle in its dark belly. [...] Is this the mother, then, this horror? This hold? This great gloomy imprisoning embrace that hangs on, that won’t let the child step out free? That sits, and waits, implacable as death? (BMN, p. 68)

Experiencing what Kristeva describes as the most powerful form of the abject, when “le sujet trouve l’impossible en lui-même: lorsqu’il trouve que l’impossible, c’est son être même, découvrant qu’il n’est autre qu’abject,” Mrs Noah considers the perspective of her own motherhood as this monstrous, smothering embrace and forcefully rejects it: “How could I ever become a mother, let myself become that embodiment of possessive power, fortress jangling with locked gates, sealed windows? Never” (BMN, p. 68). Her desperate “let me out” (BMN, p. 68) and banging on the locked doors of the palace powerfully convey her longing to escape, not only from the mother’s confining hold, but also from the patriarchal definitions of motherhood that reduce female parents to silence:

To become a mother is to become unfree; tied down; committed, as to prison. A confinement. Leaving the crossroads, the myriad beckoning possibilities; choosing just one. [...] To become a mother is to own up to having a female body and the social consequences of that: invisibility. Mothers exist only on mother’s-day cards, on telly ads for margarine. (BMN, pp. 68-69)

Mrs Noah reflects that, if mothers are silenced – in the image of the self-denying Virgin Mary, the Christian maternal ideal of “marginality and silence,” as King puts

83 Julia Kristeva, “De quoi avoir peur,” in Kristeva, Pouvoirs de l’horreur, p. 66.
85 My emphasis.
it – and disregarded, women who, on the other hand, choose not to have children are equally denigrated for not living in accordance with the fundamental Christian family values and not fulfilling their highest destiny. Since neither of the options available to her seems enviable, the protagonist struggles with a dilemma that she formulates as a bitter parody of a logical chain of reasoning, in which the relation of cause and effect inescapably leads to nonsense:

Mothers don’t have jobs, do they? Mothers have no money. Therefore mothers are boring and unsmart and have tiny minds. Mothers are cabbages buried in the mud of suburbs. Therefore motherhood is a woman’s mystical destiny, [...] a glory men can’t aspire to. Therefore any woman not choosing motherhood is not a real woman. Therefore any woman not choosing to have children is taking the easy way out. Therefore mothers don’t need to be paid and should not complain. Therefore mothers distrust women who are not mothers. Therefore women are scared of mothers. Therefore it’s the mother’s fault. Therefore mothering comes naturally. Therefore a mother’s life is already over. Therefore mothers can’t invent their own stories. Therefore mothers can’t live their own lives. Therefore mothers should not want paid jobs. Therefore it is better not to be a mother but to remain a child and remain free. Therefore it is better to imitate men. Therefore it is better to dream of a thousand possibilities, to fantasize omnipotence, to deny death. Therefore to become a mother is to accept death. Therefore it is better not. Therefore men preach the resurrection and eternal life. Therefore women are not men. Therefore women are not. Therefore I will not become a mother. Therefore I want to become a mother. Therefore I cannot find the way out. (BMN, pp. 68-69)

As the last sentence indicates, Mrs Noah acutely feels at the issue of her exploration of Atlantis that her wild solitary thinking goes nowhere. The silence of voice blurring,

86 Jeannette King, p. 64. This silencing maternal ideal is powerfully challenged in chapter 32 of The Book of Mrs Noah, which belongs to the series that revolves around the riddle “So why does to conceive also mean to conceive?” (BMN, p. 211) and examines how, although this verb associates physical and intellectual creation through its polysemy, patriarchal representations traditionally tend to dissociate both types of creativity and, more particularly, to deny women artistic generative power, as the Gaffer’s earlier words exemplify: “it’s never crossed my mind that women, and certainly not mothers, could create whole new worlds. [...] It’s the male who represents [...] creativity” (BMN, pp. 55-56). Contemplating the oil painting of a reading virgin in a church, Mrs Noah creates a subversive vision through which the two meanings of the term “conceive” are reconciled in the figure of Jesus’ mother: “She is reading the story of the Boat. Meditating on words, [...] seeing nothing but the black marks on the white page, she conceives other words; new words. She creates the Word inside herself, by herself, using her own power” (BMN, p. 214). Besides turning Mary, the passive and silent womb denounced by feminist critics, into “the author” (BMN, p. 215), this extract also foreshadows Mrs Noah’s development at the end of her narrative by providing an empowered pictorial double for the librarian, for the Virgin “is the Ark, the maker of the Word” who “discard[s]” the Flood story to “write a new text, with herself as the subject that speaks” (BMN, p. 215).

87 This part of Mrs Noah’s wild argument can be seen as a personal attack on Noah, who refuses to become a father because it entails “too much responsibility, too much curtailment of his freedom. [...] He wants to remain the child, not to become its father” (BMN, p. 213). Interestingly, if in The Book of Mrs Noah, Noah’s reluctance to have a baby is associated, as the heroine points out, with the fear to enter time and the inexorable movement towards death, in Only Human, by contrast, the situation is completely reversed, for, as I will show, Abram’s obsession with getting descendants is rooted in his belief that only through children can humankind transcend its mortal condition.
however, comes to her rescue, for it instantly transports her back on board the Ark, where she can relate her bewildering adventures to the other six characters.

4. Relegated to the Gaps

Mrs Noah’s account of her trip to the depths instantly sparks off a lively collective debate about silencing, the Forsaken Sibyl remarking to the Gaffer that he “left a lot out of Genesis, […] there’s almost no description there, if I remember correctly, of Atlantis, of what the world was like before the Flood” (BMN, p. 69). The Gaffer naturally denies any attempt to manipulate reality when passing the chaotic Atlantis over in silence, and hides behind laudable pedagogical and ethical aims:

– You could say I discarded a chapter. I don’t approve of pornography, you know. My book was written for a family market, after all. I didn’t want to encourage youngsters to try out perversions, all the wrong things. I wanted to show the purity and beauty of married life. I saw the Flood as a sort of correction fluid, blanking out all the bad bits, the parts of creation that had gone wrong. In later chapters of my novel, of course, I stressed how perverts always come to a sticky end. Torn apart by dogs, stoned to death, killed off by plagues, and so on. (BMN, pp. 69-70)

These highly parodic words show how much the Gaffer belongs to the type of authors who, unlike Mrs Noah, “make a clear design” (BMN, p. 68), as the heroine formulates it, who carefully guide the readers through their (hi)story, at the risk of imposing their necessarily limited and partial view. If the Gaffer does not see the point of “want[ing] to read what [he] […] left out,” of “try[ing] to rewrite [his] […] story” (BMN, p. 70), the sibyls and Mrs Noah, by contrast, think that “this is the moment […] for someone to tell a story […] about one of the characters the Gaffer completely forgot to put in[…] […] Fill in one of his gaps” (BMN, p. 70). This highly postmodern metafictional discussion, besides re-emphasising the clear positioning of The Book of Mrs Noah as a response to the perceived monologism of the Bible and the Christian tradition, also serves to relaunch Mrs Noah’s reflection on the notion of “confinement,” both because it deals with the issue of the implicit dimension of the Bible – that confines some characters to its gaps –, and because it leads to a particularly interesting mise en abyme in which the autodiegetic narrator, a double of Mrs Noah, comes, through the experience of physical confinement, to claim spiritual freedom and self-reliance, and to embody loving, but non-confining, motherhood.
5. Non-Confining Holds

The heroine of this first embedded story is, like Roberts’s protagonist, the unnamed wife of the biblical Noah, here renamed Jack. In the image of Mr and Mrs Noah, Jack and his wife have diverging outlooks on life, which are most explicitly reflected in incompatible representations of God that strongly recall the contrast between Jacob’s god and Dinah’s goddess in Diamant’s *The Red Tent*: Jack’s deity corresponds to the fierce, invisible, transcendent god of the Old Testament, the “mighty father in the sky, who punishes us when we do wrong, and sends us diseases and plagues and famines to show us his power” (*BMN*, p. 72). By contrast, the divinity in which the narrator believes is predominantly characterised by its motherly, immanent nature: “My God is all over the place. I keep tripping over God at the oddest times, and not always in secret holy places or when I am by myself. Sometimes God is in bed with us” (*BMN*, p. 73).

At first, Jack’s wife struggles to become “a good wife and mother” (*BMN*, p. 79). She learns to appreciate this husband who “does not beat” (*BMN*, p. 72) her and even gets to treat her with respect when she gives him three sons whom she raises in the same way as she deals with her other domestic chores, “[n]ot exactly [with] pleasure but a sort of satisfaction” (*BMN*, p. 72). She “suffer[s] in silence” (*BMN*, p. 79), adopting a submissive behaviour. Accordingly, the embedded narrator keeps silent when Jack, claiming to have received revelations from his god, appropriates both his wife’s foreknowledge of the Flood – acquired through dreams in which she sees the earth as a woman who, after having “carried the seed of new life safely inside her” (*BMN*, p. 74) for nine months, gives birth to the world in a great “flood-tide of water and blood” (*BMN*, p. 74) – and her suggestion to build a “big wooden Boat with a roof” (*BMN*, p. 75) in order to survive: “I hold my tongue. This isn’t the time for a quarrel” (*BMN*, p. 75). Repressing her fierce longing for solitude and independence, for “a Boat of [her] [… ] own” (*BMN*, p. 77), she resigns herself to board the shelter she is to share with her husband, sons, daughters-in-law, and a pair of each animal species: “couples couples couple. I want to live on my own” (*BMN*, p. 78).

Just when, after a few days, the narrator has almost completely lost, like the rest of them, her will to survive, her experience of extreme, oppressive confinement “in a small space with the fear of death tapping at your shoulder night and day” (*BMN*, p. 82) suddenly turns into a liberating gestation, during which she discovers
the joys of motherhood as a choice, not a duty, and from which she will emerge with
the strength to speak with her own voice, foreshadowing thereby Mrs Noah’s fate at
the issue of the novel. The catalyst of this change is the narrator’s daughter-in-law
Sara, who “goads [the family] […] back into living” (BMN, p. 80) and penetrates the
narrator’s thick armour of cold bitterness by confessing her sorrow at being treated
harshly by her mother-in-law and her hope that the baby she is carrying is a girl:

You didn’t welcome a daughter, […] and you’ve never thought much of the worth of
daughters-in-law. […] I want a daughter, […] I’ll love her properly. The way no one loves me.
And then I’ll let her go. I’ll let her leave me. (BMN, p. 81)

Jack’s wife is deeply moved by this vision of motherhood based on an infinite, yet not
stifling love, and decides to adopt Sara as her daughter. Strengthened and pacified by
this strong bond, the narrator, who “need[s] nothing now but this water surrounding
us” (BMN, p. 82), starts imagining a new society in which “there are no rules about
having to get married and have children” (BMN, pp. 82-83), a feminine world – very
similar to the Deftly Sibyl’s creative experience in her sickroom – in which she and
Sara are “as fluid as water” (BMN, p. 82) and can live together:

I build us a cool cave decorated with coral and shells, with a floor of silver sand, and green
weeds waving around the entrance. The water slides all over my body as I lie in it and am
carried along by it. Water is my mother, my lover, my bed. My element, which gives me the
freedom to swim off wherever I want to go. Water is my food and drink. Water is my god.
[…]
I am reborn from the Boat into water. I become fish. Untroubled by the Flood, which, after
all, is merely my home. (BMN, p. 83)

When after “the length of the pregnancy” (BMN, p. 82), the rain stops and the
narrator can finally leave the Boat with her family, she feels like a baby “propelled
from the safety of the enclosing waters” (BMN, p. 84). Her confinement having made
her realise that she cannot stand “being defined by men” (BMN, p. 83) anymore, she
starts her new life by firmly standing up to Jack for the first time. Freeing herself from
the authority of her husband and his bloodthirsty god, she refuses the dominion over
all creatures and sacrifice decreed – in words recalling Genesis 8 and 9 – by Jack’s
god: “I too […] have a rule for my new life. I swear that I shall never kill an animal
again. […] I am sick of killing, and so would your God be if he had any sense. This
argument confirms the division between Jack and me” (BMN, p. 85).

It is ultimately the dissolving of the rainbow that has connected the Boat to the
sky throughout the nine months of the Flood that truly gives the narrator her own
voice, for, as she formulates it, using (re)birth imagery again, “[n]ight has cut the
bright cord, and set me upright. Now I need a name. I need names” (BMN, p. 86). After spending the night renaming the world as an act, not of domination, but of worship, as a “way of connecting us all with each other and with God” (BMN, p. 86), the protagonist of the mise en abyme transmits to Sara her new words which she also engraves on slabs, thereby inventing what she calls “writing” (BMN, p. 87) and symbolically replacing “[p]atrilinear inheritance […] by a matrilineal handing down of culture”88: “This is my gift to you, daughter, and to your children and to their children” (BMN, p. 87).

Having created not only a maternal bond with her daughter-in-law, but also the written word and a female genealogy, the narrator withdraws into the silent seclusion that she has always desired, asking to be left alone by the Boat when the rest of the family decides to walk down the mountain to found a settlement. Although the parting with her newly found daughter is painful, Jack’s wife lets Sara go, incarnating, in this way, the loving mother who refuses to become a smothering hold. Enjoying her new freedom in her solitary retreat, she abandons language: “Daily I witness the creation of the world. When I pray, it is not with words. […] I don’t need words anymore. I’m alone, and I’ve given my words to Sara, to do as she likes with” (BMN, pp. 88-89). In what can be interpreted as her self-silencing or, on the contrary, an empowering ineffable union with the divine similar to Mary Magdalene’s in The Wild Girl, the heroine greets death, while subversively proclaiming her immortality as the embodiment of the women the Gaffer confined to “his gaps” (BMN, p. 70):

God’s silence wraps me up, hushing me, putting an icy finger to my lips. I open my mouth and the whiteness of the sky falls onto my tongue, dissolving, pouring down my throat like sweet milk. Welcome, death. In you I drown. Until I’m reincarnated, born again into the next story. I’m the ghost in the library, cackling, unseen, from between the pages of the sacred texts, waiting my chance to haunt a new generation of readers. I’m what’s missing. I’m the wanderer. (BMN, p. 89)

At the issue of the first silent sequence of five chapters, Mrs Noah has – appropriately – received no definite answers or certainties to her question “When is a confinement […] not a confinement?” (BMN, p. 63), but discovered a range of possibilities on which to ponder, through a blurred yet rhythmic chorus of voices, from the Deftly Sibyl’s creative self-confinement to her own encounter with abject motherhood, or the gestation of Jack’s wife and rebirth both as a mother and free woman.

88 Jeannette King, p. 45.
In the fourth occurrence of the five-chapter pattern to which I will now turn, Mrs Noah further investigates the multifaceted issue of women’s creativity through the riddle “Does to bear mean also to bear?” (BMN, p. 183). This conundrum explores how women’s prerogative to bear life comes together with bearing the constant heavy responsibility for one’s child’s well-being, but also how womanhood means, for the female voices in The Book of Mrs Noah, having to bear reductive patriarchal representations.

E. A Heavy Weight to Bear?

1. Taking Off the Burden of Censorious Voices

The shipmate whose experience triggers the reflection on the verb “to bear” in chapter 25 is the Correct Sibyl, the former “old pro […] writ[ing] her thousand words a morning come what may” (BMN, p. 30), who is now desperately “searching for inspiration. For a new voice. Her old one has died away and left her hoarse, monosyllabic” (BMN, p. 172). Linking what used to be her two favourite means of expression, the creation of “flamboyant selections of clothes” (BMN, p. 174) and the composition of “arrangement of words” (BMN, p. 174), she gets back to the tragic root of her writer’s block to find inspiration again in the spectacular, carnivalesque⁸⁹ – and very in-correct – wardrobe that she has imagined for herself “to enrich her vocabulary” (BMN, p. 174):

[D]resses, coats, suits […] [are] arranged in no order at all but according to some glorious carnival rule of sexual and social confusion. Dress-suits press up to ski outfits. Policemen’s uniforms are mixed up with those of chambermaids and nurses. A judge’s splendid robes hang next to a maternity smock, a university chancellor’s scarlet gown next to a nun’s habit, a businessman’s sober striped trousers and dark jacket next to a baggy harlequin costume. (BMN, p. 172)

As a young woman, the Correct Sibyl used to consider dress as a way of asserting her strong, irreverent personality and communicating her state of mind. She would put on bright, revealing clothes to “mak[e] some sort of provocative and punning statement” (BMN, p. 173), or, by contrast, an old, shapeless pair of jeans and a raincoat to convey her “introspective mood” (BMN, p. 173), bearing with a mixture

⁸⁹ The liberating aspect that carnival assumes for the Correct Sibyl is already subtly hinted at in her first brief presentation in chapter 6 when, looking at a “roller-skater execut[ing] a figure of eight backwards with swooping grace” (BMN, p. 31), Mrs Noah’s future guest muses: “Perhaps that is the way to do it; turn it the other way round” (BMN, p. 31).
of amused pride and mild annoyance the wolf-whistles through which men expressed their “desperate [need] to be noticed by [her]” (BMN, p. 173) or their snarls and insults when they were “enraged that she […] [was] not caring” (BMN, p. 173). When, however, as the text seems to suggest, she not only becomes the victim of “the Ripper,” who “rap[es] his way along the street in which she lives” (BMN, p. 174), but also has to stand some male journalists’ misogynist claims that the rapist’s “too-loving mother and dominating wife” (BMN, p. 174) bear the responsibility of the crimes, the Correct Sibyl’s former compliance with what she used to perceive as men’s rather harmless imposition of their meanings in society is replaced by hatred for what she now sees as males’ outright silencing of females. Her initial belief that

[it]’s not that men can’t read women’s signals; it’s not that they’re illiterate. They prefer their own meanings, that’s all, and, since the street, they have decided, belongs to them, feel free to impose them. They write her in on their pavement page (BMN, pp. 173-74)

therefore gives way to a condemnation that seethes with anger and bitterly echoes traditional feminist denunciations of men’s domination of the linguistic code and its gruesome practical consequences for women – such as the denial of rape:

[r]ape, by definition, means that a woman hasn’t asked for it. Except, of course, that so many men don’t understand what the word means because they refuse to read a woman’s signs, refuse to recognize the sign no. Women can’t create signs, can they? Women are silenced by male speech, aren’t they? (BMN, p. 175)

Through this sexual assault, both of the Correct Sibyl’s old means of expression are violently taken away from her, for she starts hiding behind dark glasses and cannot write anymore “the novels she once turned out with such professional regularity. Words don’t flow. She wants to spit and curse, to mourn. […] Well, that won’t do, doesn’t fit her civilized tolerant self-image” (BMN, p. 175). After a phase of radical self-silencing, during which “she shuts up” (BMN, p. 175), the Correct Sibyl turns to a dry, impersonal language that conceals her trauma, and “reads the critics: today’s high priests. They know it all” (BMN, p. 175). Having been taught the hard way that, as a woman, she cannot freely express herself through her outfits, but has to bear male definitions and therefore to “disguise herself” (BMN, p. 174), she now feels with unprecedented force how her liberty as a writer is similarly threatened by the literary authorities who try to impose their representations on – female – authors, or, to quote Gilbert and Gubar’s words in The Madwoman in the Attic, by

the perpetual admonitions of the eternal pedagogue—write this, think that[—,] that persistent voice, now grumbling, now patronising, now domineering, now grieved, now shocked, now angry, now avuncular, that voice which cannot let women alone, but must be at them, like

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Ironically symbolising this other fettering weight that she is expected to bear, she successively dons seven costumes on top of each other and enacts, in front of the mirror of her imagined wardrobe, the paralysing encounter with the Seven Deadly Sins – or critics’ censorious voices – to which, in her search for her new voice, she could as quickly fall prey as to her rapist. This private performance leads to a polyphonic confrontation of highly conflicting positions. If the “Fourth Deadly Sin: Arrogance” (BMN, p. 176) criticises the Correct Sibyl for not knowing her place – “What’s wrong with looking after your family, like decent women do?” (BMN, p. 177) –, the “Fifth Deadly Sin: Unsisterly behaviour,” on the contrary, condemns her for “betray[ing] feminism” by staying within the straitjacket of tradition with her “phallocentric psychologising” and her “romantic garbage […] about heterosexuality,” in which she “fall[s] back on patriarchal myths” (BMN, p. 177). While the “Third Deadly Sin: Lack of political bite” denigrates the Correct Sibyl because her “self-indulgent narcissistic musings about [her] […] interior life” are “[c]ompletely irrelevant to most working people’s experience and sufferings,” and advises her to remember, when writing, that her audience wants poetry that is “rhyming” and novels with “a plot” (BMN, p. 176), according to the “Sixth Deadly Sin: lack of avant-garde originality” (BMN, p. 178), on the other hand, the Correct Sibyl is not experimental enough:

You’re not very wild, are you? she asks: not really weird and violent and post-modernist. You never got even as far as modernism, did you, poor thing? […] I mean, you’re still using quotation marks and narrative and conventional sentence structures and conventional ideas of character. (BMN, p. 178)

The seven Deadly Sins nevertheless all agree that the Correct Sibyl lacks the necessary qualities to be a good writer, as they finally murmur to her in chorus: “You lack the stamina necessary for sustained creative work. You lack imagination, confidence, originality, wit. You’re too genteel. You’re too hysterical” (BMN, p. 179). Her progressive transformation, through the accumulation of clothes, into the image of a swaddled baby, mirrors her intellectual and emotional state of helplessness.

This meeting with her own silencing ghosts, however, turns into a highly liberating episode, for if the Correct Sibyl comes to the conclusion that she will never

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be able to please everyone as a writer or a woman, it is because she realises, not that she is disqualified by insuperable defects, as the Deadly Sins would like her to believe, but that “[t]he ideal mother, ideal listener, doesn’t exist” (BMN, p. 179). Her accusers themselves all seem anxious to hide certain facets of their lives and personalities that are not really in keeping with their fine words and appearances of perfection. The male Third Deadly Sin, who so powerfully defends what can be defined as Marxist ideals, and who specifically denounces the Correct Sibyl’s mystical strain as reactionary, is revealed to have had on the previous night “a vision of the Angel Gabriel” (BMN, p. 176). The Fourth Deadly Sin, behind her neat tweed suit, brown stockings and gloves, and her sermon about traditional family values and work ethics, can be regarded as the incarnation of the desperate housewife who “knows that her husband no longer loves her” (BMN, p. 177). The Fifth Deadly Sin, the hard-line feminist who despises the Correct Sibyl for being “anxious to impress men” (BMN, p. 177), actually herself actively seeks to, and excels at, rousing male interest, for she is identified as a talented professional stripper, while the Sixth Deadly Sin, with her gothic outfit and provocative claim that to be a real writer, one has to have “been a hooker and gone S-M and been a junkie and […] refused a clear gender identity” (BMN, p. 178), conceals the fact that she is a virgin who enjoys reading the Bible every weekend with her old aunt.

By screaming her rejection of the chimera of perfection, the Correct Sibyl shatters her mirror into shards, with which she cuts the clothes that unbearably weigh on her shoulders. She thereby symbolises her intellectual emancipation – “Now she can be lonely, and begin to hunt for her own words” (BMN, p. 179) – in a direct echo of Gilbert and Gubar’s claim that “[b]efore the woman writer can journey through the looking glass toward literary autonomy, […] she must come to terms with the images on the surface of the glass, with, that is, those mythic masks […] fastened over her human face,”91 not only by male authorities – as was the case for the authors analysed in The Madwoman in the Attic – but also, as the analysis has shown, by female critics.92

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91 Gilbert and Gubar, p. 17.
92 Out of the Seven Deadly Sins, three are females, which both reflects the evolution of the literary scene between the nineteenth-century studied by Gilbert and Gubar, and the 1980’s, and demonstrates Roberts’s critical perspective on any form of radical feminism.
Looking for something she might want to put on, the Correct Sibyl, this time, does not pick up clothes that risk disguising her personality, but “reaches her hand into the past” (*BMN*, p. 179) and recalls old beloved garments associated with fond memories: her antique linen nightdress that fell to pieces after being worn and washed too often, the cotton dress that she forgot one day in a bed-and-breakfast, that black suit she lent to a friend who never gave it back, or those green platform shoes that she recycled into flowerpots until they rotted. With the new awareness that, in the same way as clothes, “[w]ords can be given away, lost, put out with the rubbish […] rot and need replacing” (*BMN*, p. 181), and its relieving corollary that “[o]ne of the pleasures of being a writer is that you can take power” (*BMN*, p. 181), that language is a tool, not a constraint, the Correct Sibyl starts to “choose [her] […] own words” (*BMN*, p. 181).

### 2. Bearing … Also the Responsibility

Transporting the readers from the Correct Sibyl’s recollections to Mrs Noah’s, the refrain relates how the protagonist of Roberts’s novel, as a young woman, used to have clandestine sex in the library with a scholar studying bibliography. This relationship, based exclusively on the search for pleasure, serves as a contrast to Mrs Noah’s present situation, which she formulates with the sentence “[h]ere in my Arkive on the Ark, books on sex are allowed to stand next to books on procreation” (*BMN*, p. 183). If as a student, the heroine was looking for sexuality devoid of responsibility, she now yearns for a child, and resents Noah for not being willing to bear the responsibilities entailed by parenthood and, therefore, for still wanting to dissociate sex and reproduction. The heroine’s memory, moreover, can also be interpreted as suggesting a possible escape from her dead end if Noah does not grant her what she is looking for: separation, which Mrs Noah chose when she realised that she would never reach climax with her lover.

Noah’s voice – which then appears in this refrain –, by introducing the counter-argument, comes as an implicit answer to Mrs Noah’s musing, and leads the protagonist to the riddle “Does to bear mean also to bear?” (*BMN*, p. 183): “But the world’s a poisoned place, […] full of illness and death. How can you be so irresponsible as to bring a child into it” (*BMN*, p. 183)? As if to support Noah’s point,
In chapter 27, which rewrites the Chernobyl nuclear incident, voice blurring takes on its full meaning. As Mrs Noah, who is sitting on a bench at the centre of the piazza, reads a notice on the memorial behind her – whose precise content is never given to the readers –, a blank on the page seems to announce a change of voice. The rendition of Mrs Noah’s movements and thoughts gives way to what looks like the first-person interior monologue of a young islander silenced by both terror and governmental disinformation. The close juxtaposition of these two I’s sharing the same oppressive setting, olfactory sensations, and maternity wish leads to a confusing blend of voices: that of Mrs Noah, who only briefly walks round this over-polluted land during one of her expeditions away from the Ark, and that of an unidentified woman – presumably born of Mrs Noah’s imagination, stimulated by the poster she is reading – who gives an insider’s perception of how death progressively creeps its way into people’s minds and bodies as days pass by:

The smell pushes up my nostrils: moist decaying vegetable matter; urine; over-ripe fruit; dying flowers, slimy-sweet; incense; sickness; and, laid over the top, a thin vapour, the smell of chlorine and disinfectant.
It’s raining. […]
I read the poster stuck on the monument behind me.

Oh dear. There’s been an accident at the local nuclear power station. Don’t panic. Nothing to worry about. The radioactive cloud hanging over the island won’t stay for long: the wind will soon blow it somewhere else.
I have the smell of death in my nostrils. […] I swallow death. I inhale it. […] Death working in my cells, against my will, to make me infertile perhaps, or to give me, or the child I want to bear, some form of cancer. […]
The government is deliberately keeping silent. […] I can’t sleep at night. The invisible dust settles on my eyes, my lips. I don’t want to speak of my terrors to others and make them feel worse than they already do. We can’t console each other. We are blank-faced, silent. […]
Demonstrations occur daily in front of the Ministry of Health. […]
It’s too late, say the world’s governments. […] This is just an isolated disaster. […] Nuclear power remains clean, effective, cheap, efficient, safe. Your diseased child will be born too late to be counted as a victim. Statistics, after all, can be destroyed or lied about.

I go into the great gloomy church set back on one side of the piazza. Temporary shelter from the soft radioactive rain. (BMN, pp. 185-187)

In the religious edifice, Mrs Noah does not find the comfort she is looking for. On the contrary, she is assailed from all sides with visions of horror, as rows of skulls resting in small cavities in the chancel walls surround her, as the crucified Jesus, who
becomes in this scene a pretext for the denunciation of Christianity’s perceived glorification of suffering, seems to chastise her – in an ironic veiled reference to the popular expression “we all have our cross to bear” – for “mak[ing] such a fuss” (BMN, p. 187) about torment and death, and as relics that “leer at” (BMN, p. 187) her in their crystal boxes “like deformed babies, pathological specimens, swimming in stoppered glass jars” (BMN, p. 187), confront her with the possible tragic outcomes of a pregnancy. At the issue of her trip on dry land, it seems to Mrs Noah that bearing a child also means bearing the consequences of the decision to bring a human being into a world that might prove unwelcoming or even lethal, and, therefore, bearing to see it suffer.

4. This Womb That “Shuts Me Up”

Offering Mrs Noah a salutary diversion from her meditations on motherhood, her conversation with her six companions – initiated by the sight of Mrs Noah’s gutting of fish for supper, a parody of a bloody sadistic ritual that evokes the visions of the preceding chapter to better make light of them –, revolves around the burdens that the sibyls feel they specifically have to bear both as women and writers because – as the psychoanalytical theories to which they ironically allude formulate it – they have a womb. Thus the Deftly Sibyl deplores that, in women’s writing, topics like menstruation, “throbbing wombs, moons, grandmothers, lesbians, […] food, and orgasms” are “de rigueur” (BMN, p. 188), while the Re-Vision Sibyl confesses to being silenced, not by the traditional Freudian penis envy, but by her “womb envy” (BMN, p. 189), by this jealousy that she feels towards other women writers, created by the harsh competition imposed by publishers and reviewers:

I must hold fast to the fragile trust we build between us here on the Ark, for the winds of my envy want to blow our house down. […] One of you has your new novel selected for the best-twenty-books-by-women promotion: I want to lash out and hit, preferably you. One of you already has a cult following, based on only two books of stories: I want to see you fail. […] My envy destroys my growing love for you, shuts me up. (BMN, pp. 189-190)

If writing about her distressing feelings is contemplated by the Re-Vision Sibyl as a way of defusing the situation, so is it too by the Forsaken Sibyl who, for her part, desires men’s “[c]lean and lean” (BMN, p. 190) shapes, for she is confused by her messy body that “explodes, over and over again” (BMN, p. 190). Wiser for her confrontation with the gagging voices of the Deadly Sins, the Correct Sibyl, after reaffirming how androcentrism pervades Western societies and establishes “He”
BMN (p. 190) as the “Word that [...] structures language for everyone [...] [and] defines all that is not-him” (BMN, p. 190), points out that “He is just a word. [...] So I can also forget him, erase him, cross him out” (BMN, pp. 190-191). Reintroducing the She, she emphasises the importance of the mother – foreshadowing thereby the crucial role of the lost female parent in the last scene of the cruise –:

How can I invent she without exploring what she touches or yearns to touch, the not-she, the mother who goes away and touches father? Man and woman so distant from each other in the dictionary, such a lumber of meanings in between. (BMN, p. 191)

When, picking up on the idea of remoteness introduced by the Correct Sibyl, the Babble-On Sibyl remarks that she does not like printed books as much as letters or diaries, because they increase the gap between her and the hand that wrote the text, the Gaffer asks for a tale about a woman who cannot read or write. Through this request, the only male member of the group can be understood to suggest exploring a scenario in which not only the woman’s burden, but also the distance between the illiterate protagonist and her representation – and, therefore, the possibility of voice blurring – must be the greatest, since she has the opportunity neither to voice her hardships, nor to directly communicate her version of the story.

5. Bearing to Death

Like the other four chapters of the sequence to which it belongs, the embedded narrative can be analysed as a variation on the riddle “Does to bear mean also to bear?” (BMN, p. 183). It relates how the young servant Meg Hansey, who cannot bear to bear the child forced on her by her master Mr Allen, and who, out of despair, stabs her rapist before she escapes and gives birth in the street to a daughter whom she immediately strangles, is tragically condemned to bear the entire and unique responsibility for the baby’s death as she is hanged for infanticide. Her torturer, by contrast, is not even bothered by the police. Highlighting how easily a voice – and, a fortiori, that of an illiterate female – can be distorted, this narrative is told by some male writer or journalist and acquaintance of the Allens who, by visiting the condemned woman in prison, “coax[es]” (BMN, p. 192) her into telling him the details of her story.

Although the narrator likes to claim that he is motivated by his “sympathy” (BMN, p. 192) for this poor woman “pushed to take desperate measures in order to survive” (BMN, p. 192), and by his eagerness to comfort her, his words evidently
betray not only his financial interest, but also how much he arranges and manipulates Meg’s tale, irremediably blurring her voice. He indeed confesses that, in order not “to play the journalist too obviously” (*BMN*, p. 192), he has decided not to write anything down during his interviews. The “rough notes” (*BMN*, p. 192) that are presented to us are therefore only based on the narrator’s recollections of his conversations with Meg, which considerably increases the distance between her words and his rendering of them. This first draft moreover amply proves the extent of the male instance’s appropriation of the female voice, for it mainly consists of narrative report – which only gives the gist of Meg’s testimony, freely translated by the narrator in his own words – and Meg is almost completely denied self-expression. In a total of eleven pages, she is only granted seven occurrences of direct speech – Mrs Allen is, by comparison, allowed ten – which, what is more, chiefly serve to create the image of a submissive servant – “I’ll sit with you willingly” (*BMN*, p. 196), “I’m at your service” (*BMN*, p. 196), or, still, “Let me do that” (*BMN*, p. 201).

Significantly, the would-be writer never pretends to do justice to Meg’s original formulation; on the contrary, he explicitly announces his plan to write, on the basis of his notes, a story that “combine[s] the sensational details of popular novels and broadsheets with the sober nature of religious confessional tracts” (*BMN*, p. 192). He does not seek to genuinely listen to and then pass on Meg’s voice, but to “create a woman’s voice. Of course I have to invent Meg’s style. […] I polish up what she tells me; I give it a shape; I make her up. You have to”93 (*BMN*, pp. 192-193). Casually revealing that, to his linguistic manipulation, he has also joined physical abuse, by proudly mentioning how “I kissed her too, whenever I got the chance. […] Perhaps she would have let me have her. Probably glad too, poor wretch” (*BMN*, p. 203), the male narrator finally concludes his account with the illiterate infanticide mother’s complete objectification: “In my hands her poor body will live again” (*BMN*, p. 204).

If Mrs Noah’s polyphonic exploration of the various meanings of the verb “bear” has revealed that childbearing, understood both literally and as a metonymy for womanhood, can mean having to stand confining and alienating patriarchal definitions or even, in Meg Hansey’s case, their lethal consequences, it has, however, also shown Mrs Noah that as a writer, she has the opportunity to “take power” (*BMN*, p. 181), as the Correct Sibyl formulates it. In the final chain of chapters, which appropriately

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93 My emphasis.
revolves around the riddle “Can he come to terms with my coming to term?” (BMN, p. 244), the issue of Mrs Noah’s concerns about her husband’s ability to accept her longing to (pro)create is examined via the depiction of characters that, by dealing with their traumas, manage to find words, that is, self-expression.

F. Conjugating “To Come”: Reaching New Insights, Discovering Pleasure, and Finding Creativity

1. “She’s the One He’s Lost”

The shipmate who is portrayed as carrying out introspection at the beginning of this cycle is the Gaffer in person. He who, when he arrives aboard the Ark, defines himself as “the Creator” (BMN, p. 54) and “truth incarnate” (BMN, p. 55), and who claims that women “don’t create” (BMN, p. 56), will come to realise that his (hi)story too is rooted in female creativity.

Sitting in the Ark’s Reading Room in the hope of finding inspiration, the Gaffer is suddenly disheartened: “These days, he broods, male writers don’t stand a chance. You’re only published if you’re a woman, or Black, or gay. […] What’s a man to do” (BMN, pp. 235-236)? Determined to dig out some answers to this question, the author sets out to investigate what characterises men’s writing. In an ironic reversal, both of the androcentrism according to which, as the Correct Sibyl formulated it earlier, “He defines all that is not-him” (BMN, p. 190), and of the creative enterprises of so many female artists – not least those studied in this thesis – rewriting the male canon, the Gaffer is depicted as conceiving that “[a] man is: not-a-woman” (BMN, p. 236) and to therefore plan to “[s]can all […] female texts, discover what they leave out, then plunge into the blank space and explore” (BMN, p. 236). With this aim in mind, he decides to retype the entirety of the Ark’s library – starting with the haphazardly chosen “anthology of Egyptian tomb inscriptions concerning women” (BMN, p. 236) – and to store it on his computer memory to be able to search, compare and index, “[t]hen he’ll know everything” (BMN, p. 236).

This scene constitutes a particularly humorous rewriting, in the masculine, of chapter two of A Room of One’s Own, in which Woolf’s alter ego Mary Beton, disconcerted by the contrast between the wealth of the men’s colleges and the poverty of the women’s college at the fictional Oxbridge university, wonders why females do not have the same chances as males. Armed with a notebook and a pencil, Beton goes
to the library of the British Museum to consult “the learned and the unprejudiced” for answers, for “[i]f truth is not to be found on the shelves of the British Museum, where, I asked myself, […] is truth?”:

Thus provided, thus confident and enquiring, I set out in the pursuit of truth. […] One went to the counter; one took a slip of paper; one opened a volume of the catalogue, and … the five dots here indicate five separate minutes of stupefaction, wonder and bewilderment. Have you any notion how many books are written about women in the course of one year? Have you any notion how many are written by men? […] Here had I come with a notebook and a pencil proposing to spend a morning reading, supposing that at the end of the morning I should have transferred the truth to my notebook, […] How shall I ever find the grains of truth embedded in all this mass of paper, I asked myself. […] It was a most strange phenomenon; and apparently—here I consulted the letter M—one confined to male sex. Women do not write books about men.

Selecting a dozen volumes at random, Woolf’s narrator begins to fill her notebook, but quickly becomes aware that this vast source of highly contradictory representations of the female sex is more bewildering than helpful: “Truth had run through my fingers. […] It seemed a pure waste of time to consult all those gentlemen who specialise in woman […] numerous and learned as they are.” This destabilising encounter with the overabundance of men’s writing about “Woman” represents, as Muers points out, one of the most famous and illuminative accounts of females’ garrulous silencing through their confinement to the status of object or “question,” and their consequent apparent exclusion from “the subject-position.”

If in The Book of Mrs Noah the Gaffer realises after several hours of work, like Mary Beton, that “[h]e’s no nearer an answer” (BMN, p. 237), the reason for his failure, however, is diametrically opposed to that of Mary Beton’s. The male author is indeed, in a particularly ironic twist, overwhelmed, not by women’s silencing, but, on the contrary, by the sheer plethora of books with a woman as the subject that speaks: “By lunch time he’s tapped out half a chapter. He runs his fingers through his hair. At this rate, it will take him several thousand years to get every book in the archive into his memory. Better find another method of research” (BMN, p. 236).

A scientific approach having proved ineffective, the Gaffer lets himself be driven by imagination and memory, through the agency of the mermaids that suddenly people the sea around the Ark. These figures of female power and knowledge of the
past, present and future, are depicted to flatter, comfort but also terrify the male
shipmate all at the same time, in accordance with their traditional representation as the
embodiment of “the duality in male perceptions of woman as [...] the mother who
offers security and the sexual being who threatens to engulf and disempower him”
with mesmerising songs.

To a Gaffer who “has been broken into little pieces by lack of nourishing love”
(BMN, p. 238) and by the recognition, brought by the sibyls, that “women don’t need
him” (BMN, p. 238), the mermaids croon that he should not believe “[a]ll this
nonsense [...] about gender and sexual difference and the oedipal moment” (BMN, p.
238) for it is only a “trap constructed by women envious of [his] [...] genius” (BMN,
p. 238), and that he can “[r]efuse to be named in their terms, to be reduced, part not
whole, man not cosmic voice” (BMN, p. 238). Enthralled by their praises and
regard(s), he sees himself reflected simultaneously in all their looking-glasses, and
thinks that “[h]e is whole again” (BMN, p. 238). This veiled reference to Lacan’s
mirror stage – when the child, gazing at its image in a mirror, reaches the reassuring
awareness of its bodily unity – comes together, however, with the mermaids’
unnerving invitation to carry the Gaffer to Atlantis, his “forgotten home, [...] [the]
perfect womb” (BMN, p. 239). This perspective suddenly arouses panic in him as he
recognises that he “has never been able to remember his past” (BMN, p. 239), and
urges him to imagine an “unauthorized version” (BMN, p. 239) of Genesis that takes
the form of a journey to his own roots in the mother, structured around the different
stages of the Oedipus complex.

In this parody of Creation mixing biblical language with humorous references
to feminist texts re-sacralising the great goddess, the Mother, as the initial object of
the young Gaffer’s desire, is at the origin of all: “In the beginning there is Mother.
Omnipotent, maker of everything. [...] She is both beloved and terrible. [...] She is the
whole world to him and he to her. [...] Garden of Eden. Paradise” (BMN, p. 239). If
his childhood is, in striking resemblance to Dinah’s in the later The Red Tent, “filled
with petticoats and soft arms” and “aunts [...] [that] lift him up; pass him from lap to
lap” (BMN, p. 239), the arrival of the Father, which breaks the blissful unity with the
mother, is experienced as a Fall from grace, as the Gaffer, who acquires knowledge of

99 Warner, From the Beast, p. 399.
100 Jeannette King, p. 43.
sexuality, is expelled from the maternal Eden and reaches a new understanding of the origins:

In the cool of the evening Mother abandons her son and walks in the garden with this stranger. What can he offer that Gaffer lacks? He must know. He eats the apple, peers round the bedroom door. The intruder has three legs. And he has a fiery sword which he flourishes in Gaffer’s face. [...] Banned the lap. [...] Shut out from mother’s country, of which this person called Father is king. [...] In the beginning there is Father. Omnipotent, maker of everything. Terrible, and wise. Far away, untouchable. (BMN, pp. 239-240)

The initial rivalry with the paternal authority, which the Gaffer expresses by dressing up as Charlie Chaplin and asking his mother to sleep with him, quickly gives way to the identification with the Father – and the Judeo-Christian distrust of sexuality and the female body – when the son interprets the Mother’s rejection of his advances as abandonment:

Rescued. Father. You can be like me. My power is greater than that of the female. [...] I will give you a second chance. Have I not formed you in my image? I will cleanse you of the stain of the woman. [...] Forget your knowledge of the woman, for sex means corruption and decay. I will give you eternal life. (BMN, p. 241)

Fully integrating the paternal doctrine of male superiority and special election – he is “the chosen one [led] across the desert, away from mother” (BMN, pp. 239-240) –, the Gaffer considers symbolically killing the Father and transmitting to his own progeny the Judeo-Christian Creation narrative that is therefore, like in The Wild Girl, relegated to the status of lie passed on from father to son to ensure the supremacy of the Father:

He could marry one, get his mother back. Weigh her down with babies so that she can’t leave him, can’t leave the house. [...] Be in control of the woman; keep her in her place. Always ready for him, permanently available. Crucify the image of the Father and get his mother back. On his terms this time. Become the Father himself. Into the Kingdom. Heterosexual male. Saved. He could father a son on his wife. When the child asks: who made me? where did I come from? what is sex? what is death? the new Father can hand on the Christian story. (BMN, p. 241)

At the end of his reverie, as he remembers with nostalgia when, in his mother’s arms, he did “not have to prove his strength” (BMN, p. 242), the Gaffer discerns that he has repressed the feeling of loss caused by the inevitable separation from the maternal body and his primary desire for the mother: “She’s the one he’s lost. He bears the mark of her absence. The space of loss inside him has her shape. [...] Parting from her is necessary. It is over. It is over” (BMN, p. 242). Aboard the Other Ark, the voice of God the Father therefore subversively comes to terms with, and acknowledges, his
origin in and through the mother, foreshadowing in this way Mrs Noah’s recognition of the spectral silence of the lost mother in chapter 40.

2. “The Body, the Book”

In the refrain that follows the Gaffer’s musing, this issue of desire – hinted at in the riddle by the verb “come” – is carried on through Mrs Noah’s own meditation, as she recollects how, at library school, she learnt more about sexuality through books and how, after discovering orgasm with her lover, she decided that “the pleasures of sex are like those of reading” (BMN, p. 244) and writing. “The body, the book” (BMN, p. 244), both bring her “[a] sensation of blissful release” (BMN, p. 244), enabling her – to refer to the conundrum – to come, both to climax, and to terms. Reaching back to her present, she remarks that “[t]he Ark’s Arkive hums with desire […] making all the books jiggle up and down on the shelves and jump out of order” (BMN, p. 244). This unbridled passion sharply contrasts with the quotation from an argument with Noah that comes next, in which Mrs Noah, in the face of her husband’s fierce and constantly reaffirmed opposition to procreation, is starting to concede defeat: “I’m beginning to think, as a result of all you’ve said, that perhaps I shouldn’t have a baby. […] I’m destroying my desire. That’s what you want, isn’t it” (BMN, p. 244)? The consultation of the riddle book, however, actively relaunches the debate, with a “Can he come to terms with my coming to term?” (BMN, p. 244), through which Mrs Noah indirectly reasserts her will and questions its compatibility with her marriage.

3. A Leap into the Unknown

If Mrs Noah believes that her husband should work on his fear of parenthood, so does the heroine equally need to deal with her personal anxieties concerning her ability to create as an author. Her last port of call on the route gives her this opportunity. Strolling up this steep island that, unlike the other lands she has visited, is not plagued by dirt or stench, but, on the contrary, is brightened up by colourful houses and vegetation, the protagonist wishes to climb to the peak. As a chair lift takes her “flying” (BMN, p. 246) to the top, Mrs Noah is divided between her apprehension about, and exhilaration of, “tiptoe[ing] on nothingness” (BMN, p. 247). Her comment that “[i]lt’s the only way; to step out into the empty air and trust that I will not plummet down. My wings are quill pens, and bear me up” (BMN, p. 247) conveys
how much she conceives this experience as a metaphor for her resolve to take up writing.

When she reaches the highest point of the mountain, however, Mrs Noah finds herself alone with her doubts. She who, on her previous peregrinations, used to rely on external voices to interpret reality for her, must now count solely on her own capacities: “Up here there are no books, newspapers, pamphlets or posters to give me a clue, no rope of words to lasso the unknown and make it tolerable. Up here there’s nothing. No one. Except myself” (BMN, p. 247). This phase of introspection proves disturbing for the heroine – who compares it to “[t]hat 4 am feeling, when you wake suddenly with a parched mouth and thumping heart” and imagine that “a stranger’s fingers [are] delicately testing your front-door lock” (BMN, p. 247) –, for she is beset by what she perceives as her numerous deficiencies:


So that’s that. (BMN, p. 247)

In the image of the Correct Sibyl, who was almost driven to silence by the Seven Deadly Sins before she freed herself from her inhibitions in her imagined wardrobe and started to choose her own words, Mrs Noah needs to fill that void she feels in herself; she needs to explore, like all the sibyls have done before her, that room deep inside her where she is to find her own voice.

4. Coming to Terms with Termination

Further preparing the heroine for this coming to voice is her conversation with her companions around their last supper together, through which Mrs Noah, after ten years of unexpressed remorse and sadness, finally comes to terms with the abortion she had when she was still a student, by finding the words for it. This scene most explicitly demonstrates how the writers’ group has also progressively become a “listening group” in which the participants, to borrow Nelle Morton’s expression, “hear […] one another to speech,”101 that is, become a “great Listening Ear […] that hears without interruption down through our defenses, cliché-filled language,

pretensions, evasions, pervasive hurts, angers,” and thereby enable each other to articulate contents that are “welling up from within” and had never been spoken before. Mrs Noah’s confession that “[t]he guilt has lain deep in me, like a bone, and the sorrow. Now, at last, I can speak of it and take responsibility for what I’ve done. I am not a victim. I chose” (BMN, p. 249), triggers off a spate of revelations, as the five sibyls all confide that they have also had an abortion, and the Gaffer shares what can be interpreted as his own experience of termination:

That Boat I invented in the Old Testament, says the Gaffer: floated on dark waters. Underneath its hull were all the lost cities of the world. Now I wonder: how were they found, and tested, the elect? Did God grieve for the ones he killed? I didn’t think about that. I didn’t make him weep. (BMN, p. 249)

This demonstration of bonding across genders ironically reveals that the sibyls and Mrs Noah, who in chapter 13 so vehemently criticised the Gaffer for leaving a lot out of Genesis, have actually also, so to say, “discarded a chapter” (BMN, p. 70). Inspired by this conversation, the Correct Sibyl suggests that someone tell a story about a friendship between a man and a woman.

5. A Double Release

The last embedded story prolongs, and closes, the reflection on the association between desire in language and desire in the body, through the dystopian tale of an omniscient narrator, in which the feminist utopia of a culture organised around the veneration of the great mother is turned into a nightmarish authoritarian regime in the same vein as Atwood’s Gilead, where mother worship leads to men’s “regressive infantilism” and to the state-organised classification of each woman as either sexual object or womb. If the end of chapter 35 portrayed a Gaffer understanding that his separation from the maternal figure was necessary for his identity construction, in this narrative, by contrast, males are kept in the position of “child-m[e]n […] seeking […] to be restored to the security represented by the mother.” Accordingly, this society is governed by an invisible Prime Ministress called “Big Mummy” (BMN, p. 253). This honorary title, like that of “[c]unt […] denot[ing] Woman. Whole Woman. Real Woman” (BMN, p. 260), offers a most ironic contrast with the sanctioned statues

102 Morton, p. 55.
103 Morton, p. 55.
104 Jeannette King, p. 47.
105 Jeannette King, p. 47.
representing a blue-eyed, “girlish” woman with “barely perceptible breasts and hips” (BMN, p. 261), a sky-blue robe and “circle of stars and lilies clasped at the front by a silver crescent moon” (BMN, p. 261), and suggests a parody of the Christian – and, more specifically, Catholic – cult of Mary as the unblemished virgin mother of God. As for men, since they are deemed unable to practise self-control and contain their oedipal desire for the mother, they are legally required each week to perform “servicing” (BMN, p. 255) with the “tarts” (BMN, p. 256) “channelling […] male aggression” (BMN, p. 255) in the state brothels, and are rewarded, like schoolboys, with red stars on their card.

The embedded tale focuses on two young male vagrants called Turtle and Dog, who, defying all laws and taboos, bring up Mouse, a baby girl found in a rubbish heap, for more than ten years, until they are caught by the authorities and separated from their protégée, who is integrated into the tarts. It relates how, when Turtle is first sent to the brothel for his puberty rite, he is, by chance, initiated by Mouse herself, who secretly arranges to meet him on the following night. Making a “warm, domestic” (BMN, p. 265) shelter of their drab, unwelcoming hideout in the cab of an old lorry, they reinvent physical passion together. By challenging the authorised definition of sexuality as a heavily regulated and sterilised duty, they also find the strength to free themselves from the linguistic censorship imposed by the government, and come to their own voice, their own terms:

[T]hey move over and against each other. […] Coming is just a continuation of this slow dance. […] Mouse feels enormous, full. […] – Let’s rewrite the bloody State Dictionary, […] Let’s make our own meanings. She can talk now. So much to say, to tell. […] She lies wrapped up with him, while they play with words. Loud laughter as the poems spill out of them. […] They name each other, and each other’s bodies, slapping each other with new names. (BMN, pp. 265-266)

The tale, however, concludes on a pessimistic note, for Mouse and Turtle are surprised by the police – and most probably executed – as “the hunting cry of the sirens” (BMN, p. 266) wails loudly in the night, dramatically accentuating the young lovers’ radical silencing.

