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Defamiliarizing the popular image of the bible in some contemporary rewritings in english

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the ways some recent British and Irish rewritings of the Bible estrange what has become the publicly accepted and dominant image of the biblical text. Recently, the Bible has been given the status of "home scripture" (Sherwood, Yvonne. 2012. *Biblical Blaspheming: Trials of the Sacred for a Secular Age*. Cambridge: CUP) and become a domesticated and conservative text, a rather placid cultural/literary monument, an important foundation of democracy, a venerable religious document judged more tolerant and liberal than other scriptures. Though the Bible used to be perceived as an explosive text, peppered with potentially offensive passages, today its enmity is neutralised either by linking the Bible with ancient times or by relating it to people's religious beliefs and by entrenching its more scandalous parts within the discourse of tolerance. It is such an anodyne image of the Bible that the biblical rewritings of Roberts, Winterson, Barnes, Crace, Pullman, Tóibin, Alderman, Diski defamiliarize. By showing biblical events through the eyes of various non-standard focalizers, those novels disrupt the formulaic patterns of the contemporary perception of the Bible. It is through these strange perspectives that we observe the critical moment when the overall meaning and the role of the biblical text is established and the biblical story is actually written down. Importantly, it is also the moment when somebody moulds the scripture according to their ideas and glosses over all the complexities, violence and immorality related to the events the biblical text describes. Also, contemporary biblical rewritings defamiliarize the currently popular image of the Bible – that of a whitewashed text which inculcates morality, conserves social order and teaches love and tolerance, by employing images of disintegration, dirt and contagion as well as by constructing a figure of a fervent believer in the Bible and its ideas.

Keywords: rewriting, the Bible, contemporary novel, defamiliarization, estrangement

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In his 1993 Didsbury lectures "The Bible in the Modern World", David Clines characterised the use of biblical material in contemporary culture as based on fragmentation, distortion/alteration, non-acknowledgement and de-divinisation. According to Clines the Bible we encounter today is a tacitly present and heavily fractured Bible, its more memorable passages or characters decontextualised, transformed, rewritten, and pruned from the element of the divine. Because, as Clines asserts, "the Bible has no authority of its own in the culture, and is not allowed to say anything the culture does not want to hear,"[1] it speaks only through largely de-theologised and customarily selected elements. Thus, aspects of the Bible that disagree with the values, ideals and interests of today's society – aspects Clines does not dwell on in his lecture – are ignored, silenced, filtered, or cordoned off from those elements that the culture deems acceptable. These ignored aspects could include, for example, the so-called "pornoprophetics" (Brenner 1995:270), i.e., passages in the Bible in which sexual images of women are used to expose the iniquities of the chosen people; the "immoral Bible," i.e., passaged which "advocate moral standards that seem to us to be offensive and unacceptable" (Davies 2010:3); or "prophetic scatology" (Sherwood 129), i.e., the imagery of dirt, excrement, refuse, body fragmentation and rotting that is used by biblical prophets.

Clines's observations are applicable not only to the biblical odds and ends, which, in the words of Andrew Tate, "continue to litter the transactions of contemporary life, [... and] shadow dance in our shared but near-amnesiac cultural consciousness" (2006: 517), but also to the more holistic popular understandings of "what the Bible really means", which reduce the whole of the Bible to a text which affirms Western values. As Yvonne Sherwood explains, today an implicit alliance is assumed between the Bible and the quasi-sacred values of secular society, namely freedom, morality, democracy, rights, individualism, tolerance. Subject to the "relative non-reading" (Sherwood 71), in the course of which "a few congenial passages [are] chosen to synecdochically represent the Bible" (Sherwood 73), the biblical text becomes "profoundly secularised and turned into a *symbol* in the public realm" (Sherwood 72, original emphasis).