With this chapter ends the sixth and ultimate five-phased, polyphonic pondering on words associated with motherhood. Mrs Noah’s six shipmates having all found their way out of their writer’s block and shared a literary creation of theirs with their companions, it is now the heroine’s turn, as the Deftly Sibyl remarks in words that implicitly re-situate The Book of Mrs Noah as a rewriting of the biblical Flood
The third and last point of this analysis will therefore focus on what can be considered as the climax of the novel, when, going down to the hold of the Ark – the symbolic locus of repressed contents in Mrs Noah’s psyche – the protagonist eventually finds her voice through acknowledging the spectral silence of the lost mother – the second fundamental form of silence in *The Book of Mrs Noah* – as the very source of her creativity.

III. “Cutting the Cord, She Gives Me Speech”: Climbing Down Deep Inside, to Spectral Silence

The hold of the Ark is the one room that Mrs Noah has always refused to enter. She designed it as a “large cellar-like place, to take all the rubbish,” then immediately locked it and tried to “forg[e]t about it” (*BMN*, p. 267). The place, however, has regularly kept haunting the heroine at night, through the “muffled roars, screeches, [and] bellowing” (*BMN*, p. 57) of what she imagines to be a crowd of violent, bestial “hysterics” threatening to “burst out in mutiny and commandeer” (*BMN*, p. 267) her ship. It takes all the powers of persuasion of Mrs Noah’s companions, who have been visiting this room frequently without her, to get the heroine to walk down the – appropriately slippery – steps leading to the hold and open the massive door behind which she is expecting to find her “mess, […] brought with [her] […] onto the Ark without knowing it” (*BMN*, p. 268), in the form of a “cave alive with spiders and cockroaches; the coal cellar where the bogeyman lurks” (*BMN*, pp. 268-269). Instead of a vision of pure horror fit for a gothic novel, the protagonist’s visit of the lowest part of her boat proves to be a descent to a half-carnivalesque, half-grotesque

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underworld bustling with the repressed of Mrs Noah’s personal story, but also of literary and world history.

A. Partying with the Quintessential Silenced

In accordance with Bakhtine’s definition of carnival as a subversive world of topsyturvy connected with a general movement to the bottom and the abolishing of hierarchies,107 the “bowels” (BMN, p. 57) of Mrs Noah’s Ark are “ribbed like an upturned church” (BMN, p. 267), which reaffirms the sapping of Christian and, by extension, any patriarchal authority. They moreover house a party that assembles typically carnivalesque scenes like the performance of disco dancers in “garish silks” (BMN, p. 269) – joined by the Gaffer, “shirt unbuttoned to the waist” (BMN, p. 269) –, the circus act of “a fat Tarzan in spotted nylon G-string” (BMN, p. 270) suspended from the mouth of an elephant, a mock duel between Sappho and an Aphra Behn armed with brandysnaps, or the quiet tea party of Mrs Noah’s grandmothers by an oil stove.

The renewed presence of the heroine’s ancestors, besides indicating that Mrs Noah has come full circle, introduces into this climactic chapter the issue of the significance of a female genealogy for women, for the benevolent “Nana” (BMN, p. 269) – who gave Mrs Noah her blessing at the beginning of the novel – tells her granddaughter that she is the one who took care to tidy up and dust the neglected hold with her own “spit-and-polish memory” (BMN, p. 269), emphasising thereby, in comic fashion, the power of remembrance and the value of a matrilineal tradition. Ironically, immediately after leaving her grandmothers, Mrs Noah is brought face to face with her own past rejection and termination of this female line, for she comes across the daughter she aborted. This grotesque embodiment of the erased non-elect, with her dirty face, soiled jumper and nappy, “winds [Mrs Noah’s] […] forehead in barbed wire” (BMN, p. 270) with her whining, pressing the protagonist to

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symbolically assume the responsibility for this refused maternity by taking the baby girl in her arms until she calms down.

If ten years earlier, when faced with her unwanted pregnancy, Mrs Noah felt that she could not combine motherhood with her studies and therefore had no other choice but to abort, now, by contrast, she is able to assert that she does not want to have to choose when, as her toddler walks away, the hold confronts her with the quintessential allegorical representation of women’s restricted freedom of action in patriarchy: the motif of the red shoes – already identified in connection with *The Handmaid’s Tale* in the first part of this thesis. Mrs Noah suddenly realises that she is wearing pink satin ballet shoes filled with blood and that, like the young girl in Andersen’s tale *The Red Shoes*, she cannot stop dancing. Unlike Andersen’s heroine, who begs an executioner to cut off her feet to end her torment, Mrs Noah declines the amputation suggested by a Snow White holding a hacksaw and proudly pointing to the pile of mutilated bodies behind her. By “limp[ing] [...] smartish” (*BMN*, p. 271) away from this particularly grotesque mixture of sadism and fairy-tale female submissiveness who, in a veiled reference to the notorious Nazi slogan “Arbeit macht frei,” claims that “[i]t’s important to occupy oneself, you know, until one’s Prince shall come. Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, they all let me down” (*BMN*, p. 271), Mrs Noah refuses “to be literally or figuratively crippled by the debilitating alternatives” of “passive angel” and “active monster.” She also escapes from Snow White’s fatalistic view that “Europe’s dying. [...] All that lovely art and culture. No one will know what it was like. [...] We’re washed out, all of us” (*BMN*, p. 271), which is dramatically supported by the “ashes of six million Jews” (*BMN*, p. 271) covering the ground under Mrs Noah’s feet.

Moving from one archetype of the silenced to another, Roberts’s protagonist then joins the tea party that assembles “all the sibyls of the past” (*BMN*, p. 271). Her immediate painful realisation that she is unable to identify many of these women because she “ha[s] not been allowed to know” (*BMN*, p. 271) them, mirrors the experience of critics like Gilbert and Gubar, who, when they set to explore women writing in the nineteenth century, discovered “not only a major (and neglected) female literature but [also] a whole (neglected) female history.”

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108 Gilbert and Gubar, p. 57.
109 Gilbert and Gubar, p. xii.
anonymous, the few who have managed to make a name for themselves – such as Charlotte Brontë or Virginia Woolf –, and those often slightly obscure poets, playwrights and novelists who have been relegated to the shadow of the male authors on which they had an influence, and whose fame they will never be allowed to rival, like Jane Barker and Eliza Heywood, who exclaim that one cannot “understand the origins of the English novel” if one “[f]orget[s] the fact that Richardson read” (BMN, p. 272) them, or H.D., who points out that “[i]magism had mothers as well as fathers. […] Ezra Pound, er, defrocked me” (BMN, p. 272). In a highly subversive way, the Gaffer himself is depicted not simply to recognise the institutionalised dumb silencing of female authors in literary history, but also to utter the most forceful attack on the authority of the predominantly male literary establishment: “History doesn’t make sense without you, he cries: too many so-called definitive anthologies, compiled by men of course, leave you out. The idea of the canon is a con. The great tradition is a fake” (BMN, pp. 272-273).

The hold of Mrs Noah’s Ark offers a symbolic corrective to this discrimination, for as Roberts’s protagonist remarks, it provides a “table [that] is big enough for us all: […] no one left out” (BMN, p. 271), in the image of Judy Chicago’s “Dinner Party.”110 This piece of art, first exhibited in 1979, represents a triangular table with thirty-nine place settings for famous mythical or historical females – like Christine of Pisan, Hildegard of Bingen, or Emily Dickinson, who also take part in Mrs Noah’s tea party – together with a tiled floor inscribed with the names of nine hundred and ninety-nine other important women – including most of Mrs Noah’s guests, such as Catherine of Siena, Colette, George Eliot, Marie de Sévigné, or Simone de Beauvoir, to cite but a few. In the wake of Chicago’s artwork, the feast in The Book of Mrs Noah can be interpreted as a tribute to, and joyful celebration of, the female heritage. As Irigaray formulates it, “[n]’oublions pas […] que nous avons déjà une histoire, que certaines femmes, même si c’était difficile culturellement, ont marqué l’histoire.”111

B. Speaking with(out) the Lost Mother

The hold, by bringing together Mrs Noah’s literary foremothers and her actual blood lineage – in the persons of her grandmothers and aborted daughter –, challenges any vestige of a sense of categories in the heroine who, dying to her old self as a librarian, is ready to be born to her new identity as an author: “I’m confused. […] Parents or writers? I can’t sort them out. I can’t tell one category from another. My library skills fail me. I need new words” \textit{(BMN}, p. 273). She who has “[a]ll this time […] been wandering around the earth, going out, out, to look for a solution” \textit{(BMN}, p. 273), who has kept leaving the Ark to visit unknown islands and relying on “newspapers, pamphlets or posters to give [her] […] a clue” \textit{(BMN}, p. 247), now realises that the answer has always been inside her: “Now at last I’ve found what I’ve been needing. Here. Not Outsiders but Insiders. This is the house of language. The house of words. […] The room of my own is inside me” \textit{(BMN}, pp. 273-274). This fresh awareness that the deepest part of the Ark, which the heroine has been terrified of and has avoided throughout her journey, actually contains the key to her quest, closely parallels Cixous’s metaphorical definition of women’s experience of writing:


Having opened the many doors and windows of her Advent calendar-like subjectivity, and explored, on her own, or with the help of her six travelling companions, her “own marshes” – Noah’s refusal to have a baby, her secret guilt and anxieties connected with (pro)creativity, the stereotypical representations imposed on women by society – Mrs Noah reaches the very \textit{locus} of the repressed female genealogy and discovers that it is precisely this female genealogy – through the highly symbolic figure of the mother – that constitutes the primal source of her identity and creativity:
Here, inside the Ark, the body of the mother, I find words. [...]
Home is the body. [...]
Creation starts here, in the Ark. Love actively shapes the work. My mother nourishes me with words, words of such power and richness that I grow, dance, leap. (BMN, pp. 273-274)

Challenging what Irigaray denounces as women’s exclusion from any form of creation connected with language – “[l]a création de langage […] par le maternel a été barrée à l’origine de notre culture”113 – and its corollary, the radical dissociation of creativity and procreativity in our Western world, this passage of The Book of Mrs Noah depicts the original unity with the mother in the womb not as a preverbal bond – as in traditional psychoanalytical theories, according to which “there can be no language until the mother/child dyad is broken”114 – but, on the contrary, as a linguistically nourishing symbiosis. She reunites in this way the maternal and the verbal spheres, the body and the word. Moreover, in a powerful echo of Irigaray’s claim – also illustrated in The Red Tent, as the analysis in chapter 1 has already shown – that “[l]es filles […] parlent […] avec (parfois dans) un silence et avec l’autre – mère en tout cas. […] Cet avec elle […] doit tendre à mettre la parole entre, non à rester dans une fusion indissociable […] [.] doit chercher à devenir un avec soi,”115 Roberts’s protagonist reaches the understanding that

the purpose of the Ark is that I leave it. The purpose of the womb is that I be born from it. So that when I’m forced to go from her, when I lose her, I can call out after her, cry out her name. I become myself, which means not-her; with blood and tears I become not-the-mother. (BMN, p. 274)

These pivotal words clearly foreground what I call “spectral silence.” By “spectral,” I do not mean to designate the return of the living dead of horror stories, in which the bodies of deceased people leave their graves to torment the living. Nor does the term primarily refer to the intertextual nature, highlighted by Kristeva, Genette or Barthes,116 of all literature – that is, the more or less easily identifiable presence, in any literary text, of other texts –, although Mrs Noah’s renewed awareness of the mother must also be understood in a broader sense as a re-union with her female

113 Luce Irigaray, “Le sujet de la science est-il sexué?,” in Irigaray, Parler, p. 320.
114 Cameron, p. 121.
literary heritage, as the carnivalesque tea party indicates. In this thesis, spectral silence rather describes the haunting presence of an absence in the protagonist’s life, and its momentous influence on her process of self-definition. As my case studies will make clear, the term “absence” covers both literal and symbolic meanings, for it can relate to the heroine’s missing or dead mother, lover, child or alter ego – as in The Handmaid’s Tale\textsuperscript{117} and Only Human – but also, as in the present analysis and, again, Only Human,\textsuperscript{118} to the psychoanalytical concept of the “lost mother,” rooted in the Lacanian theory famously reworked by Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva, and perspicuously summed up by Toril Moi as follows:

The Oedipal crisis […] is […] linked to the acquisition of language. In the Oedipal crisis the father splits up the dyadic unity between mother and child and forbids the child further access to the mother and the mother’s body. The phallus, representing the Law of the Father (or the threat of castration), thus comes to signify separation and loss to the child. The loss or lack suffered is the loss of the maternal body, and from now on the desire for the mother or the imaginary unity with her must be repressed. […] The speaking subject only comes into existence because of the repression of the desire for the lost mother.\textsuperscript{119}

In the climactic scene of the hold, the crucial role of the spectral silence of the lost mother is graphically revealed to Mrs Noah, after having haunted Mrs Noah’s nights and having repeatedly been hinted at in the text through, for instance, the Correct Sibyl’s claim that she cannot “invent she without exploring what she touches or yearns to touch, the not-she, the mother who goes away” (BMN, p. 191), or the Gaffer’s “She’s the one he’s lost. […] The space of loss inside him has her shape” (BMN, p. 242).

Subversively calling into question Lacan’s attribution of the child’s entrance into language to the father and “the introjection of the phallus,”\textsuperscript{120} The Book of Mrs Noah – in the image of Irigaray’s “Le corps-à-corps avec la mère”\textsuperscript{121} – re-establishes

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\textsuperscript{117} As the analysis of The Handmaid’s Tale will show, Atwood’s heroine is simultaneously haunted by these four absences.

\textsuperscript{118} If in Only Human, as I will point out in the next chapter, the psychoanalytical meaning given to the mother’s absence is clearly associated with the actual death of Sarai’s female parent in childbirth, in The Book of Mrs Noah, by contrast, the readers are not told whether the protagonist’s mother is actually living or dead; she is moreover never given concrete physical existence through speech or a description of her appearance, and only emerges in the highly metaphorical climax, which gives to this figure a mostly symbolic signification.


\textsuperscript{120} Cameron, p. 121.

\textsuperscript{121} In this text, the feminist psychoanalyst and linguist writes: “Le phallus s’érige là où était le cordon ombilical? Il devient organisateur du monde par l’homme-père là où le cordon ombilical, lien premier à la mère, a donné naissance au corps de l’homme et de la femme” (Irigaray, “Le corps-à-corps,” in Irigaray, Sexes et parentés, p. 26).
the umbilical cord as the arch-symbol and primary meaningful link whose severing by
the mother herself bestows on the daughter her own voice:

She points to the rainbow, umbilical cord connecting us. [...] The symbol of the symbol,
denoting the separation between worlds, the one I know and the one I have lost; also their
connection.
Cutting the cord, she gives me speech. (BMN, p. 274)

This passage, which echoes in its theme and its imagery the embedded story of Jack’s
wife, disputes the mainstream psychoanalytical representation of the mother as a
necessarily “constraining [...] force in the girl’s development”122 and the Freudian
interpretation of the break with the maternal figure as automatically “angry and
hostile,”123 suggesting instead a vision of liberating motherly abnegation motivated by
infinite, non-confining love.

Moreover, in Roberts’s revisionary picture of the Oedipal crisis, the female
speaking subject – that is, the artist, but also the new woman and would-be mother
who are no longer silenced by patriarchal stereotypes – does not come into existence
through the repression of the desire for the lost maternal body enforced by the law of
the father and decried at length by Irigaray: “Le rapport à la mère [...] reste dans
l’ombre de notre culture. [...] Le désir d’elle, son désir à elle, voilà ce que doit venir
interdire la loi du père, de tous les pères.”124 On the contrary, it is by investigating this
desire for the lost mother that Mrs Noah finds creativity in her:

Words of longing for that world I’ve lost, words of desire to explore this absence-of-her. I
must go further into absence, and find more words.

Such a statement can be seen as an answer to Irigaray’s plea – first published in 1981
in Le Corps-à-corps avec la mère and reprinted in 1987 in Sexes et parentés – for the
creation of a relationship of “desiring speech”125 between mothers and daughters and
of a language to express the bond with the female (maternal) body:

Il s’agit de lui redonner la vie, à cette mère, à notre mère en nous et entre nous. Il faut que
nous refusions que son désir soit anéanti par la loi du père. [...] Nous avons aussi à trouver, retrouver, inventer les mots, les phrases, qui disent le rapport le
plus archaïque et le plus actuel au corps de la mère, à notre corps. [...] Nous avons à découvrir

122 Marianne Hirsch, The Mother/Daughter Plot. Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism
124 Irigaray, “Le corps-à-corps,” in Irigaray, Sexes et parentés, pp. 22-23. See also Luce Irigaray,
“Misère de la psychanalys,” in Irigaray, Parler, p. 270.
125 Luce Irigaray, “Women-Mothers, the Silent Substratum of the Social Order,” in Margaret Whitford
un langage qui ne se substitue pas au corps-à-corps, ainsi que tente de le faire la langue paternelle mais qui l’accompagne.126

While for the orthodox Judeo-Christian tradition, Roberts’s heroine “ha[s] no name: I am Noah’s wife,” her own re-visions of the Ark, by contrast, “has set [her] […] free” (BMN, p. 274). Having liberated her desire – or, as she says, “made [her] […] want” (BMN, p. 274) – it has enabled her, in the image of her alter egos – the Virgin on the painting in the Italian church, and Jack’s wife – to transcend dichotomous representations and “become the virgin-whore who is both the mother and the wanderer” (BMN, p. 274). Most importantly, the Ark has brought Mrs Noah to acknowledge that the origin and strength of her identity and creative power lie in the spectral silence of the lost mother; that, in other words, a woman’s voice is always a voice that speaks without – which means, paradoxically, with – the mother.127

Confirming her original intuition in the opening chapter that “[l]oss is more than absence: it is the fire” (BMN, p. 8), the heroine indeed concludes her epiphany with the revealing comment: “Writer. Mother. Two words I have linked through this voyage on the Ark, this arc of stories, a distance of so many nights, such longing. This long twist of words spun out of loss” (BMN, p. 275).

As the “word that’s been missing for so long,” Mrs Noah must now add her tale to the “rope” that “[t]he sibyls and the Gaffer have plaited […] between them” (BMN, p. 274). Symbolising the protagonist’s insertion into this great intertwining of narratives and blurred voices, the cruise ends on an image of post-orgiastic confusion that again reaffirms the link between creation and the body: “Blearily I count. Fourteen arms. Fourteen legs. […] Looking up, I stare at the Gaffer, then back down at the five sibyls entwined in sleep, each other, and us. What a muddle. I start to laugh. […] The Gaffer […] blushes” (BMN, p. 275). If at the beginning of her voyage, Mrs Noah felt disheartened by the “taking up of positions as in a war” (BMN, p. 57) within her writers’ group, she now seems to have achieved a reconciliation of her different facets, a new understanding of herself that integrates her personal conflicts into a complex, and necessarily sometimes uneasy, whole. When she is back on firm

127 A similar message can already be discerned in Roberts’s The Wild Girl, through the emphasis placed on the necessity for Mary Magdalene both to come to terms with the lack created by her mother’s premature death and, most crucially, to reconnect with the forgotten great goddess, “the lost Mother” (WG, p. 115), to be able to reach resurrection and find her primeval wholeness. In both novels, spectral silences linked with the mother – whether in biological, symbolic or divine terms – largely contribute to the novels’ programmatic revaluation of the feminine.
ground in Venice after the necessary separation from her six companions and floating shelter, Mrs Noah completes this rather idyllic picture of regenerating, creative change and growth operated through the “nice warm womb” (BMN, p. 57) of the Ark by stating that she is pregnant. With this statement, she indicates that she feels she has indeed eventually found the child – that is, (pro)creativity – behind the last door of her Advent calendar.

Mrs Noah’s wish fulfilment, however, belongs but to the realm of dreams. As the heroine is suddenly overcome by dizziness announcing her return to consciousness in chapter 43, her thoughts drift back to the concerns that originally led her to embark on her Ark: Noah’s silencing of her longing for a child, and the subsequent incompatibility that she sees between her deep-seated creative aspirations and her marriage. Having been utterly transformed by her experience, she believes that she “can’t return to that old world [she] […] shared with him” and wonders whether Noah will “be here in this new one” (BMN, p. 277). Since dreams, as Jean-François Lyotard points out, tend to satisfy aspirations forbidden to the dreamer in real life, the third part of this thesis will examine to what extent Roberts’s protagonist actually manages to make her new voice heard outside of her oneiric domain, where recalcitrant husbands cannot be simply “wiped out” (BMN, p. 7), nor benevolent long-deceased ancestors be conjured up for help by mere willpower.

After Michèle Roberts’s dream voyage into female creativity, the second case study of this section will be devoted to Jenny Diski’s Only Human. While still revolving around a blurring of voices and spectral silences, it will dissect a completely different universe, pervaded by deeply tragic echoes, and hinging on two entwined confrontations: a relentless story game between Yahweh and the unidentified human narrator focusing on Sarai, and the (love) story game – or, rather, fierce, ruthless war – between Abram’s God and the protagonist.

Chapter 4
Until “All Experience Is Fear of Loss”:
The Story Game of Competing Voices and Rival Desires

I. Human Endings and Beginnings, Divine Interruptions: Voice Blurring in a War of the Wor(l)ds

A. At the Start, There Is an End

“And at the end she is lachrymose. She lies propped up with cushions on a thin mattress, […] open-eyed, seeing nothing, waiting, it seems” (OH, p. 1). These lines opening the first chapter of Only Human, entitled “Endings,” instantly set the subversive tone of Jenny Diski’s rewriting of Genesis by foregrounding, not the triumphant beginning of the world through God’s creative Word, but the mournful, purely human end of an old woman, i.e. the matriarch Sarah. In an explicit challenge to the Judeo-Christian telos structuring both Western history and traditional storytelling as a linear paradigm from beginning to end, from Creation to the Last Judgement, Only Human starts with an end devoid of any form of revelation, the ancient woman “seeing nothing” (OH, p. 1) and “convey[ing] more than anything […] bafflement” with her “tears that come of their own accord, like breath, interrupting speech, thought, and regret” (OH, p. 2).

Not content with questioning the general macrostructure of the Scriptures, the *incipit* of Diski’s novel parodies biblical microstructures, through a syntax that ironically mirrors Genesis 1:1, which in most English translations starts with the key adverbial phrase “In the beginning,” and the distinctive abundant use of the coordinating conjunction “and” to open a sentence or clause, as in Genesis 1:4-7 – “And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. [...] And there was evening and there was morning. [...] And God said, ‘Let there be a dome.’ [...] And it was so” – or, more significantly still, in the precise verse that reports Sarah’s death: “And Sarah died at Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her” (Genesis 23:2).

**B. An Unidentified Narrative Voice for a Silenced Heroine**

Rearranging the Word of God, *Only Human* also revises its silences, for if in the Bible, the circumstances of the end of Abraham’s wife are never revealed, in Diski’s rewriting, by contrast, they provide the starting point of a novel that, right from the beginning, grants the female biblical figure the leading role. The initial chapter depicts an ancient Sarai surrounded by a group of visitors and waiting for death in her tent. The first page and a half focus exclusively on the matriarch, who is, strikingly, never explicitly named, but only referred to as “she.” They describe in minute detail her tired body – the “pouches drooping under her eyes, at her jaw, neck, her slack breasts, hanging belly, limp thighs” (*OH*, p. 1), the “[e]yes sunken, verging towards colourlessness, rims margined red without lashes” (*OH*, p. 1) – that reflects the heroine’s complete giving up of her willpower and zest for life. This image stands in sharp contrast to the barren woman’s widespread traditional association with the joyous fulfilment of God’s promise and with faith in the face of adversity – not simply through her husband, who is famously praised for “[h]oping against hope” (Romans 4:18), but also personally, as in Hebrews 11:11: “By faith Sarah herself, though barren, received power to conceive, even when she was too old, because she considered him faithful who had promised.”

Only in the second half of page two do the readers discover that the narrative voice behind this portrait actually also takes part in the scene, as a member of the company sitting around the dying elderly woman. Even then, the homodiegetic

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narrator clearly stays in the background to better foreground the book’s heroine. Using the first person plural, it completely merges into the indistinct collective identity of the “concerned visitors” (OH, p. 2) united by their awe for the matriarch and their eagerness to hear the wisdom that she must have drawn from her long life:

We are there to sit with her in her final hours, and to honour her […] for her achievements. She is a great, the very greatest of old ladies. […] We are hungry for her conclusions. […] We do not want her to die without telling what at last she knows, without passing on what she has understood from it all.

One of us leans forward with the question that must be asked. “When you look back […] over your life […] what stands out for you as the central thread?” (OH, pp. 2-3)

This celebration of female memory and its handing down from generation to generation, which is strikingly reminiscent of Diamant’s The Red Tent, is however promptly stopped short by the ancestor herself, who only offers her audience a pathetic “I wish I were dead” (OH, p. 3) completed by a renewed flood of tears. When the assembly responds to this baffling statement with an embarrassed retreat, the narrative voice, in a subtle stylistic shift from the “we” to the “I” paralleling its spatial move to come nearer the matriarch, eventually differentiates itself from the group in the last third of page three, marking thereby its individuality for the first time:

Our foolish question hangs frozen in front of us. Slowly, they begin to rise singly and in pairs, […] trying not to show their eagerness to leave. […] I squat down beside her. “I’m sorry,” I say uselessly, and touch my palm against her skeletal shoulder.² (OH, p. 3)

These few lines, however, essentially contain all the information that the readers are given about the narrative instance, for, even as it relates its tête-à-tête with the expiring matriarch, the narrator remains unidentified; its name, age, and even gender are never revealed. Although the eagerness it shows towards the old lady’s testimony, its affectionate presence by, and physical closeness to her, might indicate that it is a woman, this surmise is nowhere either confirmed, or invalidated – which is why, to refer to this narrative voice, I have chosen the neuter pronoun of the third person singular, which better maintains and foregrounds that silence. The pervasive mystery surrounding the identity of the narrative voice in this introductory chapter therefore creates a first instance of voice blurring that can be seen to announce the main occurrence – from chapter two onwards – of this specific type of silence, which, as the analysis will show, structures the novel as a whole, and which is rooted in Sarai’s inconclusive confidence to the anonymous narrator at the end of chapter one:

² My emphasis.
“‘It was all endings. Always. Endings, starting and ending, but no conclusion. […] Nothing else…’” (OH, p. 4). With this rather enigmatic utterance, the old female verbalises how devoid of meaning life looks to her, before sinking back to her silent lethargy and shut-in-ness.

The introductory “Endings” of Only Human therefore seems to suggest that Sarai has been rendered unable to give any sense of direction and purpose to her existence, that is, to articulate her experience and memories into a narrative, and has thereby been silenced in a radical, traumatic way. Having lost her capacity to tell her story, she has at the same time lost her voice, her self. Such a conception of storytelling as the distinctive feature of humanity permeates Diski’s novel, and is strongly redolent of the thesis developed by the Canadian writer Nancy Huston in her essay entitled L’espèce fabulatrice. According to Huston, human consciousness is formed by fictions and is, as such, “intrinsèquement fabulatrice. Nous sommes l’espèce fabulatrice.” Consequently, “[quand le moi romancier défaill[e], n’arrive plus à conduire efficacement […] son travail de construction, d’ordonnance, d’invention, d’exclusion, d’interprétation, d’explication, etc., ‘la réalité’ devient du n’importe quoi.” If the novel is to proceed after the first chapter, and if the cause of the heroine’s physical and mental collapse is to be explained, another voice has to substitute for the silenced matriarch and tell her story, to identify and follow “the central thread” (OH, p. 3) in her life, which the anonymous witness-narrator and its peers have failed to unearth through their meeting with Abram’s dying wife.

C. Blurred Rival Versions of the Beginning(s)

Without transition, Only Human transports its readers from the “Endings” of chapter one to the “Beginnings” of chapter two, from the dismal termination of an existence to an alternative version of Genesis that, while again parodying the language of the Bible, elevates love as the primary feeling – in the image of Roberts’s creation myth in The Wild Girl, and in a proleptic sign of the major role that this emotion will play in the remainder of Diski’s novel. “Beginnings” moreover establishes human life itself at the centre and origin, ruling out any form of verbal creation ex nihilo, or even any mention of a divine intervention:

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4 Huston, p. 27.
In the beginning there was love. No. Love comes early, but not quite at the beginning. In the beginning, and in each of our beginnings, there was the precursor to all else: interruption. This is how love starts. But, for a few fleeting moments, life was free simply to be. […] In the beginning, before the interruption, there was life itself. (OH, p. 5)

Like in the incipit, the silence of voice blurring is immediately graspable, for the narrator remains unidentified, and the readers are given no indication as to whether this instance is related to the first or not. This anonymity of the narrating voice goes together with another form of voice blurring, i.e. constant changes in narrative voice. Indeed, after a subversive self-congratulatory “And it was good” (OH, p. 5) followed by a long dash and a topographical blank, the very perplexing depiction of humanity’s beginnings suddenly gives way, in yet a new unexpected narrative shift, to another account of the origins that fully contradicts what has just been said:

Damn impertinence! Who dares to speak of the beginning?
Before the beginning, when they were nothing, when nothing was, […] before he, she and us, […] I was. […] And I, in that nothing, of that nothing, a blankness, hovered and haunted the swell of vacuity. […] Before the narrator, before the narrative, […] – I was. […] And what had been for an eternity, might have remained for an eternity of eternity. And nothing had its say. And it was good.
Yet I made the beginning, in the very beginning. That beginning. I separated and categorised, I called forth kinds, kind after kind. […] And still it was good ———— (OH, pp. 5-6)

With this outraged cry from the heart that interrupts the human tale – as the dashes can now be understood to indicate – God makes his entrance into the narrative. Right from the start, Diski’s deity unequivocally shows himself to be a testy, authoritarian, and monological godhead that disparages the dialogic confrontation of views and is wistful about the time before the creation, when his supremacy and his vision of reality could not be challenged. As the literary scholar T.R. Wright points out,

[i]n making God employ the language of Genesis chapter 1, spoken after the creation, to refer nostalgically to a time before He was disturbed by his creatures, Diski clearly signals her subversive intent, giving notice that her God-the-Narrator will diverge significantly from more orthodox characterisations of Him.5

Although the God of Only Human claims for himself the mainstream Judeo-Christian divine attributes of omnipotence and ordering of the world, forcefully reaffirming his conjuring up of the universe ex nihilo – which, according to Gounelle, constitutes the quintessential expression of divine unrestricted power6 –, the authority of his Word and his credibility are irremediably undermined, not only by the rival narrator, whose

5 Wright, The Genesis of Fiction, pp. 102-103.
tale erases his presence from human beginnings, but also by himself. In his attempt to persuade his addressees – i.e. the other narrative voice, humankind in general, but also, not least, himself – of his absolute primacy, he, who asserts that he “made order, so that the one could follow the other, and […] what came before […] sustain what came next” (OH, p. 6), ends up stating that he has precedence over none other than himself: “before I am that I am, before I will be what I will be – I was, and before I was, I was, when nothing was” (OH, pp. 5-6). This nonsensical declaration, which ironically echoes Jesus’ “‘[v]ery truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am’” in John 8:58, is a parodic reference that completely saps the sacred character of the Judeo-Christian God’s most mysterious and fascinating self-designation to Moses in Exodus 3:14 as “I am who I am” or “I am that I am,” a self-designation that has traditionally been interpreted as situating Yahweh as “the ego-agent par excellence, [as] sheer unrestricted agential power,”7 or, as Soskice formulates it, as “‘Being Itself.’”8

As these clumsy first words announce, Diski’s deity will prove to be a poor speaker whose attempts to attribute to himself any of the majesty traditionally ascribed to the divinity of the Scriptures systematically backfire. In the hands of Diski’s God, even solemn moments like blessings will only come down to – as he formulates it himself – “stuff and nonsense” or “hocus-pocus” (OH, p. 167), and his revelation to Abram of the title “El Shaddai” (OH, p. 191) – God Almighty –, to the rather pitiful confession that “I […] offer[ed] him a name so mysterious that even I didn’t know what it meant” (OH, p. 191). This impression of linguistic inaptitude is moreover reinforced by God’s remarkably informal register, characterised by exclamations like “What a canny I am I am” (OH, p. 111), “Ha! Ha, I say” (OH, p. 166), or “[t]he cheek of it” (OH, p. 42), and by the contrast with the human narrative voice that, far from being in the least overawed by its interrupter, defends its very different stance with awe-inspiring ease and often in a dignified, poetic “King James”-like style. Indeed, when, in its turn, it cuts short God-the-narrator to resume its tale, it makes a point of honour to ignore its rival with phlegm, just pointing out in passing that the other account is absolutely of no immediate interest in the present debate:

The beginning of the world (before the beginning, all our beginnings, is none of our concern. A matter of mere curiosity for later, much much later) – the beginning, I say,

8 Soskice, in Davies and Turner, p. 70.
of the world: an endless day in a garden filled with comfortable warm air riffling across bare skin. The scent of honeysuckle hangs for a second and then drifts past. Bees laden with pollen […] hum more and less loudly around her head, coming and going. But now a silhouette suddenly obscures the sun, looming over, blanked by shadow, and gathers her up into its arms. This is how the beginning of the world – all the languid protracted days of her infancy – was interrupted. […] That is how it was and is, and we go on to live in the world as we have to. Everyone does. Did and will. It is what all times have in common. It is the way of the world. (OH, pp. 6-7 and 10)

Beside its immediate parodic effect, this dialogic confrontation of two utterly incompatible standpoints is noteworthy for its unmistakable echo of the recognised Jewish predilection for debate – as Ostriker remarks, “a Jew is somebody who loves to argue, especially with God and other Jews”9 – remarkably illustrated in the Talmud and Midrashim, these “polyphonic choir[s] of hundreds of rabbis from the most varied times and places,”10 which juxtapose readings that can support and refine, but also challenge and refute one another “in timeless dialogue”11 and “unhierarchical” form, without the intervention of an editor “to tell us who is right or who is wrong.”12 In the passage quoted above, to God’s effort to reclaim as his the interruption at the origin of life – or, in other words, the beginning of the story – through both his intrusion into the tale and his cosmogonic account of how he put an end to nothingness to call forth creation, the human narrator opposes a reaffirmation of the plurality of human beginnings from a biological point of view. Its bewildering speech about love, honeysuckle, bees and shadows really starts to make sense when it is understood as describing the birth of a child, which suddenly interrupts carefree in utero life, depicted in Edenic terms, and the baby’s perception of the midwife – the “silhouette [that] suddenly obscures the sun, […] and gathers” the newborn “up into its arms” (OH, p. 7).

Beyond its manifest contrast in tone and circumstances, this passage bears striking similarities with the introductory chapter. As in “Endings,” the narrator uses first person plurals, thereby including itself into, and situating itself as the spokesperson of, the great human family. In the light of the open rivalry opposing both storytellers, the specific emphasis on “all our beginnings”13 (OH, p. 6) is far

11 Ettin, pp. 50-51.
12 Stahlberg, p. 114.
13 My emphasis.
from innocent, and can be understood as betraying the human narrator’s willingness to put God in a position of inferiority. By stressing its own belonging to a powerful collective identity, the unidentified narrative instance highlights, by contrast, God’s solitary singularity, that is, his loneliness and exclusion from humankind, which will precisely prove to be the crux of the deity’s malaise and the origin of his conflict with Sarai.

Moreover, after three sentences that seemingly describe human beings’ coming into the world from a universal standpoint, the tale suddenly shifts, almost inconspicuously, to a feminine third person singular – “her head,” “gathers her up,” “her infancy”\(^{14}\) (OH, p. 7) – that echoes the rather unconventional anonymous “she” used to refer to the heroine in the initial chapter. This intriguing mystery around the protagonist is only lifted on page thirteen, when “she” is eventually named as “Sarai” for the first time, and the novel’s focus on the matriarch thereby explicitly stated. In the same way as the embedded tales in The Book of Mrs Noah anonymously answer the requests for stories apparently left unaddressed at the end of the conversations between the shipmates, so, in Only Human, “Beginnings” implicitly explores the question to which Sarai could not give a satisfactory reply in “Endings.” This second chapter thus represents the first step in the long flashback that will relate the woman’s life from its genesis to its breaking point, a life that, as I will demonstrate, hinges on the spectral silence of the lost mother and its consequences.

These marked parallels in narration between the two human tales recounted incognito might help to partly elucidate the silence of voice blurring that hovers between chapters one and two, for they seem to suggest that the narrator witnessing Sarai’s last hours in the incipit might be the same as the narrator who, in the rest of the novel, fiercely opposes God in the story game. Only Human, however, resists – again like Roberts’s rewriting of the Flood – straightforward solutions, for significant differences appear to distinguish the two voices. If the instance in charge of the narration in “Endings” is also a character in the story it tells, God’s opponent, by contrast, does not belong to the fictional world although, as an overt heterodiegetic narrator, it repeatedly draws attention to its presence and its function as the great organiser of Sarai’s tale through metanarrative reflections on storytelling, truth claims and addresses to the narratees emphasizing the distance between the past of Sarai’s

\[^{14}\] My emphasis.
story and the present of the narrative,\textsuperscript{15} or, still, parenthetical references refuting or diminishing God’s declarations.\textsuperscript{16} Such remarks point to the omniscience with which this voice is endowed. It is indeed informed of all the events taking place before, during and after Sarai’s time, but also knows of the characters’ feelings and thoughts better than the characters themselves, even if it chooses to focus its attention almost exclusively on Sarai – who is the narrator-focaliser’s main focalised, and is regularly handed over focalisation.\textsuperscript{17}

The omniscience of God’s rival appears to contrast with the slightly naïve enthusiasm and hunger for knowledge shown by the group – which includes the narrator – sitting around Sarai on her deathbed in the opening chapter, and to question the theory of an identity between the two human narrative instances. A hypothesis that has the advantage of reconciling both the variations and the similarities between the enigmatic voices consists in arguing that the all-knowing entity, as it temporarily melts into an assembly of people fairly – or even considerably – younger than Sarai, willingly renounces its omniscience and its function as the shaper of the heroine’s story into sense and coherence to most convincingly convey her overwhelming sense of meaninglessness and lack of direction. This silence surrounding the possible connection between the unidentified homodiegetic and heterodiegetic voices in Only Human is, however, never dissipated; on the contrary, a final blurring even deepens it in the closing lines, as the narrative shifts back without transition to the opening scene and its witness-narrator: “And here she lies on her bed and waits, while we keep watch” (\textit{OH}, pp. 214-215).

Interestingly, omniscient narrators like the one featured in Diski’s novel have often been defined as godlike. Genette, for instance, writes that they are able, “comme Dieu lui-même de […] sonder les reins et les cœurs.”\textsuperscript{18} If the term has in the last

\textsuperscript{15} As in “[t]hat is how it was and is. […] It is what all times have in common” (\textit{OH}, p. 10) and “in those days, or in yours” (\textit{OH}, p. 22).

\textsuperscript{16} Such as “(before […] all our beginnings, is […] [a] matter of mere curiosity for later, much much later)” (\textit{OH}, p. 6), which also constitutes a veiled reference to the much more recent development of sciences like cosmology and the study of prehistory.

\textsuperscript{17} Sarai is, for instance, the internal focaliser in the following passage: “Something strange had come over their father. […] There was […] something about the whispering that made it a larger secret than the ones that usually concerned her. It […] was as if the very walls should be shut out of what the grown-ups were saying to each other” (\textit{OH}, pp. 19-20).

decade been much decried for its theological connection, in Only Human, it is more appropriate than ever and acquires a high degree of subversiveness, for not only is omniscience ascribed to the human narrator, but the divine narrator himself will also prove to be largely deprived of it. Diski’s God, beside being a bad orator, is also a hasty, blundering creator who haphazardly shapes humankind as “a mirror” (OH, p. 11) to answer the existential doubt with which he is suddenly beset when contemplating the animal and vegetable kingdoms: “I was, but what I was I couldn’t say. […] [W]ho had brought them into being? This question was brought into being also” (OH, p. 11). Looking back at how he created the first human and how, “thinking nothing of it” (OH, p. 11), he separated it into man and woman, the deity, who considers this initiative as his “great error” (OH, p. 10), confesses that “[w]hatever anyone might say, I did not know what the consequences would be. […] How could I have known” (OH, pp. 10-11)?

As J.W. Whedbee establishes in The Bible and the Comic Vision, the “haphazard potter-planter god in the garden, who […] seems to operate by trial and error,” is a facet of God that is present in the Bible. If the mainstream tradition – especially Christian – has “obscure[d] and largely exclude[d] a vital role for comedy […] in biblical literature,” and foregrounded “the calm, methodical […] creator of Genesis 1” – as Diski’s divine narrator himself seems to hint with his “[w]hatever anyone might say” (OH, pp. 10-11) – rabbinic readings of Genesis, on the other hand, have often interpreted God’s creation as an act that has neither been meditated upon, nor carried out according to a pre-established plan. It has, on the contrary, sprung up from a radical lack of preparation, and has kept throughout the nature of an improvisation, as the Talmudist Louis Ginzberg illustrates in one of Diski’s acknowledged sources, his famous synthesis of Jewish legends, where one can read

19 The term has been criticised, among others, by Jonathan Culler in his article entitled “Omniscience” (Narrative, Vol. 12, No. 1 [January 2004], pp. 22-34), and by Nicholas Royle, who claims that “[t]he use of the words ‘omniscient’ and ‘omniscience’ in the context of narrative fiction remains inextricably entangled in Christian motifs, assumptions and beliefs. To assume the efficacy and appropriateness of discussing literary works in terms of ‘omniscient narration’ is, however faintly or discreetly, to subscribe to a religious (and above all, a Christian) discourse and thinking” (in William Nelles, “Omniscience for Atheists: Or, Jane Austen’s Infallible Narrator,” Narrative, Vol. 14, No. 2 [May 2006], p. 128).


21 Whedbee, p. 2.

22 Whedbee, p. 32.

that God “made several worlds before ours, but He destroyed them all, because He was pleased with none until He created ours.”

This belief that, as Neher formulates it, God does not possess all the keys to his work, also constitutes one of the fundamentals of Process theology, which has developed from the works of the British mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) and the American philosopher Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000). According to this fringe Christian movement resting on the premise that everything is in flux – i.e. in process – and interrelated, God is tightly connected to the world; he depends on it “as we depend on God” and, consequently, “cannot envisage all the possibilities that will emerge from partnership with the creation.”

He can open up and suggest new possibilities to humanity, but does not have the power to impose his will. Describing this view of God as the greatest improviser, Gounelle uses the image of a navigator who manoeuvres a sailing ship and tacks, making best use of the winds and currents to reach his destination. Diski’s Only Human, however, goes much further than rabbinic exegesis or Process theology in its refutation of the Judeo-Christian Godhead’s limitless omniscience, for, as a deeply atheistic novel, it depicts a thoroughly unhelpful and clueless God that, to carry on with Gounelle’s metaphor, loses control of his boat as soon as he embarks on it, and is violently tossed about by his creation. Indeed, omniscient as he likes to proclaim himself, God is always “one step behind these humans” (OH, p. 43). It is this lack of prescience and of basic understanding of human consciousness that will precipitate God’s downfall – both figuratively and literally – in the appropriately named Only Human, but also, with it, Sarai’s destruction, as the constant great blur of discordant human and divine voices most dramatically comes to demonstrate in the course of the novel.

Mirroring on the level of the fabula the story game taking place on the level of discourse between Yahweh and the unidentified human narrator, is the fierce (love) story game between Abram’s God and Sarai, whose best weapon and, simultaneously,
worst weakness, precisely constitutes the second type of silence that pervades the novel, i.e. spectral silence. The remainder of this chapter will therefore concentrate on this other confrontation revolving around the birth of desire. It will demonstrate that, in a radical reversal of the authorized account of man and woman’s creation in God’s image, in Diski’s rewriting, it is God who, like a slow-witted child always “lagging behind” (*OH*, p. 166), learns from and evolves in the image of a particularly resourceful and imaginative humankind, of which Sarai is elevated as the epitome. The analysis will distinguish two main phases: in the first, God has not yet entered Sarai’s life, and, consequently, both the opposition between the two characters and the female’s position ahead of the deity remain largely implicit and indirect, for they mainly ensue from the subversive juxtaposition of the competing narratives of Sarai’s and God’s separate developments; in the second, by contrast, when “I am that I am” (*OH*, p. 25) bursts into the matriarch’s existence through her husband’s wish for transcendent certainties, the latent rivalry turns into an open, ruthless war between a Sarai firmly decided to hold on to the story she has built with Abram, and a divinity that, in his determination to win the patriarch’s love, does not realize that he unwittingly raises the woman to the status of envied, godlike model.

**II. In Her Image, He Craves Connection: On Sarai’s Early Encounter with Spectral Silence, and God’s Blindness to His Longings**

**A. Primeval Loss and the Beginning of Desire**

“It was all endings. Always. Endings, starting and ending” (*OH*, p. 4). Such is, as has been pointed out, the bleak wisdom of the dying Sarai in the opening chapter, but such is, also, the essence of the unidentified narrator’s depiction of the heroine’s birth. Inspired, in the image of the climax of *The Book of Mrs Noah*, by psychoanalytical theories of the young child’s development, and by the biblical story of Adam and Eve’s expulsion from Eden, it describes the baby’s coming into the world – that is, the fall from the blissful, untroubled existence in the maternal womb, into reality – as an irreversible original loss:

suddenly […] the beginning of the world […] was interrupted. […] [B]ut the memory would always stick, of the sweet sharp scent of the honeysuckle, the wafting air on her skin. […] [T]he garden became a lost world of the eternal present of the very beginning. The first loss. (*OH*, pp. 7-9)
This poetic echo of the Freudian claim that birth is the “first great anxiety-state [...] due to the separation from the protecting mother,”31 introduces the spectral silence of the lost mother into Only Human. After remarking that “[t]his is how it was and is” (OH, p. 10) for every human being, the narrator immediately announces the crucial role that this haunting absence will specifically play in the heroine’s process of self-definition, by hinting that she distinguishes herself through a heightened sensitivity to this “first great dislocation” at which “subsequent losses will glance back”32: “there are those of us who make more fuss about it than others. […] Starting out with a furrowed brow as if, even swaddled, some little creatures know it isn’t going to be easy, well before they know what the it they’re facing is” (OH, p. 10).

If the loss of the mother constitutes the first source of anxiety, it also allows the birth of the self as desiring subject, as the narrator of Only Human argues, in the wake of psychoanalysis.33 Thus as Sarai, a “small but growing consciousness[,] absorb[s] the signals of her environment” (OH, p. 7), she gradually moves from the perception of “overweening anonymous shadows” (OH, p. 8) “quite separate from the environment that merely was around her” (OH, p. 8) when she was one with the mother, to the understanding of her distinct identity – “[f]irst the fact of their otherness from her, then the knowledge of her otherness from them. Then their otherness from each other (OH, p. 8) – which itself leads to

the world-altering knowledge that, although she was not them, she was of them. […] The knowledge that the shadows’ power to change the nature of her existence […] was to be hers too. Possibility entered the beginning of the world, and with it, desire. […] The longing to become them would have been born. And then the shadows would have become the objects of her desires. Pure life was interrupted by desire. Will? Free will? The birth of love.
Father, mother, others. […] She was shown belonging, what was hers by default, and learned attachment. […] And soon, she learned to look forward to their intervention in her existence. […]
A beautiful, elegant system: the creation of time and attachment to form the glue that holds us to others. The evolution of love, a.k.a. longing, a.k.a. needing. Striving to belong, aching to be loved. (OH, pp. 8-9)

In this passage, desire is presented as the primary and ultimate feeling that precipitates the young heroine from a pure, passive life in an eternal present devoid of any aim or sense, to an existence oriented towards a future and the other. For Sarai, as for any

32 Sprengnether, p. 229.
human being, to live is to desire, to assert one’s will, but also to be desired, for as Lacan argues, what humans always necessarily desire is for the other to desire them34 and, thereby, to be recognised as human, as belonging: “[l]’être humain […] aspire, au tréfonds de lui-même, à cet alter ego dans les yeux duquel il puisse se voir et se reconnaître et par lequel il puisse se trouver signifié.”35 While it is defined as playing a momentous part in the ego formation, desire is also subtly denounced as potentially oppressive through the interrogative “Will? Free will?” (OH, p. 8) that raises the issue of our capacity to control our longings, or, on the contrary, of the impossible autonomy of the desiring subject. Love will indeed prove to be Sarai’s most enduring meaning in life, but will also cause her intense suffering, which concurs with the biblical scholar Phyllis Trible’s claim that “[a]ttachment is Sarah’s problem.”36

Although, as Maurice Couturier emphasises, birth represents for all individuals the absolute loss from which the subject will never manage to find consolation,37 for Diski’s protagonist, this trial is twice as traumatic, for the symbolic loss of the mother goes together with the actual death of her female parent in childbirth. Echoing Laurie Vickroy’s claim that the passing of the mother constitutes “the basis of traumatization”38 and, as such, “can devastate the subject’s […] future relations”39 as well as one’s belief “in one’s own safety or competence to act or live in the world, [and] one’s perception of the world as meaningful and orderly,”40 Only Human features a heroine haunted by the spectral silence of the dead mother rising “incessantly to her waking and sleeping mind” (OH, p. 182) and impairing her ego formation. Even if she is immediately adopted by her father’s wife Emtelai, who “become[s] her mother in every way” (OH, p. 26), the young girl is beset by the thought of the “faceless concubine [who] ha[s] carried her and then conveniently died” (OH, p. 182), a thought that raises nihilistic convictions in her:

by some accident she had been born to another mother, a woman without a name. […] The arbitrary nature of who she was had gripped and terrified her. […] [S]he sensed we were all

37 Couturier, p. 21.
38 Vickroy, p. 114.
39 Vickroy, p. 117.
40 Vickroy, p. 23.
lost, even adults, in a vast black purposeless place. That we only seemed to belong where we happened to be, but that really we were just dotted about the earth like dust motes revealed in sunlight. […] She knew that […] underneath the belonging, and in spite of the wall of love, was wasteland and wandering. […] [T]hat all her loving connections were human-made consolations for the emptiness that actually existed. That perhaps everyone knew of the emptiness, even adults, but they pretended they didn’t, and shored up their fears with fantasies of purposefulness. (OH, pp. 103-104)

This extract deeply resonates with existentialist accents, for Sarai’s childhood terrors correspond to the central belief formulated, among others, by Heidegger, that “we experience ourselves as ‘thrown’ into the world.” Sarai can more specifically be understood to succumb to what Paul Ricoeur calls in *Histoire et vérité* the “vertige de cette possibilité d’avoir pu être autre, d’avoir pu ne pas être,” that is, the radical contingency – or non-necessity – of her being, revealed by the very necessity of having already been born. As the unidentified voice indicates, Sarai “kn[o]w[s] there [a]ren’t any certainties” (OH, p. 14). By contrast, Abram, who immediately “gr[o]w[s] to be the most admired, the most desired” (OH, p. 17) in the orphan’s heart, will “discover […] a need for certainties so powerful that it [will] nearly destroy […] him” (OH, p. 14), as the narrator announces in a proleptic reference to Yahweh’s later appearance in Sarai and Abram’s story.

Since, existentialists argue, humans “find [them]selves born into a world not of [their] […] own choosing,” it is up to them to find their own identity and meanings. To quote Charles Guignon, “I am what I make of myself throughout the course of my life as a whole. […] What defines my existence as an individual is the ongoing story of what I accomplish throughout my life.” Guignon’s use of the term “story” is particularly revealing in the context of this analysis, for it evokes the emphasis put on tales as humankind’s distinctive feature in *Only Human*. Because the heroine’s beginnings brutally confront her with the absolute realisation of the nothingness of contingency – death –, and because this loss concerns the maternal

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43 Ricoeur, p. 320. “[C]’est surtout la nécessité d’être déjà né qui me découvre la non-nécessité d’être là.”
45 Guignon.
46 Ricoeur, p. 320.
figure, who plays a pivotal role in “helping the child to fantasize, [and] imagine,”  
Diski’s young Sarai is rendered unable, during her night attacks of vertigo, to see any purpose in life. Associating her rejection of certainties and absolutes – in the form of “gods […] look[ing] down at all” (OH, p. 104) and orchestrating human lives – as “nonsense” (OH, p. 104) with the complete invalidation of any human-made meanings, she regards the stories through which men and women can give shape to their reality as illusions and lies meant to conceal a pointless void. In other words, she cannot conceive that, as Nancy Huston expresses it, “dire que c’est une histoire ne veut pas dire que cela n’existe pas (les histoires existent), ni que c’est un mensonge (puisqu’on y croit)” and that “[l]a vie a de Sens infiniment multiples et variés: tous ceux que nous lui prêtons. […] A nous de la rendre intéressante.”  