Depending on which passages are selected, the symbolic value of those popular construals of the Bible are different – James G (1968). Crossley categorised them into four types: the Liberal, the Cultural, the Neoliberal and the Radical Bible, each consolidated around a different key value (Crossley builds

1 I refer to the original text of the lectures, published online http://www.shef.ac.uk/bibs/DJACcurrres/BMW.html. Clines's lectures were revised and published later in book format as *The Bible in the Modern World*, The Biblical Seminar, 51. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997.

on ideas and terminology introduced by Sheehan 2005; Sherwood 2012). In the form of such revered-but-not-read icons of the most cherished Western ideals and values, the Bible functions as a generally approved yet politely ignored object of secular beliefs. Categorised as a rather placid cultural/literary monument, as an important foundation of democracy (cf. Gauchet 1997; Cox 1965), as a support of a belief in the dominance of individualism over the state, or as a venerable religious document judged more tolerant and liberal than other scriptures (cf. Appignanesi and Maitland 1990; Pipes 2003; Falkenhayner 2010; on the Rushdie affair), the Bible becomes – in Sherwood's words – a placid, anodyne and thoroughly domesticated "home scripture" (6), or – in Crossley's words – a "decaffeinated" text (261). Thus, today biblical text is cocooned either by declining biblical literacy and a more or less diplomatic indifference, or by a taken-for-granted respect towards a venerable, foundational document, or, finally, by a discourse of tolerance based on respect for religious subjectivities and their scriptures (as Sherwood quips, "the fundamental quasi-sacralising principle seems to be 'We must not be rude to anyone else's scriptures'" [66]). The Bible is on the one hand cleansed of unwanted elements, and on the other hand, protected from possible violation.

Such a hygienic if bland image of the Bible is defamiliarized in many contemporary biblical rewritings in English: in Jeanette Winterson's *Boating for Beginners* (1985), Michèle Roberts's *The Wild Girl* (1984), Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989), Jim Crace's *Quarantine* (1997), Philip Pullman's *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* (2010), Colm Tóibin's *The Testament of Mary* (2012), Naomi Alderman's *The Liars' Gospel* (2012), and Jenny Diski's *After These Things: A Novel* (2004). I use the term "defamiliarization" (originally discussed in 1925 by Victor Shklovsky as part of his formalist theory of narrative prose) not merely in the sense of an aesthetic device which draws attention to the literary form itself, but rather in the sense of an instrument of cognition, which estranges the perception automatized by social and cultural conventions, which helps to eliminate illusions and which corrects one's relationship to the world. Thus, I argue that the process of defamiliarization at work in the rewritings of the Bible is based on strategies which foreground the constructedness and textuality of the biblical text– strategies which are, according to Magdalena Mączyńska (2015), a major feature of many contemporary fictional revisions of the Bible (2), and which thereby demystify and urge readers to reconstruct the understanding of its status and role. The defamiliarizing strategies foreground the rather muddy mechanisms underlying the production of what resembles the contemporary culturally acceptable Bible, and, simultaneously, defamiliarizes the complacent image of the domesticated, aseptic biblical text.

Characteristically, to de-automatize the image of the sealed off, homely Bible, ensconced in cultural and liberal values, biblical rewrites rely on a number of schemes: first, they represent biblical ideas as followed blindly or implemented uncritically, i.e., in ways characteristic of strong, if not fundamentalist, belief; second, they frequently employ liminal focalizers, who occupy structurally ambiguous positions and which offer a glimpse into the unsightly and the unconventional; and third, they often explore the defamiliarizing potential of images of decomposition, contamination, rotting, dirt, as well as images of the open body, i.e., of images which figuratively emphasise the permeability and untidiness of the borders set around the biblical. Thus, perceived and conceived by non-standard focalizers, represented in the morally dirty process of textual selection and manipulation, shown as enticing a disquieting fundamentalist reaction and as built from images of porousness and disintegration, the Bible in contemporary English-language novels offers its destabilised and defamiliarized form to challenge its commonplace understanding.

1 Defamiliarizing the vicarious religion and disowned belief

Written in the cultural context dominated by what Grace Davie calls "vicarious religion" (6) and by what Slavoj Žižek labels "the disavowed/displaced belief" (2003: 7), biblical rewrites tend to use the motif of a fervent, uncritical believer whose direct and total dedication to biblical ideas defamiliarizes both the perception of the Bible as a quaint, archaic text, best approached with a degree of caution and circumspection, and the related idea of the belief by proxy. Davie explains that in Britain a characteristic form of attitude to religion is one in which a non-believing majority of the society perceives the believing minority as practicing faith also on their behalf. Such indirect belief – a belief displaced upon the other, a belief supported by an ironic distance from the actual belief, stands in stark contrast with the strong religious passion, from which the British to a large extent have dissociated themselves. In *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox*, Davie (2015) proposes that because of "the undisputed role of Christianity in shaping British culture over the long term" (4), the function of the believing minority belongs to historic (i.e., Christian) churches, which are expected to "perform ritual on behalf of others [...,] believe on behalf of others [...,] embody moral codes on behalf of others [...,] offer space for the vicarious debate of unresolved issues in modern societies" (6). From the point of view of vicarious religion, the Bible embodies moral codes and religious ideas that are