This condition of radical existential doubt created by the loss of the mother awakens fears in Diski’s heroine that evoke yet another form of silence, i.e. the ineffable. While in Roberts’s The Wild Girl, this specific silence has been shown to arise in connection with a divine beauty and complexity situated beyond words and human understanding, in Only Human, by contrast, it is linked to its other main historical cradle,59 trauma and the related insecurity and confusion of the subject, who cannot find words to testify when confronted with the limits of the bearable:

When this panic took hold of her, she pulled her mind back urgently to the comfort of her bed, and the sounds of her home and her family around her, but the damage had been done, and she knew that it was all a charade. […] Sarai was a child, none of these words could come, but the images, the feelings were stark and irrefutable. (OH, p. 104)  

Although “in the process of growing up, of living in the way of the world” (OH, p. 104), Sarai represses her early nihilistic beliefs, throughout her life, the spectral silence of the lost mother – materialised as the nagging secret thought that “she only nearly belong[s]” (OH, p. 104) to her family – will hopelessly torment her, so that she will remain constantly torn between her intensified “crav[ing] [for] connection” (OH, p. 143) and, as the narrator muses, her dread of the possibility of renewed sentimental deprivation: “Loss. […] You would think we might adjust to it, so soon is it part of our existence. […] And yet for some it seems that loss sensitises them to itself, […] until, indeed, all experience is fear of loss” (OH, p. 183).

47 Vickroy, p. 117.  
48 Huston, pp. 191-192.  
49 Mura-Brunel and Cogard, p. 5.
If the anonymous narrator’s depiction of Sarai’s initial development stresses the heroine’s psychological and emotional depth, God’s own account of his Genesis, on the other hand, parodically reveals a deity that is characterised by his naivety and his blindness to his personal feelings. In the image of Sarai, who has just been described, from page seven to page ten, to experience the loss of the garden’s “eternal present” (*OH*, p. 9) that marks the birth of her consciousness to human reality and, more specifically, desire, the Lord undergoes a form of nativity that awakens his creative faculties. Totally unaware of the striking similarities between his and the preceding human tale, he recounts, on page eleven, how through a “stirring of consciousness that separates” him from eternity – “[t]he first separation” (*OH*, p. 11) – he comes to interact with his environment and to create the world. Congratulating himself on his achievement with the words “[n]ow I was a maker. Now, distinct from all else, having made all else, I was” (*OH*, p. 11), he unwittingly betrays his unconscious awakening to the need for recognition, that is, to desire from the other, this *alter ego* in whom he might see and recognise himself. God satisfies this powerful desire by creating humankind, which he revealingly describes as “a likeness” (*OH*, p. 11) meant to “reflect [...] its creator, and show [...] [him] to [him]self” (*OH*, p. 12).

Unlike Sarai, who is said to precociously feel that her path will be riddled with difficulties and uncertainty, God does not expect to meet with obstacles or complications. It does not take long, however, for the divinity, driven by his “innocence” and the very “curiosity” (*OH*, p. 11) for which Eve and Adam are traditionally blamed in the Judeo-Christian tradition, to commit what can be interpreted as the original sin that will inexorably lead to his fall, through the division of the first human into both man and woman: “My mistake. My miscalculation. [...] But how could I know the danger of a doublet of self-awareness” (*OH*, p. 12)? If at first, God enjoys “the company I had invented for them,” “sp[ea]k[ing] to them, [and] hear[ing] [...] the sound of other voices speaking to me” (*OH*, p. 12), his creatures quickly turn against him by disobeying the single prohibition that he had imposed on them to assert his authority, and invent, thereby, human bonding:

> With that first disobedience, everything changed. They made a new word: they made *us*. [...] From them I learned about contingency. I gave them, in my naïve fondness for separation, what I could never have: I gave them each other. And with that, I had given them too much,

50 Saint Girons, in Sollers, p. 142.
allowing them powers of creation that I had not dreamed of. I did not know about imagination. I did not know about imagination doubled. I did not know about the idea of us. From the humans I made, I learned. (OH, p. 13)

Already subversive in itself, God’s confession that he has to be taught about contingency by humankind is given even more weight through its close juxtaposition with the anonymous narrator’s claim that Sarai “seem[s] always to have known” that “there [a]ren’t any certainties” (OH, p. 14). With this extract truly begins the story of the inevitable disaster that the remainder of the novel will relate, for this human “us” that God had not anticipated will, from Adam and Eve to Abram and Sarai – and, on the narrative level, the anonymous narrator – keep challenging the divine voice, which clearly resents its immutable uniqueness. As the novel unfolds, Diski’s deity will indeed increasingly suffer from the sight of human togetherness, to such an extent that he will not hesitate to sacrifice human lives to satisfy his desire to be part of an “us” himself. Subtly foreshadowing this development is God’s reference to this “fondness for separation” (OH, p. 13), which hints at the orthodox Judeo-Christian Lord’s ordering of creation through the dissociation of elements in Genesis 1, but also at God-the-narrator’s future role as homewrecker in the Abram and Sarai story.

*Only Human* unmistakably questions what Gounelle defines as the classical theist representation of the Creator as an impassive onlooker observing the world from above for, as in Process theology, Diski’s God is affected by what happens on earth and, through creating – or rather, most of the time, suffering human creativity –, continually creates himself: “Dieu […] désir[e] aussi bien pour lui-même que pour les autres êtres. En effet, Dieu a besoin du monde pour accomplir son propre être.”

Thus when, after splitting the first human creature in two, ostensibly to end its solitude, he is left out by Adam and Eve, God cannot refrain from indignantly exclaiming “I gave my creature company. […] And what thanks did I get? How could I know that from the pair, the third is always excluded” (OH, p. 24)? He thereby betrays how much his actions are dictated by the satisfaction of his own longings, and introduces unknowingly the notion of triangular desire that will dominate the second half of the novel.

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51 Gounelle, p. 53.
52 Cobb and Griffin, p. 122.
53 Gounelle, p. 43.
Even in his attempt to regain control of creation after this first human challenge, the divine narrator proves unperceptive about human resourcefulness and his own psychology, since his condemnation of humanity to “bring forth their generations in pain and hardship […] to remind them that […] there were my beasts, of me, but not me” (OH, p. 24), is met with Adam and Eve’s enjoyment of reproduction, and with reinforced human cohesion: “They made relation to one another – none to me” (OH, p. 25). If in his fear of not belonging, Diski’s deity mirrors again Sarai, he radically differs from the heroine in his refusal to acknowledge that he does crave to be loved: “What need had I for reproduction, I am that I am? What use have I for a line, for verification of belonging, needing, loving and being loved? I am that I am” (OH, p. 25). The irony of this statement is double, for the readers already know that it is because God needed a reproduction of himself to understand who he is that he created humankind, and they will discover that it is ultimately out of the divinity’s desperate need to be loved by Abram that the child Isaac will become necessary for God to ensure the man’s attachment.

After these rather difficult commencements marked by loss and desire, Sarai and God will meet with the end of life as they knew it. This “cataclysm[ic]” (OH, p. 44) disruption of the course of their existences will then give way to fresh starts that will, however, fail to live up to their expectations and precipitate the tragic intersection of their human and divine destinies.

**B. The Beginning of the End, and Disappointing New Starts**

When eight years after Sarai’s coming into the world, loss strikes the heroine again through the untimely death of her foster mother in childbirth, not only do the orphan’s deepest fears become true in the most radical way, but guilt and new anxieties are also brought along, as the young girl believes that she is somehow responsible for this fresh bereavement. Sarai indeed welcomes the news of the prospective arrival of a biological daughter for Emtelai with a mixture of excitement at the thought of having a little sister through whom she could partly assuage her desperate hunger for love, and apprehension originating in her deep-seated dread of abandonment, which expresses itself as the excruciating idea that she might “be replaced by a more genuine article. […] [I]t was natural that the child, knowing herself not properly, not exactly and truly to belong to the family, should feel some anxiety at the coming arrival of
someone who did” (OH, p. 27). Emtelai’s pregnancy reawakens in Sarai, for the first time since her birth, “a sense of foreboding, an uncertainty about the future that she didn’t dare examine very carefully” (OH, p. 27): “A small cloud gathered over Sarai’s life. […] In Sarai’s heart, concealed deeply, the line between herself and the family thickened ever so slightly” (OH, p. 27). Although the tragic fulfilment of Sarai’s dark, half-thought hope that the baby would not come, does bring to the girl some “honeyed relief” (OH, p. 29), the predominant impression is one of “grief at [Emtelai’s and the baby’s] […] loss” (OH, p. 29) and of the “palpable” presence of “[h]er mother’s absence” (OH, p. 27) – which eloquently echoes the very definition of spectral silence.

This anguish is aggravated by the suspicion that her “half-thought thoughts, unwilled negative feelings, could [have] cause[d] the death of a woman and a child out in the real world” (OH, pp. 29-30). Having repressed her existentialist belief in human contingency since, as the narrator points out, “accident is too terrible a thought for a child in the midst of a cataclysm” (OH, p. 44), she now becomes a prisoner of the polytheist faith in gods that alternately reward and deal ruthlessly with humans, and that might therefore punish a young girl’s jealousy with her mother’s and future sister’s summary execution. A “new tightening, which she would learn eventually to live with, but which would never go away” (OH, p. 28), settles in Sarai’s heart and mind, a tightening that is bound to remain ineffable, for disclosing her “unaccountable wish” (OH, p. 28) to anyone, especially her beloved brother Abram, would threaten her “wall of love” (OH, p. 30), that is, the meaning that she has constructed for herself in her flight from the vertigo of non-necessity and pointlessness:

Some questions cannot be asked, not even of those you believe you can trust the most. […] How could eight-year-old Sarai tease out the words from the welter of emotions that came with the death of Emtelai and her child, and speak them to, a beloved other? […] Even to formulate the words to herself would have emphasised her half-relation to those who were all she had in the world. […]

[S]he knew she could not ask anyone. She knew that the price for having had the bad thoughts, the terrible feelings, was that she must remain shut up inside her, unanswered questions that would make a question of everything she thought and felt for ever after. […] Any inner turmoil, even a lifetime of uncertainty, was better than tearing down the wall of love with which she was surrounded. (OH, pp. 29-30)

When loss follows loss and, shortly after the double tragedy, Sarai’s brother Haran, tormented by existential doubts, commits suicide in the temple, thereby bringing shame upon the family and urging them to leave the only home that Sarai has ever known, the protagonist sees this latest link in a string of disasters as marking the
collapse of her world: “They were to leave the wall of love behind them, a ruin, and Sarai was to live with the secret knowledge that it was she who had wrenched away the first stone. […] The omnipotent and fearful desire that you alone have caused a crack in normality” (OH, p. 45).

If death represents a terrible shock for Sarai, it does not come as a total surprise, haunted as she is by the spectral silence of the lost mother. Diski’s God, on the other hand, is completely taken unawares when his creatures, in the person of Cain, come up with this new invention:

If death represents a terrible shock for Sarai, it does not come as a total surprise, haunted as she is by the spectral silence of the lost mother. Diski’s God, on the other hand, is completely taken unawares when his creatures, in the person of Cain, come up with this new invention:

   I knew nothing of death as they invented it. How could I? I had created life. […]
   To tell the truth, it hadn’t occurred to me. […]
   I needn’t have worried. Cain […] took care of that. […]
   Eve discovered she could make life, like me. And her son found he could destroy it, before any such thing was on my mind. Cain had taken life, my life, the life I had made. […] It seemed I was always to be one step behind these humans. (OH, pp. 41-43)

As Emtelai’s passing does to Sarai, Abel’s murder represents a breaking-point in the godhead’s life, for after this unfortunate incident, all communication between the divinity and humankind stops. While God sulks, hurt in his pride by this new sapping of his authority and appropriation of his creative powers, humans, by contrast, thrive on their own, and give up God altogether – or, in I am that I am’s opinion, “take […] [his] exhortation to be fruitful and multiply to their hearts. Rather, to their loins” (OH, p. 56), and dare to consider their “proliferation […] to be greater than [his] […] singularity” (OH, p. 56) which, as his words betray, actually does not seem as great and enviable as he would like (us) to believe:

   I was alone again. In all that time, after Cain, I took no interest. […] I did not care. I would not care. I retreated into silence. […] The world I made was a ruin, a seething mass of flesh, all held together with the mutual self-comfort of gluey sexual desire. […] And of me, there was not a thought. (OH, pp. 56-58)

   Faced with the collapse of his universe – revealingly described as a “ruin,” a word that echoes the precise term previously used to depict Sarai’s own cataclysmic experience – God then chooses to annihilate “that wayward bunch of losers” (OH, p. 66). He decides to start again from scratch with Noah, an “unimaginative” (OH, p. 66) man “as smug and stupid as you could wish” (OH, p. 68), in the hope of eradicating “autonomy and imagination” (OH, p. 67) and of being thereby “in charge of creation once again” (OH, p. 68): “if in choosing Noah I was to populate the world with dullness, well, so much the better. […] Now I wanted obedience. […] I would, at last, be ahead of the game. That was the main thing” (OH, pp. 67-68). The divinity’s hopes
to get off to a good new start, however, are quickly reduced to nothing when even his chosen one unexpectedly shows a capacity for inventiveness and unruliness by becoming the first drunkard. In response to this fresh affront, God, in a tragi-comic fashion, resorts but to what can be interpreted as his traditional, thoroughly ineffective weapons of sulking, denial and self-deceit: “[r]eally, these humans weren’t even worth the effort it had taken to make the rain fall. […] I withdrew into myself. […] I was content enough. I was perfect. I was everything. Why should I need anything else? I felt fine, just fine” (OH, p. 73). At this stage in the novel, God’s creative enterprise seems to have reached a dead-end: “I admit to a loss of confidence. A feeling of lowered self-esteem. […] How could I am fail” (OH, p. 95)?

This not very godly sentimental roller-coaster leading from a hopeful new beginning to bitter disappointment and stagnation again mirrors Sarai’s very human experience. As she leaves the security, but also disgrace of Ur for an unknown nomadic life, Diski’s protagonist reaches sexual maturity, which should mean for the heroine the “assurance of new life” (OH, p. 49), yet proves in reality to be mainly associated by Sarai with the loss of her childhood freedom and her irreversible entrance into the restricting condition of womanhood, wholly determined “by blood and its absence” (OH, p. 51): “She was unclean. […] She was no longer free to hang about her beloved Abram. […] She was a mother in waiting. […] Dangerous. […] Necessary but contaminating” (OH, p. 49). The discovery that, from this moment on, “[e]verything will stem from” (OH, p. 51) this “reality over which she [i]s to have no control” (OH, p. 50), is moreover the occasion for Sarai to be handed down the story that women whisper to themselves to explain “why the birth of children should mean such trouble for them alone” (OH, p. 49) and “why [they] […] have so little choice in [their] […] lives” (OH, p. 50). This secret tale is none other than the Judeo-Christian monotheistic account of the beginning, of which females, the unspoken names in the biblical genealogies, are subversively set up by Diski as the sole guardians: “it was the strangest story Sarai had ever heard, about a single god, alone in the universe, who made and punished and destroyed at will, and a humanity entirely at his mercy” (OH, p. 50).

If these revelations leave Sarai with a shocking “sense of helplessness, a sense of being without anyone on her side” (OH, p. 50), it is undoubtedly because they constitute a painful reminder of her terrifying childhood night feelings of being thrown into a vast black meaningless place, which she has learnt to relegate to the
back of her mind and replaced with the prevalent belief in the gods of Ur, who can be pacified through being made amends to. The episode of Sarai’s first bleeding can be analysed as the heroine’s first lesson in both the power of stories to give meaning to human experience, and their limitations, for when she asks her improvised mentor Nikkal whether it is not possible to change the single god’s mind with libations, she gets as an answer that “‘[y]ou have too much faith in the gods’ concern for us. Anyway, I didn’t say the […] story is true. […] It’s just a story. […] That’s as true as human stories can get’” (OH, pp. 50-51). Through this statement challenging any claim to absolute truth associated with the Bible, Nikkal comes to embody the possibility not simply to live, but also to be perfectly content, with the belief that there are no certainties and that, as Nancy Huston articulates,

[p]olythéismes, monothéismes […]: autant de fabulations qui donnent aux humains une prise sur leur existence.  
Elles ne sont pas vraies, mais cela est secondaire. Elles sont efficaces. […]  
Aucune religion ne peut fournir une réponse objective à la question de savoir à quelle fin existent l’univers et l’homme. Toutes, en revanche, proposent d’excellentes réponses subjectives.  
Le fait de croire en des choses irréelles nous aide à supporter la vie réelle.  

Sarai’s father Terah is the perfect illustration of this human propensity to find consolation for our misfortunes in the belief in some transcendent scheme or authority that decides our lives, for he sees in his daughter’s birth from another mother, but also in the simultaneity of Sarai’s reaching womanhood with their leaving Ur in search of a new life, an omen of the protagonist’s paramount role in the rebirth of her family, through her marital union with her half-brother Abram:

“It’s a sign, that it should have happened now. […] From you will come new life, we will grow through you, and our losses […] will be made good. […] You are different from my other children, apart from them, born from another womb. […] [N]ow it turns out to be for the good, as if it had been meant. […] You can be married to Abram, and your children will truly be a new generation to our family.” (OH, pp. 52-53)

With this speech and the subsequent marriage, Terah defines Sarai into what he considers as her destined path, and confines her to it, dictating the way of the world, to which she is supposed to conform. Sarai, however, will fail to live up to these expectations. As her introduction into womanhood means the end of her childhood liberty, so will her new life as a wife lead to further losses.

54 As Huston contends in L’espèce fabulatrice, “[t]outes les explications auxquelles nous croyons confèrent effectivement du Sens à notre vie” (Huston, p. 109).
55 Huston, pp. 110-111.
Even before it is celebrated, Sarai’s alliance with Abram raises ambivalent feelings in the protagonist. It simultaneously conjures up her deepest fear – of not belonging – and her wildest longing – to be loved by Abram, the chief object of her desire –, since it is precisely because she does not fully belong that she can marry her half-brother: “so the way of the world was subverted into her deepest desire precisely by what she dreaded most. As her father had said as if it had been meant, all her hopes and fears exploded into reality” (OH, pp. 54-55). Once sealed, Sarai’s marriage has much bitter disillusionment in store for her, for if the heroine was expecting to win a husband’s love, which would come in addition to the old, comforting brotherly attachment, she will, instead, suffer from the frustrating lack of the former, and the disorienting loss of the latter.

Abram, being as bewildered as Sarai about their sudden transition from siblings to husband and wife, plunges his young bride into a new experience of abandonment by first leaving her alone in their tent most of their wedding night, and then, as the couple share a particularly intense look into each other’s eyes – during which “love seem[s] [for Sarai] to have no limitations” and to be “so simple” (OH, p. 62) and the newlyweds feel desire rise in them – by abruptly stopping this first attempt at physical intimacy, marking “the moment when one love [i]s severed and another denied” (OH, p. 71):

Sarai ached for lost love, separated from the brother, and outside the family line, and yet not connected to the husband, she was alone in the world, secretly, as she had been when Emtelai died and she had to remain in silence with her private shame. If Abram no longer loved her as a brother, and he could not love her as a wife, she was lost, as distant from belonging anywhere, to anything or anyone, as the cold stars hanging in the desert night. (OH, p. 65)

In this confusion of extremely intense yet restrained longing, words are rendered totally inadequate; for Abram and Sarai, this “yawning chasm that ha[s] opened between them” (OH, p. 65) simply proves to be ineffable. Silence, in this context, becomes eloquent, not only in the immediacy of their first aborted intercourse, during which “[t]hey […] [tell] each other of their passion without words, explain […] its nature without dialogue, […] [teach] and learn […] the physicality of the flesh without exposition” (OH, pp. 61-62), but also throughout the many months of “their intimate separation” (OH, p. 64):

Since that first night they had […] only referred to deeper things in their mutual silence at night. I love you, come to me, come back to me, Sarai would not say. I love you, but I do not know how to love you in all ways, so I will not love you at all, Abram failed to reply. (OH, p. 76)
It is specifically through this eloquent “silence and emotional separation” (OH, p. 76) that the image of Sarai as Abram’s “little sister fade[s] from his mind, and Sarai the woman bec[o]me[s] severed from his past” (OH, p. 76), so that the protagonist and the patriarch can finally start their new life as a married couple. Sarai welcomes this move, in a slightly naïve way, simply as “the return of her beloved Abram’s old love for her” (OH, p. 82), and therefore fails to recognise that “it [i]s a different thing, with a different purpose: an aspect of something more generalised in him” (OH, p. 82), which Abram himself is not yet fully aware of, but which the omniscient narrator identifies as a “craving for conformity and for continuation” (OH, p. 76), foreshadowing thereby the male character’s future existential crisis and the dramatic disruption that it will bring.

Once married not only in theory, but also in fact, Sarai and Abram are bound together by what seems to be infinite, unconditional love. Yet, again, hope leads to disenchantment as months, years and even decades elapse and the couple remain childless, stuck in an eternal stagnation where “nothing happens and goes on happening” (OH, p. 83). While Sarai, who perceives her barrenness as “a punishment […] for her long-ago […] resentment of Emtelai’s happiness” (OH, p. 86), manages as time passes to repress her guilt and soothe her mental suffering by learning to be content with the passion that she shares with her husband, Abram, on the other hand, behind his apparent resignation, is in reality just unconsciously “waiting until all hope [i]s extinguished before allowing his despair to emerge and change the course of all their lives” (OH, pp. 87-88), through God’s irruption into their story.

III. Fighting for the Story of Love: Sarai-Abram-God, a Destructive Triangular Desire

A. When the One Finds Her Own Voice, the Other Finds God’s

The turning point of Only Human, which triggers off the direct confrontation between Sarai and Abram’s God, takes place when Abram notices that his wife no longer menstruates, and that, as a consequence, any chance has vanished of getting a child through which he would be remembered after his death. This realisation, and its formulation to Sarai as the seemingly innocuous remark “[n]ow there can be no surprises” (OH, p. 89), tolls the knell of the life of unquestioned love that the couple
have built for themselves since their very first night of passion, and reveals Sarai’s and Abram’s strongly divergent outlooks on life and its unavoidable end.

Hearing that Abram was still hoping to become a father after all these decades sends the protagonist into a fit of fury against what she now sees as her husband’s and her own passivity. As she uncontrollably hits her dumbfounded partner, Sarai blames him for pretending that their mutual love was enough to ensure a contented life together: “‘Your damned obedience, your wretched dutifulness, your devotion has wasted our lives. [...] In the name of love, how could you condemn me to this half-life, this pretend world we made of love and nothing else? [...] You’re a traitor’” (OH, p. 92). For her part, she has come over the years to contemplate barrenness as “the nature of her interior” (OH, p. 90), and herself as “a faulty mechanism, no more capable of sustaining life than an empty sack” (OH, p. 90), who deserves “the right to exist” only through “Abram’s love for her exterior body” (OH, p. 90). “[L]earn[ing] to greet the sight of each monthly flow with a grim nod of recognition of how things are, not with bitter disappointment” (OH, p. 90), she has interpreted her infertility as her given essence or a divine sentence, not as one of the many possible accidents of contingent human life.

She now feels that she, who has until this watershed “been all silence, appreciation and acquiescence” (OH, p. 92), has actually been silencing herself. By “liv[ing] [...] in the unexamined belief that life was time passing, [...] something external to the one who lived it” (OH, pp. 91-92), and by “ha[ving] been led to believe, allowed herself to believe, that there was only one life to be led: the one that she lived in” (OH, p. 93), she has fallen prey to what existentialists call “inauthenticity,” or this widespread human tendency to “conform to the ways of living of the ‘herd’” and to “feel [that] we are doing well,” “that our lives are justified so long as we are following the norms and conventions laid out in our social context.”

Existentialists claim that such conformist lives are “inauthentic,” because they are “not really our own” – “[i]n throwing ourselves into socially approved [...] roles, we disown ourselves and spin a web of self-deception” – and that the move from inauthenticity to an authentic life in which the subject eventually takes responsibility

56 Guignon.
57 Guignon.
for his fate is “made possible by [...] profound emotional experiences.”58 Such is precisely the case for Sarai, who, through Abram’s inadvertent comment, discovers with

shock [...] that she was someone who [...] had never spoken before. Where once the way of the world had sufficed as explanation for what and how she and everything was, now it had become [...] the dark devisor of her acquiescence and unconsciousness of her own self. [...] It was not that she perceived several options she had failed to take. [...] But it was enough to discover that [...] there were unsuspected possibilities. [...] Even her inner rage seemed a precious new discovery, an alternative to the suppressed guilt and unfulfilled hopes that had led her life by the nose since she was a tiny child. (OH, pp. 92-93)

Firmly decided to find her own voice now that she has awoken to this “new understanding of her life” (OH, p. 95), Sarai discovers an “inner world of [her] [...] own, where the way of the world [i]s called into question, [...] where ready answers ha[ve] no authority” (OH, p. 96), “a new place within her” (OH, p. 96), which can be analysed as filling, albeit partially, the void left by the many haunting losses that have punctuated her path, the latest being the monthly loss of a potential child, which has gradually turned “the nothing happening [...] [into] the centre of life (OH, p. 83).

Although Sarai vehemently rebels against the way of the world, it is her husband, not her, who, as the narrator formulates it, ultimately “wreck[s] havoc on the world” (OH, p. 96), for his awareness of his wife’s menopause sparks off in him a deep existential crisis that, unlike Sarai, he cannot face on his own, as he reaches the “sudden and urgent recognition of his own mortality” (OH, p. 98). According to Ricoeur, “il faut une situation de catastrophe pour que, soudain, sous la menace de l’indéterminé absolu – ma mort –, ma vie se détermine comme le tout de ce qui est menacé. C’est la première fois que je m’apparais comme une totalité menacée.”59

Being brought face to face with the previously unthinkable, yet – in all likelihood – now unchangeable fact of his childlessness, Abram discovers, “as if it had never really occurred to him before” (OH, p. 98), the ineluctability of his own end and, through it, the contingency of his life. This new insight raises in the patriarch the same anguish and nihilistic thoughts as Sarai used to have at night as a girl, before she surrendered to the way of the world:

there is no reason, no purpose, no point in anything. [...] Sarai, we are accidental creatures living accidental lives. And everything we have surrounded ourselves with, gods, priests, commerce, family, all of it is to mask the fact that we live, we die and nothing matters. (OH, p. 103)

58 Guignon.
59 Ricoeur, p. 321.
As she listens to her husband, the protagonist is grasped by “a sense of familiarity […] that at first she c[an’t] place, until she remember[s] herself as a young child alone in her bed” (OH, p. 103). Spectral silence, while making the heroine more fearful of deprivation, has also made her stronger. If, well-equipped as she now is through her always insecure identity created by her premature encounter with loss, and wiser for her awakening to her inner world, Sarai is ready and able to cope with the lack of certainty that a human path devoid of any transcendent justification entails, Abram, by contrast, is not:

as a child she had believed that the events were linked in a chain of cause and effect. […] Nowadays […] she found the world itself enough to account for life […] unlike Abram who needed, for some reason, more than the world to explain what went wrong. […] Sarai had a practical streak in her character that gave her permission to get on with life, no matter how arbitrary she suspected it might be. […] Facing the reality of death and the fact of childlessness was harder for him, who believed in some higher justice, than for Sarai, who doubted its existence but did not feel obliged to confront it. (OH, pp. 116-117)

The heroine, however, will be forced to most directly confront the idea of a divine supervision of human destinies for, with a fierce “No” (OH, p. 107) that he opposes to Sarai’s “‘we must live our lives in the world. […] You must bear it! […] That is all that there is to be done’” (OH, pp. 105-107), Abram signals his refusal to be satisfied with a purely accidental fate and, through it, invites – or, in the protagonist’s and the human narrator’s views, invents – God into their story.

It is indeed at this precise moment in the novel that I am that I am, who has also been in an impasse since the fiasco with Noah, makes his timely appearance into Sarai and Abram’s existences. With this divine entrance, the craving for absolutes of a man tormented by his finiteness meets the conscious desire for control and unconscious longing for love of a godhead rejected by his creatures. But the new relationship thereby created will also lead to a tragic love triangle fuelled by both passion and hatred, for in selecting Abram, God does not reckon with his wife Sarai, whose own powerful desires, heightened by loss, will violently clash with his. In the image of the mostly implicit opposition between the Lord and the protagonist in the first part of the novel, this explicit, ruthless rivalry will depict a resourceful Sarai and a God completely out of his depth who imitates unawares his mortal enemy, via the two characters’ opposite and opposing developments: on the one hand, God’s demotion and fall into a more and more “only human” condition, and on the other hand, Sarai’s fierce resistance to supplantation and her unwitting elevation by the divinity to the rank of godlike ideal.
Having discovered, thanks to the Babel episode, that his creatures yearn for some form of survival after their ending, and that, therefore, “death and future” (*OH*, p. 75) are his best weapons against what he considers as the scourge of human imagination, God knows that, if he wants his ultimate attempt to “be ahead of the game” (*OH*, p. 111) to have any chance to succeed, he has to choose another Noah who will not simply be “dull and unimaginative” (*OH*, p. 66), but also, to borrow his own words, of “my kind of human being” (*OH*, p. 95), which means “solitary, [and] needful” (*OH*, p. 95). Accordingly, *I am that I am* launches his first attack to conquer Abram and, through him, to reconquer the world, with a first call, in which he entices the man with the promise of making him a great nation if he agrees to leave his country:

> I made an offer of more than a lifetime to a single man who believed that he had nothing to give me in return. In fact, he had the world to give me, the only thing in eternity that I had so far discovered I wanted. He didn’t know that. […] I was getting the hang of these humans. At last, I had an edge ———— (*OH*, pp. 112-113)

To the pragmatic Sarai, Abram’s account of his conversation with God, told in feverish tones and with a wild gleam in the eyes, sounds like the ravings of a disrupted mind that conjures up imaginary voices to resolve the anguish caused by the recognition of human finiteness. Such a conception of Abram’s new monotheistic faith powerfully echoes the “atheistic explanation of Christianity” formulated by the nineteenth-century German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach in *Das Wesen des Christentums* (1841, published in English as *The Essence of Christianity* in 1854), and known as projection theory. According to Feuerbach, Christianity is just wishful thinking rooted in the specific feelings of fear and hope, and its God, the projection of our longings and desires, the image of the perfect human essence, in a non-finite form. Accordingly, to quench his thirst for transcendence and eternity, Abram conceives a godhead that is detached and omnipotent – “There is nothing this Lord cannot do” (*OH*, p. 114) – unlike the “mundane gods of stone” who, “with their ordinary human relationships and their pathetic […] rivalries[,] […] are too much like us – […] limited, constrained” (*OH*, p. 114). This passage conceals much dramatic

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61 Feuerbach, p. 186.
62 Feuerbach, p. 2.
irony, for little does the patriarch know – in contrast to the readers – that I am that I am is actually far from being the all-powerful, impassive, dignified entity of his desires, and that, by getting caught in relationships of love and jealousy, his deity will turn out to be more human than his human creatures.

Feuerbach moreover argues that the main attraction of religion resides in the fact that it is easier to remain inactive and believe that one’s salvation depends on a divine being than to act, or to imagine that one is loved by God than to love oneself. Through this passive reliance on an external agent from whom everything good comes, believers alienate themselves, for, Feuerbach contends, they divest themselves of their potentialities, which they systematically attribute to God, their all. Such a tendency to self-disempowerment, which sharply contrasts with Sarai’s newly found voice, can be observed in Abram’s statement to his wife that “we have been offered a destiny. […] Our future depends on trusting the Lord” (OH, p. 115).

Sarai is firmly opposed to entrusting her fate to the care of any authority, and, more particularly, to Abram’s Lord, who, as she emphatically points out to her husband, fails to include her in his great scheme: “‘Did your lord mention me?’ ‘You are my wife. […] I have his word.’ ‘But I haven’t’” (OH, p. 116). She nevertheless agrees to follow Abram, in the hope that this return to nomadic life and its daily practical necessities will silence the voice in her partner’s head and restore the passion that she used to share with him before their crisis: “She wanted love back so that she would not have to consider what a life without love might mean. That was why […] she let it happen ————” (OH, p. 125). It is, however, the exact contrary that is going to take place, for Sarai will be forced to acknowledge the power of this new divine story that Abram has constructed for himself, of this godhead that unknowingly desires the patriarch through Sarai, who, as a consequence, is cast as both the model and the rival to supplant. First betraying this central role that the protagonist plays in the relationship between I am that I am and Abram, is God’s offended retort to the human narrator’s tale:

——— Ha! She let it happen! What had she done but follow orders I had given my chosen one? I spoke and Abram obeyed. That is what happened. […] She may talk of madness and despair, and of voices caused by anguish. But the voice was mine, the plan was mine. The relation was between Abram and I am. I had made an us of him and me far more compelling than she could imagine with her time-tainted human love, which had produced nothing.

63 Feuerbach, p. 140.
64 Feuerbach, p. 31.
Between Abram and me, a future would be created. I could give him what she had failed to provide. She was just flesh and bone. I was almighty, I was eternal. [...] Abram was mine — ——— (OH, pp. 125-126)

As this speech oozing love and jealousy unmistakably indicates, God desires Abram but, being as unperceptive as ever, does not realise it. It in fact already takes him, who proudly describes himself again as “the Creator, the Destroyer, [...] the omnipotent, the omniscient, the singular” (OH, p. 135), ten more pages to simply discern that Abram does not only trust him but, “given the promise of a dream come true, had turned his human feelings towards me. He loved me. [...] This love [...] was beyond the power even of I am to imagine. It was the greatest surprise I had ever had” (OH, pp. 135-137). God moreover justifies this rather inglorious confession with a definition of his creation that further saps the authority of his Word, for it restricts its scope to the mere production of matter by revealing that when the deity “gave [Adam and Eve] [...] the Word: live, I told them” (OH, p. 65), he was only expecting humankind to fulfil the most basic biological functions:

My universe was a perfect machine for self-replication. [...] All life [...] had a built-in necessity to reproduce, to make a living and to degrade back into [...] the earth. [...] There was no need for a special relationship of feeling between one individual and another [...] because it was simply not necessary for the mechanism to work. (OH, pp. 135-136)

When “of course, they rearrange [...] it” (OH, p. 66), doing the “job” that God the clumsy potter admits to having “done [...] only once, and very practically” (OH, pp. 74-75), humans not only develop abstract thought and logical reasoning – “Give them one thing and they supposed another, then put the two together to make what never existed before” (OH, pp. 74-75) – but also, most importantly, feelings; these very feelings that Abram now experiences for his Lord. Originally longing for the patriarch to be “his” as his thing, in a one-sided relation between Him, the unique, divine, commanding subject and his object, I am that I am now gets an “Abram [who] [i]s mine in a way that no other creature on earth ha[s] been mine before” (OH, p. 136). Although he talks of making “an us” and creating “a future” with Sarai’s husband on page 126, and voices his intense jealousy of the heroine, it is not until page 145 that God-the-narrator consciously registers that Abram’s feelings for him are reciprocal and that, consequently, he has initiated his fall into humanity: “And now I loved, [...] as if I were their creation, as if I were a mere emotional being like them. I who drifted with eternity, solitary, needing nothing, I, it seemed, had fallen – oh, how appropriate the metaphor – in love” (OH, p. 145).
If the deity is for a long time blind to the existence of his passion for Abram, so is he to its real nature, for the supposedly all-knowing narrator fails to perceive that his desire is not truly spontaneous, but is rather an imitation of Sarai’s. As has previously been shown, right from the start, God has been envious of human bonding, which cruelly reminds him, by contrast, of his own eternal solitude, and has suffered from never being included in an “us”: “How could I know that from the pair, the third is always excluded” (OH, p. 24)? With this rhetorical question, God can be seen to announce the capital role that the notion of triangular desire plays in the second half of Only Human. According to this theory developed by the French literary critic and philosopher René Girard in his famous Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque, the subject desires the object through the Other, which he calls the mediator. There is, therefore, no direct line between the desiring subject and his object, but always an imitation of a model, whose desire for the object precisely renders the object so appealing. Girard distinguishes between two types of mediation, depending on the distance – spiritual, social or intellectual, mainly – that separates the mediator from the desiring subject. The mediation is external when the subject and the mediator do not belong to the same spheres – this is the case when the model is a god(dess), a crowned head or a hero(ine), for instance. The imitator openly admires its model, whose inaccessibility prevents the appearance of any antagonism. Internal mediation, on the other hand, takes place when the spheres of the mediator and the desiring subject are close, contributing to the development of mimetic rivalry. In this second scenario, the subject hides his imitation.

Only Human, while drawing on these patterns, parodically subverts them to better debunk the Judeo-Christian authority, for while the divine status of one of the participants should typically lead to an external mediation, with the deity playing the part of the model, in Diski’s novel, by opposition, it is the godhead who, in his desire for Abram, imitates the mediator Sarai, the god with a human face, as Girard calls it, via a mediation that is unmistakably internal, the traditional distance between the heavenly and the worldly spheres being dramatically reduced. God moreover quickly

66 Girard, p. 21.
68 Girard, p. 78.
demonstrates clear signs of the jealousy of the model that characterises internal mediation:

L’élan vers l’objet est au fond élan vers le médiateur; dans la médiation interne, cet élan est brisé par le médiateur lui-même puisque ce médiateur désire, ou […] possède, cet objet. […] Afin de cacher aux autres, et de se cacher à lui-même, cette admiration éperdue, [le sujet] […] ne veut plus voir qu’un obstacle dans son médiateur. […] Tout ce qui vient de ce médiateur est systématiquement déprécié bien que toujours secrètement désiré. Le médiateur est maintenant un ennemi subtil et diabolique; […] il contrecarre obstinément ses plus légittimes ambitions.69

Immediately after his first contact with his chosen one, *I am that I am* attempts to depreciate or even to deny the relationship between Abram and Sarai with his claims that “[t]he relation […]s between Abram and *I am*” (*OH*, p. 126), and that the “us” he has made with Abram is “far more compelling” (*OH*, p. 126) than hers because he “c[an] give him what she ha[s] failed to provide” (*OH*, p. 126) “with her time-tainted human love” (*OH*, p. 126). Behind the disparaging of an impertinent undesirable who stands between God and his object of desire, and of her decaying, finite “flesh and bone” (*OH*, p. 126) existence that is said to pale in comparison with his “almighty, […] eternal” (*OH*, p. 126) being, one can however recognise God’s natural tendency to self-deceit, and detect the first indications of God’s secret envy at Sarai’s inscription into time and matter, which the deity will progressively get to confess with sentences such as “I wanted to be loved in time” (*OH*, p. 178), “[t]here is no meaning in eternity, in constancy, in perfect singularity” (*OH*, p. 185) or “in the face of the fact of flesh and its inexplicable ways, eternity […] is not enough” (*OH*, p. 209). Girard’s explanation of desire as triangular and mimetic, since it specifically takes the rival-mediator both as the starting and ending point of the analysis,70 sheds light on the complex mechanism of love and hatred in the triangle Sarai-Abram-God. It helps the readers decode the deity’s highly ambivalent feelings towards the protagonist, and understand how, in the otherwise apparently direct relation of desire between God and Abram, Sarai comes to play such a central role that what the divine narrator himself acknowledges as the “rival[ry] for the affection of our chosen one” (*OH*, p. 145) becomes even more important than the object of desire, Abram.

By winning Abram’s love, God deprives Sarai of it, for the divinity’s appearance in the patriarch’s life creates a rift between the two human lovers, in which God, playing the part of the homewrecker, relentlessly strives to worm his way

69 Girard, pp. 24-25.
deeper and deeper. Abram gets absorbed in his new relation with his Lord, behaving like an unfaithful husband spending the night away from home and growing away from Sarai:

[W]hen they made camp, he erected a tent for Sarai beside his own. Now she slept apart from Abram for the first time since they had married. […] Abram had not lost his passion, his capacity for devotion, but it was focused away from Sarai. […] He […] desired the one who promised what she had failed to achieve. (OH, p. 127)

This representation of Abram as besotted with God is not simply a literary innovation of Diski’s, but can be traced back to the medieval Jewish tradition, for, as Aviiah Gottlieb Zornberg points out in The Beginning of Desire – another of Diski’s acknowledged sources –, in the 12th century, the prominent philosopher Maimonides (1135-1204) ‘describes Abraham as the epitome of the ‘love of God,’ an ideal but rare condition, testified to by God himself, who speaks of ‘Abraham, My lover’ (Isaiah 41:8)’71: “What is this condition of right love? It is, that one should love God with an excessive, powerful love, till one’s soul is totally involved in love of God, and one is constantly obsessed [shogeh] by it, as though ill with love sickness.”72 Maimonides’s use of the word shogeh, “which is clearly related to shaga, madness,” introduces the idea of a “pathology of passionate love”73 that Diski fully exploits in Only Human, through her protagonist’s – and the human narrator’s – depiction of a Abram who “transfer[s] his love, the meaning of his life from us to a vision in his own head” (OH, p. 141), and “moon[s] over his phantasm” (OH, p. 128).

Although Sarai is filled with internal rage against this “spectral voice engendered by despair” (OH, p. 128), her first reaction is one of dejected passivity in the face of what she regards as unfair competition – “A real rival would have been preferable. […] Now, […] she became entirely irrelevant” (OH, p. 128) – but also, most importantly, as “the most painful loss” (OH, p. 129) she has ever had to suffer, the loss of love, understood both as Abram’s turning aside from her, and the deterioration of her own passion for him: “she no longer needed Abram. She was cut adrift in a world in which she was able to manage perfectly well, but from which all purpose had been abolished. […] If, after a lifetime, she no longer needed Abram, what had that lifetime been for” (OH, p. 129)?

72 Maimonides, quoted in Zornberg, p. 88.
73 Zornberg, p. 88.
While Abram’s love constitutes for Diski’s God “the greatest surprise” (OH, p. 137) of his eternal existence, for Sarai, as the human narrator subversively emphasises, “love [is] no surprise. […] Love surprise[s] her only by its absence” (OH, pp. 137-138). In the same fashion as she momentarily fell prey, when growing up, to the fatalistic belief in the way of the world and the pantheon of gods ruling over humanity, the protagonist has been led to believe, despite her childhood pessimistic intuition that “all her loving connections [a]re human-made consolations for the emptiness that actually exist[s]” (OH, p. 104), that love is a definite certainty, “the very source of life” (OH, p. 137). Now that she is neglected by her husband, she comes to the conclusion that “she might have been deceived all her life about the central fact of her existence” (OH, p. 138), that love is actually just as contingent as any other facet of human existence. Having lost her “bedrock” (OH, p. 138), Sarai is rendered unable to find any meaning in the world anymore:

Love was so obvious, so soon, that when it took its leave of her, she had no way of understanding her existence in the world. […] [S]he lost her place in the universe. […] Now that the absolute truth had dissolved, it could not have been either absolute or truth. […] [I]t had changed and shown itself to be mere feeling. An accidental convergence of feeling. […] A mutual comfort that was subsumed by a greater need that had not been satisfied by their time together. […] In the end we are nothing more than the machinery of the universe, and love merely an element in its mechanism. Only reproduction mattered: to the universe and to humans. […] Love was a lost dream, and life itself shrivelled. (OH, pp. 137-139)

In her nihilism, Sarai can be seen to ironically follow a trajectory that is the exact opposite of God’s, the deity having abandoned his conception of the world as a mere mechanism when discovering love as meaning. Like Offred in The Handmaid’s Tale, whose indoctrination by Gilead leads her to reduce her self to a piece of machinery centred around a womb and driven by a “heart […] continuing on and on, marking time” (HT, p. 84), Diski’s protagonist comes to lose any faith in life beyond the biological when Abram, out of fear for his life and his Lord’s promise, does not hesitate to let Pharaoh have her in his bed: “Sarai observed her continuing intake of breath, her throbbing heart, and knew that there resided the power and mystery of existence. All any of us have in reality is […] life ticking on with no concern for love or heartache, for hope or emptiness” (OH, p. 147).

The realisation of Sarai’s old terror of abandonment reawakens in her the fearful child haunted by spectral silence, until she cannot cope anymore with the suffering and, as she leaves Egypt untouched by the foreign king, she is stricken by an episode of disembodiment through which she somatises her sense of not belonging.
Beyond the immediate horror of this temporary state of disconnection from a body turned into “an empty shell” (OH, p. 154), of “floating terror and helplessness” (OH, p. 155), this traumatic experience will turn out to be a salutary shock for the heroine. Indeed, when *I am that I am*, who equally perceives the Egyptian episode as a betrayal – Abram having “relinquished Sarai to the seed of another man” (OH, p. 145) –, launches his next attack to secure for himself the heart of his “beloved” (OH, p. 161) through renewed blessings that include the essential promise of future, Sarai, for her part, after a short suicidal phase, decides to be content with her contingent love: “Either Abram and the house of Shem were all she had, or the terrible coldness, the vast emptiness would descend, and she did not believe she could live any longer in so vacant a world. It had become a matter of life and death for Sarai” (OH, p. 168). She therefore resolves to fight back and fiercely oppose this lord who has become her “greatest rival” (OH, p. 168). Driven by “bitter […] jealousy at […] her ghostly adversary” (OH, pp. 168-169), she will start to defend her desire and the story of love that she has created with Abram, against God’s, exactly like the human narrator challenges God-the-narrator with its own tale. She thereby conveys the belief formulated by Huston that

que l’amour nous unisse à Dieu ou à l’un de nos congénères ne fait pas beaucoup de différence. […] Sous toutes ses formes, l’amour est une histoire que l’on se raconte pour rendre la vie vivable.74

Sarai’s counterattack against the Lord’s irresistible promise of posterity to Abram, which will appropriately consist in the heroine bringing back her husband to her own human Wor(l)d, will exacerbate the mediation. It will reinforce the heroine’s bond with her husband, for, as Girard argues, rivalry forces the mediator to strongly reaffirm his/her right of, and desire for, possession of the object.75 It will also increase God’s animosity towards the woman whom, in his jealousy, he has already started to dehumanise by regarding her as “nothing more than a vessel between Abram and me […] [.] the means of securing Abram’s love” (OH, p. 156), and in whose suffering he is taking delight: “She who refused to recognise my power or even my existence would get no succour from me. […] I rejoiced in her lovelessness” (OH, pp. 156-157).

74 Huston, p. 136.
75 Girard, pp. 27-28.
C. The Battle of Wor(l)ds: Sarai One, God One

From a God who does not know the meaning of the name he theatrically reveals to his creature, to a God whose own Word becomes meaningless, there is but one small step that is unintentionally taken by the divinity of Only Human as soon as he falls in love with Abram, as shows the following parodic rewriting of John 1:1, where God, appropriately enough, forgets the words of the Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was … what was the word? It was, it must have been I am, and yet the power of that word weakened. […]

A new word took root, not the word, […] but a word embedded in humanity. […] Love, love, love. Not my word. Not of me, of I am wrenched from eternity, complete, undivided, whole, without need, without desire, without longing. It wormed its way into my perfection, this word of humanity, and left a cavity in the flawless I am that ached to be filled. […]

And I … I … I … the Lord, the Creator, the Eternal, the Singularity, the Complete, the I am — I craved the love of Abram … (OH, pp. 169-170)

The choice of John, the Gospel that most emphasises God’s loving aspect, reinforces the subversiveness of this passage celebrating love as a solely human creation that supplants the divine Word and turns the eternal I am that I am, as his “experience of humanity increase[s]” (OH, p. 169), into a mere “forgotten name” (OH, p. 169) who tries to recollect how he used to “know […] [him]self as being, having been, always to be” (OH, p. 169).

In a highly ironic twist, while Diski’s godhead laments the loss of his Word, Sarai, by contrast, transmits what we know as the Word of the Judeo-Christian God to better attack her divine adversary. Teasing Abram about his lord who promises him countless descendants but seems to indefinitely withhold his gift, the protagonist determines to tell her husband the tales that women share during their monthly seclusion, after challenging Abram’s god to stop her and, thereby, forcefully asserting her own voice:

“I will tell and you will listen, because if your lord does not prevent me from speaking, there is nothing for you to do but hear me, and if he does stop my words you will know I tried to speak the truth.”

For a moment they waited in the singing silence of the grove.

“So,” Sarai said softly. “I will speak.” (OH, pp. 171-172)

In her attempt to win back her partner’s love, Sarai presents the events related in Genesis 1 to 12 as “an old story” in which Abram is “not the first to be chosen” (OH, p. 171) by a “jealous, vicious god [who] punishe[s] and divide[s] and diminishe[s]” humans “for making a life of their own” (OH, p. 173). In a narrative surprisingly similar to I am that I am’s own unflattering account of his achievements, the heroine
recounts how, the story says, this lonely god thoughtlessly created the first man and woman to then chastise them when they “began to live fully” (OH, p. 172), how when “the world went its own way, […] the god continued to punish and outlaw, as each of his attributes was taken from him by the resourcefulness of the creature he created” (OH, p. 172), how, out of disgust with flesh, he ruthlessly wiped out humanity with the exception of a docile, unquestioning man who ended up trying to silence his bad conscience with alcohol, and finally, how this divine being “confused and scattered” (OH, p. 173) humans when their project to leave a legacy to future generations threatened to undermine his hold on creation. Sarai therefore sees Abram as God’s latest pawn in the game of control of the world, “another docile man […] who quail[s] at extinction” (OH, p. 174), whom his lord “bait[s] […] with the honour of having been chosen, entice[s] […] with posterity, […] and then prevent[s] […] from having a child. Keep this hungry man to himself by keeping him hungry” (OH, p. 174). With a renewed echo of Feuerbach’s projection theory, Sarai denounces her husband’s inability to take responsibility for his own life through her claim that

[if this was the wisest god, the world had best go on its way alone, except for those who found such autonomy intolerable, for those who craved certainty and […] made […] a single creator their all and everything, so that when they heard his voice, and of course they would hear his voice, they knew they were chosen, were in the presence of certainty and were safe. (OH, pp. 171-174)

An expert psychologist, Sarai carries on her speech with a harsh, yet apt and extremely shrewd description of God’s psyche: “He is a separator, a baffled, angry solitary. […] He is an infant who gave birth to parents whose interest in each other he cannot tolerate. […] He fears that giving you a child will weaken his hold on you” (OH, p. 175). The contrast is particularly striking with God, who does not have the slightest idea of what crosses his creatures’ minds – “I d[o] not feel what they fe[e], only s[ee] what they d[o]” (OH, p. 177) –, who is completely baffled by humankind’s complex mental attitudes – “It should have been so simple. […] Punishment is bad. Life is good. […] What reasonable being would disobey? Human being” (OH, p. 94) – and who, later in the novel, even implicitly confirms Sarai’s severe diagnosis: “If only they had known, they needed no child, they had one already” (OH, p. 199). Having depicted her husband’s deity in what she considers his true colours, Sarai can now conclude her riposte to I am that I am’s seductive calls with the exposition of her own plan to fulfil her beloved’s wish for a child, a plan that is rooted in the reassertion of her rival desire and power:
“I am stronger than him, Abram. I am life. I am of the world. He is not. I will give you a child, whatever the consequences, because I love you and I have my own need, and my love and my need are greater than his. We do not need your god, we need a child-bearing woman, Abram. Take my slave, Hagar […] as your concubine, make a child with her who will be my child too, because I will it. Let us laugh in the face of this god. […] We will make our own future. […] It is the way of the world.” (OH, pp. 175-176)

As this passage demonstrates, Sarai sticks to the human reality and, in her refusal of transcendent justifications, even comes to embody the “way of the world,” not in the old passive acceptance of the word, but in a very active and positive sense. The rivalry between the protagonist and God for the love of Abram therefore turns into the confrontation between two conflicting Words and worlds.

While, after the patriarch’s rallying to her cause, Sarai savours her victory against God, relishing the idea that “[h]e ha[s] chosen her over his lord, and joined her in a rebellion against omnipotence and destiny” (OH, p. 176), God, on the other hand, broods over this sudden reversal of situation and seethes with hatred, an emotion that, according to Girard, can only truly be felt for the mediator, who prevents the subject from satisfying the desire that he or she has precisely suggested to the imitator.76

And had I learned also to hate? I knew that Sarai was my only rival, that her capacity to fulfil Abram’s desires was the only danger. […] Yes, I hated Sarai. She chose the world, when, like Abram, she might have chosen me out of her need. […] She opposed me with the very means of reproduction that I had burdened her kind with. She was the only thing that stood in the way of my complete possession of my beloved Abram. (OH, pp. 178-179)

This feeling of hatred that is totally new for the divinity shows that the mediation has gained in intensity through the protagonist’s hostile response which, far from diminishing the model’s prestige, typically increases it, as Girard further contends.77

By giving her Word and dictating the creation of life, Sarai appropriates divine prerogatives, whereas I am that I am, infected as he is with love, jealousy and now hatred, sinks more and more into humanity. The distance between Diski’s heroine and God keeps diminishing, and both their desires intensify, since “tout désir redouble de se voir partagé.”78 As Sarai’s dehumanising manipulation of Hagar illustrates, when it is related in the very same terms that God used earlier for Sarai – Hagar being described as “[a] weapon in the battle for […] [Abram’s] love, a vessel” (OH, p. 176) in the protagonist’s eyes – the mediation has reached the point where two triangles in

76 Girard, pp. 24-25.
77 Girard, pp. 24-25.
78 Girard, pp. 118-119.
reverse sense superimpose, and desire circulates more and more quickly between the rivals:

Nous avons maintenant un sujet-médiateur et un médiateur-sujet. [...] Chacun imite l’autre tout en affirmant la priorité [...] de son propre désir. Chacun voit dans l’autre un persécuteur atrocement cruel. Tous les rapports sont symétriques; les deux partenaires se croient séparés par un gouffre insondable mais l’on ne peut rien dire de l’un qui ne soit vrai, également, de l’autre. C’est l’opposition stérile des contraires. [...] [I]l n’y a plus, dans ce jeu-là, que des perdants.79

This heightened mimetic rivalry between Sarai and God creates but further suffering and disappointment, for although the matriarch initially feels that “[i]n Hagar, [she] […] renew[s] herself” (OH, p. 176), she quickly realises, when watching her servant’s belly grow, that she has actually won a pyrrhic victory. Not only does she dread that, in giving Abram another woman and a child from her, she might have weakened her position, that “[p]erhaps she ha[s] even acted […] unknowingly in the interest of the lord, should he exist” (OH, p. 181); she also “discover[s] that playing God at his own game g[i]ve[s] her all God’s disadvantages. She c[an] manipulate the world, but she c[an]not participate in it. […] And, like God, Sarai discover[s] a desire to destroy what she ha[s] caused to be made” (OH, p. 180).

If in modern commentaries, Sarah has often been viewed in a bad light because of her negative relationship with Hagar, in Only Human, the protagonist’s cruelty to her slave girl, and her eagerness to see her be erased from the picture are, without being fully excused, seen to be rooted in the spectral silence of the lost mother that has always haunted Sarai and now resurfaces with renewed vigour as Sarai recognises in Hagar an “echo of her own beginnings” (OH, p. 182) from a concubine who “conveniently died” (OH, p. 182). Where the human narrator sees its heroine and the forced surrogate mother as “both prisoners […] of the accomplishment of desire at the cost of peace of mind” (OH, p. 181), Sarai, driven by “a cruelty that ha[s] lain dormant since early childhood in the minute cracks between her love for the family of Shem and her fear that she d[oes] not really belong to them” (OH, p. 183), only sees a possibility to “punish the lost and the dead, to punish Abram, and to punish his lord” (OH, p. 183). Sarai, however, renounces to fully taking this opportunity, for when Ishmael is born, she does not tear him away from his mother. The protagonist, it seems, learns to be content with her small, hard-won victory over God:

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79 Girard, pp. 118-119 and 123.
Abram and Sarai lived a kind of peace, a sort of short-term eternity. They had challenged the Lord and in some way had won. Silence had fallen on Abram’s inner ear. […] Sarai had brought Abram back to reality, and now they both lived in it, together, life going on. […] What could be done had been done. Abram and Sarai were full with years, life was no more for the making, it had been made. (OH, pp. 188-189)

Behind the satisfaction and serenity, the human narrator nevertheless detects “the worst of all the losses” (OH, p. 187), for this well-ordered existence of “being old and waiting for their lives to come to a conclusion” (OH, p. 190) also signifies the absence of desire, which, as the French philosopher Baldine Saint Girons remarks, is “plus mortel encore que le désir: cet ennui qui consiste à ne pouvoir sortir d’un ‘moi’ dont j’éprouve l’équivalence avec le ‘rien’?”80: “If you do not succumb to despair, you succumb to life. […] It is the moment when life goes on. […] You have not died from despair, and therefore you will live. After a while, you do not even notice how terrible such a loss of loss is” (OH, p. 187).

God-the-narrator, the neglected suitor, will however not allow Sarai and Abram to passively “wait […] for their lives to come to a conclusion” (OH, p. 190), for, as he formulates it, “[f]rom love, […] from the need to retrieve the woman’s subversive narrative,81 to come to my own conclusion, I could not let Sarai and the world have their way” (OH, p. 191). In an echo of Revelation 21:6 – “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end” – Diski’s deity strives to reclaim for himself not only the conclusion of the story, but the story as a whole, with an outraged as if, in this telling of a story – both tellings – I were not having my say. As if my say, indeed, were not the story itself. The story’s mine, not hers, never was. The interruption is the narrative, the interrupter is the narrator, […] I am the interruption and the narrative. […] I am the commencement and the conclusion.82 (OH, p. 190)

Although I am that I am does interrupt eternity to create life and does cut in on the human narrator, this status of interrupter does not impart to him any ascendancy. In Only Human, God is – unlike in the Christian Bible – no longer the ultimate authority, the alpha and the omega, since the story begins and ends on a purely human level, with the rival human account that questions the divine truth.

80 Saint Girons, in Sollers, pp. 145-146.
81 This highly ambiguous phrase, since it can either simply refer to Sarai or to the narrating voice, deepens the mystery around the gender of the human narrator.
82 Such a claim is specifically rooted in Christianity, for as Neher remarks, in the Jewish understanding of the Bible, “il n’y a pas de point Oméga, pour la simple raison, d’abord, qu’il n’y a pas de point Alpha. La Bible hébraïque commence, non par la lettre première de l’alphabet, mais par la lettre seconde, par le Bet – Beréshit. […] Aucun point Oméga ne peut se targuer de ramasser en lui le tout de l’histoire, car il ne peut se référer, à l’autre bout, qu’à un point second. […] De A à Z, l’histoire biblique reste ouverte dans la conception juive” (Neher, p. 247).
If God seeks to conclude on the narratological level, he does so also from the point of view of desire, his eagerness to dominate the story game being indissociable from his willingness to outplay Sarai in the love game:

There is no meaning in eternity. [...] I realised that if I were to be anything at all to these humans, I had to become their meaning. But more than that, I discovered that if I were to be anything to myself, [...] I needed them to become my meaning.
It was Sarai I had to overcome. (OH, pp. 184-185)

This extract, together with the divinity’s confession that “I found myself wanting. [...] I called Abram my chosen one, my beloved. Yet what it was I loved in him, I couldn’t say” (OH, p. 190), reveals that *I am that I am* is not so much in love with Abram himself as with desire, with the “us” that Sarai, the model-rival, epitomises, and will defend, in the third battle that opposes her to God, with the weapons of humour and tenacity.

**D. The Choice of Laughter: Sarai Two, God One**

Diski’s God unquestionably brings a comic element to *Only Human* – appropriately subtitled, from this point of view, *A Divine Comedy*. This contribution however largely takes place at the godhead’s expense, via the contrast between his speech replete with ludicrous self-importance, and his acts betraying his total incompetence, for *I am that I am* does not master, or even understand, humour, as his third confrontation with the protagonist very well illustrates.

Torn between his compelling need for transcendence and his presence in the human world, between his open faith in the Lord and his unavowed “wish [...] [God] were not his master” (OH, p. 153), Abram reacts to his divinity’s new call, its renewed blessings and its institution of the ritual of circumcision with silent reticence: “When would this man speak? Not even refusal [...] even after I demanded that my power be inscribed on his penis” (OH, p. 192). Only when the godhead announces that Sarai – whom he renames Sarah, in his willingness to impose “the sign of [his] [...] control over one other thing” (OH, p. 192) – will get a son, does silence give way to an irrepressible fit of laughter that throws the patriarch shaking onto the ground. God misinterprets this reaction as a sign of submission, as “a Kierkegaardian ‘fear and trembling’”83 – “At last, [...] I’ve got him, he’s mine” (OH, p. 192) – until he understands the real nature of Abram’s response and its unfortunate implications:

“[T]his laughter kept me at a distance, drew a circle about my Abraham [...] and left me outside, unable to break through the wall of laughter” (OH, pp. 192-193). In bringing her husband back to human reality, Sarai has taught him the sense of bitter mockery that she has always cultivated towards her partner’s lord. However, Abram is not Sarai. As God remarks with relief before “disappear[ing] from the face of the earth” “with all the humourless dignity [he] […] c[an] muster” (OH, p. 194), his lover “c[an]ot commit himself entirely to the world” (OH, p. 193), and shows his reluctant acceptance of his lord’s will by using the name “Sarah” and imposing circumcision on all the men of his house.

Sarai regards Abram’s new names for themselves, and the sorry spectacle of men groaning in pain, as Abram’s relapse into the folly of his divine tale, in which her husband plays the part of the lord’s “new Adam. But this time he has taken back fertility and naming for himself” (OH, p. 196). The patriarch, however, shows her that he has reached a middle way – albeit uneasy and uncertain – between her and his god, by identifying the “us” that lies at the centre of the war between Sarai and I am that I am, as their ultimate human prerogative: “He does not understand human love. By default, it is ours. There is […] nothing he can do about our love. […] Us is all we can have that can’t be touched” (OH, p. 196). As a consequence, the human narrator concludes, with a pun that both refers to Sarai and Abram’s new weapon and foreshadows the coming of Isaac, that

[perhaps, after all, there could be both the madness and the way of the world. And if there was laughter, it might bridge the gap between Abram’s longings and vision and Sarai’s world of desert and necessity. The Lord could command, but Abram and Sarai could sit in silence and smile. (OH, p. 196)]

Accordingly, when God appears to his beloved in the form of three messengers, to “fe[e]l […] the earth under [his] […] feet” (OH, p. 191) and, at the same time, repeat his promise, the half-asleep Sarai, who welcomes with laughter the overheard news that she is to bear a son, resolves to brazenly lie to her husband’s lord and deny sniggering. She thereby signals her refusal to abandon the authentic existence – in the existentialist sense of the term – that she has built for herself, to “lose her life again, this time to belief. […] It was hers, her existence. […] She would not relinquish it to dreams of comfort. […] [S]he smiled a brittle smile at the man in bright white to let

84 The protagonist therefore later wonders whether the whole episode has really happened, or if it has only been a dream.
him know that, whoever and whatever he might be, still, she could choose” (*OH*, p. 198).

If Sarai is free to deny *I am that I am’s* existence, the latter, by contrast, has become entirely dependent on his creatures’ will, which again challenges the most progressive views of the Judeo-Christian deity, like Fiddes’s claim that God, “who depends upon nothing outside [his] […] own self for existence […] may still, out of pure free will, […] [and] for enrichment of the divine life […] choose to be […] completed by those who are created*:\(^{85}\):

She knew who I was, but still she lied. Such a lie. “I did not laugh,” when the sound of her mockery rang in the air. She meant “I will not believe in you, no matter how you confront me with your reality.” […] Abraham, after all the decades of promises and disappointment could choose to believe, and Sarah could choose to deny. And I was subject to their choices, I, their maker. […] Endurance, denial and humour were my limitations. (*OH*, pp. 198-199)

To this hilarity, God plans to implacably oppose “raw power” (*OH*, p. 199), for he concludes that “[t]here [i]s nothing, it seem[s], that I c[an] do about Sarah except destroy her” (*OH*, p. 199), announcing the fatal end of the novel. His latest reverse having made the deity realise that “[a]ll along, my promises, my enticements to the human, ha[ve] been promises to myself” (*OH*, p. 203), *I am that I am* admits, in the most dramatic manifestation of his imitation of Sarai and her always insecure desire, that “I longed to remain implicated, and I saw that humanity had the capacity to go its own way. Now I feared abandonment” (*OH*, p. 203). Abram’s lord therefore persuades himself that “[o]nly […] a child […] c[an] break the bond between them that […] [keeps] me outside Abraham’s heart. What they most want […] [is] the final weapon I ha[ve] against them” (*OH*, pp. 202-203).

However, when Sarai eventually gets pregnant in her old age, and gives birth to Isaac, things do not evolve according to God’s plans, since this wonder represents both for Sarai and the narrative voice but one of the many “strange things [that] happen” (*OH*, p. 205) on earth, like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, or the famines and plagues that Abram, Sarai and their people have fled from: “Cities disappear in storms of fire. […] Rains fail to come or come in torrents. […] And Sarai and Abram had a boy. […] It is all the way of the world” (*OH*, p. 205). Moreover, this “love created in the flesh” (*OH*, p. 206), as the anonymous narrator calls Isaac, reinforces Sarai’s and, to a certain extent, Abram’s connection to the human reality:

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\(^{85}\) Fiddes, p. 174.
The child was circumcised, it was true, but beyond that there was no mention of Abram’s lord. […] The lord of Abram’s hopes and hopelessness was very nearly forgotten in this affirmation of holding together. The world took on a renewed importance. (OH, pp. 205-206)

Sarai’s maternity furthermore soothes the suffering entailed by the haunting losses that have punctuated the protagonist’s existence, for “Isaac [i]s new life to Sarai, another beginning that dissolve[s] the life-long shadow that ha[s] encased her heart, and give[s] her back her long-lost stepmother, the half-loved half-sister, and the anonymous woman who began it all” (OH, p. 205). In short, Isaac’s birth is celebrated as the triumph of human bonding and tenacity, epitomised by Sarai, in both the war for the story of love – “[i]t […] thrived and lived, lived, lived: this singular truth of Sarai and Abram, […] of the fact of them. Of us” (OH, p. 206) – and the story game. As the human narrator proudly remarks, in a reaffirmation of humankind as the storytelling species, and in answer to God’s “[t]he story’s mine, not hers, never was” (OH, p. 190),

[w]henever the story belongs to, the events took place in the world: in the world of wishes and dreams, perhaps, but what more human a world could there be? […] We taught him a thing or two about being human. I am that I am learned the power of we would be. […] His story, her story, my story: it doesn’t matter. The need to tell it makes it a human story, whoever authors the narration. […] And perhaps, after all, eternity is nothing without humanity interrupting it. (OH, pp. 204-205)

It is, however, precisely because “eternity [i]s not enough” (OH, p. 209) anymore for God since he has “learned to reflect […] [his creatures] and their paltry human wishes”86 (OH, p. 209), that I am that I am cannot stand the sight of “this happy, human family […] congratulating itself on the splendid achievement of being human” (OH, p. 206). Sarai and Abram have therefore not heard the last of this blundering and jealous deity who is firmly decided to call a halt to this semblance of an idyllic human happy ending by demanding the satisfaction of his own desire for love and control:

Now, Abraham and Sarah had what they wanted. […] And me, what of me? Did I have what I wanted […]? Love? […] I had been used to provide them with what they needed, […] but what had I received in return? I wanted the love of my creation, I wanted proof that the word was mine, after all. (OH, pp. 206-209)

In an ultimate attempt to defeat, i.e. silence, Sarai, God will attack the very embodiment of the protagonist’s love, wishes and dreams, her beloved son Isaac, by

86 In a highly ironic way, God moreover comes to the conclusion that “[t]he only image I had created, it seemed, was their vision of themselves in me” (OH, p. 209), which can be analysed as indirectly substantiating Feuerbach’s atheist claim that man is the original model of his idol (Feuerbach, p. xxxvi).
requesting the boy’s sacrifice from Abram. This scene of the Akedah marks the tragic end of the war between the human Sarai, whom spectral silence has turned into an anxious child terrorised by loss, but also a fierce fighter energised by what can be described as her atheistic conviction, and a “only human” God defined by his mimetic desire. It will constitute the loudest, most devastating silence in the life of Diski’s heroine, as will be shown in the third part of this thesis.

The analyses of Diamant’s *The Red Tent* and Roberts’s *The Wild Girl* have shown how the heroines associate their quest for voice with the entity of the great mother reconciling the maternal and divine spheres. The second pair of case studies was devoted to Roberts’s *The Book of Mrs Noah* and Diski’s *Only Human*, in which the figure of the female parent is disconnected from the sacred, yet still plays a particularly decisive role in the protagonist’s construction of her identity. My third and final duo of critical surveys will focus on Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Tennant’s *Sisters and Strangers*. Both carry one step further the challenging of authority already perceptible in the second group of novels, since not only God, but also the mother, are depicted as being of little or no help, power or comfort to Offred and Eve. The following chapters will demonstrate that Atwood’s and Tennant’s novels hinge on the form of silence that I call “reticence;” the former, through the Handmaid’s reluctant discourse of revolt, and the latter, via Grandmother Dummer’s playfully secretive and deceptive account of Eve’s constant oscillation between subjection and self-affirmation.
SECTION 3

RETICENT TESTIMONIES

Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Tennant’s *Sisters and Strangers*
Chapter 5
“Clamour[ing] to Be Heard, Though Silently”: Offred’s Reticent Tale of Rebellion

I. “It Hurts Me to Tell It … But I Will Myself to Go On”: An Introduction to Reticence

“To survive, Offred seems to suggest, one must surrender.” As this quotation illustrates, Atwood’s protagonist has sometimes been interpreted as a compliant victim, or denounced as “a heroine whose sole resistance goes on inside her head, a resistance […] indistinguishable from passivity and masochism.” Such analyses, however, overlook the truly subversive character of Offred’s opposition to the Gileadean authority. They fail to consider one of the central, typically postmodern messages of the novel, namely that “[c]ontext is all” (HT, p. 154) and that, in situations where “[t]he circumstances have been reduced” (HT, p. 18) in such a

1 Le Breton, pp. 90-91.
2 An earlier, succinct version of this chapter – in which the notion of “reticence” is not yet developed – was published in 2009 in the form of an article devoted to Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale, and Roberts’s The Wild Girl and The Book of Mrs Noah, entitled “Filling In What Was Left Out: Voices and Silences of Biblical Women” (in Vanessa Guignery [Ed.], Voices and Silence in the Contemporary Novel in English [Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009], pp. 112-129).
drastic, violent way, the Handmaid’s reluctant revolt might precisely prove to be the best, or even the only viable strategy to effectively and durably challenge women’s state-organised silencing. Offred’s resistance to the suppression of her freedom of expression and her dehumanisation must therefore be assessed according to the severely limited possibilities, or rather “impossibilities,” offered to her, and not indiscriminately according to traditional feminist or humanist standards. Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* unmistakably belongs to the category of trauma fiction that, according to the American literary scholar Laurie Vickroy, “immerse[s] us in individual experiences of terror, [and] arbitrary rules[,] […] explore[s] the problematics of action in coercive circumstances” and demonstrates that “[i]ndividuals’ actions under extreme oppression, whether in a domestic or war situation, cannot be understood by applying normalised values or moral systems”:

Many of the characters portrayed struggle with experiences of dehumanization so raw that holding onto their humanity becomes a precarious and conflicted process, and inevitably an ambivalent sense of identity and conscience arise out of such traumatic contexts.

Endeavouring, against all odds, to give herself a voice, both in her daily experience of Gilead and in her narrative rendering of it, Atwood’s protagonist defies the totalitarian regime at its very core, for the dictatorship represents, as Sherrill Grace points out, “the ultimate monologistic authoritarian discourse that permits no other voice to speak.” Given its highly oppressive setting, Offred’s struggle for self-assertion, although it is described by the Handmaid as vital, also constantly confronts her with the danger and pain that it entails, as her narrative repeatedly conveys in an extremely powerful way. As such, Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* is therefore characterised by “reticence,” a type of silence that – unlike the more punctual experience of eloquent silence, for instance – pervades an entire story, in which the narrator is torn between, on the one hand, the need to testify to one’s fate and, on the other hand, some reserve, secretiveness or unwillingness to disclose one’s intimate thoughts, feelings and deeds. As Rosenman explains, “[é]tudier la part du silence dans la parole du témoin, c’est aussi prendre la mesure de ce qu’il peut y avoir

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5 This word is borrowed from the critic of Holocaust literature Lawrence Langer, who asserts that victims of oppressive, dehumanising situations are only allowed “a choice between impossibilities” (Lawrence Langer, quoted in Vickroy, p. 34).
6 Vickroy, p. 34.
7 Vickroy, p. 34.
d’ambivalence dans […] le désir de dire, du risque encouru à raconter.”

Tales of reticence specifically rest on the dramatization of the narrator’s doubts, hesitations and interruptions, which are rendered mainly through gaps, detours, close-ups on visual images or words, flashbacks, allusions, innuendos or self-erasure – this last strategy referring to the placing sous rature, or the giving and then taking away, of elements of the text, as Brian McHale defines it in Postmodernist Fiction. Since they disrupt the normal flow of the story, these various techniques draw the readers’ attention to, and favour their participation in, the process of narrative construction, giving thereby a polyphonic character to the text.

As is the case in Atwood’s dystopia, reticence often finds its source in trauma – in the same way as experiences of the ineffable and spectral silences, with which it is sometimes conjoined. In such discourses, the specific tensions and difficulties occasioned by the remembering and telling of the traumatic events forbid any “completed statement, [or] […] totalizable account,” but rather yield what Shoshana Felman calls a “testimony”:

[a]s a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full recognition. […] In the testimony, language is in process […], it does not possess itself as a conclusion, as the constatation of a verdict or the self-transparency of knowledge.

As will be shown, The Handmaid’s Tale perfectly epitomises this form of reticence rooted in trauma, the protagonist repeatedly stressing her reluctance to tell her story, and how it constitutes a predicament for her, while nevertheless forcing herself to carry on with her fragmented narrative.

When words risk sweeping along the memory of a traumatic past, threatening to shatter the subject’s fragile stability and composure, maintaining silence about these experiences often appears as a necessity. Discourses of reticence such as The

10 Brian McHale, Postmodernist Fiction (London/New York: Routledge, 1989 [1987]), pp. 100-101. Although the typical postmodern form generally leaves the reader with an “irresolvable paradox of the world outside the characters’ minds,” in the studied novels, narrative self-erasure assumes, as will be shown, a less destabilizing form, for the various scenarios which are presented and then negated take place in a character’s head, “as mental anticipations, wishes, or recollections” (McHale, p. 101).
12 Felman, in Felman and Laub, p. 5.
13 Le Breton, p. 21.
Handmaid’s Tale consequently summon the issue of the secret, defined by Arnaud Lévy as knowledge concealed from others – “savoir-caché-à-autrui.” The analysis of Atwood’s novel – and of Tennant’s Sisters and Strangers – will foreground three main functions of secrecy: when an absence of communication is part of the narrator’s ludic or cunning stance, when it is used as a protective weapon, and, finally when it serves more offensive aims. Firstly, secrecy can be used in the context of a narrator’s playful or even deceitful attitude towards the narratees, when the voice in charge of the tale chooses to deliberately pass over in silence controversial actions or words that might prejudice the relationship with the addressees, to disseminate or delay the disclosure of information necessary for the understanding of the story or to resort to insinuation, thereby purposely disorienting the readers or putting them on the wrong track – as Offred sometimes does in The Handmaid’s Tale, yet in a considerably less systematic way than Grandmother Dummer in Tennant’s rewriting of the Eden story. Secondly, in traumatic or oppressive situations especially, secrecy can work as a defensive strategy, enabling one to turn a blank face to the other – as Sontag points out, “[a] person who becomes silent becomes opaque for the other” – and thereby to conserve some control or areas of intimacy: “through silence […] speakers can protect themselves from potential intrusions; or as Saunders (1985: 173) puts it, through silence […] people preserve emotional neutrality.” Secret also enables its users to avoid unveiling themselves when it might prove perilous:

il est parfois malaisé de prendre le risque d’énoncer une objection de conscience en toute clarté devant ceux dont on ne soupçonne pas les positions personnelles. Le silence s’impose alors comme une forme de sauvegarde de soi dans l’ignorance des menaces recelées par l’auditoire.

Finally, secrecy can also take a more offensive aspect, when it is meant to mark refusal: “Le silence devient une forme d’opposition quand on se tait de manière délibérée pour traduire un refus, une résistance personnelle à quelqu’un ou à une situation.” This powerful weapon maintains the other in a position of need and, since

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15 Le Breton, p.118.
16 Sontag, p. 16.
18 Le Breton, pp. 90-91.
19 Le Breton, p. 21.
it kills dialogue at its root, can reduce him/her to silence. Under authoritarian systems of government, as in The Handmaid’s Tale, it can moreover mark the determination to stop being the regime’s puppet. Whether in its defensive or offensive form, “[t]he silence that might be taken as timid avoidance of a direct confrontation or attack is a sign of strength.” As Ettin remarks in Speaking Silences, “[t]his is the underdog’s strategy, using the weapon of apparent weakness to endure and triumph.”

This case study will highlight how Offred’s struggle for voice can be understood as a fight for the restoration of both polyphony and plurality of identities and meanings, which are denied and ruthlessly eradicated by the Gileadean authorities, and how this narrative crusade rests on the perilous equilibrium between adjusting to her silencing and resisting it, between disclosure and remoteness, between anamnesis and forgetting.

II. “I’ll Pretend You Can Hear Me”: Offred’s Polyphonic Testimony

A. “I Tell, Therefore You Are”: Dialoguing with the Narratee(s)

Nous […] engendrons autre chose que des enfants: de l’amour, du désir, du langage, de l’art, du social, du politique, du religieux, etc. Mais cette création nous a été interdite depuis des siècles. […] La question d’avoir ou de ne pas avoir des enfants devrait toujours se poser sur fond d’un autre engendrement, d’une création d’images et de symboles, pour ne pas devenir traumatisante ou pathologique.

This quotation from Irigaray’s Sexes et parentés appropriately illustrates what is at stake in The Handmaid’s Tale, where Offred, being denied by Gilead any kind of creation except biological reproduction – which officially determines her existence completely, to the point of life, or death –, defies the totalitarian regime to (re)claim for herself liberating and empowering forms of creativity in order to survive. She who is only allowed minimal communication, consisting mainly of hollow state-sanctioned greetings further emphasising her sole recognised raison d’être – such as the biblically-inspired and revealingly expunged “Blessed be the fruit” and “May the

20 Le Breton, pp. 85-86.
21 Ettin, p. 175.
22 Ettin, p. 175.
Lord open” (HT, p. 29) – or the “clipped whispers, […] [a]mputated speech” (HT, p. 211) stolen through the white wings of her Handmaid headgear, irrepressibly “long[s] for […] [a]n exchange, of sorts” (HT, p. 21). She consequently imagines her testimony as a tale told to a narratee whom she conceives in her head:

if it’s a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don’t tell a story only to yourself. There’s always someone else.
Even when there is no one.
A story is like a letter. Dear You, I’ll say. Just you, without a name. Attaching a name attaches you to the world of fact, which is riskier. […] I will say you, you, like an old love song. You can mean more than one.
You can mean thousands. (HT, pp. 49-50)

Envisaging her fate as a story and, thereby, re-establishing a semblance of dialogue, enables Offred to alleviate the immediate suffering caused by the loneliness and isolation imposed on her and, simultaneously, to hope for, and project herself onto, a reality situated beyond Gilead, for, as she formulates it, “[i]f it’s a story I’m telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off” (HT, p. 49).

This need to communicate with a narratee Offred invents for herself in order to maintain a sense of agency and identity, shows how much the Handmaid’s story is intended as a critique of the monologism of male authorised discourses, and echoes Bakhtine’s belief that “in dialogue a person not only shows himself outwardly, but he becomes […] that which he is, not only for others but for himself as well. To be means to communicate dialogically.”24 Adapting Descartes’ “I think, therefore I am,” the protagonist moreover claims, later in the novel, that “[b]y telling you anything at all I’m at least believing in you, I believe you’re there, I believe you into being. Because I’m telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are” (HT, p. 279). With this rewriting, which “shifts the emphasis away from the isolated thinking subject to the speaking subject”25 and is strongly reminiscent of the French poet Francis Ponge’s own “Je parle et tu m’entends, donc nous sommes,”26 Offred not only empowers herself, but she also very forcefully summons her narratees – including us, readers –, giving birth to them as subjects in/of her tale.

Although the heroine repeatedly stresses how essential such storytelling is for her mental sanity – “I would like to believe this is a story I’m telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance” (*HT*, p. 49) –, she at the same time periodically voices her reticence. She confesses her ambivalence about the power of imagination – “I’ll pretend you can hear me. But it’s no good, because I know you can’t” (*HT*, p. 50) – and, with the seemingly contradictory string of sentences “[i]t isn’t a story I’m telling. It’s also a story I’m telling, in my head, as I go along” (*HT*, p. 49), states her awareness that her distress, in its terrible actuality, cannot be simply swept away or rendered fictional by being turned into a tale. With these words, and the following remark specifying, in passing, that she “[t]ell[s], rather than write[s], because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden” (*HT*, p. 49) – which draws attention to the original oral form of the story we are reading, yet keeps secret the circumstances of the narration – Offred moreover foregrounds the combined processes of recollection and storytelling. Atwood’s is a highly self-conscious narrator, so much so that, to borrow Hilde Staels’s expression, the “telling [of] her story, […] becomes the story of its telling.”

The heroine of *The Handmaid’s Tale* endeavours to share her story, that is, the facts that constitute her life under the Gileadean regime, but she also realises, as Hutcheon notes, that it is “inevitably ordered, constructed, fictionalised.” She accordingly uses, on several occasions, the term “reconstruction” to define her narrative:

> All of it is a reconstruction. It’s a reconstruction now, in my head, as I lie flat on my single bed rehearsing what I should or shouldn’t have said, what I should or shouldn’t have done, how I should have played it. If I ever get out of here –
> Let’s stop there. I intend to get out of here. It can’t last forever. […]
> When I get out of here, if I’m ever able to set this down, in any form, even in the form of one voice to another, it will be a reconstruction then too, at yet another remove. (*HT*, p. 144)

By repeatedly acknowledging the subjective nature of her narrative, Offred undermines the notion of absolute, complete, objective truth imposed by the authorised discourse, and conveys the unspeakable – or, when associated with trauma, ineffable – nature of her experience: “It’s impossible to say a thing exactly the way it

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was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances” (*HT*, p. 144).

At different stages in the text, Offred expresses her reticence by sharing with her narratee the difficulties the anamnesis entails – the hesitations, uncertainties and revived psychological suffering –, thereby justifying the fragmented aspect of her narrative, which she typically associates with dismemberment:

I wish this story […] showed me in a better light, […] less hesitant. […] I wish it had more shape. […] There is so much […] getting in the way, so much whispering, […] so many unsaid words, so much creeping about and secrecy. […]

I’m sorry there is so much pain in this story. I’m sorry it’s in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force. […]

[It] hurts me to tell it over, over again. […] But I keep on going with […] this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it, as I will hear yours too if I ever get the chance. […] So I will myself to go on. (*HT*, pp. 279-280)

When despite this determination to testify to her distress, the tension becomes almost unbearable and threatens to give way to forgetfulness and despair, Offred resorts to flashbacks and narrative detours into the stories of other women who have also risen up against Gilead and whose existence the dictatorship strives to negate. Such a strategy enables the heroine to ease the pressure, but also gives her tale another subversively polyphonic dimension.

**B. “A Way of Keeping Her Alive”: Passing On Other Mutinous Female Voices**

**1. Moira, the Archetype of the Rebel**

Fragments of the adventures of Offred’s best friend, the lesbian feminist Moira, provide welcome interludes of female audacity and rebelliousness that allow Atwood’s protagonist to escape to “[s]omewhere good” (*HT*, p. 47) when she is “too tired to go on with this story[,] […] too tired to think about where I am” (*HT*, p. 138). The archetype of the free spirit, who used to take delight in spicing up her college years with gently inflammatory gestures like the writing of an essay on date rape or the organisation of an “underwhore party” (*HT*, p. 66), Moira refuses to be moulded into the red shape of docile and “chaste vessel […]” (*HT*, p. 255) as soon as she is brought to the Red Centre, where she meets again Offred for her indoctrination.

Undeterred by a first failed escape, which ended in a session of torture perpetrated by the Aunts, the young woman later repeats her attempt and manages to break loose from the training institution, creating thereby a commotion. The account
of how she tricked an Aunt in the toilets and forced her to switch clothes with her before gagging her in the furnace room, quickly circulates among the Handmaids by word of mouth “in the semi-darkness, […] from bed to bed” (HT, p. 143). It fills them with a mixture of, on the one hand, admiration for this peer, who, as “lava beneath the crust of daily life” (HT, p. 143), has turned the Aunts into “absurd” figures that can “be shanghaied in toilets” (HT, p. 143), but also hope that “[a]t any moment there might be a shattering explosion” (HT, p. 143) and, on the other hand, fear of the freedom that she embodies – since the unwilling boarders of the Rachel and Leah Centre have already started to “los[e] the taste for freedom” (HT, p. 143). Offred ironically expresses this ambivalence through her pun on the word “loose,” which combines positive associations connected with wild, unrestrained energy, and reproving accents conveying the official view on women rebels: “Moira had power now, she’d been set loose, she’d set herself loose. She was now a loose woman” (HT, p. 143).

Moira represents for Offred a model of unruliness, a fantasy of liberty whom the narrator tends to retrospectively idealise. She for instance embellishes the story of her best friend’s feat by making her utter threatening words to the Aunt, like “I could zap you with this, or stick this thing into your eye. Just remember I didn’t, if it ever comes to that” (HT, p. 142) and claiming that “I expect Moira said something like it” (HT, p. 142). However, the narrative of Atwood’s protagonist also shows that Moira’s frontal attack on the totalitarian regime does not constitute a winning strategy, for the fugitive is caught again by the authorities after eight or nine months on the run, and consigned to Jezebel’s, a clandestine brothel for officials and trade delegations, where she is turned into a grotesque echo of an old times’ pin up with a worn-out bunny costume.

It is in Jezebel’s that Offred, who has been taken on a secret outing by her Commander, last sees her friend, and manages to hear from her the story of her hiding and subsequent arrest during furtive stolen conversations in the restroom. The Moira that Offred has in front of her on that occasion strikingly contrasts with the Moira that Offred has always known, for her fighting spirit and radical feminist ideals have given way to what the heroine interprets as “indifference, a lack of volition” (HT, p. 261):

“You should figure out some way of getting in here. You’d have three or four good years before your snatch wears out and they send you to the boneyard. The food’s not bad and there’s drink and drugs, if you want it, and we only work nights.” (HT, p. 261)
Such cynical defeatism frightens the protagonist, who dreads that Gilead has succeeded in “really do[ing] it to her then, tak[ing] away something – what? – that used to be so central to her? […] I want gallantry from her, swashbuckling, heroism, single-handed combat. Something I lack” (HT, p. 261).

Although this last appearance retains a subversive character, since Moira, in her forced prostitution, manages to keep challenging Gilead’s sanitised language and sexuality by cultivating her impertinence and striking up lesbian relationships, turning Jezebel’s into “[b]utch paradise” (HT, p. 261), as she calls it, the path of the female rebel eventually fails to provide Offred with a model of female triumph over state-enforced silencing:

I’d like to tell a story about how Moira escaped, for good this time. […] I’d like her to end with something daring and spectacular, some outrage, something that would befit her. But as far as I know that didn’t happen. I don’t know how she ended, or even if she did. (HT, p. 262)

The ultimate futility of Moira’s violent revolt, which is, according to Marta Caminero-Santangelo, “nothing more subversive than death,” can be seen to be foreshadowed in her name, for in Greek, μοίρα means “one’s portion in life, lot, destiny” — often in the negative sense of fatal destiny — and, when used as a proper noun, refers to Destiny personified as the goddess of death or calamity. Moreover, as several critics have pointed out, the name of Offred’s friend “recall[s] Moira Shearer,” the actress who plays the part of the ballerina committing suicide in the 1948 film The Red Shoes — a film that hinges on the motif of the same name, which is frequently alluded to in Atwood’s work, as has already been mentioned.

Transmitting her best friend’s words, and “mak[ing] [them] sound as much like her as [she] can” despite the arduousness of the exercise, is crucial for the

32 Magnien and Lacroix, p. 1164.
33 Barbara Hill Rigney, quoted in Caminero-Santangelo. See also Marta Dvorak, “What is Real/Reel? Margaret Atwood’s ‘Rearrangement of Shapes on a Flat Surface,’ or Narrative as Collage,” in Bloom, Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale, p. 150.
34 Offred acknowledges her uncertainties and her editing work with the words “[t]his is what she says, whispers, more or less. I can’t remember exactly. […] I’ve filled it out for her as much as I can: […] she just gave the outlines” (HT, p. 255).
narrator, because “it’s a way of keeping her alive” (HT, p. 256). This sentence, while conveying the Handmaid’s still surviving hope of a future reunion with her confidante, can also be interpreted as foregrounding that, under the oppressive circumstances of Gilead, the voice of open, explosive opposition needs the seemingly timorous, un-heroic, yet more enduring voice of reticent resistance to be passed on and heard.

2. Offred’s Sombre Double

Offred’s predecessor as Fred’s Handmaid also surfaces time and again through detours in the tale when, “trying not to tell stories, or at any rate not this one” (HT, p. 60), the narrator fantasises about the woman who must have lived in her room before her. A subtle mixture of positive and negative escapist meanings, the former Offred represents the heroine’s “dark double,” with whom Offred gets into contact through the scratched inscription “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum” (HT, p. 62) that she finds by chance in the bedroom cupboard. This message is subversive, not primarily because of its meaning, which the Commander only later translates as “don’t let the bastards grind you down” (HT, p. 196), but because of its written form – Handmaids being forbidden to write – and, most importantly, its intended function. Offred’s predecessor having left it “for whoever came next” (HT, p. 62), it was designed as an alternative discourse challenging the authorised monologic propaganda. These four words therefore immediately acquire a taste of magic and rebellion for the heroine, even though she does not, at first, understand their meaning:

I thought it might be Latin, but I didn’t know any Latin. […]
It pleases me to ponder this message. It pleases me to think I’m communicating with her. […]
It pleases me to know that her taboo message made it through. […] Sometimes I repeat the words to myself. They give me a small joy. (HT, p. 62)

During the prologue to the Ceremony, when the household is supposed to be united in prayer after the reading of Genesis 30:18 – “And Leah said, God hath given me my hire, because I have given my maiden to my husband” –, the Handmaid’s secret statement is even vested with spiritual significance by Offred who, being lost for words in the face of her imminent ritualised rape, repeats the only message that “sounds right, and it will have to do, because I don’t know what else I can say to God” (HT, p. 101), a message that she associates, in its seditious nature, with a mental

representation of its author that has, revealingly, “the face of Moira” (HT, p. 101). Although, as will appear in the rest of the analysis, the hidden inscription progressively regresses from the status of subversive prayer to that of an opaque command, then of “a sad graffiti” (HT, p. 196) and of a schoolboy joke, it never fully loses its appeal for the heroine as a call to sedition.

This liberating aspect of Offred’s constructed dialogue with her forerunner is however inextricably linked with dismal connotations, for the woman who, as one of the Marthas euphemistically calls it, “didn’t work out” (HT, p. 63), is repeatedly linked with the moulding in the shape of a wreath on the bedroom ceiling, and the “blank space, plastered over” (HT, p. 17) at its centre, where a chandelier must have been before, the very chandelier from which Offred assumes – and this is later confirmed by the Commander – that the former Handmaid hanged herself. Offred’s double therefore represents, as Sandra Tomc argues, “the ultimate escape of self-annihilation.”36 Conveying her mixed feelings about this radical getaway, the narrator connects it with both her fear of destruction and her yearning for protection from torment. Thus the central blank on the ceiling, since it looks to her like “the place in a face where the eye has been taken out” (HT, p. 17), brings to her mind still another image of mutilation symbolising Gilead’s silencing of women, while the relief ornament around it evokes nothingness, being “a frozen halo, a zero. A hole in space where a star exploded. […] All things white and circular” (HT, p. 210), like “the round face of the implacable clock” (HT, p. 210) which marks the time that the heroine has to kill in her room, the time that is actually slowly killing her with boredom and unfulfilled longing. Yet, like the taboo formula in the closet, the wreath seems to possess for Offred some safeguarding magical power:

I look up at the ceiling, the round circle of plaster flowers. Draw a circle, step into it, it will protect you. From the centre was the chandelier, and from the chandelier a twisted strip of sheet was hanging down. That’s where she was swinging, just lightly, like a pendulum; the way you could swing as a child, hanging by your hands from a tree branch. She was safe then, protected altogether. (HT, p. 223)

In moments of despondency, Offred does contemplate taking her life, as when, reflecting that her fate can “[s]ometimes […] hardly be borne” (HT, p. 62), she bluntly declares “I know why […] they took down the chandelier” (HT, p. 62), thereby implicitly confessing to fleeting suicidal thoughts. The Handmaid nevertheless does

36 Tomc, in Bloom, Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale, p. 83.
not choose her predecessor’s fatal outcome, even when she imagines that she can “feel her presence” (HT, p. 305) and hear her encourage her to “[g]et it over” (HT, p. 305). Atwood’s protagonist can therefore be seen to pass on her “ancestress[’]” (HT, p. 305) message, making her survive her chosen death, but also to reject its irreversible defeatism, preferring to find her own voice, which in its reticence, never lapses into self-destruction.

Re-introducing dialogue with her double, her lost friend and her narratees, Offred strives to alternately share her distress and divert her thoughts from it, while challenging her silencing by the authorities. Besides this subversive horizontal form of communication, Atwood’s heroine also voices her polyphonic rebellion by creating her own verbal intercourse with God, which questions Gilead’s religious monologism based on distorted scriptural references and impersonal, soulless rituals.

C. “Oh God. How Can I Keep On Living?”: Offred’s Chatty Discourse with the Maker

As is clear from the very practice of surrogate motherhood imposed upon Handmaids, the Gileadean regime draws heavily on the Bible, through which it intends to legitimise its policies. Like any totalitarian state, it does not hesitate to adapt its sources to suit its authoritarian needs, understanding the sacred texts of the Judeo-Christian tradition in the most literal way, or tampering with their words. Atwood’s heroine, however, is not deceived by these falsifications and even, as Howells remarks, “delights in the exposure of Gilead’s fraudulent biblical rhetoric.” 37 For instance, when Aunt Lydia asserts that “All flesh is weak” (HT, p. 55), Offred immediately corrects in her head the words from Isaiah 40:6 – “All flesh is grass” (HT, p. 55) –, re-establishing in this way the original metaphorical language of the Bible revealingly eradicated by the Aunt in her willingness to reduce language to unique, literal meanings. The heroine of The Handmaid’s Tale is not fooled either by the Aunts adapted version the Beatitudes, which emphasises the aspects of Jesus’ sermon that can best serve the ideology of passive acceptance of one’s fate promoted by Gilead – “Blessed be the poor in spirit. […] Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the meek” (HT, p. 100) –, but does not mention its more liberating facets – “Blessed

are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matthew 5:6) – and contains the particularly helpful but made-up “Blessed are the silent” (“HT, p. 100). Offred consequently comments: “I knew they made that up, I knew it was wrong, and they left things out too, but there was no way of checking” (HT, p. 100).

If Atwood’s protagonist refuses Gilead’s gross tampering with the Scriptural text, she also challenges the religious practices the fundamentalist regime imposes, like the Soul Scrolls, those shops where, night and day, machines print, say with “toneless metallic voices” (HT, p. 176), and instantly recycle the prayers people order by Compuphone. Stating, during one of her walks with her fellow Handmaid, that she does not believe that God listens to such machinery, Offred articulates her rebellion to a peer who might be under the government’s heel, and therefore takes considerable risk for, as she observes, such a confession constitutes “treason. […] Subversion, sedition, blasphemy, heresy, all rolled into one” (HT, p. 177).

Considering this fierce resistance to the orthodox Gileadean devotions, when the narrator feels the need to communicate with God, her prayers strikingly contrast with the automated entreaties or the communal sessions of worship at the Rachel and Leah Centre, during which the Handmaids are made to kneel on the hard floor at the foot of their beds to create the harmonious image of “Christmas-card angels, regimented in our robes of purity” (HT, p. 204), and beg for obliteration, mortification and “emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled” (HT, p. 204). Alone in her bedroom at the Commander’s house, Offred creates her own alternative religious discourse, which conveys her rejection of Gilead’s chocolate-box ceremonials and her constant oscillation between despair and hope – “I pray where I am, sitting by the window. […] I don’t even close my eyes. Out there or inside my head, it’s an equal darkness. Or light” (HT, p. 204). Offred’s prayer also betrays her need to connect with feelings with the Lord, in a deeply personal manner, as her opening sentence illustrates: “My God. Who Art in the Kingdom of Heaven, which is within” (HT, p. 204). With her subversive version of “The Lord’s Prayer,” Offred challenges not only the authority of the Gileadean regime, but also the orthodox formulation of the canonical text and its mainstream interpretations. The Handmaid enters into dialogue much more emphatically as an individual, deliberately substituting the more intimate first person possessive determiner “my” for the conventional, collective “our”; she also addresses a distinctively immanent divinity whom she revealingly refuses to call “Father,” preferring the more neutral term “God.”
As for the first three requests of the orthodox “Our Father,” in which the
believers pray for and assert their wish for the fulfilment of God’s will and the coming
of His Kingdom, they are turned into mild reproaches: “I wish you would tell me
Your Name, the real one I mean. [...] I wish I knew what You were up to” (HT, p. 204). For Atwood’s narrator, a name represents the key to a person’s real self, for she
declares later in the novel that “I tell [Nick] [...] my real name, and feel that therefore
I am known” (HT, p. 282), which echoes the paramount significance of naming in
Genesis pointed out by Bronner:

To name is to know. As noted in the Anchor Bible Dictionary, “the knowledge of the name
opens up specific human dimensions for communication and for fellowship.” When a name is
known, an avenue for relationship opens up.38

By keeping some mystery around His identity, God prevents Atwood’s heroine from
fully knowing Him and, a fortiori, His intentions, although Offred affirms that she
does not “believe for an instant that what’s going on out there is what You meant”
(HT, p. 204).

Offred’s adaptation of the four requests that constitute the second part of the
orthodox version of “The Lord’s Prayer” then emphasises to what dramatic extent the
oppressive situation in which the Handmaid is, determines and even distorts her
actions, wishes and hopes. The narrator does not ask for daily bread – Gilead
providing enough food for its “two-legged wombs” (HT, p. 146) to remain healthy
and fertile – but rather professes her difficulty “getting it down without choking on it”
(HT, p. 204); nor does she appeal for pardon – “Now we come to forgiveness. Don’t
worry about forgiving me right now” (HT, pp. 204-205) –, for, given the
circumstances, God should primarily concentrate on keeping her relatives safe or, if it
is already too late, on putting an end to their suffering and “even provid[ing] a Heaven
for them. We need You for that. Hell we can make for ourselves” (HT, p. 205). For
her part, the heroine promises to try to forgive her torturers, before moving on to
confess the appeal of temptation, which takes the specific form of suicidal thoughts
associated with the removed chandelier in her bedroom, and begging God to deliver
her from evil, as in the conventional “Pater Noster.”

As foregrounds her reconfiguration of the conclusion of “Our Father,”
Offred’s prayer reveals how much Atwood’s protagonist simultaneously wants to

believe in, and has serious doubts about, God’s power and Kingdom: “Then there’s Kingdom, power, and glory. It takes a lot to believe in those right now. But I’ll try it anyway. In hope, as they say on the gravestones” (HT, p. 205). This last sentence refers to Romans 4:18 – “Who against hope believed in hope” – which, as has already been mentioned earlier, praises Abraham’s unwavering faith in his seemingly hopeless situation. While it brings a touch of optimism, Offred’s “[i]n hope” also contrasts in its tentativeness with the more confident orthodox closing formula “amen.” This idea is further reinforced by the chattier words with which Offred concludes her dialogue with God, for after an empathic “You must feel pretty ripped off. I guess it’s not the first time. If I were You I’d be fed up” (HT, p. 205), the Handmaid carries on with renewed gentle reproof: “I feel as if I’m talking to a wall. I wish You’d answer” (HT, p. 205). Offred eventually terminates her conversation with a half-comical, half-tragic cry from the heart: “I feel so alone. All alone by the telephone. Except I can’t use the telephone. And if I could, who would I call? Oh God. It’s no joke. [...] How can I keep on living” (HT, p. 205)?

With its intertextual hint at Polly Bergen’s 1959 melancholic love song “All Alone” – starting with “All alone by the telephone” – this final complaint reinforces the postmodern character of Offred’s alternative religious discourse, which brings together bits and pieces of canonical texts and popular culture to form a highly polyphonic whole challenging Gilead’s spiritual monologism. As the third part of this chapter will show, Offred, as an insurgent champion of multiplicity, reticently asserts her voice not only through her re-establishment of dialogue, but also through her dogged determination to maintain for herself a diversity of selfhoods and, in its wake, of senses, in response to the authorities’ imposing of radical uniformity and univocality.

39 The Holy Bible. Authorized King James Version (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, n.d.), p. 221. For this particular instance, the King James Version – from which Atwood quotes in The Handmaid’s Tale – has been preferred, since the New Revised Standard Version – the reference edition in this thesis – does not use the specific phrase “in hope” mentioned by Atwood’s narrator, but translates instead the beginning of Romans 4:18 as “Hoping against hope.”
III. “My Self Is a Thing I Must Now Compose, as One Composes a Speech”: Offred’s Fight for Plurality of Identities and Meanings

A. “I’m a Refugee from the Past”: Remembering Her Former Selves

1. Self-Definition as a Weapon of Self-Affirmation

Offred’s narrative constitutes a much-needed defensive weapon that prevents the heroine from falling apart. In the same way as it enables her to conceive an “after-Gilead” in which her torment would have come to an end, so does her testimony give her the occasion to summon her memories of the “before-Gilead” and remember thereby that her identity is not limited to the dehumanising official status of Handmaid. As the protagonist formulates it, “[w]hat I need is perspective. […] Otherwise there are only two dimensions. Otherwise you live with your face squashed against a wall. […] Otherwise you live in the moment. Which is not where I want to be” (HT,p. 153). Offred consequently tells how, when waiting with the rest of the household for the Ceremony to begin, she takes her mind back to the time when she was still allowed individuality and subjecthood, in a sudden, disorientating switch from her present in the sitting room of the Commander’s Wife, Serena Joy, to her past escape attempt with Luke and their daughter:

We wait, the clock in the hall ticks, Serena lights another cigarette, I get into the car. It’s a Saturday morning, it’s a September, we still have a car. Other people have had to sell theirs. My name isn’t Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it’s forbidden. […] Luke drove, I sat beside him. (HT, pp. 94-95)

This memory is the opportunity for Offred to assert her refusal to forget her former name, to which she attributes “an aura […] like an amulet, some charm that’s survived from an unimaginably distant past” (HT, p. 94) and which she summons up, “not quite within reach, shining in the dark” (HT, p. 94), when lying in her bed.