directly believed by others, while the majority rest content with the cultural memory those ideas constitute. For Žižek, "when it comes to religion [...], we no longer 'really believe' today, we just follow (some) religious rituals and mores as part of respect for the 'lifestyle' of the community to which we belong [...]" (2003: 7). We relegate the "disowned/impersonal belief" (Žižek 2003: 7) onto culture, which becomes the field of respected but disavowed beliefs, with no place for anyone who lives their culture immediately and who takes their religion seriously. For most Westerners, Žižek observes, a belief can thrive "only as not fully (publicly) admitted, as a private obscene secret" (2003: 6).

Contemporary biblical rewritings reconnect the Bible, reduced as it is today to the cultural resource or a venerable support of Western democracy, to the idea of strong, sometimes militant belief, which dominates the world that the biblical rewritings construct. They defamiliarize the idea of vicarious religion by turning their central characters into staunch, uncompromising believers, whose excessive (and destructive) faith prevails (or is declared to prevail in the future) over others, and also whose susceptibility to fundamentalist views proves to be an inter-generationally transmittable feature. The rewritings foreground what for many people today should remain hidden and private, and flaunt what constitutes a salaciously "real" religious belief.

Thus, in the Flood part of Barnes's novel, entitled "Stowaway", Noah is portrayed as an unflinching and inflexible follower of God, whose "blind" (Barnes 11) – even infantile ("not adult" [Barnes 21]) – obedience to God compensates for his incompetence in the fields of ship building, navigation, or fauna. Although his dedication did save some animals, his sense of being chosen gave him a license to decide about the life and death of animals. As "a man who had his little theories, and [...] didn't want anyone else's" (Barnes 8), Noah is implacable in his (often ridiculous) decisions, like the one of building the ship from gopher-wood or of taking on board all animal species, irrespective of their size or utility. The fact that the system defining which animals should get into the Ark by sevens and which by twos "made very little sense" (Barnes 11) reflects badly on Noah, who follows God's ruling indiscriminately and thoughtlessly. More ominously, however, Noah's implementation of God's decree to divide animals into the clean and the unclean is not only a blind pursuit of "the divisiveness of God's animal policy" (Barnes 10), but also a dangerous precedent for a segregationist principle, which – as the rest of the novel shows – when re-applied to humans in the twentieth century, causes oppression and genocide. Noah's dedication to God, his unsuspended and firmly placed belief (to paraphrase Žižek), makes him "a monster, a puffed-up patriarch who spent half his day grovelling to his God and the other half taking it out on [... animals]" (Barnes 12). As we hear from the narrator, "There was something a

bit sinister about Noah's devotion to God; creepy, if you know what I mean" (Barnes 21). Interestingly, the animal narrator also observes that because all humans "have Noah's genes", we all tend to be "hopelessly dogmatic" (Barnes 25), believing what we want to believe in the Noah-like, blind way. Thus, we carry the fundamentalist genes, whose normally hidden, secret nature is brought into the open by the woodworm focalizer, and whose shaping power may be activated also in the present generation.

In Tóibin's novel, strong beliefs are held by apostles, who – craving for doubt-free cognitive certainty – are ready to bend the truth of the events to make them fit the fixed ideas on which they want to build the new faith. There is a suggestion that the steadfast and uncompromising dedication of Jesus' disciples to the new faith, which they themselves construct, is a slightly mutated form of the cold determination of the sinister figures who silence Jesus. Their self-assured, brutal, hungry and rough faith, based on their own (to a large extent manipulated) version of events, is depicted as the inadvertent effect of the spread of the brutality, certainty and voracity characterising the unidentified and powerful enemies of Jesus. The "contagion" (Tóibin 69) that first spreads among the crowd during the crucifixion is what later affects the apostles and what, as Mary predicts, will help them "thrive and prevail" (Tóibin 103). Because no one, even Mary herself, is left unaffected by the contagion, we are led to surmise that it will continue to infect others down the coming centuries.