True to her reticent stance, the heroine nevertheless never discloses her first name to her narratees. Such secrecy stimulates the readers’ interest and imagination, and has led critics like David Ketterer or J.B. Bouson to argue that Offred’s true identity is actually encrypted in the chain of names that the narrator reports to subversively whisper from bed to bed with her fellow Handmaids in the Red Center, for only one of them – “June” (HT, p. 14) – remains unassigned to a character in the
novel. Offred revealingly confesses that she “keep[s] the knowledge” of her original name “like something hidden, some treasure I’ll come back to dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried” (HT, p. 94). This image shows how much the heroine’s specific relation to her forbidden name is in the image of her reticent testimony as a whole, which I analyse as radiating, like the flowers of Serena’s garden, “a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to point, to say: Whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard, though silently” (HT, pp. 161-162). The mystery with which Offred surrounds her name can be seen to illustrate the use of silence as a protective weapon, for this “site […] of escape,” as Sandra Tomc calls it, betrays the narrator’s deep-seated need to keep out of reach, to create and reclaim for herself some spaces of privacy so that she cannot be wholly and definitely “known” (HT, p. 282), confined to a delimited and limiting identity:

That the evasion of naming is paradoxically a form of self-affirmation is made clear in what Offred says about rhetorical strategies of evasion generally: their purpose is “to keep the core of yourself out of reach, enclosed, protected.”

In other words, Offred wants to keep control, at least inwardly, of how she is defined, which echoes Vickroy’s claim in Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction that “[a]ny sense of control, even if it is self-abusing or ineffectual, is necessary to building a perception of an integrated identity. The ego must avoid feelings of total helplessness, or a sense of self will disappear.” Accordingly, besides the name that marks her as the property of her Commander, Offred also rejects the falsely laudatory metaphors of Aunt Lydia, whose trainees are, as Offred bitterly remarks, supposed to be “hers to define, we must suffer her adjectives” (HT, p. 124). When the older woman teaches Offred and her peers “with satisfied good cheer” to “[I]think of [them]selves as pearls” that the Aunts “will lick […] into shape (HT, p. 124), the heroine reflects that “[p]earls are congealed oyster spit” (HT, p. 124). She thereby completely sweeps away the association with glamour and high – market – value, and challenges the image of an easy and pleasant moulding of the Handmaids into submissive perfection, for as Marta Caminero-Santangelo emphasises, “the
Refusing the metaphors that Gilead foists on its Handmaids, Offred conceives her own, and thereby asserts her resolve to name her reality by herself and, most fundamentally, to be able to choose. For instance, when stopping, during one of her compulsory shopping trips, by the Wall where executed rebels are displayed hanging from hooks, she interprets the anonymous figures as melting snowmen “with the coal eyes and the carrot noses fallen out” (*HT*, p. 42). She likens the blood that has seeped through one of the bags covering the heads to a smiling mouth drawn by a young child – “[t]hese are not snowmen after all” (*HT*, p. 42) –, and the colour of that grim smile to that of the tulips in the garden of the Commander’s Wife. By associating this sinister sight with comforting everyday images, Atwood’s protagonist aestheticises the horror to which she is subjected to make it more bearable. Such a close-up on visual images therefore participates in Offred’s self-protecting reticence. Moreover, with this string of metaphors – a stylistic device that, as Kalamaras underlines, “makes naming a highly fluid activity rather than the fixity that a more conceptual language assigns”45 – Offred plays with the limitless poetic possibilities offered by language and denied to Handmaids, broadening her linguistic horizon in the same way as she endeavours to recreate for herself a composite, open identity.

The narrator, however, seems to go back on her last metaphor when she declares that “[t]he red is the same but there is no connection. The tulips are not tulips of blood, the red smiles are not flowers, neither thing makes a comment on the other” (*HT*, p. 42). With this apparent change of mind, the heroine can be understood to warn her addressees and herself against the misuse of metaphorical language, for she insists that “[t]he tulip is not a reason for disbelief in the hanged man, or vice versa. Each thing is valid and really there” (*HT*, p. 43). Offred thus maintains that one should not, and cannot, negate terror by means of pretty images, which is precisely what Gilead does when Aunt Lydia tries to indoctrinate her trainees into forgetting the suffering unavoidably occasioned by their institutionalised rape and dehumanisation with her flattering, beguiling pearl imagery. Horror should never be disguised into natural beauty and normality, unlike what Aunt Lydia claims, when she declares that the Wall

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44 Caminero-Santangelo.
45 Kalamaras, p. 130.
“may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary” 
(HT, p. 43). Conversely, beauty should not be effaced by horror, as Offred already remarks at the beginning of her tale: “The circumstances have been reduced. […] But a chair, sunlight, flowers: these are not to be dismissed. I am alive, I live, I breathe” (HT, p. 18). This is why Offred so forcefully resists the official enforcement of uniformity and amalgamation: “It is through a field of such valid objects that I must pick my way, every day and in every way. I put a lot of effort into making such distinctions. I need to make them. I need to be very clear, in my own mind” (HT, p. 43).

2. Offred's Mutinous Recollection of Her Former Multifaceted Self

Offred also keeps resisting her dehumanising depersonalisation by continually reasserting her unquenchable thirst for the freedom and recognition that she used to enjoy before the totalitarian regime seized power: “I want to be […] told my name. I want to be valued, in ways that I am not; I want to be more than valuable. I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me” (HT, p. 108). If, via a play on the word “invalid” highly reminiscent of Mrs Noah’s punning riddles in Roberts’ eponymous novel, the meal brought to her in her bedroom evokes her diminishing by the authorities and the precise moment when she and her family were captured, it also leads her to recollect, in a pressure-easing flashback, how, by contrast, women in the pre-Gilead era felt that their lives had no limits and used to be free to love:

The arrival of the tray, carried up the stairs as if for an invalid. An invalid, one who has been invalidated. No valid passport. No exit.

That was what happened, the day we tried to cross at the border, with our fresh passports. […] I don’t want to be telling this story.

I don’t have to tell it. […] I could withdraw. […] Why fight?

That will never do.

Love. […] That’s better. […] We can talk about that. […]

Falling in love, we said; I fell for him. […]

There is a good deal of comfort, now, in remembering this. […]

It’s strange to remember how we used to think, as if […] there were no contingencies, no boundaries. […] Luke was not the first man for me, and he might not have been the last. If he hadn’t been frozen that way. […]

He was, the loved. One. Is, I say. Is, is, […] can’t you manage to remember it, even a short word like that? (HT, pp. 236-239)
Offred strives to look back on the time when she was loved as a woman, a wife, a mother and, even if imperfectly, as a daughter, that is, when she was still allowed a multiplicity of positive identities. Having lost contact with her mother since she discovered her ransacked flat, Atwood’s heroine misses “a motherly figure, someone who would understand and protect” (HT, p. 26) her. If the Handmaid originally hopes that the Commander’s Wife might fill the void left by the loss of her female parent by assuming the role of substitute mother, she is quickly disappointed. Serena Joy, this “[n]either serene nor joyous […] former ‘total Woman’” who used to preach on television “about how women should stay home” and has now, as Offred mockingly notes, “become speechless […] , now that she’s been taken at her word” (HT, pp. 55-56), immediately appears to Offred as extremely cold and bitter. This is revealed by the narrator’s description of Serena’s “eyes, which [a]re the flat hostile blue of a midsummer sky in bright sunlight, a blue that shuts you out” and “her chin, clenched like a fist” (HT, p. 25). This aggressiveness is further symbolically emphasised by the image of the Wife’s knitting lying on the floor with “the needles stuck through. [sic] it” (HT, p. 24). Although things have never been easy with her hard-line feminist mother, who would bring her to book burnings instead of spending the promised quality time with her, and would later make a habit of coming round to tell her daughter and son-in-law “what was wrong” (HT, p. 130) with their lives, Offred feels the acute need to spiritually reconnect with her female parent.

While in the past, she used to resent her mother’s marked nonconformity and all-consuming activism, and to blame her for expecting her daughter “to be the model offspring, the incarnation of her ideas” (HT, p. 132), Atwood’s protagonist now “want[s] her back” (HT, p. 132) and realises that she has always “admired […] in some ways” (HT, p. 132) that woman who strikes Offred as “pretty” and “earnest” (HT, p. 129) in her fight for women’s liberation, when she appears in the old documentaries about pro-abortion demonstrators – now classified as “Unwomen” (HT, p. 128) – shown to Handmaids at the training centre. Even though she bitterly remarks to her absent mother that “[y]ou wanted a women’s culture. Well, now there is one. It isn’t what you meant, but it exists” (HT, p. 137), voicing thereby her suspicion of her parent’s uncompromising adhesion to a cause that “is prepared to

46 Hammer, p. 40.
limit basic freedoms in the pursuit of its goal”47 in much the same way as the Gileadean regime, the heroine comes, thanks to the necessity of her own rebelliousness, to the reappraisal and positive reaffirmation of her bond with her mother called for by Irigaray in Sexes et parentés – “Nous avons à veiller à [...] ne pas retuer la mère qui a été immolée à l’origine de notre culture. Il s’agit de lui redonner la vie, [...] à notre mère en nous. [...] Nous devons [...] lui redonner droit à la parole, parfois aux cris et à la colère”48 –:

No mother is ever, completely, a child’s idea of what a mother should be, and I suppose it works the other way around as well. But despite everything, we didn’t do badly by one another, we did as well as most.
I wish she were here, so I could tell her I finally know this. (HT, p. 190)

Offred also “need[s] to remember” (HT, p. 203) her husband Luke and their daughter, and when they inevitably fade away, she blames herself for “forgetting too much” (HT, p. 203). Even in these recollections, Atwood’s narrator questions the official doctrine most eloquently epitomised by Aunt Lydia’s “love […] [for] either/or” (HT, p. 18). Offred admits, in what sounds like a subversive profession of faith, that she pictures three different versions of what might have happened to Luke after they were separated, successively declaring that she thinks he has been shot during their flight through the woods, that he is held captive, and that he has managed to escape and will one day get in touch with her:

Here is what I believe.
I believe Luke is lying face down in a thicket. […] I pray that at least one hole is neatly, quickly, and finally through the skull. […]
I believe this.
I also believe that Luke is sitting up, in a rectangle somewhere, grey cement. […] He […] doesn’t know what he’s accused of. […]
I also believe that they didn’t catch him. […] Any day now there may be a message from him. […] It’s this message, which may never arrive, that keeps me alive. I believe in the message. (HT, pp. 115-116)

Presenting truth, in a typically postmodern way,49 as contingent, by claiming that “[i]n reduced circumstances you have to believe all kinds of things” (HT, p. 115), Offred confesses that she “believe[s] in […] all three versions of Luke, at one and the same time. This contradictory way of believing seems to me, right now, the only way I can believe anything” (HT, p. 116). As Karen Stein points out, “this textual layering

47 Fiona Tolan, Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 151-152.
49 Howells, The Handmaid’s Tale, Margaret Atwood, p. 81.
functions to problematise the Gileadean notion that there exists one truth, one officially sanctioned version of reality.”50 In a similar way, when she is told by Moira that her mother has been sent to the Colonies to sweep toxins, the narrator alternately tries to convince herself that her mother’s “cockiness, her optimism and energy […] will get her out” (HT, p. 265), and admits that, since she “know[s] this isn’t true,” she has “mourned for her already” and “will do it again, and again” (HT, p. 265).

Atwood’s heroine also imagines her lost daughter “as a ghost, the ghost of a dead girl, a little girl who died when she was five” (HT, pp. 73-74), and refuses that idea, arguing that, since she appears to her “at different ages […] [s]he knows she’s not really a ghost,” for “[i]f she were a ghost she would be the same age always. […] I […] think about a girl who did not die when she was five; who still does exist, I hope, though not for me” (HT, pp. 73-74).

Remembering her mother, Luke and the little girl they had together, enables Offred to rebelliously re-establish for herself a multifaceted selfhood as daughter, lover, wife and mother, and to keep hoping. It however does not come without suffering or risks, for under such oppressive circumstances, “[t]here’s a lot that doesn’t bear thinking about” (HT, p. 17), like the moments of intimacy with her husband, her daughter’s beloved stuffed rabbit, or the “treacherous smell” of yeast, “a nostalgic smell. […] It smells of mothers. […] It smells of me, in former times, when I was a mother” (HT, p. 57). Such “attacks of the past” (HT, p. 62), as Offred calls them, “[s]ometimes […] can hardly be borne” (HT, p. 62) by Atwood’s narrator, for they threaten to overcome her with grief – “You’ll have to forgive me. I’m a refugee from the past. […] I wander back, try to regain those distant pathways; I become too maudlin, lose myself” (HT, p. 239) – or madness, the “[e]asy out” (HT, p. 292) of “go[ing] so far in, so far down and back, they could never get you out” (HT, p. 237).

Since “[t]hinking can hurt your chances” and Offred “intend[s] to last” (HT, p. 17), Atwood’s heroine cultivates her reticence, exerting herself to keep a fragile balance between narrated anamnesis and forgetting marked by gaps, when Offred abruptly “shut[s] […] out” (HT, p. 57) hazardous memories and “bring[s] [her]self back, to the

50 Karen Stein, “Margaret Atwood’s Modest Proposal: The Handmaid’s Tale,” in Bloom, Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale, p. 138.
here” (*HT*, p. 265) to never describe, for example, her separation from her daughter after their arrest, or her beginnings as a Handmaid.51

Being constantly aware of how dangerous betraying her feelings of restlessness and sorrow or her rebellious thoughts can be, Atwood’s protagonist carefully makes herself up: “I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born” (*HT*, p. 76). Offred’s association between her self-representation and poetic or rhetorical arrangement should not simply be understood metaphorically, but also literally, for the heroine is repeatedly portrayed to muse on the meanings and sounds of words, these “litanyes” helping her “to compose [her]self” (*HT*, p. 120), as when, waiting for the Ceremony – during which her hands will be held by the Wife as a sign of control –, she reflects on the term “Household: that is what we are. The Commander is the head of the household. The house is what he holds. To have and to hold, till death do us part. The hold of a ship. Hollow” (*HT*, p. 91), or when she recalls women’s former financial liberty:

It’s strange, now, to think about having a job. *Job*. It’s a funny word. It’s a job for a man. Do a jobbie, they’d say to children, when they were being toilet-trained. Or of dogs: he did a job on the carpet. [...] The Book of Job. All those women having jobs: hard to imagine, now. (*HT*, p. 182)

As Marta Caminero-Santangelo observes, “Offred struggles within her own mind to preserve the multiple possibilities of words and to choose between them.”52

Through the various identities that she creates for herself, Offred reticently asserts her rebellious voice, which is characterised, as has just been demonstrated, by her need to remember her former recognition as a woman, wife, mother and daughter, but also, as will now be shown, by her desire for both power and a sexuality through which she can reconquer her female erotic body. While pretending, under her various guises, to submit to authority, Atwood’s narrator actually subtly questions it, in the image of her visits to the Wall, this official instrument of terror meant to remind Gileadeans of the punishment they risk incurring if they rebel. If Handmaids are encouraged to go and meditate at this symbol of the regime’s total control to silently

51 Although the narrator mentions that this is her third and last chance as a Handmaid, she keeps silent about her first two positions, revealing only that the second Wife “spent most of her time in her bedroom; the Marthas said she drank” (*HT*, p. 26).

52 Caminero-Santangelo.
reaffirm their “hatred and scorn” (*HT*, p. 43) for the hanged bodies and, in this way, to testify to their consent, Offred, for her part, subversively re-appropriates this praxis. She interprets these silhouettes as “time travellers,” messengers “come here from the past” (*HT*, p. 43) who fill her with a safeguarding feeling of relief – none of them being Luke – and with the emotional expression of her reticence, “blankness. What I feel is that I must not feel. [...] I won’t give anything away” (*HT*, p. 43). Such an attitude illustrates R.P. Clair’s contention that “oppressive practices can be consumed in ways that challenge their intended effect.”

As leadership scholar David Collinson argues, “[r]esistance and consent are rarely polarized extremes. [...] Resistance frequently contains elements of consent and consent often incorporates aspects of resistance.”

Combining a façade of acceptance with her deep-seated rebelliousness, Offred manages to work the repressive system and its abuses to her advantage, and to strategically create for herself new identities as conspirator and mistress with the Commander, and as secret lover with the chauffeur Nick.

**B. “No Longer Merely a Usable Body”: Games of Words, Power and Desire with the Commander**

1. **“He Was not a Monster, to Her”: A Reticent Account of Ambivalent Feelings and Influence**

In Gilead, the bond between a Commander and his Handmaid is conceived by the State as a simple, unambiguous relationship between a subject and an object whose sole function is reproductive. Any hint of complicity, desire, or even simply a subject-to-subject tie is proscribed:

> [W]e aren’t concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary, everything possible has been done to remove us from that category. There is supposed to be nothing entertaining about us, no room is permitted for the flowering of secret lusts; no special favours are to be wheedled. (*HT*, p. 146)

At the beginning of Offred’s posting, these prescribed roles are respected in the Commander’s house, so that the heroine feels merely like “a boat with no cargo, a chalice with no wine in it, an oven – to be crude – minus the bun” (*HT*, p. 172). The Ceremony, which is performed by the book, and according to the Word ritually read

54 David Collinson, quoted in Clair, p. 157.
as a prelude in front of the assembled household, has, as the narrator notes, “nothing
to do with passion or love or romance” (HT, p. 104). While the Commander accomplishes “his duty” “with a regular two-four marching stroke, on and on like a
tap dripping” (HT, p. 105), Offred, physically framed and symbolically controlled by
an embittered Wife, mentally dissociates herself from her body and minutely analyses
the situation from a linguistic angle, thereby taking distance to make her condition
more tolerable:

My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking.
What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not
what he’s doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and
only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven’t signed up
for. There wasn’t a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose. […]
One detaches oneself. One describes. (HT, pp. 104-106)

Although he is her most obvious torturer and, as one of the highest ranking
officials, has taken part in the conception and implementation of the system that
abuses her, Offred cannot hate her Commander categorically. If at some point she
fantasises about “spit[ting], out the window, or throw[ing] something, […] to hit him”
(HT, p. 67), she also confesses, only one page later: “I know I ought to feel [hatred]
[…], but it isn’t what I do feel. What I feel is more complicated than that. I don’t
know what to call it. It isn’t love” (HT, p. 68). These ambivalent emotions raised by
the Commander in the heroine are most perceptible in Offred’s impressions of the
head of the family as he is about to read from Genesis, for the man, chameleon-like,
successively assumes for Offred the trust-inspiring and endearing appearances of “a
museum guard,” “a midwestern bank president,” “a vodka ad” and “a shoemaker in an
old fairytale book” (HT, pp. 97-98), until the protagonist, remembering her master’s
true position, wonders: “Is there no end to his disguises, of benevolence” (HT, p. 98)?

Slightly perplexed and embarrassed by her contradictory responses to the
Commander, which – as she fully realises – contrast with the outright condemnation
of rulers expressed by her shopping partner Ofglen or Moira, the narrator adopts her
typically reticent stance. In a digressive address to her male narratees, she strives to
defend her behaviour and empower herself by evoking what she believes to be the
specifically female impulse towards forgiveness and the control that ensues from that
disposition:

if you happen to be a man, sometime in the future, […] please remember: you will never be
subjected to the temptation of feeling you must forgive, a man, as a woman. It’s difficult to
resist, believe me. But remember that forgiveness too is a power. To beg for it is a power, and
to withhold or bestow it is a power, perhaps the greatest.
Maybe none of this is about […] who can do what to whom and get away with it. […] Maybe it’s about who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it. Never tell me it amounts to the same thing. (HT, pp. 144-145)

Immediately following this justification is Offred’s abrupt rendering of the Commander’s particularly bold, and totally illegal request to his Handmaid, “I want you to kiss me” (HT, p. 145), which the heroine accompanies with the metanarrative comment “[w]ell, of course something came before that. Such requests never come flying out of the blue” (HT, pp. 144-145). With this unannounced flash-forward, Atwood’s protagonist brings a sudden new development in her narrative and, with it, some suspense; she moreover purposefully foregrounds words that suggest some form of physical coercion and draws again attention to the reconstructed nature of her tale, implicitly pointing to, and justifying in advance, her behaviour blending submission and rebellion in the second part of the novel, but also, more specifically, her future marks of reticence – which mainly take the form of gaps and self-erasures.

Offred’s master complicates things further for his Handmaid, as demonstrates the narrator’s re-contextualisation of his blunt asking for a kiss. Breaking some of the most fundamental laws governing the organisation of the Gileadean society, the official has Offred secretly summoned to his home office. Although it constitutes an invitation that she can hardly refuse, since, as she reflects, “[t]here’s no doubt about who holds the real power” (HT, p. 146), the heroine immediately perceives that she might derive profit from this situation, for if she is, as she suspects, the one person who can provide what he desires, she is in a position of strength: “there must be something he wants, from me. To want is to have a weakness. It’s this weakness, whatever it is, that entices me. It’s like a small crack in a wall, before now impenetrable. […] I want to know what he wants” (HT, p. 146). While Offred reports to resolutely adopt a blank attitude in what she considers as a trading exchange, her interlocutor, by contrast, endeavours to charm her, assuming the “studied pose” of “some old come-on from a glossy men’s mag” (HT, p. 147) – as Offred notes in “[a]n inner jeering” (HT, p. 147) – or the “sheepish” (HT, p. 147) look that men used to display in former times to appeal to women. The Commander moreover almost instantly reveals his wish:

“I want …” he says.
I try not to lean forward. Yes? Yes yes? What, then? What does he want? But I won’t give it away, this eagerness of mine. It’s a bargaining session, things are about to be exchanged. […]
“I would like –” he says. “This will sound silly.” […] “I’d like you to play a game of Scrabble with me,” he says.
I hold myself absolutely rigid. I keep my face unmoving. [...] “All right,” I say, as if indifferent. I can in fact hardly speak. (*HT*, pp. 148-149)

Offred, behind her façade of composure, hides an intense urge “to laugh, shriek with laughter” (*HT*, p. 148) rooted in the significant gap between her expectation of “[s]omething unspeakable, down on all fours perhaps, perversions, whips, mutilations [...] [a]t the very least some minor sexual manipulation” (*HT*, p. 163), and the Commander’s real intentions, which she deems “ridiculous, [...] like a fetish for lace-up shoes” (*HT*, p. 163). Atwood’s protagonist however also discerns the subversive nature of this request, for this game that Offred used to connect with “retirement villas” (*HT*, p. 148) or adolescents has now become, because of its illegality, a highly desirable “violation,” “kinky in the extreme” (*HT*, p. 163), that gives her “an eyeblink” (*HT*, p. 149) of freedom. Associating the Scrabble counters and letters with the cool, acid voluptuousness of candies that she would love to taste, she metonymically refers to the pleasure that the prohibited use of language gives her. This playful linguistic confrontation with the Commander moreover symbolises the real struggle between men and women for the mastery of the word, as Jacques Leclaire argues.55

It is in this ambiguous situation mixing conspiracy, verbal fencing and sensuousness that the Commander’s request for a kiss is formulated. In her narrative rendering of it, Offred multiplies the expressions of her reticence. She claims that her master’s demand arouses in her murderous thoughts, in which she imagines killing her oppressor with a sharp lever taken from the toilet and enjoying the sight of his “blood coming out of him, hot as soup, sexual, over my hands” (*HT*, p. 150), but promptly goes back on what she has just said: “In fact I don’t think about anything of the kind. I put it in only afterwards. Maybe I should have thought about that, at the time, but I didn’t. As I said, this is a reconstruction” (*HT*, p. 150). Offred then describes how she complies with the Commander’s demand, how the latter, being not fully satisfied, asks with “candour” to be kissed “[a]s if you meant it” (*HT*, p. 150), and eventually ends her account with “[h]e was so sad. That is a reconstruction, too” (*HT*, p. 150). In the

following sentence, Offred directly transports the readers to the hall and stairs that lead her back to her bedroom. Through this gap and these two consecutive instances of self-erasure, Offred allows some uncertainty to remain about the real sequence of events and the two characters’ true attitudes, for the narrator never confesses if she really did kiss the Commander without any feelings, whether she did agree to kiss him a second time or not, and whether her superior was genuinely saddened by her lack of enthusiasm or if she invented this element. Such secrecy can be analysed as another illustration of her will to preserve for herself some degree of intimacy, but also as a symptom of the discomfort she might feel for a compliance possibly rooted not solely in self-interest, but also in compassion or even affection. Eager to ease her conscience and to keep her narratees’ approval, Offred might pass her real feelings over in silence, and try to depict the dictatorship official in a more favourable, human light.

This hypothesis seems to be confirmed by Offred’s musing, once she is back in her room, upon her secret meeting and the Commander’s “desire […] [t]o be played with, to be gently kissed, as if I meant it” (HT, p. 154). After recording with satisfaction that, due to the favourable change of circumstances, she now “can ask for something” (HT, p. 153) by “manipulat[ing]” the man “for [her] […] own good” (HT, p. 153), the protagonist of The Handmaid’s Tale notes that this possible “passport” or “downfall” (HT, p. 154) represents “one of the most bizarre [sic] things that’s happened to me, ever” (HT, p. 154). Accordingly, she concludes with a “[c]ontext is all” (HT, p. 154) that causes her to remember a programme she watched as a young girl “about one of those wars[,] […] with a woman who had been the mistress of a man who supervised one of the camps where they put the Jews, before they killed them. In ovens” (HT, p. 154). Offred most certainly refers here to the historical figure of Ruth Irene Kalder, the mistress of Amon Göth, the commandant of the Nazi concentration camp at Płaszów, who was interviewed in film maker Jon Blair’s documentary “Schindler: His Story as Told by the Actual People He Saved.” What now strikes a chord with the adult heroine is the woman’s statement that her powerful lover, portrayed as “cruel and brutal” (HT, p. 155) in the documentary, “was not a monster, she said. People say he was a monster, but he was not one”56 (HT, p. 155).

56 Offred’s description of her memories of the war documentary is filled with intertextual references to Blair’s programme such as this defence of Göth, directly inspired by Kalder’s “Göth was not a brute” (D.M. Crowe, Oskar Schindler: The Untold Account of His Life, Wartime Activities, and the True Story behind The List [Cambridge (MA): Westview Press, 2004], p. 213). The broadcast is however never
Projecting onto Kalder her own reticence as well as her undefined and indefinable feelings, Offred wonders:

What could she have been thinking about? Not much, I guess. [...] She was thinking about how not to think. The times were abnormal. [...] She did not believe he was a monster. [...] Probably he had some endearing trait: he whistled, off key, in the shower, he had a yen for truffles. [...] [S]he’d have [...] kissed him on the ear, and not just to get something out of him either. The instinct to soothe, to make it better. (HT, p. 155)

Through this intertextual detour via the story of Göth’s mistress, Atwood’s protagonist once more implicitly vindicates her conduct, and demonstrates how extreme circumstances can distort normal value systems and morals, turning the “available temptation” to “invent a humanity, for anyone at all” (HT, p. 155) into an essential survival tool: “He was not a monster, to her. [...] All this she would have believed, because otherwise how could she have kept on living” (HT, pp. 155-156)?

What is more, by eventually closing this parenthetical expression of reticence with the mention that “[s]everal days after this interview with her was filmed, she killed herself. [...] Nobody asked her whether or not she had loved him” (HT, p. 156), Offred tacitly entreats her narratees not to judge too quickly or too harshly her own inclination to humanise her oppressor in order to cling to her sense of identity and humanity.

This first unauthorised evening with the Commander, its incongruous, “hilarious” (HT, p. 154) nature, and the liberating perspectives it seems to open, spark off in Offred a wild fit of laughter through which the heroine is symbolically and subversively reborn:

I hear something, inside my body. I’ve broken, something has cracked, that must be it. Noise is coming up, coming out, of the broken place, in my face. [...] If I let the noise get out into the air it will be laughter, too loud, too much of it. [...] It could be fatal.
I cram both hands over my mouth [...] drop to my knees, the laughter boiling like lava in my throat. I crawl into the cupboard. [...] I shake, I heave, seismic, volcanic, I’ll burst. [...] [M]irth rhymes with birth, oh to die of laughter. [...] I lie on the floor, [...] evening out my breathing, as in the exercises, for giving birth. (HT, p. 156)

Such a scene, which echoes Offred’s earlier description of the rebel Moira as “lava beneath the crust of daily life” (HT, p. 143), can be analysed, as Howells indicates, as putting into practice Cixous’s theory, developed in “The Laugh of the Medusa” and “Sorties,” about feminine writing being necessarily “plus que subversif,”

identified by Offred, since the heroine was too young at the time of the viewing to remember any precise element, or even to fully understand its significance.

57 Howells, Modern Novelists, p. 137.
“volcanique,” and challenging the law with laughter.\(^{58}\) Through its blending of hopeful joy, potentially lethal consequences, and resigned grief reawakened by her predecessor’s secret message in the closet, which makes the narrator wonder why the former Handmaid “did […] bother” since “[t]here’s no way out of here” (\textit{HT}, p. 156), Offred’s fit also evokes carnivalesque laughter, whose association of death and rebirth renders deeply ambivalent.\(^{59}\)

As Bakhtine argues, “[i]t is precisely laughter that […] destroys any hierarchical […] distance […] [,] making an object come up close, […] where one can […] dismember it, lay it bare and expose it. […] Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world.”\(^{60}\) It is, therefore, oriented towards the mutation of powers, truths and established orders.\(^{61}\) Offred herself repeatedly acknowledges the specific subversive power of her inner jokes, jeering and whispering of obscenities about those in power, for comparing the gardening Wife to a saint doing penance and a “kamikaze” (\textit{HT}, p. 161) convulsively cutting off “the swelling genitalia of the flowers” (\textit{HT}, p. 161) in retaliation for being herself “withered” (\textit{HT}, p. 91), or imagining the newly wed young officials’ honeymoons as “ignominious failures, cocks like three-week-old carrots, anguished fumblings upon flesh cold and unresponding as uncooked fish” (\textit{HT}, p. 234) “deflates them, reduces them to the common denominator where they can be dealt with” (\textit{HT}, p. 234). Accordingly, the attack of hilarity in chapter twenty-four, at the issue of which Atwood’s heroine revealingly notes that she can only hear “the sound of my own heart, opening and closing, opening and closing, opening” (\textit{HT}, p. 156) – which metaphorically implies, as the concluding “opening” emphasises, that Offred is touched by the Commander, in the image of Ruth Irene Kalder, whose “heart would have melted” (\textit{HT}, p. 155) for Göth –, most appropriately introduces the new relation between Offred and the Commander, based on the breaking of dictatorial laws and taboos, and on a new balance of power thanks to which she further regains subjecthood.

\(^{58}\) Cixous, in Clément and Cixous, p. 179.

\(^{59}\) Bakhtine, \textit{Poétique}, p. 185.


\(^{61}\) Bakhtine, \textit{Poétique}, p. 185.
2. “I Have Power over Him”: Fencing with, Devouring, and Withholding Words

The Commander, who used to enjoy the exclusive privilege of “ha[ving] the word” (HT, p. 99) to which Offred and the other women are denied access, now shares it with the heroine. Showing her into his “oasis of the forbidden” “filled with books. Books and books and books, right out in plain view, no locks, no boxes (HT, p. 147), the Commander gives his Handmaid the opportunity to produce words not only through manipulating the letters of the Scrabble game, but also, later in the novel, through handling a pen, this dangerous tool from which Aunt Lydia would warn Handmaids away with the motto “Pen Is Envy” (HT, p. 196), another Gileadean disguised misquotation, which puns on Freud’s theory of female penis envy. In an allusion to Gilbert and Gubar’s62 denunciation of the pen as the Western author’s penis-like “instrument of generative power,”63 and of women’s traditional “reduce[ing] to mere properties, to characters and images imprisoned in male texts” because of their lack of “pen/penis,”64 Offred, as she carefully copies her predecessor’s secret message for the Commander to translate it, relishes the touch of the instrument between her fingers, “sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains. […] And they were right, it is envy. Just holding it is envy. I envy the Commander his pen” (HT, p. 196). If the meaning of the sentence “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum” (HT, p. 196) proves to be disappointing, since, as the Commander explains, it merely constitutes a mock Latin schoolboy joke he and his friends invented, it also enables Offred to discover that she is not the first Handmaid to be invited into the master’s office, and that her dark double committed suicide when the Wife found out about these secret appointments. Such discoveries give Offred further power over the official, for she can tease him with the idea of stopping her visits to exact from him black market goods that improve her everyday life, or information on the working of Gilead beyond the reduced sphere of servants:

“You want my life to be bearable to me,” I say. […]
“Yes,” he says. […]
“Well then,” I say. Things have changed. I have something on him, now. What I have on him is the possibility of my own death. What I have on him is his guilt. At last.

63 Gilbert and Gubar, p. 6.
64 Gilbert and Gubar, p. 12.
What would you like?” he says. […]
“I would like to know.” […] “What’s going on.” (HT, pp. 197-198)

As Françoise Couturier-Storey puts it in her analysis of desire in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, since Offred “is the centre of desire, she is the one who controls the game, against all appearances because he is socially the powerful one.” 65 Wishing to acquire a broader perspective on the totalitarian regime, Offred takes advantage of her ascendancy over the Commander to try and make him speak. While she “enter[s] his silence” (HT, p. 197) by “prompting him, playing up to him, drawing him out” (HT, p. 194), the heroine strives to repress the words she “feel[s] […] backing up inside” (HT, pp. 194-195) her because “we are fencing. Either he talks or I will. […] And if I talk to him I’ll say something wrong, give something away. […] I don’t want him to know too much” (HT, pp. 194-195). Refusing to unveil herself, Offred initially opposes to her master’s asking for her opinion about what he and the other instigators of Gilead “’ve done, […] [h]ow things have worked out” (HT, p. 222), highly evasive answers like “I don’t think a lot” or “I have no opinion” (HT, p. 222). Such secrecy combines Offred’s traditional defensive strategy with offensive accents marking her refusal to grant the Commander the closeness he wishes to establish. As the heroine observes: “What he wants is intimacy, but I can’t give him that” (HT, p. 222). When the Handmaid eventually takes the risk of voicing criticism at the dictatorship official by pointing out that the government has overlooked love, the Commander, as he tries to “justify himself” (HT, p. 221), betrays what Bouson calls the “male supremist ideology” 66 hidden behind his appearance of benevolence and open-mindedness, for he argues that Gilead has but “return[ed] things to Nature’s norm” (HT, p. 232) by helping women “fulfil their biological destinies in peace. With full support and encouragement” (HT, p. 231).

Apart from this explicit assertion of his deep-seated chauvinistic belief in men’s right – or duty – to control women’s sexuality, the Commander is predominantly depicted to show his concern to find favour with Offred, who observes that “[i]t’s difficult for me to believe I have power over him, of any sort, but I do; although it’s of an equivocal kind” (HT, p. 221), because, as she notes, “[t]here are


66 Bouson, pp. 145-146.
things he wants to prove to me, gifts he wants to bestow, services he wants to render,
tendernesses he wants to inspire. He wants, all right” (HT, p. 221). This desire of his
expresses itself most visibly in his eagerness to impress Offred with small acts of
bravado such as listening to a dissident radio station “to show […] [her] he can” (HT,
pp. 220-221), to move her with playful “fake subservience” (HT, p. 221) as, sitting on the
floor beside her chair and holding her hand, he looks up at her from “a juvenile angle”
(HT, p. 221), to show his “approbation” when she is “entertained” (HT, p. 193), and to
please her with presents, like an old Vogue.

By offering her this magazine, Offred’s master encourages her to challenge
another main aspect of the Handmaids’ silencing dehumanisation, after that of
writing: the ban on reading. While in the past, the heroine used to consider such
popular publications as “infinitely discardable” (HT, p. 165), the censorship now
imposed on them has turned them into items so subversive – and, hence, so desirable –
that Offred, although she sees “this longing […] as trivial and absurd” (HT, p. 164),
“want[s] […] [them] with a force that ma[kes] the ends of […] [her] fingers ache”
(HT, pp. 164-165). These magazines not only enable the protagonist to rebelliously
reclaim possession of the word, like the novels by Raymond Chandler or Charles
Dickens that she later “read[s] […] voraciously, almost skimming, trying to get as
much into […] [her] head as possible before the next long starvation” (HT, p. 194),
they also provide her with images of “bold, striding, confident” (HT, p. 165) females
who evoke to Offred “[p]irates, […] with their ladylike briefcases for the loot and
their horsy, acquisitive teeth” (HT, p. 165). They remind her of the boundless
promises that such light reading used to suggest to women: “rejuvenation, pain
overcome and transcended, endless love. The real promise in them was immortality”
(HT, p. 165).

Through this mention of imperishability within the frame of her compromising
temptation by the Commander, but also through the accompanying remark “[w]hat
was he going to give me next? A girdle?” (HT, p. 166) and her emphasis on the
official’s systematic asking for a kiss to crown their secret encounters, Offred alludes
to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. In this Middle English Arthurian romance, the
highly virtuous young knight Gawain, on his way to what he expects to be his
execution by the supernatural Green Knight – as part of a beheading game started at
King Arthur’s court – finds shelter in a castle where his loyalty to his Christian and
chivalric values is tested by the beautiful chatelaine’s bold sexual advances. If Gawain
does not yield to physical temptation – he precisely only accepts chaste kisses – and manages to elegantly talk his way through this sensitive situation where he is torn between his chivalric duty to serve the lady and his ethics prohibiting adultery, he does, however, eventually betray his faith and knightly principles when, breaking the pact he made with his male host to give him anything he might win during his stay in the castle, he accepts from the temptress a green girdle supposed to magically make him invulnerable – like Offred’s old magazines – and hides it from the lord. With this intertextual reference, Offred subverts the roles of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, attributing the traditional misogynist Eve-like role of the temptress to the Commander, whose illicit secret contacts with Offred might represent for her, like the lady’s girdle for Gawain, “a passport” or her “downfall” (*HT*, p. 154). Atwood’s heroine might also implicitly announce that, like Gawain, who is never decapitated by the Green Knight but, contrary to expectation, simply scratched and gently reprimanded for momentarily forgetting about his moral principles when faced with death, she will not meet the seemingly inevitable death in the Colonies.

Writing, reading, talking: the master’s office is the place where all taboos, all bans inflicted on Offred, “dissolve […]” (*HT*, p. 165), so that the protagonist no longer feels merely exploited as “a usable body” (*HT*, p. 172), but respected as an individual by a Commander who has, at the same time, become “no longer a thing” (*HT*, p. 170) to her. When the time for the Ceremony arrives, this change in the two characters’ perceptions of each other “complicates” (*HT*, p. 170), as Offred formulates it. The ritual, which she used to regard as an “act of copulation, fertilization perhaps” becomes “awkward […]” (*HT*, p. 169) and “indecorous” (*HT*, p. 170). The narrator, but also, Offred now realises, the Commander, cannot anymore “pretend not to be present,” to “exist […] apart from the body” (*HT*, p. 169), and the master of the house, betraying his need to humanise this imposed sexual relationship, looks at Offred and tries to touch her face. Such an attempt at physical and emotional proximity provokes, on their next evening together, an angry response from Offred, who bluntly rebukes him for risking her life and, when he apologises to her and confesses that he finds the Ceremony too “[i]mpersonal” (*HT*, p. 171), for taking so much time “to find that out” (*HT*, p. 171), voicing thereby in the most direct way her newly acquired authority over

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67 Offred notes that “[t]his state of absence […] had been true of the Commander too, I knew now” (*HT*, p. 169).
him. Sensing in her male interlocutor “none of the animosity I used to sense in men, even in Luke sometimes. He’s not saying *bitch* in his head” (*HT*, p. 193), the heroine goes so far as to declare him “positively daddyish” (*HT*, p. 193) in chapter twenty-nine.

As Magali Cornier Michael highlights, “the Commander’s desire for intimacy demonstrates that he himself wants to be recognized as a subject. The paradox is that only another subject can recognize him in those terms, so that Offred is […] the subject who can substantiate his subjecthood.”68 Although flattered by her master’s demonstrations of interest and consideration for her, the heroine largely remains lucid about the deepest motivations for his benevolence and the true nature of his needs. Remark ing that “[t]he Commander likes it when I […] show precocity, like an attentive pet, prick-eared and eager to perform” (*HT*, p. 193), and regretting that he turns her reading sessions into “a kind of performance” or “a curious sexual act” (*HT*, p. 194) by silently, greedily watching her, Offred demonstrates her awareness of his wanting her not simply “to be a subject, but *his* subject,”69 to assume the age-old role of mistress whose “job [is] to provide what is otherwise lacking” (*HT*, p. 172). Despite the “banal” (*HT*, p. 166), “absurd as well as […] ignominious” (*HT*, p. 172) aspect that she attributes to this status, the protagonist acknowledges that it brightens her up, since it “occupies space” (*HT*, p. 172) and time, and answers her desire for power – however limited by the circumstances –, for “anything that breaks the monotony, subverts the perceived respectable order of things” (*HT*, p. 243) and that, therefore, enables her to assert her rebellious voice.

This ambivalent mixture of freedom and coercion reaches its peak in the last, and most daring illicit activity reported between Offred and the Commander: the evening out at the clandestine brothel Jezebel’s. Taking up again the motif of temptation introduced by the intertextual references to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the heroine observes that she “wasn’t that wrong about the girdle, after all” (*HT*, p. 242) when the Commander, revealing what he allegedly means to be a surprise and an opportunity to satisfy his Handmaid’s yearning “to know” (*HT*, p. 266), gives her an old cabaret or theatre feathered costume to disguise herself as a prostitute and enter Jezebel’s incognito. Enticed by the “childish allure of dressing

“up” and the “so sinful, so free” (HT, p. 242) nature of this nostalgic – albeit distorted and sinister – vestige of the past, Offred accepts to pass herself off as “an evening rental” (HT, p. 245) and to contribute to what Moira defines as a “crummy power trip” (HT, p. 255) of the official’s. Rejecting her best friend’s typically unequivocal view, the narrator prefers to see in this evening out the “juvenile display” (HT, p. 248) of a man who, in a voice that “assumes more and more the sprightliness and jocularity of youth,” savours “breaking the rules, under […] [his peers’] noses, thumbing his nose at them, getting away with it” (HT, p. 248), a show that, although she deems it “pathetic,” Offred “understand[s]” (HT, p. 248) maybe more than anyone else, since she herself yearns for such empowering small acts of defiance.

Thanks to this outing, the heroine breaks about all the taboos inflicted upon Handmaids that she has not yet violated – the bans on tobacco, alcohol, cosmetics and revealing clothes –; she learns and passes on the story of Moira’s insurrection, and is also brought to cast a comforting glance back to the time when she would meet Luke in hotel rooms. This liberating aspect is however indissociable from a harsh return to the reality of her condition of sexual object, with the logical conclusion of the evening. As the Commander starts to undress, Offred adopts her usual protective weapon of blankness. Echoing Ruth Irene Kalder’s testimony, she purposefully thinks that “[h]e is not a monster. […] I can’t afford pride or aversion, there are all kinds of things that have to be discarded, under the circumstances” (HT, p. 267), and consequently orders herself to “[f]ake it” (HT, p. 267). In this context, the Commander as mischievous, endearing boy and “father-protector” 70 of the Scrabble games or the show in front of the other officials most explicitly leaves way to the Commander as “father-persecutor.”71

If, on the whole, Offred’s unlawful relation with the Commander contributes to the satisfaction of the protagonist’s safeguarding longing for recognition as an individual and for some degree of control, it does not enable her to reconquer a body that Gilead has appropriated and reduced to procreative functions. While with her master, Offred can but “lie there like a dead bird” (HT, pp. 266-267), through her liaison with the Guardian Nick, by contrast, she subversively comes back again to life and, more specifically, to the sensual dimension of her body, as will now be analysed.

70 Bouson, pp. 145-146.
71 Bouson, pp. 145-146.
C. “I’m Alive in My Skin, Again”: Offred as Secret Lover

Deprived of any bodily comfort and physical contact except for the brutal, impersonal impregnation and the monthly medical check-ups, Offred desperately longs for “the act of touch” (*HT*, p. 21) and for her body to be recognised and valued both as an integral part of her self and femininity, and as a *locus* of desire, pleasure and communion with the other. Although her indoctrination at the Rachel and Leah Centre and the Sword of Damocles of the authorities’ most literal understanding of Genesis 30:1’s “Give me children, or else I die” (*HT*, p. 71) have partly succeeded in making the heroine internalise the Gileadean reducing of her body to a usable womb – she reflects, for instance, that “I’m a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am” (*HT*, p. 84) –, Atwood’s protagonist is repeatedly depicted as challenging the state-enforced depreciation, exploitation and de-eroticising of her frame. As Magali Cornier Michael contends, in Gilead, “an assertion of sexuality signifies an assertion of subjecthood.”

When waiting “washed, brushed, fed, like a prize pig” (*HT*, p. 79) for the Ceremony, Offred conceptualises her body, her “own,” “[t]reachorous” “territory” (*HT*, p. 83), in astronomical terms. She becomes “the earth [she] […] set[s] […] [her] ear against, for rumours of the future” (*HT*, p. 83) coming from her uterus, the inside of which is “huge as the sky at night and dark and curved like that,” and illuminated by “[p]inpoints of light [that] swell, sparkle, burst and shrivel […], countless as stars” (*HT*, p. 84), while the “moon, gigantic, round, heavy” that her ovum constitutes “transits, pauses, continues on” (*HT*, p. 84). In this scene, Offred uses “images of immense bodily territories” highly reminiscent of Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa,” as Howells remarks. Although it is inextricably linked to Gilead’s definitions of her, which have partly “become [her] […] own” (*HT*, p. 83), as is revealed by her confession that the “pass[ing] out of sight” (*HT*, p. 84) of her internal moon month after month brings to her “despair” (*HT*, p. 84) and a feeling of emptiness, such typically feminine lunar and cyclical imagery – closely akin to Dinah’s in *The Red Tent* – challenges the dictatorship’s authority.

Trying to counter the psychologically and physically damaging effects of the Ceremony and, more generally, of Gilead’s implicit principle that, since Handmaids

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72 Cornier Michael, p. 153.
“are containers […] [] [t]he outside can become hard and wrinkled” (HT, p. 107), Offred, as soon as her monthly duty is performed and she is safely on her own in her bedroom again, smears on her skin butter that she has hidden in her shoe, using a trick that she learnt from other Handmaids at the Centre to moisturise her skin. Beside its obvious cosmetic function, this subversive alternative “ceremon[y]” (HT, p. 107), as Offred revealingly calls it, is part of her survival strategy that consists in hoping for a future after the dictatorship: “As long as we do this, […] we can believe that we will some day get out, that we will be touched again, in love or desire” (HT, p. 107).

Offred positively re-appropriates her own body through language and personal rituals, but also by playing with her power of seduction as, going past a young Guardian who tries to surreptitiously catch a glimpse of her face, she deliberately shows it to him and teases him – who is not “yet permitted to touch women” (HT, p. 32) – by swaying her hips. Such “a small defiance of rule” (HT, p. 31) represents for the protagonist “possibilities, tiny peepholes” (HT, p. 31) that help Offred to project herself beyond Gilead – in the same way as her “buttering” session – and to regain a sense of mastery, albeit limited and slightly cruel: “I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there. I hope they get hard at the sight of us and have to rub themselves against the painted barriers” (HT, p. 32).

As the heroine points out, whatever appeal she might struggle to preserve for herself is useless if she cannot derive from it any profound, lasting and concrete benefit in the form of solace and the satisfaction of her sexual desires. In other words, Offred feels that she cannot fully reclaim her body if she cannot explore its possibilities through shared tenderness and love:

You can wet the rim of a glass and run your finger around the rim and it will make a sound. This is what I feel like. […] I feel like the word shatter. I want to be with someone. […] Can I be blamed for wanting a real body, to put my arms around? Without it I too am disembodied. […] I can stroke myself, under the dry white sheets, in the dark, but I too am dry and white, hard, granular. […] There’s something dead about it, something deserted. (HT, pp. 113-114)

This cry from the heart comes as a justification to the narratees for what Offred cannot help but perceive as a betrayal of her husband Luke. It follows a particularly intense scene in which Atwood’s protagonist, who has sneaked into the sitting room at night with the intention of stealing something, comes across the Commander’s chauffeur Nick, and the two young people seem to be at once irresistibly “pulled towards each other by a force, current” (HT, p. 110) – as the Guardian draws the Handmaid against
him to kiss her and she for her part fantasises undressing him – and “pulled apart” (*HT*, p. 110). Originally, Atwood’s heroine shuns the advances of this mysterious man whose “too casual, […] not servile enough” (*HT*, p. 27) attitude immediately intrigues her. She refuses to return his furtive wink, and, when he tries to play footsie with her, moves her foot away, attributing a positive response to this concealed contact only to her shoe, which she feels “soften, blood flows into it, it grows warm, it becomes a skin” (*HT*, p. 91). Offred describes her strong physical attraction to Nick in terms of a powerful hunger – as in “I want to […] taste his skin, he makes me hungry. […] It’s so good […] to be felt so greedily, to feel so greedy” (*HT*, pp. 109-110) –, a hunger “[w]hich [she] […] can’t indulge” (*HT*, p. 201), not simply owing to danger, but also because of her feelings of shame and guilt, as is revealed by her vain attempt at self-deception in the lounge: “Luke, you’d know, you’d understand. It’s you here, in another body. Bullshit” (*HT*, p. 110).

When a knitting Serena Joy, after intimating that her husband might be infertile, suggests to Offred that she should try having a baby with Nick – the older woman would then be rid of her Handmaid –, what essentially constitutes another evident form of exploitation of the narrator’s body actually turns into an opportunity for Offred to abandon herself to her desire for the Guardian. By starting a secret relationship, Offred can moreover assert herself in rebellion against Gilead’s elimination of love, the female erotic body and, as Claude Maisonnat observes, closeness with the Other:

> l’amour à Gilead […] [d]ans la mesure où il est ouverture à l’Autre, mise en relation avec le désir de l’Autre, acceptation de sa dimension inconsciente, […] échappe à tous les contrôles, toutes les barrières mises en place par Gilead pour se prémunir contre l’irruption de l’inconnu, de l’altérité dans son monde clos et protégé.75

The tinge of coercion that Serena’s request carries does not, however, fully ease Offred’s guilty conscience, which expresses itself through the narrator’s deep reticence. When she reaches the moment of her first arranged meeting with Nick, the Handmaid resorts to the technique of self-erasure, as in the episode of the Commander’s asking for a kiss. After recounting a first version in “the language of

74 This exploitation is symbolised by the Wife’s fitting of a “skein of wool” (*HT*, p. 213) over Offred’s hands, which leaves her “leashed, it looks like, manacled” (*HT*, p. 213).
75 Claude Maisonnat, “Amour, éthique et utopie dans The Handmaid’s Tale,” in Lacroix et al., p. 56.
“Harlequin romances” 76 – “He doesn’t even say anything, why fool around, it’s an assignment. [...] His mouth is on me, his hands, I can’t wait and he’s moving, already, love, it’s been so long, I’m alive in my skin, again” (HT, p. 273) – Offred reveals that she “made that up. It didn’t happen that way” (HT, p. 273), and switches to a second account. In this more detailed report, the young people exchange clichéd lines from old movies to disguise their unease and “keep the core of [them]sel[ves] out of reach, enclosed, protected” (HT, p. 274), Offred replying, for instance, “[a]nd what’s a nice girl like me doing in a spot like this” to Nick’s “[y]ou come here often?” (HT, p. 274). This highly dated, fabricated language emphasising the two characters’ shared awareness of the artificial nature of their rendezvous, brings them closer. When Offred, reduced to tears by such a linguistic echo of things “gone away” (HT, p. 274), is comforted by the Guardian, the couple take advantage of this physical closeness, and move on to the very goal of their meeting which, as the heroine reticently admits, gives her sexual pleasure: “There wasn’t any thunder [...] , I added that in. To cover up the sounds, which I am ashamed of making” (HT, p. 274). Like the first one, this second scenario is however negated with a “[i]t didn’t happen that way either” (HT, p. 278).

Atwood’s protagonist finally never describes this moment, and concludes with words that recall Mary Magdalene’s ineffable union with the divine in The Wild Girl: “I’m not sure how it happened; not exactly. All I can hope for is a reconstruction: the way love feels is always only approximate” (HT, p. 275). This gap in the story not only reveals the belief Offred shares with Roberts’s heroine that words cannot always describe a woman’s experience adequately, or her need to create for herself yet another space of privacy, but it also foregrounds the guilt feelings she has about her husband, which make her wonder: “If I knew for certain he was dead, would that make a difference? I would like to be without shame” (HT, p. 278). Finally, this silence, since it emphasises both the Handmaid’s predicament and the multiplicity, contingency and reconstructed character of truths, shows again how much Offred wishes to keep her narratees’ active participation and, most importantly, empathy.

As she describes how, after that first night, she keeps coming back to Nick’s flat again and again “for [her]self entirely” and “feel[s] [...] thankful” (HT, p. 280)

76 Madonna Miner, “‘Trust Me’: Reading the Romance Plot in Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale,” in Bloom, Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale, p. 36.
each time he lets her in, Offred most explicitly voices this specific concern not to offend her addressees. Gently flattering her audience, she makes it a point of honour to clearly distinguish her reticence from deceitfulness: “I am coming to a part you will not like at all, because in it I did not behave well, but I will try nonetheless to leave nothing out. After all you’ve been through, you deserve whatever I have left, which is not much but includes the truth” (*HT*, p. 280). This truth, as it emerges along the last twenty or so pages of Offred’s testimony, is that, although they never use the word, because “it would be romance, bad luck” (*HT*, p. 282), Atwood’s heroine falls in love with the Guardian to the point of recklessness and, if Offred’s own confession is to be trusted, “laziness” (*HT*, p. 283). Accordingly, the protagonist declares herself prepared to “wear pink feathers, purple stars, if that were what he wanted” (*HT*, p. 281) and consciously deludes herself into believing in the romantic idea that “[b]eing […] with him is safety; it’s a cave” (*HT*, p. 281) – “of course […] [t]his room is one of the most dangerous places I could be […] but I’m beyond caring” (*HT*, pp. 281-282). She however notes, with a touch of self-reproach:

> And how have I come to trust him like this, which is foolhardy in itself? […]
> I talk too much. I tell him things I shouldn’t. […]
> I tell him my real name, and feel that therefore I am known. I act like a dunce. I should know better. I make of him an idol, a cardboard cutout. […]
> Impossible to think that anyone for whom I feel such gratitude could betray me. (*HT*, p. 282)

Offred moreover no longer cares about hearing news from, or transmitting information to the underground resistance group Mayday that originally filled her with hope and excitement when her shopping partner Ofglen revealed its existence to her. “[D]aydreaming, smiling at nothing” (*HT*, p. 283) like a teenage girl discovering love, the heroine seems to be content with the life that she has made for herself with Nick: “I no longer want to leave, escape, cross border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him” (*HT*, p. 283). As has been argued, among others, by Howells, “this forbidden love story looks very like a traditional romance plot, with its strong undercurrent of sexual magnetism which leads the heroine into dangerous territory with a dark stranger.”

77 *The Handmaid’s Tale* might consequently appear to

put forward the “culturally conservative message”\textsuperscript{78} that a woman’s only possible goal in life is “her introduction to Mr. Right.”\textsuperscript{79}

Coming to this conclusion, however, would mean overlooking the central message of the novel with which this chapter started, about the paramount significance of the oppressive circumstances in the assessment of Offred’s deeds, words and thoughts. In a totalitarian state that bans love, having an affair actually constitutes a highly subversive choice, “a form of female opposition to the State.”\textsuperscript{80} Moreover, like Mrs Noah in Roberts’s eponymous novel, Offred revealingly feels pregnant by the end of chapter forty-one. With this conviction that she nevertheless immediately identifies as “wishful thinking” (\textit{HT}, p. 283), the protagonist of \textit{The Handmaid’s Tale} conveys her sense of achievement and fulfilment specifically reached through her challenging of the oppressive Gileadean authority. Furthermore, Offred’s love story with Nick represents a survival strategy on several accounts. Firstly, it enables Atwood’s heroine to go through the particularly gruesome Salvaging, or public execution of rebels, which Handmaids are compelled to attend. Offred, who “do[es]n’t want to be telling this story” (\textit{HT}, p. 285), recounts how, in the past, she has already symbolically touched the rope joining together all the assembled Handmaids, placed her hand on her heart “to show […] [her] consent, and […] complicity,” and “seen the kicking feet” but now “do[es]n’t want to see it any more” (\textit{HT}, p. 288).

The narrator consequently expresses her reticence to testify to this horrible scene and her forced participation in it. She resorts to diversionary close-ups on the meteorological conditions – “[l]uckily the weather is all right: not too hot, cloudy-bright. It would be miserable kneeling here in the rain” (\textit{HT}, p. 285) –, on the rope which is “thick and brown and smells of tar” and “runs up onto the stage” “like a fuse, or the string of a balloon,” “which winds like a snake […]], bending like a very old, very slow river viewed from the air” (\textit{HT}, p. 285), or, still, on the grass, where she spots a dandelion. This flower of which Offred is fond, because of its connection to the games she remembers playing with her daughter, but also, most certainly, because of its “insolently random and hard to get rid of and […] [c]heerful” (\textit{HT}, p. 224)

\textsuperscript{78} Bouson, p. 152.
\textsuperscript{79} Tomc, in Bloom, \textit{Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale}, p. 81. See also, on this topic, Charlotte Sturgess’s “The Handmaid as a Romance Heroine,” in Lacroix \textit{et al.}
\textsuperscript{80} Bouson, p. 152.
nature mirroring her own rebellious resilience, evokes to the Handmaid “the colour of egg yolk” (HT, p. 286). This last association, which makes her “feel hungry” (HT, p. 286), foregrounds Offred’s typically reticent zest for life in even the most distressing context. It evokes the motif of the egg, this highly symbolic food metonymically defining her, that she is inevitably served for breakfast, and that she subversively re-appropriates by interpreting its “smooth but also grained” surface as a lunar “barren landscape, yet perfect,” a divine-like blankness – “I think that this is what God must look like: an egg” (HT, p. 120) – that, in the same way as Offred conceals her rebelliousness, hides inside its life and explosive potential – the egg “tast[ing] faintly of sulphur” (HT, p. 210).

Besides these by now traditional close-ups on visual images and associations, Offred can now add a new tactic that distracts her from the atrocity and appropriately helps her hold herself together, in the form of comforting recollections and anticipations of her intimacy with Nick: “I try to think about tonight, about making love, in the dark. […] I remember being held” (HT, p. 285). This safeguarding interconnection between, on the one hand, the protagonist’s will to preserve her life and sanity in the face of atrocity, and on the other hand the love story through which Offred rediscovers her body as an instrument of delight, is confirmed when, following the Salvaging, the Handmaids are prompted – in what is called a Particicution – to tear to pieces a man alleged to have raped two of their peers. After acknowledging with shame her participation in this blood bath – “despite myself I feel my hands clench. It is too much, this violation. […] I want to tear, gouge, rend” (HT, pp. 290-291) – Offred confesses, with equal discomfort, her imperious, almost irrepressible need to indulge in gustatory and sensual pleasures:

This is monstrous, but nevertheless it’s true. Death makes me hungry. Maybe […] it’s the body’s way of seeing to it that I remain alive, continue to repeat its bedrock prayer: I am, I am. I am, still.
I want to go to bed, make love, right now.
I think of the word relish.
I could eat a horse. (HT, p. 293)

If Offred’s affair with Nick can be seen to intensify her desire to survive, so it seems to provide in the most concrete way the very key to the protagonist’s deliverance, as the end of the narrator’s testimony appears to indicate. In a dramatic quickening of the action, Offred almost simultaneously learns that, in order to protect Mayday, her shopping partner Ofglen hanged herself upon seeing the black van used
to cart away dissidents, and is greeted with insults by Serena Joy, who has just discovered her Handmaid’s illegal activities with the Commander. As a consequence, the heroine switches from her late carefree focus on pleasure, to an acute awareness of danger and thoughts of surrender – “I’ll obliterate myself [...] I’ll [...] become a chalice. [...] I’ll renounce. I know this can’t be right but I think it anyway” (HT, p. 298) – to, eventually, the mental enumeration of a series of possible scenarios of escape, each as undesirable and unworkable as the other. Confined again to her bedroom, Atwood’s heroine feels the presence of her predecessor, whose voice merges with hers in a sudden disorienting blur, and envisages taking her life, like Ofglen or the previous Offred: “There were always two of us. Get it over, she says. I’m tired of this melodrama, I’m tired of keeping silent. There’s no one you can protect, your life has value to no one. I want it finished” (HT, p. 305). When Offred hears the dreaded black van coming to fetch her, her mind flies to the possibility she has not taken to find a weapon, thereby implicitly referring to her friend Moira’s bold feat.

It is, however, precisely because she has chosen, out of a blend of deep-seated will to live and self-preserving cowardice, neither suicide, frontal revolt, nor active involvement in the resistance – options that repeatedly prove to be deadly, as the tragic ends of Offred’s ancestor, best friend and shopping partner most explicitly demonstrate –, but has devised for herself a form of reticent rebellion that specifically involves her liberating love story with Nick, that the protagonist of The Handmaid’s Tale survives and manages to make her subversive voice heard, thereby lastingly challenging her silencing by Gilead. While she is expecting strangers to storm her bedroom, Offred is in actual fact suddenly brought face to face with Nick, who enjoins her to follow the two members of the secret police – or Eyes – without fear, for they are double agents for Mayday. Torn between the suspicion that her lover might in truth prove to belong to the Eyes himself, and her inclination to depend on him, the heroine chooses to willingly put herself in the strangers’ hands: “He calls me by my real name. Why should this mean anything? [...] ‘Trust me,’ he says; which in itself has never been a talisman, carries no guarantee. But I snatch at it, this offer. It’s all I’m left with” (HT, pp. 305-306). Offred is therefore escorted down the stairs under the anxious eyes of a seething Serena and a “helpless,” “shrinking” (HT, p. 306) Commander whom she dominates, in a highly symbolic way, via her higher position: “I am above him, looking down” (HT, p. 306).
As she is helped into the van, the narrator abruptly stops her narrative: “Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing. […] And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light” (HT, p. 307). With this refusal to conclude her story, which reflects the “postmodern suspicion of closure, of both its arbitrariness and its foreclosing interpretative power,” Atwood’s protagonist foregrounds her reticence in the most dramatic way. In an echo of her earlier silences about, among others, her name or her first night with Nick, but also of her revealing statement that, when the times were beginning to change, and rapes, or gruesome murders were soaring, she and her friends “were the people who were not in the papers,” who “lived […] in the gaps between the stories,” which “gave [them] […] more freedom” (HT, pp. 66-67), Offred interrupts her tale, expressing one last time her indissociable need and reluctance to testify, and celebrating, in this way, the unique power of silence praised by Alice Chalanset in her contribution to Le silence: la force du vide:

> Force inouïe de qui garde le silence, se tenant à l’abri […] de toute réduction. […] Chaque prise de parole me voue à n’être que ce que je suis, ou plutôt à me trouver honteusement identifié à ce que je ne suis pas […] – terrible enfermement d’un sujet dans et par sa parole.82

Besides enabling the heroine to remain partially ungraspable, indefinable, i.e. both protected and free, Offred’s ultimate silence also imparts considerable power to the narratees, for it invites them to formulate their own interpretations of the Handmaid’s fate, which can further empower her by truly listening to, and faithfully transmitting her subversive, polyphonic and plural voice, but also distort or even silence her again. The novel itself most graphically thematises this risk in its closing section entitled “Historical Notes,” which casts new light – but also, to take up Offred’s last image, darkness – on the heroine’s testimony, as will be shown in the third part of this thesis.

81 Hutcheon, Politics, p. 66.
Quand elles se réveilleront d'entre les morts, d'entre les mots, d'entre les lois.
Il était une fois…
De l’histoire qui suit on ne peut pas encore dire: “ce n’est qu’une histoire.” Ce conte reste vrai aujourd’hui. La plupart des femmes qui sont réveillées se souviennent d’avoir dormi, d’avoir été endormies.
Il était une fois… et encore une fois…¹

Chapter 6
“So Utterly beyond the Pale”: The Playfully Reticent Tale of Eve’s Journey

I. Once Upon a Time: An Introduction into Grandmother Dummer’s Reticence

As in Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale, in Tennant’s Sisters and Strangers, the heroine gives voice to her life in the form of a reticent tale to challenge the roles to which she is confined. Grandmother Dummer’s use of this silence however markedly differs from Offred’s, for the Handmaid’s reticence is intrinsically linked to her nightmarish fate as a forced surrogate mother, and therefore often acquires particularly intense traumatic and tragic accents. In Tennant’s Sisters and Strangers, by contrast, that very same form of silence arises in the context of the playfully misleading and highly parodic account of Eve’s journey through the seven (stereo)typical identities believed to be forced onto women in Judeo-Christian societies – identities that are all related, in comic fashion, to the castigated mainstream representation of the biblical first woman as inherently guilty and inferior to man.

While Offred’s reluctance hinges on the reconstructed immediacy of suffering, Grandmother Dummer’s, on the other hand, is a reticence purposefully rooted in

¹ Cixous, in Clément and Cixous, p. 120.
distance, for it is related to a blurring of voice, as Grandmother Dummer’s position vis-à-vis her “fairy story for grown-ups” (S&S, p. 8) ultimately proves to be deceptive in the last two pages of the novel. Until the very end of her narrative, the older woman assumes the typical heterodiegetic identity of the ancient female storyteller of fairy tales traditionally instructing the young ones in “who is trusted and who is not, about what is considered praiseworthy and what is condemned, […] hopes and dangers.”

However, in the penultimate page of *Sisters and Strangers*, Grandmother Dummer, in the last and, from a retrospective angle, most extensive example of her reticence, hints – instead of simply stating explicitly – that she and Eve are actually one and the same, that behind the heterodiegetic narrator is hiding an autodiegetic narrator, by unexpectedly switching to first person pronouns. In this way, she fuses the narrated realm of Eve and the reality of the Cornish summer shared with her granddaughter Elsie and her friend, which provides the frame for the story of Eve’s adventures. This feigned distance based on a secret is moreover combined with a true distance created by the retrospective nature of Dummer’s narration, the heroine relating her instructive adventures in the light of the maturity and sagacity she has progressively acquired throughout her long, eventful life.

Such a unique expression of reticence through the use of secrecy and the conscious self-blurring of the narrative voice that, while telling her own story, also resolutely stands aloof, can be interpreted as following from the heroine’s eagerness to get her message across. By implicitly posing as the old nurse or crone of fairy-tales, a figure endowed with “the authority of traditional wisdom accumulated over the past and acknowledged […] on account of its truthfulness,” Grandmother Dummer ensures herself the receptiveness of her young audience who is versed in fairy tales and undoubtedly more responsive to such stories than to an ancestor’s sharing of her experience in a confessional or moralistic tone. Distancing herself from her own story, Tennant’s protagonist moreover gives universal validity to it: “Eve is everywhere. […] It’s not a story of an olden-days princess, Grandmother Dummer said. She’s here and now. And one day, mark my words, you may turn out exactly like her” (S&S, pp. 11-12). Through this specific feature, Dummer’s account mirrors one of the basic features of traditional fairy tales, which “are not told in the first person of the

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2 Warner, *From the Beast*, p. 49. As Warner points out, “[f]airy tales are not told in the first person of the protagonist” (Warner, *From the Beast*, p. 215).

3 Warner, *From the Beast*, p. 25.
protagonist,” so that “[t]he audience is invited to take her part – or his – as well as identify with the mishaps and reversals in the protagonist’s life.”

If Grandmother Dummer’s reticence can first be interpreted to derive from her determination to cunningly lead the girls to listen to her narrativised message attentively and with an open mind, so can it be seen to stem from her concern not to directly impose her own interpretations, but rather to lead her protégées to think for themselves and reach their own conclusions, in a gentle way, yet often with much humorous irony towards the naivety and gullibility of both her audience and her younger self. Consequently, in the image – once more – of fairy tales, which, as Bruno Bettelheim points out, tend to designate complications only through hints, Dummer’s account of Eve’s initiation often rests on allusions that are precisely characterised by their silence, for, to quote Annette de la Motte,

[v]acillant entre absence et présence, entre offre et refus, […] [l’allusion] dévoile […] graduellement le sens sans le brusquer. Exigeant la collaboration active du lecteur dans l’acte de décodage du sens, elle […] l’invite […] à constituer le sens qui se déduit à l’aide de ce qui est donné ainsi que de ce qui est tu. [Sa] […] vertu suprême est, au fond, [sa] […] réticence. […] En s’abstenant de dire, l’allusion crée donc un espace vide, de manque, qui cherche à être comblé. […] Comme le blanc, elle crée du silence, elle est silence.

While serving Grandmother Dummer’s didactic aims, allusions also contribute, together with gaps and self-erasures, to the dramatisation of her hesitations and interruptions, mostly caused by her wish to playfully disappoint her addressees’ expectations, by brief spells of restraint when she evokes a scene oozing eroticism that “isn’t suitable […] at all” (S&S, p. 13) for her wards, or by her shame about the innocence and passivity of her youth, which repeatedly makes Dummer suddenly break off as she remembers thoughts and actions that she eventually never shares with her granddaughter and her friend – the elderly woman sometimes putting forward excuses, such as the need for the girls to go to bed, to evade questions and end the conversation. Such moments are particularly frequent at the beginning of the novel. The aged narrator, for instance, is said to “f[all]l silent and s[i]t staring out at the falling dusk” (S&S, p. 12) and, one page later, to “ha[ve] fallen silent again” (S&S, p. 13), when she evokes what originally seemed to Eve the perfect, blissful days in

4 Warner, From the Beast, p. 215.
5 Bettelheim, pp. 253-254.
Eden; shortly afterwards, Elsie’s friend also remarks that “Grandmother ha[s] fallen silent again” (S&S, p. 29) after mentioning Eve’s desperate efforts to maintain the status quo when her dream world was beginning to fall apart. These reticent recollections are frequently accompanied by manifestations of regret – Dummer sighing, “pursing her lips and looking away” (S&S, p. 30) – that are interpreted by the young girls as Dummer’s expressions of strong empathy for Eve, “almost as if she’d known this situation herself and it was painful to remember it” (S&S, p. 27).

II. Meet Lilith: from the Passive Princess to the Demonic Face of the Female Struggle for Equality

The passage that introduces Eve’s first transition from one stereotypical identity to another appropriately illustrates the narrator’s reticence. Halfway through her description of how Eve anticipates Adam’s return in her boudoir, playing in this way the role of the submissive princess dutifully waiting for the prince’s kiss one last time before her metamorphoses, Dummer suddenly interrupts her narrative, thereby abruptly departing from the grown-up version of the happily-ever-after scenario, and frustrating the girls’ voyeuristic hopes, to better teach them the lesson of “one of the basic tenets of life” (S&S, p. 14), the impossibility of “Paradise” (S&S, p. 14):

Adam has come in, and, pulling her peignoir away from her…
– But there, my children, I must break off.
– And, said Grandmother Dummer when we looked up at her imploringly, it didn’t happen anyway. Because something had taken place that day which was to change the course of this happy couple’s life.

It had to do with a simple question of matrimony. As it so often does. (S&S, p. 14)

This instance of self-erasure, which recalls Offred’s frequent use of the technique in The Handmaid’s Tale, enables Grandmother Dummer to introduce, in a most dramatic fashion, Eve’s awakening. Echoing Cixous’s belief that “[i]l était une fois… […] Les belles dorment dans leurs bois, en attendant que les princes viennent les réveiller. […] Belles, mais passives. […] Il se penche sur elle… On coupe. Le conte est fini. Rideau. Une fois réveillé (e), ce serait une toute autre histoire,”7 Dummer recounts how, in a highly symbolic move, when Adam approaches to kiss his lover awake, “Eve’s mouth” unexpectedly “opens at the same time as her eyes” (S&S, p. 17) to declare that

7 Cixous, in Clément and Cixous, p. 120.
a woman claiming to be his wife has come to their house – in a voice so “unfamiliar to Adam” that “[h]e even wonders for a moment if Eve has been practising ventriloquism, along with her classes in Batik and Provençal pottery and the occasional fencing and martial arts” (S&S, p. 17), as Dummer specifies with sardonic wit. It is this encounter with Adam’s first partner Lilith, which also coincides with the arrival of the evil serpentine tempter Frank Blake, that launches Eve’s journey through the “seven ways” (S&S, p. 7) by making her want, for the first time in her life, “to escape from the cage where she was as happy as a lark and as sweet-voiced as a nightingale” (S&S, p. 33).

As Grandmother Dummer explains in a flashback, Eve’s life of luxurious domesticity in Eden is suddenly disrupted by the appearance of “a face – or just a segment of it – […] between the slats” (S&S, p. 20) in her kitchen. Having been successfully indoctrinated, Eve automatically identifies this unbound female presence looming from the outside world as “an impossible monster in a fairy tale book. Two burning dark eyes. And then a great big mouth like an ogre’s, that wants to come in and eat her and her house all up…” (S&S, p. 20). Yielding to her desire for knowledge – or, according to the denounced patriarchal definitions of women, her inherent inquisitiveness –, the heroine enquires who her visitor is and what she wants. In answer to Eve’s questions, the stranger unleashes the elements in the form of thunder, “a terrible rush of wind,” “a squall of sleet” (S&S, p. 21), and sudden heavy darkness. This last element causes Eve to imagine, in a sarcastic reference both to the gloom that is said to fall during Christ’s crucifixion,8 and to mainstream Christian interpretations of Eve as the source of the evil for whose remission Jesus has to sacrifice himself,9 that

it must surely be the end of the world. For a wild moment she thinks that, somewhere, Christ must be crucified. But that wouldn’t be possible, children. Because Eve comes a long time before Jesus. Indeed, everything in the world is her fault, and poor Jesus had to die to atone for her terrible wickedness. […] She should have known not to ask questions. (S&S, p. 24)

8 See, for instance, Luke 23:44-46: “It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. […] Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.’ Having said this, he breathed his last.”
9 As Mieke Bal formulates it, “hers is all the guilt” (Bal, Lethal Love, p. 104).
This encounter between Eve and Adam’s first partner foregrounds Grandmother Dummer’s teaching that “many women can’t see each other when they’re placed in different categories. […] [I]t’s called Divide and Rule” (S&S, p. 139), rooted in the common feminist argument that “[t]he divisions between mothers and daughters, between sisters, between all women, are the cornerstones of patriarchy.”

While affirming the almost inescapable nature of male-defined types for women – as Dummer tells the girls, “[b]iology is not destiny. No. But you’ll find that all the old categories […] are still there for women” (S&S, pp. 57-58) – Tennant’s *Sisters and Strangers* challenges them through comic exaggeration. Such a subversive parodic re-enactment of silencing identities demonstrates connections with the female strategy of playing with mimesis advocated by Irigaray, through which women deliberately assume traditional feminine roles to question them and convert them into a form of affirmation:

Jouer de la mimésis, c’est donc, pour une femme, tenter de retrouver le lieu de son exploitation par le discours, sans s’y laisser simplement réduire. C’est se resoumettre […] à des “idées,” notamment d’elle, élaborées dans/par une logique masculine, mais pour faire “apparaître,” par un effet de répétition ludique, ce qui devrait rester occulté: le recouvrement d’une possible opération du féminin dans le langage.11

Constantly playing on excess, *Sisters and Strangers* brings face to face, on the one hand, an Eve embodying a blend of the spoiled passive princess and the “immensely charming”12 and “pure”13 Angel in the House, who “has had dinner ready for as long as it’s been in the specially prepared freeze-heater, replenished at the Manoir Au Quat’ Saisons […] and containing an exact balance of protein and calorie […] – lettuce soup, most probably” (S&S, p. 13) and who, “while waiting for the key in the door” (S&S, p. 11) “on a bed that is an exact replica of Cleopatra’s barge” (S&S, p. 13), rubs “oils of Afghan pansies and unguents made from samphire buds found on the highest cliffs of County Kerry into her pale skin” (S&S, p. 11), and, on the other hand, a monstrous, inarticulate Lilith spreading terror and destruction wherever she goes.14 Tennant’s version of Adam’s first partner pushes to extremes, in

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14 Accordingly, in Eden, Lilith’s anger breaks the conservatory roof and frees Eve’s puma from its cage, while in Venice, Lilith makes the Grand Canal rise “to its highest ever level and the Piazza San
ironic fashion, the angry, “wild and unkempt”15 aspect of Lilith, the first woman created for Adam, according to Jewish texts like the *Alphabet of Ben Sira.*16 On account of the origin she shares with Adam in the dust of the ground17 – as reported in the first biblical creation story – the legendary Lilith is said to immediately have with her husband a quarrel over equal sexual rights, which symbolises the latent conflict over claims to social supremacy, as Jacques Bril argues in *Lilith ou la mère obscure.*18 Still according to the legend, faced with Adam’s refusal to listen to her, Lilith pronounces the ineffable name before flying out of Eden, to the Red Sea, where she is found “consorting promiscuously with demons”19 and cursed by God’s angels to give birth every day to a hundred demons that systematically die by dusk. This figure rebelling against female submission to men has predominantly been used throughout its history as the archetype of a fearsome, demonic femininity,20 leading Gilbert and Gubar to claim that

[w]hat her history suggests is that in patriarchal culture, female […] “presumption”—that is, angry revolt against male domination—[is] […] inevitably demonic. […] Lilith represents the price women have been told they must pay for attempting to define themselves.21

Accordingly, in *Sisters and Strangers,* Grandmother Dummer tells Elsie and her friend that Lilith, who instantly took to “answer[ing] [Adam] back” and “sitting astride him as if he were no more than a broomstick, a sort of temporary transport to a witches’ bacchanalia” (*S&S,* p. 68), was perceived by Adam and God alike as “a terrible mistake”: “God even apologized to Adam for what he had put him through” (*S&S,* p. 68). The deity rectified his error by banishing Lilith to the wilderness and, having seen that “equality wasn’t what he – or Adam – could cope with at all,” by creating Eve, “a smiling, submissive part of [Adam] […] just waiting to do as it was told” (*S&S,* p. 68). Behind her horrifying façade, Tennant’s Lilith hides a woman who gives free rein to her anger at having been denied equality and reduced to the silencing status of an emotionally disturbed outcast, as Eve comes to realise when,

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16 Lesses, in Lindsay Jones, p. 5459.
17 Ginzberg, and Bril, pp. 70-71.
18 Bril, p. 72.
20 Bril, p. III.
21 Gilbert and Gubar, p. 35.
outraged by the revelation of Adam’s lie about his marital status, she begins to see in
the mirror “someone else altogether star[ing] back at her from the glass. And it was
the monster” (S&S, p. 32).

Having unwittingly got under way her transformation into Lilith, Eve decides
to start taking responsibility for herself, which however ironically only results in
making her even more responsible – that is, guilty. When behind Adam’s back she
books the holidays in Italy that Lilith demands, hoping in this way to be rid of the
monster, she actually enables her rival to meet a lawyer who will “conclusively prove
[…] that Lilith is not only due half of all Adam’s wealth and possessions, but, as his
ture and lawful wife, is due the other half as well” (S&S, p. 50). Moreover, when she
yields to the devil Frank Blake’s temptation and stops taking her pill in the hope that a
child will ensure the durability of her couple, she in reality precipitates the collapse of
her union and accentuates her association with blameworthiness, for as Grandmother
Dummer teaches the girls, “when you are [ready to bear children], you’ll see that the
responsibility will lie fair and square with you. It will, in short, be all your fault”
(S&S, pp. 43-44).

Caught between a Lilith whom he sees, unsurprisingly, as “the monster, the
ravening wolf who would eat his shares in Consolidated Gold and swallow whole
emerald mines in South Africa” (S&S, p. 37), and a pregnant Eve of whom he must
“make an honest woman” (S&S, p. 50), Adam is subsequently led to a divorce and a
second wedding ruined by the new ex-wife. For if Dummer starts depicting nuptials
worthy of the most magical fairy tale, with a bride “radiant, under a diadem of Marie-
Antoinette’s diamonds” and in a cream satin dress “exaggerating rather than
concealing the twin boys that Eve will bear her lucky husband” (S&S, p. 46), and a
couple leaving for their honeymoon “in the biggest hot-air balloon in the world,
shaped as a monstrous replica of the London Ritz hotel” (S&S, p. 47), the whole event
being filmed “by Bernardo Bertolucci, with music by Andrew Lloyd Webber and
costumes by Emanuel” (S&S, p. 46), the old narrator, however, in another occurrence
of self-erasure, abruptly stops this idyllic picture:

Just a strip of celluloid and some dishy side-effects. For the wedding didn’t happen at all like
that, you see. Adam spent his last penny on hiring the directors and actors. […] Because, you
see, Lilith had taken Adam to the cleaners. (S&S, p. 47)

As is shown by “the Polaroid snap they had to beg the Indian cleaner to take”
(S&S, p. 48), the real wedding, during which an Adam and Eve with messy hair and
dressed in stained, faded clothes are married in a “grimy registrar’s office” (S&S, p. 48), is associated, not with a joyous rise in the air under the impressed eyes of grateful guests, but, on the contrary, with a cruel fall into a hellish reality. The couple is thrown out of Eden, “doomed to wander, exiled from the love and protection of their god” (S&S, p. 52), and anathematised as “a marked couple” (S&S, p. 51) – Eve being identified worldwide as “an acknowledged sinner” who “has eaten of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (S&S, p. 51). The newlyweds are moreover unrelentingly hunted down by Lilith who, like the madwoman in the attic in Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* – the quintessence of the heroine’s dark double –, burns down the “château” (S&S, p. 52) where they have found refuge: “and they are evacuated, dripping wet from the pumps and scorched by the flames that Lil, disguised as Mrs Rochester, has wrapped around the hangings of their four-poster. Never forget the fury of a first wife abandoned” (S&S, p. 52).

Despite all her efforts to save her marriage, Eve becomes both the bad wife and the bad mother. She “end[s] up trying to please a cross unemployed man in a crumbling slum, with screaming brats and not enough to eat” (S&S, p. 57), a man who “decides that everything that’s happened to him is Eve’s fault” (S&S, p. 56). When the heroine, who “sees nearly every time now the mad, enraged and bitter eyes of the monster” (S&S, p. 59) in her mirror, starts to liberate herself and, feeling “she [i]s the wiser and stronger of the two” (S&S, p. 58), strives to symbolically take the ascendancy over Adam by wanting to be “the missionary and Adam the ignorant heathen” (S&S, p. 58) – in an echo of Lilith’s initial cause of disagreement with Adam, both in the Jewish legend22 and in Tennant’s novel – Adam “sees Lilith, a hideous, accusing monster. Adam hates and fears the monster. So he goes” (S&S, p. 62).

Besides being held responsible and ostracised for not having been able to “keep her man” (S&S, p. 62), who has started a new career as a politician thanks to his new conquest – the Cabinet Minister’s Daughter Brigid –, Eve also gets trapped in the role of the bad mother, the other evil facet of Lilith. Struggling to survive on her own with no job and constantly fighting sons, she “pushes the enormous weight of the twins before her in a double pushchair, like a monstrous never-ending pregnancy” (S&S, p. 65), in her new Fourth-World neighbourhood implicitly identified with the

Inferno through the graffiti “‘Abandon Hope All Ye who Enter Here’” (S&S, p. 66), which constitutes an intertextual reference to the inscription at the entrance to hell in Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*. As she sees forsaken children in the streets, she “knows very well […] that she will do this to Cain and little Abie too” (S&S, pp. 65-66), like “the parents in fairy tales who, when they can no longer support them, take their children out to the forest and leave them there to die” (S&S, pp. 65-66), or like Lilith, the “vile mother with sour milk in her breasts” (S&S, p. 68), who, according to the legend, devours or strangles newborns, including her own.23

If Eve’s initial transformation into Lilith very much looks like an exile into silencing ghastly roles, it also represents the first step in Eve’s emancipation from male authority. The heroine has definitely abandoned her submissive passivity as well as her emotional and financial subordination to Adam. Furthermore, in another marked instance of the playful use of mimesis, Grandmother Dummer points out that Eve’s “powers have grown with the identity of Lilith. Her slightest sob brings down a whole row of artisans’ houses. […] Heads of State all over the world wake with acute anxiety attacks when Lilith/Eve screams in her desire for vengeance” (S&S, p. 70). In her “rage of the eternal exile” (S&S, p. 69), Eve embodies not only the outcast victim, but also the triumphant woman warrior and the female agent of vengeful retribution, i.e. “Hagar, surrogate wife of Abraham, who was cast out in the desert with her son Ishmael when her services were no longer required” (S&S, p. 69), as well as “Judith as she holds up the head of Holofernes, and […] Salome as she drinks the blood from the severed neck of John the Baptist” (S&S, p. 69). Like the first, Eve’s subsequent moves into, and out of, the other five categories for women will simultaneously prove to be oppressive and liberating; they will silence the heroine, but also enable her to find her own voice.

**III. Subverting the Extreme Representations of Female Sexuality: From Harlot to Madonna**

Predictably answering Lilith/Eve’s wild howling for vengeance is Frank Blake, denounced by Grandmother Dummer as “the god who works night and day against the true God” (S&S, p. 70) – who can be identified as the patriarchal representation of the divine principle and, by extension, the Judeo-Christian tradition, seen to slyly confine

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23 Bril, pp. 62-64.
women to silencing roles. As he instigated Eve’s transformation into Lilith, so is “the Serpent” (S&S, p. 42) behind the protagonist’s turning into the stereotypical identity of the “harlot” (S&S, p. 85). With a great many allusions betraying her contrition and her wish to preserve her young audience, Grandmother Dummer recounts that Blake urges Eve to take up “[t]he oldest profession” (S&S, p. 71), but also that, after giving her the necessary “equipment” (S&S, p. 73), he takes Cain and Abe away, with the promise to entrust them to Adam’s care. The tempter actually abandons them in the street, fulfilling in this way Eve’s premonition that she would one day embody the cruel mother even in its most ghastly aspect.

This harsh revelation, although toned down by Dummer’s reticence, initially makes Elsie and her companion so indignant that they welcome with relief the old woman’s interruption in her story and, through some sort of mimetism, become what can be described as reticent listeners:

We were silent for quite a long time after Grandmother Dummer had stopped speaking. And I suppose, in a way, we wanted her to be silent now, too. Children can take just so much news from the other world, the world beyond puberty. […]

So for several days we played on the beach. […]
It was all such a long way from the life-story of Eve, the story Grandmother Dummer had begun because we insisted. (S&S, p. 74)

The girls however know that “there [i]s no going back” (S&S, p. 74) and, after this salutary break during which they “deliberately [do] not th[ink] of Eve” (S&S, p. 75) – which gives them the opportunity to come to terms with the shock of Cain and Abe’s dreadful fate –, they run in from the beach one evening, moved by the certainty that “the story [i]s about to continue and […] [they] ha[ve] to be there” (S&S, p. 75).

If the identity of prostitute first renders Eve “literally powerless” (S&S, p. 75) – the young woman being exploited and beaten by her pimp –, it also enables the heroine to discover the diametrical opposite of such male exploitation of the female body, i.e. the power of bonding so central to feminist thought, “[i]n the shape of the tart on the floor above, Sally” (S&S, p. 77), who helps her to escape from the brothel in which they are both held captive. Most importantly, the “harlot role” (S&S, p. 87) is depicted to further liberate Eve from masculine domination, for as Grandmother Dummer points out, the heroine and her new friend feel

[f]ree of men, paradoxically, for by becoming whores they had freed themselves from the whole chain of stereotypes into which men place and always will place women: it’s as if the whore, by being so necessary and so utterly beyond the pale, cancels all the others out immediately. (S&S, p. 86)
This sense of liberty and connectedness experienced by Sally and by Eve, who “find[s] herself out in the world after such a long time either incarcerated with Adam as his faithful wife or locked up with […] [her] pimp” (S&S, p. 84), however has its limits. The two females can be seen to be indirectly caught up by the male system of divide and rule, for not only are they blacklisted by the other women, who cast them “glances such as she had never in her life received before” (S&S, pp. 84-85), but they also unknowingly re-establish between themselves the male-organised rivalry that they had previously deconstructed when, as they live together, Sally starts getting the upper hand. While her vivacious friend makes a lot of money by prostituting herself, Eve, by contrast, has to content herself with the household chores, the pair turning in this way into “a Mary and a Martha” (S&S, p. 88).

This imbalance can be analysed as the main element triggering Eve’s new metamorphosis, for it drives her to put a small ad in a newspaper to get her twins back, in reply to which over a thousand children are brought in, whom Eve decides to all keep, being unable to say if hers are among the “mob of urchins” (S&S, p. 92). Such an overtly hyperbolic scene satirises the Christian elevation of motherhood as self-sacrifice – as embodied by the Virgin Mary –, and appropriately announces Eve’s incarnation of the Madonna role, in conjunction with Grandmother Dummer’s pedagogical outing to the little church of Zennor, where the old woman makes her wards see “for the first time, […] the Virgin as she really is: mournful, preoccupied with the burden of love taken on in the name of the whole world; suffering and pain etched in the fine stained-glass” (S&S, p. 103).

Another – and rather unexpected – manifestation of female bonding initially comes to the rescue of Eve and her protégés, in the person of Lilith, who, having become a good friend of the heroine since Adam left Eve, “freezes the Garden of Eden” (S&S, p. 101), so that Brigid leaves and Eve can move in again. This return to Eden however turns out to have more in common with “a Hieronymus Bosch-like vision of Hell” (S&S, p. 102) than with heaven. In a sarcastic reference to both Christ’s holy wounds and the Virgin Mary’s depiction as Mater Dolorosa, Eve, who has to take care of the children on her own, “feels guilty all the time now she is Madonna” (S&S, p. 109) and, when she receives blows from the twins in answer to her desperate attempts to make up for the time when she could not take care of them, kisses the bruise in front of them, so they can see that even the wounds they inflict are holy. […]
She neglected them. And now she will pay the price. [...] Poor Eve. At least she knows now for real that she’s entirely to blame. (S&S, pp. 110-111)

Ironically mirroring typical Marian iconography, where the mother of Christ often “gaze[s] out beyond the picture frame to dwell on an inner landscape of the soul, where tragedy and triumph are bound together” and her countenance radiates a “[w]istfulness [that] seems [...] a part of modesty and grace, a suitable expression of wonderment at her own beauty and mystery,” Eve-Madonna is said by Grandmother Dummer to “cry from time to time, [...] [but] mostly she’s looking pretty pleased with herself and secretive – like that picture of her you have in your book on Renaissance art; or like the Virgin just up the hill in the church” (S&S, p. 115).

If Eve feels empowered on a personal level by the grace of the Madonna, she also gains ascendancy over Adam in a most comically literal way, for, as she is pregnant with Seth, Adam becomes “subsumed by maternity and all its restricting mess of gurgling, demanding human life,” and consequently feels “the mother [i]s a prison and not a wife any longer” (S&S, p. 125). It is this male perception of maternity that, according to Dummer, enables Eve to “go back to being a Virgin again, when only recently she had been so very much the opposite” (S&S, p. 105), because, following the Jungian claim that “all men want a virgin mother, at least in symbolic form,” and, making fun of the doctrine of Mary’s perpetual virginity, Dummer explains how

men cannot accept to themselves that their mother is anything other than a virgin from beginning to end of her life. This is stronger by far than the Oedipus complex – which was invented, after all, by a man who knew the power of jealousy and rivalry, but did not understand that Oedipus had never any desire for his mother – only the desire that his mother had never been impregnated by any human agency at all. (S&S, p. 105)

Faced with this mother-wife Madonna/Eve, who “doesn’t need [her man] [...] for anything” (S&S, p. 115), Adam begins “to shrink” (S&S, p. 108). The family’s move, decided by Eve, to Calabria – one of these areas “where the Madonna would not be taken in vain” (S&S, p. 105), since “Mariolatry is the faith of faiths” (S&S, p. 106) – does not improve Adam’s condition. On the contrary, confirming Grandmother Dummer’s belief, formulated earlier in the local church, that in deeply Catholic Mediterranean countries, “[i]n the lap of [Mary’s] [...] blue gown, childhood returns

25 Warner, Alone, p. 335.
with the force of the plaster images that hang on every wall” (S&S, p. 103), Adam, who is said by Dummer to be “infantile at heart,” like “most men – after their upbringing with their own mother Madonna –” (S&S, p. 126), is depicted, in a very graphic manner, to regress to a state of complete dependence on the mother:

Adam lies in the arms of Madonna and he drinks the milk from her breast. He is small now, smaller than Seth; and Madonna has to be especially protective of him when the boys play – for fear Cain decides to play an Oedipus trick, or the others simply kick him too hard. (In fact, Adam is more trying than a small child, for he is more truculent than the others when it comes to having to share the love and attention of the Mother of them All.) (S&S, p. 126)

If the Madonna, “[a]ll the world over, […] is worshipped and revered” and, “where the sea is bluest, so is the worship all the more devout” (S&S, p. 103), Eve is nevertheless neither truly valued, nor fulfilled in this role. As a consequence, she bursts out of this identity by getting back to Eden with Adam and the children, and starting to “tell […] lies” (S&S, p. 133), a highly lucrative activity through which the heroine “finds herself pigeon-holed once again” (S&S, p. 139), but which also brings her financial independence, extensive fame and power.

IV. On the Celebration of Female Lies and Denigration of Women’s Scholarly Truths: From Courtesan to Bluestocking

“Lies, said Grandmother Dummer, are what you have already been brought up on, my poor girls. And the lies will go on until the day you die, unless you really take care to identify a lie when you hear one” (S&S, p. 134). Adopting her role of pedagogue more explicitly and emphatically than ever, Tennant’s old narrator teaches her audience about what she perceives as the highly pernicious effect of being “brought up to believe in the Cinderella story as if it were the gospel truth” (S&S, p. 136). With unmistakable hints of reticence, such as – yet another – interruption of her tale, introduced by “an embarrassed cough” (S&S, p. 136) or an empathic smile, the benevolent ancestor betrays her wish to alleviate the young friends’ “shock” and “disappoint[ment] at Red Riding Hood – and our favourite, Cinderella – being just a pack of lies” (S&S, p. 135), but also the unease that seizes her as she is about to unveil how Eve falls prey – and even actively contributes – to what Dummer describes as this international conspiracy that “encourage[s] [women] […] to see [them]selves as [they] […] shouldn’t” (S&S, pp. 135-136). As the grandmother points out, if “[f]or every fairy story you’ve had read to you, there’s another where the princess is brave

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and active, and the prince is quiet and likes to [...] wait for the little frog to [...] turn into a strong, beautiful woman in his bed one fine day” (S&S, p. 135), the harmful chimera of “the Prince Charming story” (S&S, p. 138) however overshadows them, making every single girl “in our whole wide world [...] wait [...] for that moment [...] when she is chosen, singled out” by the “prince who will elevate [her] [...] if [she is] [...] especially humble, and make [her] [...] his helpmeet, his very top aide” (S&S, p. 136). By using the specific word “helpmeet” that, as the Oxford English Dictionary indicates, is “[a] compound absurdly formed by taking the two words help meet in Gen. ii. 18, 20 [...] as one word,” Dummer implicitly denounces the depiction of Eve as the product of the Judeo-Christian God’s will to give Adam “a helper as his partner,” which has often been used to legitimise an ideology of female submission to men, as has already been noted earlier.

Since Eve has “been told so many lies when she was a child that she can’t tell the truth from fantasy” (S&S, p. 139), she readily falls into the trap that keeps women “as little girls, so they’re ready to consume the lie, in a variety of different forms – until the day they die” (S&S, p. 138). Swapping her “mystic Madonna expression” (S&S, p. 117) for the “distant, merciful” and “ineffable smile” of an “inviolable” “virgin [...] in charge of the keys to life and death” (S&S, p. 141), Eve, like an obedient schoolgirl, “[lays] out a cheap lined exercise book and pick[s] up a pen and beg[ins] to write,” not the expected lines, but “her lies” (S&S, p. 140), in the form of medical romances worthy of the most sentimental Harlequin book. In her typical playfully reticent style, Grandmother Dummer recounts how Eve imagines herself as a nurse passionately in love with the surgeon of “the most advanced brain-transplant unit in the world,” who “can transform at the drop of a hat [...] the kindest of men into a mass murderer, a dribbling idiot into the inventor of quantum theory” (S&S, p. 142). Using a great many sexual innuendoes, Dummer draws the girls’ attention to Eve’s “red and shiny” (S&S, p. 141) hair, which leaves it “to the reader to speculate on whether there’s a fire down below” (S&S, p. 141), and to “that hard C” in the name of the “incredibly handsome Richard Colne” (S&S, p. 142), whose “scalpel” Eve “yearns to get the chance to wash” (S&S, p. 143).

27 As translated in the New Revised Standard Version.
With such vulgar, sardonic allusions, Dummer subversively reinforces her message that “[a]s long as you don’t really believe in these lies, they can be quite harmless” (S&S, p. 145), but as soon as they become your reality, they enslave you, as is the case with Eve. For if at first, the heroine uses the large profits she has reaped with her books to improve her family’s standard of living, she quickly comes to be “as addicted as her readers” (S&S, p. 146). It is this precise moment that the tempter Frank Blake chooses to make a new appearance, as “the most powerful publisher of Big Lies in international book-production” (S&S, p. 146), and to give Eve a massive advance to write a trilogy, thereby turning the young author into “a courtesan” (S&S, p. 148) “owned now not by a French Baron or Northern industrialist but by a mega-corporation” (S&S, p. 149). Leaving the medical sphere, she proceeds – both literally and imaginatively – to Vastmere, the estate of Frank Blake, disguised as the “wicked, hawk-nosed” (S&S, p. 153) “Anthony de Lacey, fifteenth Earl and seventeenth Viscount of Rushdie in Co. Clare” (S&S, p. 150). With the heroine’s move from the “doctor-nurse schlockerations” (S&S, p. 150) to tales of “wanton maids” (S&S, p. 157) infatuated with an aristocratic “cross between Mr Rochester and Heathcliff” (S&S, p. 153) – a satirical reference to the Byronic, i.e. proud and brooding, version of the Romantic hero – Tennant’s *Sisters and Strangers* means to denounce the happily-ever-after in all its forms, from the popular, mass-market series romances to the highbrow, canonical masterpieces of English literature.

Conveying how completely Eve takes her fiction for reality, Grandmother Dummer deliberately blurs the frontiers between the facts of Eve’s life as a courtesan writing in the seclusion of the de Lacey estate, and the alternative world she has created for herself. As in *The Book of Mrs Noah*, biological and literary creativity are closely associated, for Eve is said to be able to “sit down in her boudoir in Castle Rushdie one fine morning and begin to write” her trilogy only as soon as she is “in love with the last of the de Laceys, and about to bear his child” (S&S, p. 153). A couple of pages later, Eve punningly wonders “[h]ow [she could] […] possibly deliver in time if there is no one to act as housekeeper in Eden” (S&S, p. 155). Like Noah in Roberts’s novel, Adam not only has never supported his wife in her maternity wish; he also cannot bear to watch her make a literary career for herself so quickly and to become, as a consequence, the “house-husband” (S&S, p. 155):

Adam could love her when he was on top. […] But […] he can’t be simply her inferior. […]  

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For women, you see, are not supposed to be more successful than men, and must try to conceal it if they are, instead of flaunting it, which I’m afraid Eve has rather taken to doing.

The divorce papers arrive at Vastmere.

[...] Adam is adamant. [...] And he wants fifty per cent of her royalties for life. (S&S, pp. 154-155)

Castigating the fickleness of the society and the fearsome adaptability of the literary industry, Grandmother Dummer’s tale shows how, when he discerns a sudden wind of “rebellion and escape” (S&S, p. 157) among the female readership – probably a reference to the rise of second-wave feminism –, Frank Blake, to “deal with this insurrection” in “a more cunning way than usual” (S&S, p. 157), commissions Eve, the widely acclaimed author “fuelling the dreams of women who know no better with her tales of [...] darling landowners or brain surgeons” (S&S, p. 157), to write the “Biggest Lie of them All” (S&S, p. 157). Disguised “as an archangel of feminism, a herald of free opportunity and equity” – for “there’s nothing easier for a woman than to repent, and to announce that she has seen the light” (S&S, p. 157) – Eve depicts “a woman who battles through to success and self-awareness in a male-dominated world” (S&S, p. 158).

According to Grandmother Dummer, the specific threat of this arch-lie resides in its portraying its heroine’s rise “with a veneer of reality, while in reality writing a fairy tale just as pernicious as the rest” (S&S, p. 158), which deceives women into believing that “it’s as easy as Eve makes out to be a woman and go it alone” (S&S, p. 158). For if, as the old narrator points out, there actually are successful women, with her heroine Holly Spine – whom the readers can only perceive as a caricature of the hard-core feminist that “hasn’t worn make-up for years [...] and [i]s seen throwing her lipstick over Brooklyn Bridge, in the first of the sagas” (S&S, p. 162) –, Eve

forgets the anguish she suffered. She forgets the nappies; and the pain of Adam’s lack of love for her when Cain and Abe were born; and the way she had to do things she didn’t want, just in order to keep alive.
She forgets the sneers of the world. (S&S, p. 158)

This metanarrative reflection emphasises again what Grandmother Dummer responds to through her narrative, where she exposes the fairy tale aspect of the denounced lies by using that very same fairy tale form in a highly self-conscious manner. This subversive stance foregrounds the difficulties and pitfalls met by Eve to educate the new generation and correct the errors of the past.

For, despite her growing experience, Eve “ha[s]n’t learnt her lesson” (S&S, p. 168). Having achieved fame, success, wealth and influence, she dreams of falling in
love, of “find[ing] the perfect man: the new man” (S&S, p. 161). As Grandmother expresses it, borrowing the famous words from prince Hamlet, “there’s the rub” (S&S, p. 159). Eve goes to any length to fulfil her desire, undergoing surgery, having boudoir photos taken – which, ironically, makes “sales soar […]” (for, in this age of contradictions, no one minded the fact that this great feminist writer was also posing like a Page Three model. It just showed how up-to-date she was)” (S&S, p. 164). The heroine sinks into her lies so deeply that, out of shame, Grandmother Dummer resorts to the ultimate expression of reticence in her narrative rendering of Eve’s adventures, the gap: “It is time, said Grandmother Dummer, to draw a veil over Eve’s behaviour at this point. I can only imagine that lies breed lies – and Eve is desperately lonely by now and will do anything to get Adam back” (S&S, p. 164). Eve’s next reported move shows how radically she has changed sides again, by turning Holly’s feminist spine into caricatured reactionary holiness, as the heroine

suddenly, in A Child to Remember, becomes the biggest anti-abortionist you ever knew in your life. She marches in defiance of the cruel murder of unborn children. She proclaims the happiness of Muslim women; and she exalts the virtues of arranged marriages in general, preferably with a birth-control-free litter of children. Informed that Islam will not take her because of her brazen past, Holly joins the Roman Catholic Church. […] So […] did Eve. (S&S, p. 165)

Joining political activism to her religious crusade, Eve founds the Green Chastity Party to save both her fellow humans and the environment, but ends up being swindled by the ones she strives to help and, although “[s]he [i]s Green,” letting “her money [go] […] through the hands of her stockbrokers to the mines of South Africa”: “This is capitalism, and her lies ha[ve] made her lie on a world scale” (S&S, p. 170). During this period, Eve loses herself completely in naïve idealism rooted in an unconditional belief in romances, thereby forming with her faithful confederate Sally a Cervantes-like duo of “Donna Quixote and Sacha Panza” (S&S, p. 167).