In Winterson's rewriting, as Terry R. Wright (2007) puts it, "the most obvious satirical target [...] is fundamentalism," which he glosses as "the literal reading of the Bible, mocked by Northrop Frye, who is referred to several times in the novel" (78). Wright points out that Frye's insight, expressed in *The Great Code* (1983) and repeated by an intrusive narrator in the novel, is that the poetic, concrete and ritualistic language of the biblical myth should not be taken at face value and read literally "as a handbook" (Winterson 66). The result of reading the Bible for moral instruction is fanaticism, a stance which makes one turn a blind eye to the fact that the "Bible writers didn't care that they were bunching together sequences some of which were historical, some preposterous, and some downright manipulative" (Winterson 66). By satirizing the fundamentalist equation of the Bible with a handbook (or, as Beal (2011) puts it, of reading the Bible as "B.I.B.L.E., Basic Instruction Before Leaving Earth [5]), *Boating for Beginners* foregrounds the otherwise imperceptible error committed by those who subscribe to the contemporary image of the Bible as a moral guide. The novel defamiliarizes the idea of the disowned belief by having Noah grotesquely glorify fresh food and reject frozen food. The absurd moral imperative becomes the need to "return to real values" (Winterson 14), give up on "convenience foods and refrigerators" and relish "a simple diet prepared by a simple wife" (Winterson 15).

Admittedly, Winterson's rewriting not only confronts the reader with a proto-Bible-wielding, anti-feminist fanatic, but also forces readers to see the egoistic, tendentious, small-minded motivations lying behind his militant beliefs. Because he created God out of the defrosted dessert, Noah desperately tries to prevent the repetition of this act and elevates his personal trauma to the status of a moral dogma. Moreover, Noah's strong, intransigent (and definitely outlandish) beliefs are shown as part of the cyclicality, or the eternal return, of human history. In the novel, the time of the flood looks almost exactly like the late twentieth century world, complete with Cliff Richards, the Gaza Strip, hamburgers, the film industry and sex change operations. Since the novel suggests that our world is a repetition of the biblical world it constructs, we are made to think that though wiped away during the flood, this world – including its fundamentalist beliefs – will be recreated in the future, which implies that Bible-related fanaticism is an inescapable element of the present. Though we may think that Bible-based intransigence is a thing of the distant past, and that strong beliefs are cherished only by non-Christians, the novels suggest that we are its unwitting inheritors and continuators. Infected with it, historically or genetically determined by it, we are likely to succumb to unreflective Christian beliefs.

2 Defamiliarizing through focalizers

In many contemporary rewritings of the Bible, the scriptural world and its fundamentalist believers are focalized by characters who in the biblical hypotext were either absent, or side-lined, or positioned as objects of perception, i.e., by characters who in terms of Meir Sternberg's (1987) gap-blank distinction (236) are blanks – elements omitted for the lack of interest. In Barnes, the focalizer (i.e., the point from which elements of the narrative world are "focus[ed], orient[ed], interpret[ed]" [Bal 2009:149]) and the narrator is a woodworm, a stowaway on Noah's ark. As Tate comments, the "absurd, defamiliarizing twist of an articulate larva reminds us that canonical versions of history are normally delivered by those in power: the woodworm, a despised species, typifies the position of the outcast, the figure whose viewpoint is rarely heard" (2011: 58). In Winterson's comic rewriting, the variable focalization switches from Noah, to one of his daughters-in-law, to various non-biblical characters. In Alderman, the focalizers are Jesus' mother (she is a fixed focalizer in Tóibin), Judas, Caiaphas, Barabbas; in Roberts, it is Mary Magdalene, one of the "transgressive women [...] marginalized by patriarchal society", a focalizer "well placed" (King 2000:104) to challenge the

traditional vision. In Diski, focalization switches from the external focalization of the nameless Redactor to Rebekah, Isaac, Jacob, Leah, Rachel.

These focalizers subvert the received vision of the biblical because they put the familiar in an unfamiliar light and, taking advantage of their peculiar, insider's perspective, present what was inaccessible in the canonical account. Interestingly, many of those focalizers are (or become) estranged from the rewritten biblical world (including its passionate believers), and through their critical and often disillusioned perception of this world – perception coming *from within* this world – they create a picture of a complex, conflicted, morally messy Bible, and consequently, destabilise the image of the Bible as bland, pious, morally clear-cut. In other words, the focalizers not only give access to the otherwise unseen, but also – through their intradiegetic alienation and their contestation of the world in which they live – complicate their scriptural milieu and de-automatize the commonplace understanding of the morally clear and simplistically pious Bible.

Focalizers in contemporary biblical rewrites often perceive things which controvert the popular image of the Bible as a moral handbook or as the source of individualism, and disagree with its status as cultural and civilizational foundation. For example, Barnes' woodworm sees all sorts of corruptions in the behaviour of Noah and his crew, corruptions redolent of those listed by Davies in his discussion of the "immoral Bible": the alleged higher echelons of humankind engage in illicit sex, gratuitous violence, acts of vindictiveness and self-interest. Their vulgar anthropocentrism and thinly disguised contempt for animals defamiliarize the popular (and slightly infantile) image of Noah as the humane and avuncular protector of the world's fauna. "You've always been led to believe that Noah was sage, righteous and God-fearing," (Barnes 8) observes the woodworm and, having given many proofs to the contrary, finally quips, "He was a monster" (Barnes 12). Through a chiastic relation between the biblical patriarch and animals, a relation in which animals prove more ethical than Noah and Noah more beastly than animals, the woodworm defamiliarizes the image of the Bible as a moral touchstone.

Tóibin's Mary foregrounds the sense of pervasive terror which accompanied her during the time of Jesus' public teaching. Instead of a dignified atmosphere surrounding Jesus in the canonical gospels, instead of the clear New Testament conflict between the Galilean and the Pharisees, her account of biblical events emphasises a deleterious atmosphere of frenzy, hysteria and unspecified disturbance. She conceives of events in terms of animalistic, body-level reactions, stronger than the culturally defined behaviours. She notices "a smell of pure unease" (Tóibin 60) and "the wildness that was in the air" (Tóibin 56), a hunger for blood and pain, "spreading like contagion" (Tóibin 69) among the crowd, "a

dark brutality" (Tóibin 79) of the never-clearly-identified powerful people, and an irresistible reflex to protect herself at Golgotha and to escape. Mary's focalisation defamiliarizes the Bible as a cultural repository and replaces it with the vision of – as she says of herself – "an animal who has been in the wild" (Tóibin 94) and will never be completely domesticated. Also, she defamiliarizes the idea of the uprightness and righteousness of the first Christians, especially when she sees a striking similarity between the disciples and the ferocious people that orchestrated Jesus' death – both are "determined" (Tóibin 79), "deliberate, [...] dedicated" (Tóibin 102) and in control, "brutality boiling in their blood". This juxtaposition defamiliarizes the image of heroic but gentle apostles and questions the commonplace understanding of the Christian mission as benignly motivated.

In Diski's *After These Things*, the Redactor keeps foregrounding patterns which repeat across the generations in the family of Abraham, Jacob and Isaac, and which cancel the uniqueness of individual lives. As the Redactor declares, "Jacob might have noted the repetition – already – of another's story in his own. But which human wants to confront the possibility that they are in a different narrative from the one they thought they were in?" (Diski 83–84). By seeing individuals in terms of their fitness for *his* narrative (and manipulating or cutting out whatever he thinks hampers his story), the Redactor draws attention to the problem of human freedom, which – as some popular understandings of the Bible hold – is one of the fundamental ideas communicated in the biblical text. Focalised by the Redactor, the Bible subordinates the sense of individual control over one's life and of freedom to choose to "the progress and logic of the story" (Diski 106). In Diski's novel, what is usually treated as a badge of individualisation is rewritten as "unorchestrated cacophony" (4) and effectively defamiliarized.