This utopianism thoroughly detached from reality comes to an end when Eve decides “to give up telling Lies for ever” (S&S, p. 175), and consequently moves on to her “next incarnation” (S&S, p. 168) by becoming a leading physicist and molecular biologist working on “the meaning of life, the universe and everything” (S&S, p. 179). Although the heroine demonstrates uncommon intelligence and quickly attracts much scholarly attention with her findings that are – to say the least – most revolutionary, she is never given the opportunity to truly acquire the status of scientist, but is confined to the stereotypical identity of the bluestocking. In humorous fashion, Adam,
who also takes up a career in research – but is “miles behind Eve in sheer intelligence and application” (S&S, p. 174) –, is said to expectedly try, out of jealousy and disgust at “the ‘male domain’ of the intelligence having been appropriated by his wife” (S&S, p. 177), to silence the protagonist in the most radical way by plotting assassination attempts. With words recalling the wild dinner party at the end of The Book of Mrs Noah, Grandmother Dummer explains how Eve quickly comes to the conclusion that

a woman with even the most modest talents is pushed out and driven into silence. Or, added Grandmother Dummer with a sigh, into the madhouse, or the gas oven (in the old days, that is: suicide can be more easily planned these days, just send your gifted woman writer or painter to live near a nuclear energy station or near one of the polluted rivers of our despoiled planet and she hasn’t a chance of surviving and developing her promise). (S&S, p. 175)

To illustrate this statement, Tennant’s old narrator mentions “the wounded, extraordinary images of Frieda Kahlo,” which were for too long locked up in “the prison of their creator’s gender […] while her lover Diego Rivera went on to become Mexico’s – and Latin America’s – most famous artist” (S&S, p. 176), or Rodin’s mistress

Camille Claudel, who spends her last thirty years locked away in an asylum, “mad,” according to her relatives – but mad in that very sensible American use of the word, just plain angry at the terrible way […] [Rodin] treated her and the world treated her work. (S&S, p. 175)

Stabbed in the back by Adam, Eve turns to a lesbian relationship with Sally, who has also become a scientist, a relationship inspired by “Virginia Woolf, […] and her escapes with Vita Sackville-West, her resulting fantasy of Orlando, the androgynous, transhistorical heroine” (S&S, p. 177). This story, which announces the ultimate identity that Eve will take on, and which should have enabled the heroine to escape from the traditional “single, celibate, childless” destiny of “women who succeed in intellectual pursuits or artistic careers” (S&S, p. 177) and to lessen the competition between the two women, however proves to be a failure, for, because of “that Divide-and-Rule policy which men have implemented so successfully down the centuries” (S&S, p. 179), Sally becomes Eve’s “deadly rival” (S&S, p. 178).

If Eve meets opposition in the personal sphere, so does she in the public area, for society equally exerts silencing pressure on her. For “cracking DNA and the double helix,” Eve “receive[s] no recognition at all,” and when she “perfect[s] cold nuclear fusion, thus supplying the world with a limitless amount of cheap electricity,” “the big boys who run the nuclear reactors […] discredit her” (S&S, p. 179), out of fear of losing their profits. In a passage exploiting comic exaggeration to the extreme,
Eve is depicted to understand “the working of atom particles that run backwards,” so that “old wars can be mended” (S&S, p. 179), and to find nothing less than the “algebraic formulæ [that] describe […] God and the meaning of the universe,” so that, as she proves to “all the bishops,” she can, “by a touch of [her] […] pure mathematics,” make the “heavens […] open for an instant” and reveal “the Divine Face” (S&S, p. 180). As Grandmother Dummer explains to her young audience, “no one believe[s]” (S&S, p. 180) the protagonist, who is locked up in a hermit’s cell:

Eve [is] […] soon disillusioned with the results of her scientific discoveries. While men were greedy and determined to put profit before the future of the planet, the brilliance of astrophysicists such as Eve would be ignored and relegated to the wastepaper basket. (S&S, p. 182)

Having freed herself from the lies that used to imprison her, and become an active, independent, brilliant woman in possession of the most unbelievable, powerful knowledge humankind can dream of, Eve seems to be more silenced than ever. This pessimistic note is however toned down by two elements. Firstly, faithful to her reticence motivated by the determination to have her granddaughter and her friend find their own answers, Dummer refuses to disclose what God looks like, and resorts one more time to secrecy and the strategy of the gap, only commenting that “Eve might be disappointed [by what she did see], […] but when our time c[o]me[s] we might be perfectly happy with it” (S&S, p. 182). This statement prompts Elsie and her peer to

wonder if God [i]sn’t after all a dear old man with a beard as white as the clouds, rather like Santa Claus; and although it [i]s true we wouldn’t mind this, we [think] […] it [i]s time the face of a beautiful black Eve looked down from up high – the first African mother goddess of us all. (S&S, p. 182)

Such thoughts convey how deeply Grandmother Dummer’s wards have heard, assimilated and appropriated their ancestor’s message of female empowerment. Secondly, Eve’s journey still involves a seventh incarnation, which will give her the opportunity to subversively burst out of her silencing as a bluestocking, as will be shown in the third and final part of this thesis.

After the first part, which emphasised how the six novels of the corpus all position themselves as answers to the silences of the Bible and specifically denounce the silencing of the female biblical character that they reconfigure, in this second part, I have highlighted how, in response to this silencing, each heroine develops a unique
voice rooted in words and silences. The third and final part of this thesis will examine to what extent the protagonists truly manage to make themselves heard, or if the silences that they choose or are imposed on them at the issue of their story threaten to silence them again.
PART III

CLOSING SILENCES VOICING OPENNESS
Chapter 1

The Granddaughter Passing On the Heroine’s Voice

I. “I Shall Leave These Words Buried”: Mary Magdalene’s Distrust of Words

At the end of the case study of The Wild Girl in Part II, Mary Magdalene was depicted as refusing to submit to the exclusionary ascendancy that Simon Peter was establishing for himself within the nascent Christian Church and, firmly determined to make heard the strong apostolic and prophetic voice she had achieved through her initiation into the ineffable divine, to leave for Alexandria to preach. As will now be shown, this voyage to self-expression proves to be a predominantly silent journey to a deeper understanding of her self and God, but also to doubt that could easily lead the heroine to silence herself.

Sailing together with her three companions – her sister Martha, Salome and the mother of Jesus –, Mary Magdalene redisCOVERS the power of eloquent silence. She who used to communicate wordlessly with Jesus, and to particularly value his oratory style conveying openness through welcoming pauses, experiences in this new exile a form of eloquent silence that is synonymous with “spiritual nourishment”\(^1\) and deep bonding with God:

The ship rocked on the lap of the waters, and I hoped that we rocked on the lap of God, and then let my mind wander where it would. I […] enjoyed a heaven-sent numbness. I believe that without this period of contemplation and quiet I would have been lost. (\textit{WG}, p. 145)

\(^1\) Sontag, p. 17.
The trial of Simon Peter’s denial of her vocation has destabilised Mary Magdalene, who is torn between, on the one hand, pain, anger and bitterness, and, on the other, the joy and hope brought by her revelations, which she symbolises through the description of her soul as “two green cliffs” divided by “an abyss” (WG, p. 145). The heroine realises that her “task seem[s] to be to explore and to fill the emptiness”: “If God [i]s in the abyss, and if God [i]s the sweet green fields on the cliffs on either side, God [i]s also the bridge I ha[ve] to build over the terrifying and empty air” (WG, p. 145). Thanks to the eloquent silence of meditation, which combines with the other major type of silence in the protagonist’s life – the ineffable –, Mary Magdalene finds the strength to “abandon” her “old self,” “desire, and pride, and hope, and [her] […] feeling that [she] […] [is] important” and has “a heaven-sent mission,” so that, in the inner space where she gives herself completely to God and is “stripped of all the […] habits and words that [she] […] formerly used to establish [her]self”2 (WG, p. 145), God mends her divided soul:

God descended and lifted me up. I was carried in God’s hands. And now I knew that the right hand of God could raise me up to heaven and into the light, and that the left hand of God could plunge me down into hell and darkness. […] God’s hands were joined, and bore me up, and were my bridge, and the bridge was inside me. […] It was fragile, and it was strong, and for the time being it held. […] I put away my guilt and my self-reproach, so that the pain and confusion of the past became bearable. Through this acceptance, I made a gradual return to myself, and to life. (WG, pp. 146-147)

At the issue of this experience, Robert’s heroine feels that she has acquired the capacity to “thr[o]w loops of understanding between” Jesus’ teachings and her own revelations, and to “w[ea]ve them together into a complicated web” (WG, p. 146). Such a sense of peaceful harmony and completion persists throughout the account of how Mary Magdalene is shipwrecked with her three companions near Massilia – as in the popular French legend1 –, is taken in by the local people, and, after giving birth to her daughter Deborah, retires further inland to find “more solitude […] [and] a home of [her] […] own” (WG, p. 152). withdrawing with her friends and child into a life of domesticity, contemplation and mothering, the protagonist is

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2 My emphasis.
3 As Marina Warner remarks, “according to local legend, Mary Magdalene, Martha her sister, Lazarus her brother, as well as two other Marys from the Gospels—Maria Jacobi and Maria Salome […]—had all been washed up on the shores of Provence in a rudderless boat after they had fled persecution in the holy land. […] Mary Magdalene moved inland to the forest of Sainte Baume, where she preached Christianity to the locals and expiated her wicked life in conditions of grim austerity” (Warner, Alone, p. 229).
convinced that her latest journey has “enabled [her] […] to come home in a way [she] […] never dreamed could be possible” (*WG*, p. 141) and, thereby, to reach a state of “blossoming and repose” (*WG*, p. 153):

> I have produced one harvest, and with the seeds garnered from it have sown the beginnings of the next. I am a daughter and a mother, and tread more or less happily in that circle. I have been a singer of songs and a prostitute and the lover of the Lord, a traveller and an outcast and an exile. […] Now, at last, I have become an ordinary woman, settled in my home and in my work, peace dwelling in me. I have achieved my ambition, and am able to be still, and I give God thanks. (*WG*, p. 153)

If introspection and spiritual contemplation can constitute a privileged path to self-knowledge and knowledge of God, they can also lead to self-silencing, for, as she persuades herself that she needs “to bear witness to God through prayer and silence” (*WG*, p. 155), Mary Magdalene remains silent for fifteen years. The protagonist can be interpreted as living under the delusion that she has reached what the Gnostic *Gospel of Mary* describes as the “Rest in Silence,” this ultimate step in the soul’s ascension to God, attained when it has restored its original unity⁴ and freed itself from its adversaries – Darkness, Desire, Ignorance and Wrath⁵:

Alors seulement, peuvent cesser les altercations et les discussions soulevées par les adversaires ainsi que la mission dont sont chargés tous les disciples: l’annonce de la parole de l’Évangile; le Logos est issu du Silence, il doit donc y faire retour. Nous rejoignons ici le thème du silence mystique ou de la sagesse silencieuse évoquée dans les récits herméti ques ou gnostiques.⁶

Two events shake Roberts’s heroine out of this illusion and urge her to make her voice heard. Faithful to the role of spiritual guide that she has assumed throughout the novel, Salome, on her deathbed, points out to the heroine that “all [her] […] fine words […] are […] [g]one in the wind,” which “propel[s]” (*WG*, p. 163) Mary Magdalene into putting her testimony down in writing. This task proves to be more difficult than expected, for the narrator, who at the beginning believed that she “knew the truth, and that putting it down would be easy,” quickly comes to realise that “finding the truth in words is a struggle, and that recording it […] increase[s] [her] […] doubts and confusions rather than lessening them” (*WG*, p. 162). Recalling her experience of the resurrection, when “the world and language dissolved, and [she] […] along with it” (*WG*, p. 162), Mary Magdalene foregrounds the essential

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⁴ Pasquier, p. 95.
⁵ de Boer, pp. 62 and 86. “From this time on will I attain to the rest of the time, of the season, of the aeon, in silence” (*The Gospel of Mary* [17:4-7], in J.M. Robinson, p. 526).
⁶ Pasquier, pp. 95-96.
ineffability of the reality which she is trying to render into “human translation” (WG, p. 154), for she confesses that her “feeble and faulty words” (WG, p. 158) are lies if they do not manage to convey how much ignorance I have acquired as well as conviction. [...] How much I wish that this book could be a window into that world, a transparency. How much I wish that these leaves were of glass. It is impossible. With every mark of ink on the page, I obscure what lies behind. What my language reveals it also hides. (WG, p. 162)

These doubts are further reinforced by the second element – besides Salome’s last enjoiinder – which makes Mary Magdalene realise that she cannot afford to rest in silence: a series of four dreams directly inspired by the description of the powers of Darkness, Desire, Ignorance and Wrath, past which the soul has to ascend in The Gospel of Mary. The first of these visions recalls Wisdom’s cry to humanity in Proverbs 1:24-28: “Because I have called and you refused/[…]and because you have ignored all my/counsel/[…]I also will laugh at your calamity;[…]Then they will call upon me, but I will/not answer.” Brought back to the beginnings of humanity, Mary Magdalene, who witnesses Adam and Eve’s expulsion from Eden by Ignorance and the subsequent darkness that falls upon the world, calls to the Goddess for help, but gets as only answer a reproof by the serpent which most explicitly confronts the heroine with the recognition that she does not possess all the keys and cannot control all the repercussions of her spiritual choices or actions: “You think you know everything. You think you need me, but have you thought of the consequences? People like you are dangerous” (WG, p. 166).

In the second dream, Mary Magdalene, whose scarlet robe and loose blond hair unmistakably identify her as a prostitute, is turned into a powerless onlooker of the public collective burning of “women, either very young ones, or those past childbearing age” (WG, p. 167) – i.e. all women who are not mothers and wives – by “the Child of Ignorance,” who calls himself the “Master” (WG, p. 168) and can be identified, with his “stiff golden robe” (WG, p. 167) and “jewelled cross […] around his neck” (WG, p. 168), as a parodic reconfiguration of bishops. This scene is inspired by the witch hunts rooted in the belief “that female sexual desire […] made women particularly susceptible to the devil’s persuasions.” It can be seen to denounce the association, in the mainstream Christian sexual ethics, between female sexuality and sin, and, more specifically, the emphasis on motherhood as the redeeming path for

7 Norris, p. 101.
women in 1 Timothy 2:14-15, which have frequently led, according to Marina Warner, to “the infertile woman, past the age of childbearing” being depicted in Christian history as a “pejorative and repugnant aberration […]” because she “transgresses the function and purpose of her sex.”

By desperately trying to save her peers and presenting herself as a priest, as “Mary Magdalene the healer, […] who christens the bodies of the living and anoints those of the dead” (WG, p. 168), the heroine draws the Master’s attention and hatred on her. In the image of the soul in The Gospel of Mary 15:18, who exclaims “why do you judge me although I have not judged? I was bound though I have not bound,” the heroine, who is categorised as a “[l]ittle witch” and “she-devil of filth and uncontrolled lust” (WG, p. 168) by Ignorance’s son, is condemned to the stake, like all “free women […] who are dangerous, who impede the work of salvation” (WG, p. 169). The narrator only escapes the pyre thanks to the intervention of Salome, who, while scolding her for “never learn[ing]” (WG, p. 169), receives into her embrace a Mary Magdalene associated once again with the figure of the helpless, “crying baby” (WG, p. 169).

By contrast, the third dream thoroughly reverses the roles, for it is now Mary Magdalene who assumes the part of the implacable judge. Standing in a hall of judgment, she watches a crowd of women equally dressed in scarlet trying a single man “slumped in the dock, his face hidden in his hands” (WG, p. 170), for the crimes against females said to have been committed by his sex throughout history. The speech for the prosecution lists all the possible ways in which men are perceived to have silenced women, from charges of rapes that are passed over in silence or presented as “acts of desire” (WG, p. 170) in order “to establish conquest of a territory whose nature [men] […] fear, to continue [their] […] separation from the woman in [themselves] […] whom [they] […] have lost” (WG, p. 170), to accusations of obliteration of the feminine in the main fields of society:

– You have denied us an education that includes our history. You have written all the official and learned books, and you have barred us from your scheme of knowledge. […]
– You mutilate our spirits, cutting out our desire and our intelligence because you think those things are male. […]
– You have punished us when we have tried to rise. […] You have burned us, or called us possessed, and you have tried to stamp out our power, our love, our life. […]

8 Warner, From the Beast, p. 44.
– You have created God in your image alone, and you have spoken in the name of God to name us as Babylon, the harlot city who must be trampled and overthrown. (WG, p. 171)

As Mary Magdalene feels the irrepressible urge to give evidence, voicing the frustration and outrage she experienced when she was “raped […], [and] denied […] a soul,” was refused the right to “baptise and offer the bread and wine,” was not listened to when she spoke “of the sacred marriage in the soul,” and was “sent […] into exile” (WG, p. 172), she is overcome by hatred for the accused and is intoxicated by “a power and satisfaction” she has “never felt,” by a feeling of “omnipotence” (WG, p. 172). Her description of herself as being “all sharp edge and biting point, all cleanness […] [] purpose […] [, or] a weapon for cleansing and purging” (WG, p. 172), constitutes an ironic echo of Ignorance’s or his son’s sense of their spiritual mission, whose methods Roberts’s heroine borrows when she takes part in the book-burning chosen as a sentence. Mary Magdalene is bluntly led to perceive her mistake as soon as she realises that her own book is being burnt too, together with many other works by women authors, and that the man in the dock is none other than Jesus, “naked, and vulnerable” (WG, p. 173), and looking for his lost bride. Guided by Salome’s voice, which whispers to her ear “[c]an you understand now what you are capable of? Can you learn now?” (WG, p. 173), the protagonist moves on to her fourth vision.

In this ultimate part, Mary receives her own Revelation, in the form of an apocalyptic scene of destruction prompted by humankind’s rejection of the goddess. The dream opens with a view of Jerusalem which Mary Magdalene describes as “the bride with full knowledge of her husband” (WG, p. 174), as in Revelation 21:2: “And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” This sight fills the protagonist with the certainty that “if only I could enter her I too would become complete. Now I carried the knowledge of my own capacity for evil in my heart; now I knew what separation and hatred meant; and now I needed to go into the knowledge of good” (WG, p. 174). The majestic city however quickly metamorphoses into a “gloomy” (WG, p. 174) fortified town with “smoke-blackened walls” (WG, p. 175) besieged by Ignorance and his sons, “their arms full of engines of death” (WG, p. 176). To the male God’s cry “I am entire. […] I can split the seeds of creation in two and make death, and so I am God” (WG, p. 176), Mary Magdalene, who, together with all the other disciples, her parents, Martha, Salome and Mary, surrounds the city, opposes her plea to let them “marry [him] […] and [make him] [r]emember the woman who made [him] […] […]
the fullness of God” (WG, p. 176), for he too is “a force for life, not simply death” (WG, p. 177).

When, faced with Ignorance’s renewed expression of his violent hatred for the feminine, the narrator of The Wild Girl summons up Sophia “from her prison under the earth,” the female divinity comes “out roaring, as a dragon of rage” (WG, pp. 177) that “possesse[s] [them] […], weakening the force of love in [them] […] by her hunger and rage” (WG, pp. 177-178). This confirms Cixous’s claim that “[l]e Refoulé’ […], quand il revient c’est d’un retour explosif, absolument ruinant, renversant, d’une force encore jamais libéréé, à la mesure de la plus formidable des répressions.”10 As Ignorance counter-attacks, destruction rushes upon them all. Like in Revelation 8:7-9:3, 11

hail and fire mingled with blood cast upon the earth, and all the earth and trees were burnt up, and all the green grass. Then I saw a great mountain burning with fire cast into the sea so that the sea became blood and all the creatures in it died. And there fell from heaven what seemed a great star, burning like a torch, which fell upon the rivers and springs and was bitter as wormwood to taste so that many men and women died of its waters. And another star from heaven fell deep into the earth, opening up abysses and pits, and there went up smoke from it as though from a great furnace, and the bodies of whole nations were cast there, onto mass graves. The sun and the air grew dark, and burning bodies lay in the streets, and the city of Ignorance was no more. (WG, p. 178)

In the image of John in Revelation 10:8-11,12 Mary Magdalene is instructed to “take this vision, and eat it up and swallow it and digest it well. […] First of all it will make your belly bitter and painful, but then the words in your mouth shall be as sweet as honey,” and commissioned to “go and prophesy to many peoples and nations, and speak in tongues, and tell them of what you have seen” (WG, p. 178). Giving a foretaste of the joy and triumph that the proclamation and accomplishment of the word of God will bring – “the words […] shall be as sweet as honey” – besides the

10 Cixous, in Clément and Cixous, p. 175.
11 “The first angel blew his trumpet, and there came hail and fire, mixed with blood, and they were hurled to the earth; and a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up. The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea. A third of the sea became blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died. […] The third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many died from the water, because it was made bitter. […] And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from heaven to earth […]; he opened the shaft of the bottomless pit, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the shaft.”
12 “I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll; and he said to me, ‘Take it, and eat; it will be bitter to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth. […] Then they said to me, ‘You must prophesy again about many peoples and nations and languages and kings.’”
suffering – “it will make your belly bitter and painful” –, Mary Magdalene’s dream closes on a wonderful sign of harmony.

Rewriting John’s vision of what is commonly interpreted as Mary’s delivery in chapter 12 of Revelation,13 and as the fall of the quintessentially immoral, idolatrous14 “Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth’s abominations,” personified as a “woman […] clothed in purple and scarlet” (Revelation 17:4), Roberts’s The Wild Girl reconciles the traditional opposites of the Christian doctrine, the virgin and the prostitute. It depicts how Mary – who is, as in Revelation, given typical attributes of the goddess15 – gives birth to a Jesus revealingly said to know, unlike Ignorance, that a woman gave him life and that they both are part of God. Most importantly, it also shows the mother of Jesus come to the scarlet woman “signed as Babylon the Great, as the mother of harlots and of all the abominations of the earth, as the temptress drunk with the blood of the saints” (WG, p. 179), and embrace her, so that the two females “h[o]ld the child between them” (WG, p. 179), forming thereby a highly subversive trinity transcending the mainstream Judeo-Christian male/female, divine/human and virgin/prostitute dichotomies.

If this oneiric picture of perfect harmony fills Mary Magdalene with the certainty that “[t]his time […] surely [she will] […] reach Jerusalem” (WG, p. 179), her return to reality, by contrast, confronts her with the realisation that God is not yet “the unity” of the Father and the Mother “seething in all things” (WG, p. 160) around her:

There [i]s no unity. The dream of harmony shatter[s] into pieces like an earthenware jar thrown across the floor of my room. A clay envelope broken, the edges of true words jagged and sharp, incomprehensible. […] Just odd words in pieces. Fragmented memories and desires. (WG, p. 179)

At the issue of this divine revelation summoning her to “finish [her] […] book and to leave [her] […] home, [her] […] earthly paradise, and to travel anew, through cities

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13 “A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth. […] And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne; and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days” (Revelation 12:1-2 and 5-6).


15 Caspi and Cohen, p. 147 and Baring and Cashford, p. 568. Roberts’s Mary is “arrayed with the sun, and with the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars” (WG, p. 178).
and deserts and the wilderness, to proclaim the Word” (WG, p. 180), Mary is portrayed as a divided woman, torn between the need to bear witness “to warn against Ignorance,” and the knowledge that “ideas are dangerous”: “Have not my visions taught me how we are willing to kill each other for the sake of an idea, for the sake of keeping a dream pure and intact” (WG, p. 180)?

The ending that Roberts proposes is full of nuances, for Mary Magdalene decides to leave her daughter and friends to preach, but also chooses to bury her book: 

My words will be carried on in the stories that we tell each other. […] I do not want my work to lead anyone into danger. I shall carry with me in my heart the words that I must speak in future, and I shall leave these words buried under the tree, to ripen there or to rot. […] In this great tumult of soul, […] I shall depart, with a baggage of doubt. (WG, p. 180)

Mary Magdalene justifies this act, which can be interpreted as a mild form of self-silencing, by her fear that her testimony might “fall into the wrong hands” (WG, p. 163). One can also see this decision as being rooted in Mary Magdalene’s distrust of words that would be imposed on people like the truths that “priests and rulers urge […] on” (WG, p. 37) believers. Since, as she confesses earlier in her gospel, “the telling of [her truth] […] changes [her] […] and changes it” (WG, p. 70), the heroine seems to favour the oral transmission of her word, which is not fixed and, therefore, permits not only evolution and revision, but also interaction and exchanges of views.

The female disciple’s burying of her book also constitutes a clever way of emphatically celebrating the link – or, to borrow the words of Diamant’s narrator Dinah, the chain – between mothers and daughters, this female genealogy that is perceived to be overshadowed by the male tradition and is repeatedly foregrounded in the novels analysed – as the case studies have demonstrated –, for Mary Magdalene’s testimony reaches us thanks to her granddaughter, who has dug it up, copied it and handed it down “as [she] […] ha[s] passed on by word of mouth the stories and songs that came from her” (WG, p. 181). Mary Magdalene’s descendant thereby eventually combines the written and the spoken words, providing her ancestor, thanks to bonding and the encounter with the female other, with a fully accomplished, lasting and tangible voice as disciple, apostle and prophet. As this third part of the thesis will show, the denouements of the selected works demonstrate striking similarities specifically based on this motif of the granddaughter who hears and transmits her female ancestor’s (partly) lost or buried voice, which can be seen to occur in a literal, symbolic or ironic form in the six novels of the corpus.
II. “Big Bad Witch”: Eve’s Ultimate Subversive Enactment of Female Stereotypes

In Tennant’s *Sisters and Strangers*, the role of the granddaughter Elsie – and her alter ego, the narrator –, is immediately brought to the fore, the *incipit* situating Grandmother Dummer’s tale within the frame of the heroine’s passing on of her story to her daughter’s daughter and her friend. At the issue of her fairy story, Dummer seems to have made her voice heard and reached her educational goal with her young audience, who has assimilated her message of female empowerment and questioning of the traditional confining, derogatory identities said to be projected onto women in Judeo-Christian societies. Keeping to the very end her playfully reticent stance, she catches the girls by surprise, allusively moving from “Eve was soon disillusioned” (*S&S*, p. 182) to

And Sally was getting on a bit, too. […]

So we decided to live together. […]  
We bought a cottage in the rocky piece of magic known as Cornwall … and before long we had a reputation for being witches, you know.

– Well what do you expect? Grandmother Dummer called out. (*S&S*, p. 183)

If the witch belongs to the most scorned representations frequently projected, throughout history, on women “who refuse to conform to” patriarchal conventions, this figure is here exploited subversively and turned, as “in the radical feminist theory of the 1970s and early 1980s,” into “a signifier of female independence,”16 “marriage resistance,”17 and “commitment to lesbian-feminist sisterhood.”18 Eve’s initiation therefore constitutes a journey from complete passivity, financial and emotional dependence on Adam, to a radical emancipation from what is denounced as masculine domination, an emancipation based on a positive embodiment of the witch as possessor of knowledge surrounded with “a halo of mystery and secrecy that evokes the notion of a private territory or kingdom where women are queens.”19 Such a reconfiguration of the biblical first woman’s fate reveals strong connections with feminist interpretations of Genesis 1-5, according to which Eve epitomises the

16 Palmer, in Parker, p. 143.  
17 Palmer, in Parker, p. 144.  
18 Palmer, in Parker, p. 143.  
“recognition of the need to challenge boundaries, to make the imaginative leap, however difficult, unpredictable and even dangerous, into a new phase of existence,” and is rewarded for her sense of initiative with “the opportunity to pass on her knowledge to future generations.”

In Tennant’s *Sisters and Strangers*, this future generation, in the person of Elsie and the narrator, is initially puzzled by this revelation of Grandmother Dummer’s true identity and last role, asking “why ‘we’?” (*S&S*, p. 184), although more and more hints have accumulated over the last couple of pages. For instance, the wards have been noting that, when heading for the nearby cove to take one last swim before the end of the holidays, the old woman has been moving “more agilely than usual, as if the end of the day, and the end of the summer, were giving her strength somehow: as if she burned inside, with the telling of Eve’s long journey” (*S&S*, p. 183). They have also spotted the “phosphorescent trail” (*S&S*, p. 183) left by Dummer when taking her first stroke in the water, which can be interpreted to evoke the tail of a mermaid, this mythical figure of female power and knowledge of the past, present and future, who is connected with “sexual allure” yet “baulk[s]” intercourse for, as Pamela Norris remarks, “what phallus could penetrate the slippery scaly surface?”

Such a symbolic reference to the half-fish, half-woman creature cryptically highlights Eve’s rejection of heterosexual relations and prescribed Judeo-Christian models of femininity, for lesbian sisterhood. This identification with the mermaid becomes explicit when, as they overcome their early surprise and remember seeing children point at Grandmother Dummer and call her “a big bad witch” (*S&S*, p. 184), Elsie and the narrator slowly understand that their atypical host is “Elsie’s grandmother Eve” (*S&S*, p. 184). Associating the elderly figure who waves at them “from far out to sea” (*S&S*, p. 184) with the mermaid of the local church whom Dummer described earlier as the embodiment of silenced female power and creativity, they realise that, “as […] the mermaid of Zennor […] sang her song of her journey through life to [them] […], [they] must try to change the world of men … … [sic] and make a new Eve” (*S&S*, p. 184).

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20 Norris, p. 404.
21 Norris, p. 403.
22 Warner, *From the Beast*, p. 399.
23 Norris, p. 328.
As it is handed on the torch by Eve, does the new generation really pass on the heroine’s voice? In the image of the protagonist’s path, which playfully combines silencing and testimony, it seems that Elsie and her friend’s contribution to the challenging of the stereotypical identities imposed on women in Judeo-Christian cultures on the basis of the widespread representation of Eve – the paradigm of Woman – as inherently sinful, is not straightforward. The narrator only hands down Eve’s story many years or even decades after hearing it, as is revealed in the sentence “the stories Grandmother Dummer told us […] haunted our dreams long after we were grown up and she had died” (S&S, p. 7). What is more, the readers are given no indication as to whether Dummer’s granddaughter and her alter ego did live their lives in accordance with the lesson taught by Eve, if they learnt from their ancestor’s mistakes and achievements, or not. When Eve’s granddaughter by adoption does relay the heroine’s adventures, she purposefully maintains the readers in the ignorance that was hers as a young girl listening to her friend’s elderly relative sharing a “fairy story for grown-ups” (S&S, p. 8), thereby reproducing Eve’s reticent schema of transmission of knowledge, with its final denouement unveiling the blurring of voice. In this sense, the narrator does assume the role of a new Eve, communicating a tale that, like its popular predecessors, typically “reveal[s] possibilities, […] and advocate[s] a means of escaping imposed limits and prescribed destiny”\textsuperscript{24} to us, narratees, who consequently become, in our turn, the new generation.

III. “There Never Was Such a Silence”: Sarai and the Ineffable Human Horror

Of all the novels studied, Only Human is the one that most emphasises the motif of the granddaughter handing down the heroine’s voice – here taken in a symbolic sense, the human narrator that acts as Sarai’s memory remaining unidentified –, for its reconfiguration of the biblical Sarah hinges on the exploration of the Akedah as the ultimate loss in the matriarch’s life. This loss precisely robs the protagonist of her voice at the issue of a long, fierce war against Abram’s deity, during which she has managed to subversively appropriate God’s word and prerogative to create life, countered his raw power with disarming humour, and brought Abram back to the

\textsuperscript{24} Warner, From the Beast, p. 24.
human world with their son Isaac, while God, in his fall to human condition, has unknowingly been elevating her to the role of godlike model.

With the subversive, debunking tone that characterises it from the start, Diski’s novel depicts Isaac’s binding as a pure tragedy generated by God’s ultimate attempt to silence his enemy Sarai, a tragedy that destroys the protagonist, but also, before her, God himself. In a dramatic reversal of roles, it is Abram who eventually tests his divinity. As the latter notes with amazement, when “demanded the death of his boy,” the patriarch remains impassive: “[n]ot a muscle in his face moved. […] He was implacable in his obedience, cruel in his refusal to rebel” (OH, p. 212). Faced with such cold determination, I am that I am realises that “neither he nor I would ever have love between us” (OH, p. 213) and, in the image of his constant unavowed model Sarai, is tortured by the overpowering fear of loss:

My will, my wish would never be enough. […] I could not sacrifice the hope of love, the future of love. […] I could not risk an eternity of loss. […] If I took the human future, the dream, I would have nothing left for myself. Was Abraham prepared to lose his dream to prove I could not have his love, but only his obedience? (OH, p. 213)

Reaching the final step of his inexorable fall into humanity, I am that I am backtracks and stops Abram’s knife, for he has, as he revealingly confesses, “been rendered too weak, too fearful, too human to pass the test” (OH, p. 213). In Only Human, the Akedah marks God’s defeat in the fight for Abram’s love, but also the breaking off of communication between the deity and his chosen one. If in the Scriptures too, Abram’s second “Here I am” (Genesis 22:11) in the Akedah episode are the last words ever spoken by the patriarch to Yahweh, in Diski’s biblical rewriting, this ultimate reply does not bring in its wake any divine blessing – as in Genesis 22:15-18 –, but rather divine sulking, the Lord feeling betrayed, in ironic fashion, by Abram’s listening to his Word. As the narrator of After These Things – the sequel to Only Human – remarks, “God clam[s] up.” This failure in the fight for love is consequently indissociable from a defeat in the story game, for I am that I am is deprived of the paramount prerogative to represent “the conclusion” (OH, p. 190), on which he used to establish what he claimed to be his limitless, indisputable authority, by the human narrator, who, interrupting his adversary once more, resumes his narrative and has the last word, with his account of Sarai’s experience of the Akedah.

The biblical passing over in silence of Sarah’s reaction to the near-sacrifice of her only son in Genesis 22, combined with the rather abrupt mention of her death in Genesis 23:2, has attracted much exegetical and critical attention, including feminist-oriented suspicions of silencing, such as Catherine Chalier’s:

Le récit de la Aquéda garde un énigmatique silence quant à ce qui advient de Sarah. […] La lettre biblique, tenant à l’écart la femme, négligeant de penser son effroi devant l’insondable demande divine, signifie-t-elle que cette tribulation aux confins de toute raison ne concernait que le père et le fils? Et si le texte, au chapitre qui suit, enchaîne, directement, sur la mort de Sarah, faut-il n’y voir qu’une coïncidence?26

The midrashic tradition, for its part, has often seen Sarah as dying of heartbreak and horror at what nearly happened to her son, and, therefore, as being “the true victim of the Akedah,” whose death constitutes “its unexplicated, inexplicable cost.”27 The Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer, for instance, quoted by Zornberg in Diski’s source The Beginning of Desire, writes that, when hearing Satan’s account of the sacrifice, the matriarch “crie[s] three sobs” and “wail[s] […] three times”28 before “she g[ive[s] up the ghost [lit., her soul fl(ies) away] and die[s].”29

Drawing on midrashic, feminist, but also, as in the rest of the novel, existentialist and Feuerbachian influences, Only Human depicts a Sarai experiencing Isaac’s binding on the altar as Abram’s mad sacrifice of her embodied love, dreams and wishes, to the projection of his wild longing for certainties and eternity. In an echo of Jewish sources, Diski’s anonymous human narrator recounts how the protagonist reacts to Isaac’s ghost-like confession of his father’s murderous intents by uttering “three long, languishing notes” that seem “to still the very air around Beer-sheba, so that the howl of loss that is the way of the world [can] […] be heard to the ends of the earth and at the very edges of time” (OH, p. 214). This final, and most devastating, loss is none other than the loss of the meaning – albeit contingent and imperfect – that Sarai, through tenacity and an unshakeable rooting in the world, had progressively led Abram to create with her over the decades. It is also, for the heroine, a most brutal reminder of the non-necessity of being, of the constant presence of death in life, which plunges Sarai into a fatal attack of vertigo and completely shatters the matriarch’s purpose in life and in her story:

26 Chalier, p. 67.
27 Zornberg, p. 123.
28 Zornberg, p. 124.
29 Zornberg, p. 123.
The past disintegrated, blown to fragments. [...] The fragments remained: this time and that
time, but they no longer cohered. They no longer offered a story that made sense. [...] The
present remained, but meant nothing, a bleak corridor, too dark to see ahead, too narrow to
permit a backward glance. Sarai’s heart was turned to stone by her final glimpse of the past
before the ever-present darkness swallowed her up. (OH, pp. 213-214)

Such words present the Akedah as an extremely severe form of trauma that
characteristically fills the victim with “speechless terror,”30 reduces memory to a
“wordless and static”31 (in)ability and creates a “loss: of voice, of life, of knowledge,
[…] of truth, of the capacity to feel, of the capacity to speak.”32

With this grim image of complete intellectual and emotional disintegration,
Sarai’s story comes full circle. Not only do the readers now retrospectively understand
the condition of the heroine in the introductory chapter, where she was shown to be
unable to “look back […] over her life” to communicate to her eager audience “what
stands out […] as the central thread” (OH, pp. 2-3), and to wish for nothing but death,
but, in a final occurrence of voice blurring, narration also suddenly switches from the
overt heterodiegetic instance that fiercely opposes God in the story game, to the
witness-narrator of chapter one, who repeats almost verbatim its original description
of the old matriarch in the incipit:

And here she lies on her bed and waits, while we keep watch, while the tears slip down her
ancient, expressionless face without any sudden surge of passion or obvious cause, as if the
tears were welled already, brim full behind her shrunken eyes, and leak like spillage over the
lids whose muscles are not strong enough to dam them up. She is waiting. That is all. (OH, pp.
214-215)

This excipit, behind its apparent simplicity or, even, simplism, actually hides a
highly subversive metanarrative reflection that challenges the Judeo-Christian sense
of history as a divine scheme ending in harmony. Although it is circular and, as such,
can be described as closed, the last chapter of Only Human is predominantly
characterised by its openness. Questioning the conventional structures of narrative
closure based on the Judeo-Christian telos, the anonymous narrator suspends the
ending, and refuses to evoke Sarai’s death, taking in this way the opposite course to
the Bible and its unexplained mention of Sarah’s death, introduced in almost an aside –
especially compared with the extremely lengthy description of Abraham’s
negotiations to find her a burial place, in Genesis 23:2-20.

30 B.A. Van der Kolk and Onno Van der Hart, quoted in Vickroy, p. 93.
31 Judith Herman, quoted in Vickroy, p. 93.
32 Felman and Laub, pp. 231-232.
This choice of the unidentified instance in charge of Sarai’s story is cryptically announced and justified a few pages earlier, in a long self-reflexive comment about the functions and significance traditionally attributed to the narrative ending, which starts as follows:

You begin a story, a telling, and by the end the story tells itself. Finally, motive, justification, character and meaning are futile. The end is reached, and by the end, none of it matters, because only the ending makes sense of anything that went before. (OH, pp. 209-210)

Such an assertion can be understood in the light of Frank Kermode’s argument, in The Sense of an Ending, that in narratives, the end bestows meaning upon the whole by transforming mere successiveness into meaningful time.33 Diski’s narrator calls this outlook into question, for it cannot accept to see Sarai relegated to futility, back to being just one step in the Judeo-Christian drama, another unspoken name in its exclusively male-centred genealogies – with the well-known, remarkable exception of the Matthean genealogy of Jesus, which cites Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, the wife of Uriah and Mary (Matthew 1:1-17).

The alternative suggested by the narrative instance to the Judeo-Christian telos is the interruption, for “[o]nly a story without an end sustains the notion that the dreams and struggles of its protagonists account for more than the workings of chance and necessity. The only story without an end is one in which the narrator arrests the narrative” (OH, p. 210). Since “[t]here is only and always just the one ending” (OH, p. 210) – death –, the narrator’s final “[s]he is waiting. That is all” (OH, p. 215) ensures that “[t]he interruption is indeed the narrative” (OH, p. 210), i.e. that Sarai’s life and, specifically, her heroic struggle against Abram’s ruthless deity, remain significant.

As a consequence, the sentence “[t]he interruption is indeed the narrative” (OH, p. 210) can also be interpreted to refer to God’s original intervention in the human story, both in the sense of the narrator’s tale, and of Sarai and Abram’s lives – an intervention that, in this first case, is at the origin of the voice blurring that truly constitutes the core of Diski’s Only Human on the level of the discourse, and in the second, starts the fight for love that prompts Sarai to find and assert her voice. Developing this idea of I am that I am’s butting in as the crucial turning point in the matriarch’s existence, the anonymous narrator gives its narratees a synopsis of its

story, in which Abram is depicted as a man who dreamt of “creat[ing] a story without an ending” – that is, of achieving eternity through descendants – but lacked “the strength to do without the authority of a dream narrator” (OH, p. 210) – in other words, without a God whose perfect essence derives from its very source in Abram’s imagination, and whose function is to soothe the existential anxiety awoken by his realisation of human finiteness when faced with his wife’s menopause. “[G]rasping” what the narrative voice calls “the real nature of the story” – its exclusively human and fundamentally contingent character –, “Sarai took up the narrative” (OH, p. 210) and tried to get Abram to live according to her human wor(l)d. The couple were however “interrupted by what they called by different names, but which grew strong enough to call itself I am and make itself the way of the world. […] In the end, it destroyed them, broke their love and their lives” (OH, p. 210), so that, as the narrator comments,

[stories would be told – and told and told – that were worked like shapeless clay or lumpish stone into the semblance of sense, but the final form was always in the wishful eyes of the shaper, never in the original material itself. The clay needed dreams and wishes breathed into it before it became anything recognisable. (OH, pp. 213-214)]

Pointing out that “after all, it was only the way of the world that was made and remade by those who lived in it” (OH, p. 210), the unidentified voice uncompromisingly situates Abram and Sarai’s story, its joys and tragedies, on a purely human level, which is in accordance with Diski’s provocative claim that, with Only Human, she “wanted to retrieve the Bible from stupidity, to take it back as an essentially human story.”34 It also again forcefully foregrounds storytelling as humankind’s distinctive feature, as the only possible locus of meaning that, as Sarai’s fate clearly demonstrates, can as much reconcile men and women with the contingency and finitude of life on earth and give them a purpose, as destroy them. Such a message reveals strong connections with Nancy Huston’s contention that:

Les fariboles sont précieuses, miraculeuses. Elles nous permettent, les yeux fixés sur l’idéal, de tenir le coup dans l’adversité.
Les fariboles sont funestes, terrifiantes. Elles nous permettent, les yeux fixés sur l’idéal, d’ouvrir le gaz pour exterminer nos semblables.35

For the deeply atheistic narrator of Only Human, Abram’s story of divine transcendence unmistakably belongs to the second type. The patriarch’s ultimate

34 Jenny Diski, in Helen Brown.
35 Huston, p. 128.
betrayal of his wife through the near-sacrifice of their son plunges the protagonist into horror so that, in a complete reversal of Dante’s fate in the *Divine Comedy*, from which Diski’s biblical rewriting draws its subtitle, Sarai can be interpreted to be instructed in the deepest, darkest realm of humankind and to experience a descent to the most hellish form of despair. In the light of the intertextual reference to Dante, God’s fall to humanity can be seen to reduplicate the motif of the descent and reinforce the subversive portrayal of the divinity as evolving in the image of his mediator Sarai.

*Only Human* consequently seems to partake more of tragedy, characterised, as Northrop Frye defines it, by its final plunge “downward to a ‘catastrophe’” and its closing formula of the type “‘Count no man happy until he is dead,’”36 than of the comedy announced in the subtitle, which traditionally ends with a “‘They lived happily ever after’”37 or, as in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, “I seemed to see the Universe alight with a single smile.”38 If the Bible can be viewed, as Frye shows, as “a ‘divine comedy,’” in which “man […] loses the tree and water of life at the beginning of Genesis and gets them back at the end of Revelation,”39 Diski’s revision of God’s story, by opposition, testifies to what Paul Fiddes describes, in the wake of Frank Kermode, as “a loss of the sense of history as a divine fiction” that used to “g[i]ve a confidence that contingencies would either arrange themselves into patterns, or be resolved in final harmony.”40

Of comedy, Diski’s novel possesses the educational facet, through which, traditionally,

> those who see themselves as wise are made to look foolish, and those who are foolish are found to have wisdom. [...] The pretentious and the pompous are humiliated, and those whom they have humiliated are vindicated. [...] Tyrants are deposed, beggars become kings, and the oppressed are set free.41

While *I am that I am* sees all his claims to omniscience, omnipotence and majesty challenged by the rival voice but also by his own – God accumulating blunders in both his deeds and his words –, and while the deity is instructed by his creatures into

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40 Fiddes, p. 11.  
41 Hyers, p. 2.
the way of the world – as the rival narrator proudly declares, “We taught him a thing or two” (*OH*, p. 204) – and is demoted to an “only human” condition, by contrast, Sarai, the orphan simultaneously made vulnerable and energised by spectral silence, is seen to hold God in check and to develop a profound, sombre wisdom about humanity and its yearnings for transcendence, to which even her deadly divine enemy seems to come round when he acknowledges, for instance, that “[t]here is no meaning in eternity” (*OH*, p. 185).

In a tragicomic non-ending where none of the opponents triumphs, where the quintessence of the ineffable is certainly not Yahweh, but rather the horror of the ultimate loss experienced by the heroine, and where a sulky God abandons his inconclusive story with humanity, Sarai is shown to prefer the terrible human void of nothingness to what is depicted as the easy – and so easily destructive – Judeo-Christian scenario. For this choice and the relentless battle that has eventually led to it, the matriarch is honoured and given a second voice by her symbolic granddaughter. Such is Diski’s intensely atheistic and irreverent version of the biblical silences around Sarah, and of the Jewish belief that humankind itself possesses the keys to its own destiny – as André Neher formulates it, “[l]a branche chrétienne a grandi vers le Ciel. L’arbre juif est resté fidèle à la Terre.”

![Image](image-url)

**IV. “Wherever You Walk, I Go With You”: Dinah’s Life Beyond the Grave**

Having broken, through testimony, the bondage of silencing imposed by her mother-in-law, and symbolically reconnected with her mothers, Dinah, who has settled into a life of domesticity, believes that she has found contentment and peace of mind, in much the same way as Mary Magdalene in her French exile in *The Wild Girl*. Yet like Roberts’s heroine, Leah’s only female child is made to perceive that such harmony is but illusory, for when her brother Joseph comes to fetch her to accompany him incognito to their father’s deathbed, she feels “an old heaviness return to [her] […] heart and recognize[s] the weight […] carried during [her] […] years in Nakht-re’s house” (*RT*, p. 312).

The daughter whose name is taboo in Jacob’s tribe has not yet addressed her silencing within her own family, which fills her, not with the “sorrow” of the victim,
but rather with an “anger” that typically expresses, as Hirsch points out, a determination “to claim a place, to assert a right to expression and to discourse,” and that Dinah revealingly describes as “[finding] its lost voice” (RT, p. 312). To her enquiries about her father’s possible regrets – “‘What of me?’ I said. ‘Did he mention me? Did he repent of what he did to me?’” (RT, p. 312) –, her brother answers that Jacob “said nothing of [her] […]. Dinah is forgotten in the house of Jacob” (RT, p. 312). The protagonist however soon realises that this categorical view is inaccurate and that her name has not been “blotted out, as though she ha[s] never drawn breath” (RT, p. 290), for everyone.

This revelation comes through the figure of the young Gera, one of the nieces that Dinah has never had the opportunity to meet before, and who, together with her many siblings and cousins, represents the new generation of Jacob’s clan. Prompted by the heroine to unravel the story of her family, Gera tells Dinah about Leah’s beautiful only daughter. In what the heroine’s relative describes as an “ugly tale” (RT, p. 316), the genuineness of the young Shechemite prince’s love is uncompromisingly contrasted with the villainy of Simon and Levi, whose claims that “their sister had been kidnapped and raped” and that the Canaanites plotted to “take what was Jacob’s and make it Hamor’s” (RT, p. 316), are clearly presented as fallacious and motivated by an evil, jealous nature.

Where facts are lacking, legend has taken over to perpetuate the memory of Leah’s daughter, which secretly circulates among the new generation in the form of a song recounting how she was “gathered by the Queen of Heaven and turned into a falling star” (RT, p. 317). When Gera confirms that the name of Leah’s daughter is remembered and loved – the young girl confessing that, “[s]omeday, if [she is] […] delivered of a daughter, [she] […] will call her Dinah” – the narrator is filled with “peace. The story of Dinah was too terrible to be forgotten. […] The past had done its worst to me, and I had nothing to fear of the future” (RT, p. 317). To this tribute of the younger ones, Dinah can add that of the previous generations, for, as she is recognised and acknowledged as a sister by Judah, the clan leader, she hears from her brother that their mother, braving Jacob’s ban, spoke of her lost daughter every day until she died, and, foreseeing this meeting, entrusted to her son’s care the first ring that Jacob gave

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Rachel, so that he could pass it on to her, and Dinah thereby understand that her mother “died with an undivided heart, and wished the same for” (RT, p. 318) her.

In an ultimate celebration of the protagonist’s sacred bonding with her motherly figures, Dinah is depicted as living the last years of her life in the knowledge that, as Zilpah formulated it many decades earlier, “[w]e are all born of the same mother” (RT, p. 318). She moreover dies surrounded by the comforting vision of such female unity in diversity – mirroring the multifaceted goddess –, for, as she breathes her last, her surrogate daughter Kiya turns before her eyes into a presence “glow[ing] like the moon and s[i]ng[ing] with the green and solemn voice of the Queen of the Night,” while all the important women who have peopled her life appear to her,

each one burning with her own fire. Leah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Bilhah. Inna, Re-nefer, and Meryt. Even poor Ruti and arrogant Rebecca were arrayed to meet me. Although I had never seen them, I recognized [Leah’s mother] Adah and Sarai as well. Strong, brave, wonderstruck, kind, gifted, broken, loyal, foolish, talented, weak: each one welcoming me in her way. (RT, p. 320)

These words evoke the traditional representation of the goddess as “ever-changing yet ever the same; by turns ‘radiant, thundering, destructive, defiant, judgmental, kind, generous, peaceful, healing, erotic, decisive, discerning, wise, transcendent, loving, fertile, joyous and ever youthful.’” Dinah’s passing also refers to the understanding of death in goddess religion as “a return to earth, to the womb that gave us birth,” which foregrounds one last time the centrality of the great mother to women’s lives in The Red Tent.

The final twist in the novel reveals that Dinah’s voice has actually braved death, for with the incongruous statement “I died but I did not leave them” (RT, pp. 320), the narrator starts recounting how, after she expires, she is granted eternity through the love of her family and friends, from Benia, in whose eyes and heart she stays “[f]or weeks and months and years,” “walk[ing] with him by day and [lying] […] down with him at night,” to her various female heirs: Shif-re, who sings the birthing song Dinah taught her; Kiya, who “move[s] with [her] […] motions”; and Gera, who “name[s] her baby Dinah” (RT, pp. 320). Explaining her “immortality” (RT, p. 321), Diamant’s heroine argues that “people who are loved [never die]” because “something as insignificant as a name […] [can] summon up the innumerable smiles and tears, sighs and dreams of a human life” (RT, p. 321). She thereby echoes

44 Baring and Cashford, p. 193.
45 Christ, Rebirth of the Goddess, p. 132.
the widespread ancient tribal belief, reported by Hutton Webster in his study of taboos, according to which mentioning a name amounts to calling its bearer back from the beyond,\(^\text{46}\) but also, much more recently, goddess spirituality pioneer C.P. Christ’s belief, formulated in *Rebirth of the Goddess*, in a form of “conditional […] survival after death […] dependent on continuing connection with the living.”\(^\text{47}\)

In the chain of female descendants to whom Dinah owes her immortality, the narratees – “you […] women with hands and feet as soft as a queen’s, […] so free with your tongues” (*RT*, pp. 1-3) – are the latest link. If it can be argued that Dinah does not fully seize the opportunity to make her voice heard when she chooses not to reveal her identity and past in its most gruesome details to her clan after Jacob’s death, and contents herself with a legendary destiny, a mere “tale that girls tell each other” (*RT*, p. 316) and that is devoid of the subversiveness demonstrated by Eve’s fairy story in *Sisters and Strangers*, one can also contend that the narratees precisely compensate for this mild form of self-silencing. By “com[ing] hungry for the story that was lost” (*RT*, p. 3) and “visiting the echoes of [Dinah’s] […] name” (*RT*, p. 321), they symbolically assume the role of the granddaughter transmitting the heroine’s voice. They enable the protagonist of *The Red Tent* to transcend time and reach the twentieth century, so that Dinah’s opening sentences “WE HAVE BEEN lost to each other for so long. […] The chain connecting mother to daughter was broken” (*RT*, p. 1) can lead to the closing formula “[w]herever you walk, I go with you” (*RT*, p. 321), and the silent victim of the Bible can be turned into a self-assertive woman who takes her destiny into her own hands and speaks in a voice celebrating as a source of power the images conventionally associated with the feminine and debased in the Western world.

V. “How Does a Woman Survive? I Pick Up My Pen”: the Irreconcilability of Mrs Noah’s Creative Aspirations with Matrimony?

Having explored the many doors and windows of her Advent calendar-like subjectivity, and discovered the primal source of her identity and writing in the spectral silence of the lost mother that inhabits her, the heroine of *The Book of Mrs*


Noah seems, at the end of her voyage aboard the Ark, to have found both balance and creative power. When the time comes to confront this new “world” (BMN, p. 277) that she has created for herself with the conscious reality, the issue of the protagonist’s silencing however quickly resurfaces.

While slowly emerging from her dream, Mrs Noah transports us one last time to her sibylline companions’ everyday lives, which have also been deeply altered by the experience on board Mrs Noah’s shelter for authors in need of inspiration. The perfectionist Correct Sibyl, who, in her first brief presentation, timidly contemplated, when admiring a “roller-skater execut[ing] a figure of eight backwards,” whether “turn[ing] it the other way round” (BMN, p. 31) might be the solution to her writer’s block, and who, in her floating carnivalesque wardrobe, overcame her paralysing wish to please everyone by vanquishing the censorious voices of the Seven Deadly Sins, now freely surrenders to the profoundly liberating quality of a street carnival. In a symbolic, secular form of baptism, the woman, filled with irrepressible euphoria, sings and dances all day in the rain, melting into the crowd of merrymakers:

[T]he first Carnival float leaps down Westbourne Grove towards her. […] The force of joy breaking out in her and unfurling along the tarmac is so great that she bursts into tears, fresh rain wetting her face. […] [T]he watching people break free from the pavement and jig forwards […]. and the Correct Sibyl goes with them, released into this joy. […] Repression lifts: the people lift their knees to the rhythm, splash in rain and music, twirl their hats, joggle their bones and shake their flesh free and get soaked. […] No more division between pavement and road. The unconscious is out. (BMN, p. 282)

This scene, which emphasises what Bakhtine defines as carnival’s typical suspension of all the rules, bans, restrictions and hierarchies that structure normal life, the abolishing of distances and etiquette, and the development of free, informal contacts between people associated with a general idea of renewal, confirms that the Correct Sibyl has broken free of the dictates of the literary establishment, the fears and doubts that used to inhibit her, and is reborn to a new self in touch with her unconscious and her own aspirations.

If the path to inspiration and literary creation seems clear and straightforward for the Correct Sibyl, for some of Mrs Noah’s other companions, by contrast, it proves

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51 Wolfreys, p. 28.
to be full of traps. The Deftly Sibyl, for instance, discovers that turning the garden shed into a semblance of the longed-for house of her own, a “hermitage” (*BMN*, p. 278) wrapped in silence that husband and children are warned – with the notice “Danger: Woman at Work” (*BMN*, p. 278) – against entering unless invited, does not brush aside her insecurity and qualms about her ability to combine a literary career with a family. Accordingly, the mother of two is depicted as oscillating between “self-hate,” as she inwardly despises what she considers a “pathetic,” “immature” and “neurotic claim to [a] personal territory” as laughable as “a dolls’ house” – “[r]eal writers (men) can write anywhere (in the middle of a battlefield or a riot) – and hopeful pride, when “[h]er fingers touch the typewriter keys, re-order her world[,] […] reconstruct what she knows: a partial vision, limited, the joins showing” (*BMN*, p. 279).

Moreover, the domestic world is shown to be always looming, ready to invade the fragile sphere of privacy that she has struggled to give herself. Confirming Tillie Olsen’s argument that “[m]otherhood means being instantly interruptible, responsive, responsible. Children need one now. […] It is distraction, not meditation, that becomes habitual,” *The Book of Mrs Noah* shows the Deftly Sibyl interrupted in her solitary work by her alarmed daughter, and rush back to the house to take care of her injured son. This passage, which echoes the sibyl’s claim, earlier in the novel, that she wants to “write a story in which the heroine […] can find independence, autonomy, some freedom; by staying” and wishes to be herself able to combine “freedom and self-actualization […] with loving others and allowing their claims on [her]” (*BMN*, p. 217), foregrounds the issue of the difficult triangle women-creativity-matrimony, and foreshadows the denouement of Mrs Noah’s adventures in the real world.

The nuanced quality of the ending of Mrs Noah’s own story is made perceptible as soon as the heroine wakes up in her room. By contrast with the sense of belonging experienced by the narrator in the final moments aboard the Ark, and the various images of harmonious combination and interlocking that she uses in that chapter – the “rope of stories” that her companions “have plaited” (*BMN*, p. 274) between them, or the seven “entwined” (*BMN*, p. 275) bodies of the wild party in the hold –, Mrs Noah’s perception of herself and her immediate environment in the Venetian Pensione Seguso is characterised by alienation and meaningless

52 Olsen, pp. 52-53.
fragmentation. Not only does she feel that she “take[s] up too much space in this room, which has Noah’s books, files and papers piled everywhere in it,” she also perceives her face in the mirror as “a collection of jigsaw pieces that don’t make a whole” (BMN, p. 285). The difficulties that initially prompted her to turn to the unconscious realm to “discover how other women survive” (BMN, p. 32) resurface as the protagonist remembers the intense loneliness that she has been feeling throughout her trip round Italy to accompany her husband working on the Italian health service, and as Noah himself appears in the bedroom to relate how his wife’s prolonged sleep has ensued from their umpteenth quarrel about her maternity wish.

The **excipit** of *The Book of Mrs Noah* can be analysed as raising the question of the heroine’s deaf silencing, this form of silence that takes place when the producer of a discourse fails to be heard by its interlocutor and, as a consequence, is discredited and reduced to mutism. As soon as Mrs Noah starts to tell her husband about her dream experience, with the sentence “you won’t believe this, but –” (BMN, p. 287), she is, as the dash indicates, interrupted by Noah, who is in a hurry to leave for his conference, and therefore wholly unreceptive to her story. When, undeterred by such indifference, she forcefully voices her disquiet – “I didn’t realize how difficult I’d find it, no privacy, sharing a room all this time and you having to work every night” – and reaffirms her determination to express herself with a strong “I **must** talk to you” (BMN, p. 287), she is, in a comically ironic fashion, silenced again, by the room service bringing breakfast.

Faced with this deaf silencing hinging on Noah’s renewed failure to act and to support his wife in her creative enterprises as a woman and author, the heroine chooses to make her voice heard by turning to writing. Such a scene reinforces the novel’s challenging – first announced in the **incipit** – of the biblical representation of Noah as the active agent and his wife as the epitome of silent wifely obedience, but also of the woman’s diametrically opposite image as a shrew thwarting Noah’s projects in the mystery plays. Reiterating the question at the root of her oneiric journey – “How does a woman survive?” (BMN, p. 288) –, she this time provides an answer by picking up her pen and opening her notebook. She thereby puts into practice the teaching of her dream cruise, according to which a woman survives through the creative voice she finds within herself, for the story the narrator eventually gives birth to, is the one we have just read, as its opening sentence reveals: “*My story, I write: begins in Venice*” (BMN, p. 288). Through this cyclical ending that
The Book of Mrs Noah has in common with Diski’s Only Human, the readers become the attentive ears that Mrs Noah cannot find in her husband, the symbolic granddaughter who has come to listen to the heroine’s voice, which she defines as follows:

I like writings that can be torn out, […] chalked on a wall, drawn with a stick in the sand on the seashore and then washed away. I was taught that art is supposed to last, to be preserved in libraries and museums, to defy rotting and perishing, to contain eternal meanings that transcend history. […] My art won’t be like that. The creation of the world happened in seven days and seven nights. […] My creation will be as daily as dusting, or dreaming. (BMN, p. 288)

As these words indicate, Mrs Noah’s voice specifically celebrates the here and now, process, the creative unconscious and the oneiric, in an ultimate challenge to the Judeo-Christian Word, to complete, eternal truth, and unquestionable authority.

VI. “She Slips from Our Grasp”: Offred’s Blurred Voice

The last novel of the corpus, Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale, can be seen to reconfigure in an ironic way the motif of the granddaughter passing on the heroine’s voice, highlighted in its literal form in Roberts’s The Wild Girl and Tennant’s Sisters and Strangers, and in a symbolic variant in Diski’s Only Human, Diamant’s The Red Tent and Roberts’s The Book of Mrs Noah. Having chosen, in a last expression of the reticence that characterises her story of rebellion, to interrupt her narrative and, in this way, to encourage the narratees to formulate their own interpretation of her fate, she has left the door wide open to all possible forms of appropriation, from the most deferential passing on of her highly personal and emotional testimony, to crude distortions of her words. The one example of rendering Offred’s voice provided by Atwood’s work, in its final section “Historical Notes on The Handmaid’s Tale,” although presented as faithful and objective by its author, actually hides major falsifications. Through this essential part of the novel, The Handmaid’s Tale concludes on an explicit foregrounding of the issue of voices and their silencing.

In these “Notes,” which contain what is presented as a written version of Cambridge historian James Darcy Pieixoto’s lecture on “Problems of Authentication in Reference to The Handmaid’s Tale” (HT, p. 312), held during a symposium on Gileadean Studies in 2195, the readers discover that the text they have just read is actually the transcript of Offred’s oral testimony, recorded on audio cassettes which remained buried in an army footlocker for over two hundred years. The revelation of
this previously concealed frame story brings to light the silence of voice blurring that has pervaded Offred’s entire narrative. The Handmaid, whom we assumed to be a first-degree narrator, proves in retrospect to be a second-degree narrator in Atwood’s novel, which dramatically increases the distance between us and the heroine. By being pushed back one level, situated within a broader historical context, and reduced to the status of an object of historical scrutiny, Offred’s tale loses much of its – albeit reconstructed, as the protagonist repeatedly points out – immediacy.

The Handmaid’s voice is moreover irremediably mediated by the openly pedantic and chauvinistic male scholar Pieixoto, who has, together with his colleague Professor Knotly Wade, transcribed the tapes, but also edited and published Offred’s tale. If at first sight, the two Cambridge professors seem to play the same role as the granddaughter in The Wild Girl, who unearths, copies and spreads Mary Magdalene’s gospel, on closer inspection, one perceives that, while saving Offred’s account from the oblivion into which it had been plunged for two centuries, Pieixoto and Wade also unquestionably deaf-silence the heroine’s voice, for they fail to truly understand it, during both their initial editorial work, and Pieixoto’s presentation of it.

Besides teasingly discrediting Offred with derogatory comments such as “[s]he appears to have been an educated woman, insofar as a graduate of any North American college of the time may be said to have been educated” (HT, p. 318), Pieixoto reveals how, in a highly disturbing echo of the Gileadean totalitarian practices of renaming Handmaids and reducing them to bodies, Wade appended the title “The Handmaid’s Tale” to Offred’s testimony, not simply to pay homage to Chaucer, but also to pun on “the archaic vulgar signification of the word tail; that being, to some extent, the bone, as it were, of contention, on that phase of Gileadean society of which our saga treats” (HT, p. 313).

In the same way as Gilead tampers with its – mainly biblical – sources, by freely rearranging their words and concealing its manipulations under a façade of objective, faithful rendering, Pieixoto and Wade do not specify where they have intervened in the text of Offred’s life. Although the lecturer points out that, since the tapes were neither organised in their box, nor numbered, he and his colleague had to “arrange the blocks of speech in the order in which they appeared to go,” through a process based on “some guesswork” consequently leading to an “approximate” (HT, p. 314) result, and although the historian remarks that they “had to go over [the transcription] […] several times, owing to the difficulties posed by accent, obscure
referents, and archaisms” (*HT*, p. 314), their work appears without any editors’ notes. The readers are presented with a text that completely passes over in silence the difficulties raised by the transcription, the areas of uncertainty and, most importantly, the alterations made by the male voices. If Offred regularly points out her doubts and the reconstructed nature of her story, Pieixoto, by contrast, eliminates these elements, going so far as to imply that “further research” (*HT*, p. 314) will remove any approximation.

The keynote speaker of the “Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies” (*HT*, p. 311) describes for ten pages the history and fundamental policies of the dictatorship, how he examined the genuineness of the tapes and their labels, and set about – to no avail – identifying the people mentioned in Offred’s account, concentrating for more than four pages on the all-important figure of the Commander and the career path of the two regime officials who might hide behind the pseudonym “Fred.” To Offred herself, Pieixoto devotes but the equivalent of two paragraphs. In his scholarly search for the complete, definite truth about the Gileadean regime and, more specifically, in his vain attempts to determine the authenticity and precise origin of what he dismissively calls a “soi-disant manuscript” (*HT*, p. 312), Pieixoto relegates the Handmaid to near-invisibility in his discourse, and questions her ability to testify, thereby illustrating the realities of dumb and garrulous silencing, and overlooking the warning encrypted in the very place where the conference is held, “the University of Denay, Nunavit” (*HT*, p. 311), “namely, to ‘deny none of it.’”

The Cambridge historian also remains deaf to Offred’s typically reticent voice. Obsessed as he is with quantifiable data, indisputable, univocal information and concrete facts about the History of Gilead, he fails to listen to the woman behind the words, to see that she conceived her text as a subjective reconstruction of her tragic personal story, and cannot help but express his contempt for, and irritation at, the “many gaps” (*HT*, p. 322) that punctuate Offred’s testimony. Desperate for “even twenty pages or so of printout from [the Commander’s] […] private computer” (*HT*, p. 322), Pieixoto laments the fact that the narrator did “not see fit to supply us with her original name” (*HT*, p. 318) and did not have “the instincts of a reporter or a spy,” for if she had “had a different turn of mind,” she “could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean empire” (*HT*, p. 322).

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53 Bouson, in Bloom, *Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale*, p. 59.
Blinded by the frustration that he experiences in the face of his inability to reduce Offred to a fully graspable object of knowledge, the professor cannot understand the protagonist’s reticence rooted in her vital need to keep for herself some areas of privacy as a powerful gesture of self-preservation, resistance and self-affirmation in her highly traumatic circumstances. He accordingly ends his lecture by deploring the interruption with which Offred abruptly stops her narrative, which he sees as emblematic of her refusal to unveil the historical truth:

Did our narrator reach the outside world safely? […] Or was she discovered in her attic hiding place? […] Our document […] is on these subjects mute. We may call Eurydice forth from the world of the dead, but we cannot make her answer; and when we turn to look at her we glimpse her only for a moment, before she slips from our grasp and flees. As all historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it; but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and, try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day. […] Are there any questions? (HT, p. 324)

Pieixoto’s reference to Eurydice, who is nearly rescued from the Underworld by her husband Orpheus, but is irremediably dragged down into the shadow again when, breaking the only condition imposed by Hades, her lover looks at her before reaching the gates,54 is particularly revealing. If the scholar is right to metaphorically claim that he has rescued Offred from the abyss, he is however wrong to accuse her of fleeing, for it is he who – although he prides himself on standing “in the clearer light of our own day” (HT, p. 324) – symbolically kills her again by not listening to her voice, by refusing her the two main things she has struggled to re-establish through her tale: the “creative interaction between the ‘I’ who speaks and the ‘you’ who responds,”55 and a plurality of meanings and identities.

The concluding section of The Handmaid’s Tale has often been described as extremely bleak and led to comments such as “[Offred] is lost to her twenty-second century audience as Eurydice is to Orpheus,”56 or “[t]he wom[a]n ha[s] been silenced once more and it is the historian […] who ha[s] the final word.”57 If, from a purely structural point of view, Pieixoto does have the last word in Atwood’s novel, it can also be argued that “Offred’s Tale claims a space, a large autobiographical space,

54 Philibert, pp. 95-96.
55 Hilde Staels, “Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale: Resistance through Narrating,” in Bloom, Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale, p. 124.
within the novel and so relegates the grand narratives to the margins as mere framework for her story which is the main focus of interest." What is more, Pieixoto’s concluding “[a]re there any questions?” (HT, p. 324) not only introduces the interaction with the audience that traditionally ends a talk; it can also be seen to indirectly urge us readers to question the historian’s point of view, and to hand over to us the responsibility of listening to and interpreting Offred’s voice with an open, yet critical mind.

The ending of The Handmaid’s Tale is particularly paradigmatic of the message conveyed by the six novels studied in this thesis. The excipit of Atwood’s rewriting of the biblical figure of Rachel’s servant Bilhah, where the handmaid bursts out of her forced confinement in a silent reproductive role through her subversive narrative, does not lapse into easy, crushing triumphalism, but confirms the novel’s pervasive “sense of buried things bursting upwards […], into the light, as if to point, to say: Whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard, though silently” (HT, p. 161). In The Handmaid’s Tale as in the rest of the corpus, the heroines struggle with determination to find their voice and make it heard to counter their initial silencing, a voice that, through its essential intrinsic silences – whether they be the eloquent silence and the ineffable of The Red Tent and The Wild Girl, or the spectral silence and voice blurring of The Book of Mrs Noah and Only Human, or, still, the reticence of The Handmaid’s Tale and Sisters and Strangers –, never falls into authoritarianism, monologism, or the imposing of certainties, but – stressing the receptive dimension frequently disregarded in studies about voice and silence, as pointed out in the first part – ultimately hinges on the openness and plurality created by an encounter and dialogue with the other.

58 Howells, Modern Novelists, p. 127.
CONCLUSION
Dinah’s self-affirming complaint at the beginning of Anita Diamant’s *The Red Tent* appropriately captures the essence of the present study that has been devoted to a selection of six contemporary novels reconfiguring biblical women perceived to be largely confined to the gaps of the Scriptures: Michèle Roberts’s *The Wild Girl* (1984), Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), Michèle Roberts’s *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987), Emma Tennant’s *Sisters and Strangers* (1990), Anita Diamant’s *The Red Tent* (1997), and finally Jenny Diski’s *Only Human* (2000). This doctoral thesis has shown how, in the selected corpus, each female protagonist gives herself a voice through which she can define herself as speaking subject, a voice that not only rests on language, but also, crucially, on silence.

The two main concepts on which this research hinges, *voice* and *silence*, having been given a large variety of – sometimes contradictory – meanings in social science and religious studies, *theoretical prolegomena* were first dedicated to a definition of both terms as pertaining to my corpus. *Voice* was interpreted in a broad and a narrower sense. According to the former, inspired by Vincent Jouve’s description of a character’s axiological universe in *Poétique des valeurs*, voice embraces the different means through which a character defines itself, i.e. not only through its words and silences, but also its thoughts and actions.

Since this sense encompasses feminist and postcolonial meanings associated with the emancipation and recognition of marginalised and excluded minorities, which are decisive for my corpus, but does not take into account textual representation – another key aspect in this study – a second, more specific definition of “voice,” as the narrative instance, was attributed. According to this double interpretation, the novels analysed not only thematically establish women’s right to a voice, but also formally give their protagonists a voice as narrators of their own stories – with the unique and notable exception of Sarai in *Only Human*, who nevertheless vicariously speaks through her highly efficient self-appointed, omniscient mouthpiece, the anonymous narrator.
The concept of *silence* was given considerably more theoretical attention, on account of its deceptively straightforward nature, but also, primarily, of its seemingly paradoxical association with the coming to voice of biblical women in a Western context, where this phenomenon is traditionally regarded as the mere opposite of language and, as a consequence, reduced to a void, an absence of meaning, or the enemy of communication. Such a widespread disregard was shown to be reflected in the paucity of extensive publications about silence.

Via a brief survey of the few critical references in theology, philosophy, linguistics, rhetoric and literature, which this work simultaneously draws on, and distinguishes itself from, the general features of the notion as applied to my corpus were isolated, and a definition was given of silence as a phenomenon that is complex, multifaceted, meaningful, relational – i.e. inscribed within some communicative activity that may or may not involve language –, the signification of whose particular occurrences is indissociable from the context. In reaction to the traditional Western subordination of silence to speech, both concepts are regarded in this research as giving rise to, complementing, and nourishing each other, and as equally powerful tools that can serve both oppression and empowerment.

This thesis situates itself within a largely unexplored area of literature, for while much has been written about the silencing of minorities, about the radical form of silence of key male novelists and playwrights like Pinter, Camus, Beckett or Kafka, or about silence in Holocaust literature, practically no research has been carried out about novels written by women and/or with a female protagonist, and their potential depiction of silences as eloquent and powerful tools in a woman’s self-definition.

Along its three parts, this doctoral research has examined the following questions: what kinds of silence do the protagonists use or are confronted with? in what circumstances? how do these silences contribute to or, on the contrary, hinder, these characters’ coming to voice? On the basis of the general definition of silence given in the theoretical prolegomena, and of the detailed analyses of the six novels selected, seven – often interconnected – types of silence emerged, with the aim of doing justice to a concept that has often been oversimplified, and of providing a nuanced reading of each biblical rewriting that brings to the fore both its specificities...
and its parallels with the other selected works: *the implicit dimension, silencing, eloquent silence, the ineffable, spectral silence, voice blurring* and, finally, *reticence.*

The **first part** of this doctoral research, entitled “**The Silenced Feminine?**,” concentrated on the common starting point of the six novels. In chapter 1, I showed that all my biblical rewritings are rooted in the same two fundamental forms of silence — *the implicit dimension* and *silencing* — and adopt a complex, ambivalent, revisionist approach to the Scriptures — and, through it, the Judeo-Christian tradition —, both feeding on and challenging them. While taking as the very “source of the expression”1 the *implicit dimension* of the Bible — i.e. the elements excluded in the necessary process of selection of information —, they also denounce what is perceived as the almost systematic confinement of women to the silent background, which is interpreted as revealing the patriarchal bias of the biblical narratives and as silencing the female sex.

*Silencing*, which constitutes a *leitmotif* in the corpus, was described as taking three different forms: *dumb silencing*, through which women are excluded altogether from representation, *garrulous silencing*, which takes place when females do appear in male discourses, but are reduced to (silent) objects because confined to the domestic sphere, presented as inefficient speakers, or objectified in male writing about “Woman,” and, finally, *deaf silencing*, where women manage to acquire the status of speaking subjects, but fail to be heard by their interlocutor.

In chapter 2, “Theory into Practice,” I applied this typology to the six novels to foreground the various ways in which the protagonists’ freedom of expression is depicted as drastically threatened or limited. Roberts’s *The Wild Girl* was shown to subversively rework the complex, ambivalent figure of Mary Magdalene, who seems to have played a positive, even major role in nascent Christianity, but also to have undergone some form of dumb and garrulous silencing — her role as an apostle or as an eyewitness of the resurrection is often weakened, or even eradicated, as in 1 Corinthians 15:5, and she has, through her assimilation with the sinner in Luke 7:37,

1 My translation. Macherey, p. 106.
become the prototype of the sinful sexual woman. The analysis highlighted that Roberts’s novel specifically problematises how the heroine’s testimony is under the permanent risk of being silenced by religious and familial male authorities in her youth, and by the ferocious opposition that she later meets in the person of Simon Peter, the embodiment of traditional patriarchal views in *The Wild Girl*. Dissecting the myth of the compound Mary Magdalene, accused of silencing not only the biblical woman, but also, through her, the whole of womankind and its divine counterpart, *The Wild Girl* presents an alternative, egalitarian version of Christianity hinging on the heroine’s struggle to make her voice heard as a disciple, apostle and prophet, and her initiation into a divine reinstating the value of the feminine.

The first exploration of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which revisits the story of Bilhah, the silent maid whom Rachel gives to Jacob for reproductive purposes in Genesis 30, determined that Atwood’s dystopian dictatorship of Gilead rests on the dumb and garrulous silencing of its Handmaids – to whom the heroine Offred belongs –, implemented through a complex mixture of severe infringement of their freedom of expression, infantilisation and dehumanising effacement of their individuality and subjecthood.

Roberts’s *The Book of Mrs Noah* was analysed as a response to both the dumb-silencing image of Noah’s wife as the anonymous, silent embodiment of wifely submission in the Scriptures, and her garrulous-silencing construal as the evil shrew in the medieval mystery plays. It was also examined as a rewriting of the Flood narrative where, disoriented by her husband’s total disinterest in her biological and literary creative aspirations, the heroine launches into an oneiric cruise aboard her own Ark, her “*Salon des Refusées. Des Refusantes*” (*BMN*, pp. 19-20), to try and challenge not only her own silencing, but also that of all female authors of the past, present and future.

The fourth analysis pointed out how Tennant’s *Sisters and Strangers* castigates and subverts, by interweaving – in comic fashion – reworked scriptural material with fairy tale references, the mainstream garrulous-silencing image of Eve as essentially inferior to man and guilty – an image based on the portrayal of the first woman’s creation from *ʿādām* and eating of the forbidden fruit in Genesis 2 and 3, and its later
widespread misogynist interpretations. Demoting the Bible, but also the Christian tradition and Jewish legend, to the status of garrulously silencing “lies” (S&S, p. 136) as harmful as the Prince Charming story, Tennant’s novel constitutes Grandmother Dummer’s lesson to her two young protégées in the seven stereotypical roles to which women are said to be traditionally confined in (Judeo)-Christian societies.

Diamant’s *The Red Tent* fully exploits the remarkable implicit dimension of Genesis 34 by rewriting as a tragically thwarted love story what is predominantly interpreted as the rape of Jacob’s silent daughter. It was explored as Dinah’s response to her garrulous silencing in the Scriptures, a response in which the heroine recounts her struggle to save from oblivion her own voice and, through it, collective female memory, after the events at Shechem forbade her access to her memory and, in this way, interrupted the all-important chain connecting mother to daughter.

Finally, *Only Human*, Diski’s rewriting of Sarah, whom the Scriptures – in what can be seen as a combination of dumb and garrulous silencing – emphatically define through her lacking reproductive capacities and surround with one of their most dramatic silences in the episode of the Akedah, was analysed as a highly subversive polyphonic narrative that stresses Sarai’s exclusion from God’s plans, but also her own forceful refusal to acknowledge the possibility of divine existence – rooted in her highly insecure sense of belonging. Revisiting Isaac’s binding and, midrash-like, imagining both its terrible consequences and causes, it depicts an open war, fought over Abram’s love, between Sarai and Abram’s “only human” godhead, to silence the other and erase him/her from the love equation. Mirroring, on the discourse level, this first fight, is the fierce story game played by the two narrative instances – an unidentified narrator focusing on the biblical woman and God himself – who, also contending for the last word, constantly interrupt each other.

These first explorations of the novels demonstrated that the corpus, since it depicts silencing as a reality of the protagonists’ lives and a constant threat to be fought against, amply draws on feminist denunciations of what is perceived as the limitations of women’s freedom of expression. As was highlighted in the last point of Part I, the selected works can also be seen to be influenced by the two main feminist responses to this silencing, that emphasise both genders’ common humanity and
equality or, on the contrary, a distinctiveness situated outside mainstream language, in a syntax of incompleteness and fluidity, or a language of the body, for instance. My thesis however also proves that the analysed novels carry on where most feminist texts dealing with female silences stop, and suggest more nuanced answers, for instead of leaving the silenced protagonist to her status of victim by rejecting the discourses containing oppressive silences or even language itself as irredeemably patriarchal, or of valorising some reductive, essentially mute female identity, they show that their heroines fight with determination to find their voice, as was subsequently demonstrated in the remainder of this doctoral thesis.

The second, and most substantial part, “Voices Draped in Silences,” which described the way in which each heroine, as an answer to her silencing, strives to define herself by playing on the infinite possibilities offered by language and silence, was divided into three sections presenting the case studies in pairs to better foreground how two novels based on the same forms of silence exploit them in unique ways. The sections themselves were organised according to the evolution that can be perceived in the relation between, on the one hand, the protagonists’ voice, and on the other hand, authority, in both its divine and maternal aspects, from Dinah’s and Mary Magdalene’s perception of their self-definition as rooted in the rehabilitation of the divine archetype of the great mother, to, in *The Book of Mrs Noah* and *Only Human*, the dissociation of the – still foregrounded – maternal dimension from the divine – depicted as, at best, partial and useless, and at worst, utterly destructive – to, finally, *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Sisters and Strangers*, in which any form of authority is approached with distrust and, as a consequence, not only God, but also the mother, are depicted – respectively in a tragic and a deeply ironic fashion – as being of little or no help, power or comfort.

The first section was devoted to Diamant’s *The Red Tent* and Roberts’ *The Wild Girl*, where the protagonists’ struggle against their silencing is tightly interwoven with a celebration of the goddess, whose name is equally in danger of being forgotten, and where silence – in the form of the *ineffable* for *The Wild Girl*,
and of *eloquent silence* in both *The Wild Girl* and *The Red Tent* – is described as a path to the other – whether divine or human – and to self-knowledge.

*The Red Tent* was envisaged as an ode to the endangered plural (great) mother revolving around the reconfiguration of Dinah – the subjugated “voiceless cipher” (*RT*, p. 1) in the Bible – as a self-assertive heroine who speaks in a voice forcefully celebrating as a source of power the realities and images that are conventionally associated with the female sphere and debased in Western thought – such as nature, the moon and, most importantly, the body and the mother. The analysis distinguished two major phases in the protagonist’s testimony, detailed in the two main points of the chapter. In the first, entitled “A Universe of Mothers and Goddesses,” Dinah was shown to challenge her silencing in the Scriptures by launching into the story of her direct female ancestors, a tale of multiple mothers mirroring a powerful, plural goddess associated with images of connectedness, of intimacy and cyclical rhythms. I revealed that this literal and symbolic universe of Leah and her three sisters, which so insistently rests on what the Western dichotomies identify as typically female, functions to deconstruct the traditional equation of the feminine with passivity and subjugation.

In the second phase, “I Gave Voice to My Life,” which concentrated on Dinah’s personal story, I traced the protagonist’s movement from complete fusion with the universe of her multiple maternal figures, to a loosening and then complete break of these ties caused by the events of Shechem, which enable Dinah to discover another form of intimacy – the *eloquent silence* shared with prince Shalem, in which words are perceived as useless or even as an obstacle to communication – but also precipitate her silencing. The case study determined that Diamant’s Dinah eventually finds her own voice by seizing the opportunity to (re-)inscribe herself as a unique link in the chain connecting mother to daughter, through her experience of maternity, midwifery, and testimony, which is celebrated for breaking the bondage of silence.

The detailed analysis of *The Wild Girl* interpreted Roberts’s alternative gospel as Mary Magdalene’s mystical initiation into the divine, thanks to which the protagonist finds her voice as a disciple, apostle and prophet. Through a spiritual and – more subversively – physical union with Jesus that largely rests on *eloquent silence*, both in the form of completely wordless communication betraying the intimate complicity between the two lovers, and of the meaningful pauses conveying openness
that characterise Jesus’ preaching, Mary Magdalene finds God in herself, via divinely-inspired visions and trances. These religious experiences were established to be intrinsically linked to silence, through their highly ineffable quality. Referring to situations in which a phenomenon is perceived not only as exceeding language – as in the unspeakable – but also, and crucially, as stretching or transcending the limits of human comprehension, the ineffable was located in Mary Magdalene’s profound sense of dissolution of her self and union with God, expressed through the various manifestations of the rhetoric of the ineffable: gaps, periphrases, metaphors and negations.

Such encounters, since they give Mary Magdalene access to a reality far beyond common language and humanity, were interpreted as bestowing unique prophetic authority on the narrator’s voice, through which, in turn, the female, both in its human and divine manifestations, is redeemed, most explicitly in the climax of the heroine’s initiation. Challenging one of the most fundamental doctrines of Christianity, The Wild Girl reconfigures the resurrection as a sacred marriage of the male and the female in us, through which we regain our primeval, Edenic unity reflecting the fullness of God our Father and Mother, which was lost with the silencing of Sophia by Ignorance, the male likeness of the divine, or Roberts’s parodic portrayal of the Christian God.

Reinstating – primarily via the reintroduction of the goddess in the Christian cosmogony – the value of the feminine, and presenting sexuality as a path to the divine, Roberts’s biblical rewriting deconstructs the very bases of the silencing image of Mary Magdalene as the second Eve, and suggests an alternative representation of the early Christian as a powerful prophet determined to defend women’s freedom to speak in the name of God against Simon Peter’s attempts to garrulously silence female disciples, and to make her subversive, divinely-inspired voice heard.

In the second section, where the maternal dimension still plays a central role, but is disconnected from a divine sphere depicted as laughable or even destructive, I concentrated on Roberts’s The Book of Mrs Noah and Diski’s Only Human, which hinge on voice blurring and spectral silence.

The Book of Mrs Noah was presented as an oneiric voyage into feminine creativity (dis)organised around the silence of voice blurring, which mainly refers to situations where the narrative authority cannot clearly or easily be situated. In
Roberts’s extremely complex, confusing and disorientating rewriting of the Flood, voice blurring most noticeably and importantly takes the shape of nearly constant changes of narrative voice from chapter to chapter or even within a chapter, more often than not without explicit or directly recognisable indications to guide the readers along the narrative. The case study highlighted how these changes lose the readers across the various narrative levels, when they are led to mistakenly confuse and merge into one the autodiegetic narrator of the frame story and primary narrative level – the unhappy wife on an Italian trip – and the principal autodiegetic narrator of the secondary narrative level – the product of this dissatisfied woman’s unconscious, Mrs Noah the cruise organiser for authors out of inspiration – until the heroine’s voyage is eventually identified as a long dream four pages before the end of the novel, or when, as the seven members of Mrs Noah’s writers’ group decide to tell each other tales, the readers are suddenly brought face to face with yet another voice – the instance in charge of the narration in the tertiary level.

To this joyful cross-level confusion are added repeated oscillations between autodiegetic and heterodiegetic voices within the main narrative level, which were shown to become more complex but also more systematic from chapter 11 onwards, for they are associated with the repetition of a fixed sequence linking together five heterogeneous and seemingly loosely connected chapter-types, from the depiction by an unidentified heterodiegetic voice of how one of Mrs Noah’s companions frees him/herself from his/her writer’s block, and the refrain where the heroine consults the riddle book, to Mrs Noah’s dialogue with the inhabitants of the island on which the Ark is moored, the metanarrative discussion around the shared meal aboard the Ark, and the closing embedded story.

If voice blurring certainly gives to The Book of Mrs Noah a highly fragmentary quality, where discontinuity and polyphonic openness deeply resonate, and creates a highly heterogeneous and unstable narrative authority that foregrounds a fluid, de-centred sense of identity challenging the traditional humanist view of the subject as stable, centred and unified, it was also revealed that this silence imparts a certain rhythm. As such, it contributes to the original structure of Roberts’s fiction, which rests on an alternative form of logic that I called the “archeo-logic” of dream, based on the workings of the unconscious and, more specifically, on the heroine’s free association of words and meanings linked with motherhood. By way of illustration, I explored three of the strings of five chapters and demonstrated how they can be seen
to be organised around the polyphonic treatment of the polysemous terms related to maternity that are foregrounded by the riddles concluding their refrains.

This exploration emphasised that, thanks to the silence of voice blurring, Mrs Noah’s meditation on creativity is constantly relaunched and given new impetus, for it is approached, in each new chapter-type, through a different voice – that is, from a fresh angle –, so that, after the sixth cycle, the heroine eventually agrees to visit what I interpreted as the symbolic locus of the most repressed contents in her psyche, the hold of the Ark. In this climactic scene depicting an underworld bustling with the silenced people of Mrs Noah’s personal story, but also of literary and world history, the protagonist was shown to find her voice through acknowledging as the very source of her identity and creativity the spectral silence of the lost mother. This form of silence was defined as describing the haunting presence, in the protagonist’s life, of an absence – understood either in a literal or, as in this scene, in a symbolic sense rooted in the psychoanalytical theory describing the loss of the maternal body through the splitting of the dyadic unity between mother and child by the Law of the Father –, and its momentous influence on her process of self-definition. The Ark having brought Mrs Noah to locate her voice within herself and to identify it as a voice that necessarily speaks without – which means, paradoxically, with – the mother, the protagonist’s claim, at the issue of her journey, that she is pregnant, was seen as revealing her conviction that she has finally found (pro)creativity.

By contrast with The Book of Mrs Noah, in which spectral silence and voice blurring are associated with a profoundly freeing atmosphere, in Diski’s Only Human, the same two types of silence are indissociable from tragic accents, as the analysis underlined. Voice blurring was first located in the complete anonymity of the homodiegetic narrator that stands by the dying Sarai in the incipit and that, by reverently staying in the background, puts the protagonist to the fore. After introducing, for four pages, a heroine who, having lost the capacity to articulate her experience and memories into a narrative, has been silenced in a radical, traumatic way, this first voice abruptly hands over, in a second instance of blurring, to what seems to be an overt heterodiegetic narrator – also unidentified – who, substituting for the voiceless matriarch, launches into a long flashback relating Sarai’s life from its genesis to its breaking point.
In conjunction with these uncertainties that prevent readers from identifying the human narrative instances, *Only Human* was shown to be structured around a most dramatic and subversive form of voice blurring generated by the entrance into the story of a testy, authoritarian, and monological God who, with an outraged cry from the heart in which he claims for himself the exclusive prerogative to create and cause things to begin, interrupts the human narrator, starting in this way a relentless story game in which the mainstream image of the Judeo-Christian God as a masterful, awe-inspiring, all-powerful, omniscient authority is mercilessly sapped – not least, most ironically, by the godhead himself.

Closely interwoven with this subversive dialogic blur of human and divine narrative voices, is the fierce (love) story game between Abram’s God and Sarai, whose worst weakness, and, simultaneously, best weapon, was identified as the spectral silence of the lost mother. As was pointed out, this silence, by rooting the heroine in a condition of radical existential doubt, renders her more fearful of deprivation, but also equips her to cope with the contingency of a human life devoid of any transcendent justification, and turns her into a fierce defender of her heightened desire.

The case study demonstrated that, in a radical reversal of the authorized account of humankind’s creation in Yahweh’s image, in Diski’s *Only Human*, it is the divinity that evolves in the image of Sarai. The analysis of the hostilities between the matriarch and the godhead distinguished a first phase, in which the opposition mainly derives from the subversive juxtaposition of the competing narratives of Sarai’s and God’s separate developments, and a second phase where, after Abram initiates the tragic love triangle to answer his wish for certainties, the latent rivalry turns into an open war between a Sarai firmly decided to hold on to her story with Abram, and a divinity that, in his determination to win the patriarch’s love, does not realise that he falls into a more and more “only human” condition and unwittingly raises the woman to the status of envied, godlike model. By giving her own Word and dictating the creation of life with Hagar, by defeating God’s raw power with laughter and bringing Abram back to the human world with their son Isaac, Sarai wins crucial battles against her divine enemy, asserting with determination her voice.

The third section concentrated on Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Tennant’s *Sisters and Strangers*, which amplify the calling into question of the
authority of the divine and maternal figure already perceptible in the novels of the second section, and were exploited as examples of the silence that I called *reticence*.

Atwood’s dystopia *The Handmaid’s Tale* was scrutinised as Offred’s reluctant rebellion against her state-organised silencing. The case study highlighted how the Handmaid’s struggle for voice can be understood as a fight against the monologism, uniformising and univocality of Gilead. This revolt was seen on examination to entail both the restoration of polyphony and the re-establishment of a plurality of identities and meanings. Offred’s fight for polyphony was shown to rest on the narrator’s (re)construction of a dialogue with the narratees, with other women who have rebelled against the totalitarian regime – like Offred’s best friend Moira and her predecessor –, and with God. As for the Handmaid’s re-establishment of a plurality of identities and meanings, it was seen to be based on Offred’s determined efforts to play on the various significations and sounds of words, to remember her former positive identities as a woman, wife, mother and, even if imperfectly, daughter, and to create for herself new facets – as conspirator and mistress with the Commander, and as secret lover with the chauffeur Nick – through which she can fulfil her desire for power and for recognition, and reconquer her female erotic body.

I established that Offred’s rebellion is specifically characterised by *reticence*, a type of silence that pervades an entire story, in which the narrator is torn between the need to testify to one’s fate, and some reserve, secretiveness or unwillingness to share one’s intimate thoughts, feelings and deeds. The protagonist’s narrative crusade resting on the delicate balance between adjusting to her silencing and resisting it, between disclosure and remoteness, between anamnesis and forgetting, she repeatedly reaffirms the vital role of her tale in her struggle for survival, while stressing her almost constant reluctance to tell her fragmented story, and how it constitutes a predicament for her. Offred’s reticence was specifically shown to be conveyed in an extremely powerful way through gaps, detours into other stories, close-ups on visual images or words, flashbacks, and self-erasure, which all help the narrator to preserve her sanity as well as some spaces of privacy that defy any attempt at confinement to a wholly delimited and limiting identity.

In response to scholarly claims that Offred’s attitude is one of passivity and surrender, it was argued that it is precisely because she has chosen neither suicide, frontal revolt, nor active involvement in the resistance – options that repeatedly prove
to be deadly –, but has devised for herself a form of reticent rebellion, that the protagonist of *The Handmaid’s Tale* survives and manages to make her dissident voice heard, thereby lastingly challenging her silencing by Gilead.

The sixth and last case study discussed Tennant’s *Sisters and Strangers* as Grandmother Dummer’s playfully reticent account, to her granddaughter Elsie and her friend, of Eve’s journey through the seven female (stereo)typical identities believed to be forced onto women in Judeo-Christian societies – identities that are all related to the castigated mainstream representation of the biblical first woman as inherently guilty and inferior to man, and are reconfigured on the basis of the strategy of playing with mimesis advocated by Irigaray, through which traditional feminine roles are deliberately and subversively assumed to better be questioned and converted into a form of affirmation. I demonstrated that, in Dummer’s tale, reticence is associated – in contrast to Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* – with the old narrator’s highly deceptive and parodic stance, and predominantly takes the form of allusions, gaps and self-erasures through which the protagonist betrays her brief spells of restraint or her shame about the innocence and passivity of her youth, but also means to playfully disappoint her protégées’ expectations and to lead them to think for themselves and reach their own conclusions.

The analysis traced Eve’s development from her initial embodiment of a cross between the spoiled passive fairy-tale princess and the charming, pure Angel in the House, to its very opposite, Lilith, the monstrous, inarticulate legendary first wife of Adam and symbol of the female fight for equality, to the two traditional extreme representations of feminine sexuality, the Harlot, which liberates Eve from masculine domination but further alienates her from the other women, and the saintly Madonna, a role in which Eve is revered worldwide but never feels truly valued, to, finally, her move from the lies of the Courtesan, which bring her fame and wealth yet imprison her in an unconditional, naïvely idealistic belief in romances, to the search for truth of the Bluestocking, whose uncommonly brilliant, revolutionary discoveries on God and the meaning of the universe are discredited by male scholars and the Church. Eve’s initiation was interpreted as leading the heroine from complete passivity, financial and emotional dependence, to intellectual and economic emancipation, as a simultaneously oppressive and liberating path through roles that both silence the heroine and enable her to find her own rebellious voice.
Finally, the third part, “Closing Silences Voicing Openness,” examined to what extent the biblical women truly make their voices heard or if the silences that they choose, or that are newly imposed on them by the end of their tales, risk silencing them again. It revealed striking similarities in the denouements of the selected works, based on the motif of the granddaughter who hears and transmits her female ancestor’s – partly – lost or buried voice, which can be seen to occur in a literal, symbolic or ironic form in the six novels of the corpus.

This motif was first isolated in its most literal manifestation in The Wild Girl, where, after sailing in eloquent silence to Alexandria to preach – in response to Simon Peter’s organisation of the Church around an exclusively male leadership – Mary Magdalene withdraws into a life of domesticity, contemplation and mothering for fifteen years, until she is shaken out of her silence by Salome, who urges her to make her voice heard in writing, and by a series of four dreams that warn her against the danger of imposing one’s truth, but also of renouncing to transmit her visions. When, as she decides to accept this oneiric call to preach, the heroine also chooses to bury her gospel, it is her granddaughter who eventually puts an end to the heroine’s mild self-silencing by unearthing and copying her spoken words, thereby providing her ancestor with a fully accomplished, lasting and tangible voice as disciple, apostle and prophet deconstructing the mainstream image of Mary Magdalene as the repentant prostitute.

In Sisters and Strangers, the motif of the granddaughter is particularly brought to the fore in the incipit situating Grandmother Dummer’s tale within the frame of the heroine’s passing on of her story to her daughter’s daughter and her friend, and in the excipit, where, in the last and most dramatic expression of her playful reticence, the protagonist reveals to her young audience both her true identity as Eve and her last subversive embodiment of the stereotypical roles for women – the witch, as signifier of female independence and possessor of secret, subversive knowledge. Demonstrating that she has assimilated Dummer’s message of female empowerment, the narrator feels invested with the mission to become the New Eve, a mission that she can be seen to fulfil – albeit imperfectly, as might indicate the complete lack of
information about her own life and the long period of time that passes by before she hands down Dummer’s message – by reproducing Eve’s reticent schema of transmission of knowledge and her voice mapping out mutinous possibilities that challenge the representation of women as the sinful, sexual daughters of Eve.

Exploiting a much darker vein, *Only Human* ultimately depicts a heroine utterly destroyed and silenced by the loss of the semblance of meaning that she, through tenacity and an unshakeable rooting in the world, had progressively created with Abram over the decades. Diski’s tragicomic non-ending, which revisits the Akedah – and its loud silence surrounding Sarah – as God’s ultimate defeat in the love and story games and, most importantly, as the sacrifice of Sarai on the altar of Abram’s desperate need for transcendent certainties and of God’s as acute craving for love, was interpreted to portray a Sarai who prefers the terrible, ineffable human void of nothingness to what is presented as the easy – and so easily destructive – Judeo-Christian scenario. For this terrible choice, the matriarch is honoured and given a second voice by the unidentified human narrator acting as her symbolic granddaughter.

In *The Red Tent*, it is the narratees themselves that are cast into the symbolic role of the granddaughter transmitting the heroine’s voice. After she chose to only partly address her silencing in her own clan by contenting herself with a legendary destiny instead of unveiling the gruesome truth, when Dinah is welcomed into death by all her female ancestors, she is granted eternity through the love of her family and friends but also, crucially, through us, who – compensating for her slight self-silencing – enable the protagonist to transcend time and reconnect with her twentieth-century daughters, not as a victim, but as a self-assertive woman who took her destiny into her own hands.

The scrutiny of the ending of *The Book of Mrs Noah* revealed that in Roberts’s biblical rewriting too, the reader becomes the symbolic granddaughter who comes to the heroine when she is deaf-silenced by her husband’s total disinterest, and who listens to her voice when she starts writing. Challenging the biblical representation of Noah as the active agent and his wife as the silent obedient partner, but also the biblical character’s diametrically opposite image as a shrew thwarting Noah’s projects
in the Mystery Plays, *The Book of Mrs Noah* celebrates a female protagonist who fights to speak up and to give birth to her creative aspirations as a woman and author.

Finally, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood’s rewriting of the biblical figure of Rachel’s servant Bilhah, where the handmaid bursts out of her forced confinement in a silent reproductive role through her subversive narrative, the motif of the granddaughter was identified in an ironic configuration, through the figure of the Cambridge historian Pieixoto in the “Historical Notes.” It was argued that the male scholar, while saving Offred’s account from the oblivion into which it had been plunged for two centuries, also partly silences the heroine’s voice by discrediting her, tampering with her words, relegating her to the margins of her own tale and failing to understand her reticence as a powerful gesture of self-preservation, resistance and self-affirmation. As was pointed out, this *excipit* does not lapse into defeatism or fatalism for, besides keeping the silencing male voice to the periphery – it remains confined to the succinct frame appended to the three hundred pages of Offred’s testimony –, the novel also points, with its closing words, to the reader, who is handed over the responsibility to listen to and interpret Offred’s voice with both an attentive ear and a critical mind.

The ending of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, in its characteristic openness and plurality created by the distinct emphasis on dialogue, was interpreted as condensing the global message conveyed by the six novels studied in this doctoral thesis. These depict heroines who struggle with fierce determination to find their voice and make it heard to counter their initial silencing, but who never fall into monologism or authoritarianism thanks to their silences inviting, or even conjuring up, the other, whether it be in the form of the wordless communion with the loved or divine one that defines eloquent silence and the ineffable in *The Red Tent* and *The Wild Girl*, or the great chorus of – sometimes discordant – voices and the haunting presence of the lost mother created by voice blurring and spectral silence in *The Book of Mrs Noah* and *Only Human*, or, still, the anguished or playful appeal to the other in the typically reticent *Handmaid’s Tale* and *Sisters and Strangers*.

By revealing the six selected novels’ elevation of silence to a highly effective multifaceted means of meeting and communicating with the other, and, as importantly, of self-definition, I hope to have contributed to the (re)instatement, as a profoundly meaningful and relational phenomenon, of silence, which is too often
overlooked or rejected as a potential medium of interaction on account of its conventional status as the opposite of language in the binary oppositions structuring Western thought. If research in social science and religious studies has largely shunned silence, or concentrated only on very specific types, such as the silence of meditation as a path to God, the silence of nothingness of the male avant-garde tradition and Holocaust writers, or the silencing of minorities, this thesis has highlighted the fact that many more forms of silence deserve scholarly attention, and that voice and silence are not mutually exclusive. It constitutes a first, and necessarily limited, step in a truly fascinating field. As such, it raises further questions and will lead, I hope, to further developments.

The issue of the oral or written character of voice, for example, which I chose not to specifically develop, would certainly deserve in-depth exploration in connection with the corpus. One could investigate whether both aspects are equally developed by the protagonists, or if, on the contrary, they tend to favour one over the other, on the basis of, among others, their relation to the oral and written use of language. Such a preference might be perceived at the end of Roberts’s *The Wild Girl*, where Mary Magdalene’s decision to bury her gospel before she leaves for her preaching mission might be interpreted as a sign of her mistrust of the immutable side of words that are inscribed on paper, and her wish to cultivate the spoken – that is, changeable and interactive – communication of her testimony.

While the present study has demonstrated that many powerful and empowering facets of silence are intrinsically constitutive of the heroines’ self-assertive voices in the selected biblical rewritings, it would be interesting to broaden the scope of investigation to contemporary novels – written by women or men – with a non-biblical female protagonist, and examine to what extent they associate chosen, potent, and significant silences – and not only the too often stereotypical blank page – with their main character’s identity, process of self-definition and self-affirmation. Spectral silence, in particular, through its privileged link with traumatic memory or the key figure of the mother, might prove to open up fascinating new critical perspectives, as might voice blurring and its highly challenging implications on the discourse level, in a contemporary literary scene abounding with novels that experiment with narration. Applying the corpus-based typology of this literary study to the very source of the novels, the Bible, might also shed new light, for instance, on the largely overshadowed associations between God himself and silence and, in this

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way, help question widespread monolithic representations of the Scriptures and its deity as the book and the Lord of the Word exclusively. In conclusion, and to borrow the words of Diamant’s heroine again, there is, indeed, far more to tell.
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