Many of the contemporary biblical rewrites defamiliarize the popular image of "the Good Man Jesus", which – according to Crossley – is "the familiar theme of Jesus being tolerant, inclusive, and an all-round decent person" (31) and "a particularly inspirational figure, typically misunderstood by the church, and even by the New Testament writers" (29). Perceived by the specifically positioned focalizers, Jesus turns out a far more problematic figure than the popular imagination allows him to be (admittedly, defamiliarisation here does not involve the sexualisation of Jesus, which has become something of a familiar trope in novels by D.H. Lawrence, Nikos Kazantzakis, Dan Brown and in Scorsese's film *The Last Temptation of Christ*). The focalizers are often both very close to Jesus (the case of his mother, his twin brother, his disciple and friend), and estranged from him (they differ drastically in their outlook on Jesus' actions or get separated from him). In *The Testament of Mary*, his mother

describes his early teaching as delivered in a "voice all false" and a "tone all stilted [...] like something grinding" (Tóibin 16). At the wedding in Cana, Jesus "appeared unfamiliar, oddly formal and grand, [...] using strange proud terms to describe himself and his task in the world" (Tóibin 46–7). Still deeply affectionate of her son, Mary perceives Jesus as somebody strangely affected, somebody likely to strike poses and put on airs.

In *The Liars' Gospel*, Jesus is seen by Mary as an "angry" (Alderman 24) and impetuous man, capable of hitting his father and disrespecting his mother. He is seen by the High Priest as a "madman, [...] whirling his arm wildly, shouting without cease, [...] white spittle in his beard and his mouth" (Alderman 159), and by Barabbas as an "arresting" yet "mad" prophet (Alderman 220). Even Crace, who rather faithfully employs the model of "the Good Man Jesus", colours his representation of Jesus with elements which skew his popular image. Thus, in *Quarantine*, Jesus is not only a pious, well-meaning and decent (if naïve) peasant boy, but also a rather pitiful man craving to prove his worth, a simpleton tragically misinterpreting religious ideas and implementing the literally understood forty-day fast. He is perceived not as misunderstood or rejected by his environment, but rather as fatuously misunderstanding the world and as undoing himself because of this disastrous misunderstanding. All in all, one can say that while the popular image of the Good Man Jesus defamiliarized the previously dominant, theologically-determined, faith-dependent picture of him as Christ (and stimulated the so-called quest for the historical Jesus [Ehrman 2000; Bond 2012], still paradigmatic in Pullman's rewriting), Jesus in many contemporary rewritings of the Bible is meant to estrange and complicate the now taken for granted picture of the Galilean as a misunderstood and unjustly treated man of undisputable virtue. In those novels, he tends to be focalised either as somewhat callous, or as visibly disturbed, or as tragically immature and simple-minded.

3 Defamiliarizing through foregrounding the textual production of the bible

The focalisation adopted in contemporary biblical rewritings defamiliarizes the popular understandings of "what the Bible really means", i.e., it defamiliarizes what Crossley calls the Liberal, Cultural, Neoliberal and Radical Bibles. In the novels, the focalizers often observe the critical moment of the composition and writing down of scripture – the moment when the overall meaning and the role of the biblical text is established, the moment when somebody moulds the

scripture according to their ideas and glosses over all the complexities, violence and immorality which (as the novels have it) accompanied the events the biblical text describes. Significantly, the textual result of this process of selection and manipulation usually resembles one of the currently popular images of the Bible.

For example, in Pullman, the gospel made up by Christ is similar to the contemporary Cultural Bible. Christ creates it at the cost of suppressing the egalitarian, communitarian, anti-clerical and apocalyptic message of Jesus' teaching, i.e., at the cost of eradicating the Radical Bible. Advised by the ambivalent God-Satan figure (who oversees the whole process of writing scripture) to think of the "greater good" coming from the falsification of Jesus' life, Christ writes a gospel which caters for "the desire for beauty and music and art, [...] the noble passion for knowledge and inquiry, for philosophy [...]" (Pullman 172). Christ's Cultural Bible is not only a repository of aesthetic and philosophical values, but also a touchstone of morality and pedagogically useful ideas. It is shaped by the idea (dear to Christ, yet despised by Jesus [Pullman 122]) that God is just, and rewards virtues and punishes vice, a truth made evident in Jesus' fake resurrection. For Christ, morality requires such legalistic approach, "or else why be virtuous?" (Pullman 122). Because people "are not good for much" (Pullman 225), they need an incentive to pursue a proper life, which Christ's Bible – tacitly invested with the power to reform human morals – will provide. Focalised both by Christ and by Jesus, the Cultural Bible figures as a deeply tainted resource of spiritual, moral and artistic virtues because those promulgated virtues are perceived either as a deplorable but necessary suppression of radicalism (Christ's perspective), or as a deeply deceitful and tragically harmful manipulation (Jesus' perspective).

Boating for Beginners reduces the Bible to its contemporary Neoliberal version, by means of which it brings into a sharp focus the rarely noticed heritage of the Thatcherite understanding of scripture and the taken for granted commodification of the Bible. In the novel, the composition of the Bible is linked with the comically theologised neoliberal belief in self-help, in the economical grounding of social relations, and in the dominance of the individual over the state. Thus, Noah becomes fabulously rich thanks to the publication of Genesis (a book he co-authored with God), an "inspired word of God [...] delivered to Noah in a mighty cloud of leaflets" (Winterson 52). Subsequently, Noah turns into a "lousy fascist bastard" (Winterson 69), a ruthless neoliberal, "totally committed to money as a medium for communication" (Winterson 69), and vehemently critical of Nineveh, a downright socialist place. His ideas are supported and championed by the neoliberally-minded God – "the Omnipotent Stockbroker" (Winterson 30), who teaches that "there is no fixed minimum

wage" (Winterson 30) and who colludes with the marketization of religious belief. Also, Noah's Bible turns into a full-fledged commodity when, supplied with a sequel (the Book of Exodus) and adapted into a film, it starts to function as a "blockbuster" (Winterson 12) and "good box-office material" (Winterson 15).

Winterson's novel defamiliarizes the Bible not only by hyperbolising its contemporary liaisons with market-oriented ideas and collapsing the divine with the neoliberal, but also by offering readers a glimpse into the lowly and unprepossessing origins of the Bible. Through a family-circle focalizer (Desi, one of Noah's daughters-in-law), we learn that God is actually Noah's creation, a scientific experiment-gone-wrong, and that Genesis is meant to cover up the unhallowed pedigree of the deity. The scene of the detranscendentalised creation *à rebours* is a pastiche of the Frankenstein narrative, in which Noah brings to life a piece of defrosted gateau, observes its development into a spiritual being and witnesses its growing autonomy. The preposterousness of this idea defamiliarizes both the fundamentalist claim of the divine origin of the Bible, and the popular understanding of the Bible as a text meant to teach morality and virtue. In *Boating for Beginners*, the Bible is an extravagant and manipulative book, with "a magnificent lack of concern for [...] common sense" (Winterson 69), and full of "outrageous things" (Winterson 66). Its aim is not to inculcate morality but to redeem and add lustre to the mundane character of human life, which is achieved by the morally doubtful suppression of the nauseating truth of God's origin, and its replacement with the grandiose story of humans as the apex of divine creation.

Similar morally dubious manipulations accompanying the composition of the Bible are perceived by Jesus' mother in Tóibin's *The Testament of Mary*. In Ephesus, where she stays having fled from the crucifixion scene, she is regularly visited by followers of Jesus, who start writing down the gospel. Mary is critical of their "earnest need for foolish anecdotes or sharp simple patterns" (Tóibin 4), and of their "efforts to make simple sense of things which are not simple" (Tóibin 99). One of the followers wants stories that will comply with the meaning and aims he established, and that will "stretch to whatever limits he has ordained" (Tóibin 5). Her criticism, however, turns into revulsion and abhorrence when she understands the "enormity of their ambition" (Tóibin 101) which makes them not only bend the facts (for example, the fact the she escaped from Golgotha) and fit them into their patterns, but also think in ominously totalising ways. When they speak of changing the whole world with their book, of eternal life brought to "everyone in the world" (Tóibin 100), of the necessary and salutary suffering *meant* by God and happening to redeem mankind, she sees "something dark appearing in their faces" (Tóibin 100), something that feeds off their unnamed, but "vast and insatiable needs" (Tóibin 40). If for many people

the Bible is a venerable instrument used to spread both Christianity and Western culture/values in various parts of the world, this unidentified darkness and disturbing hunger, perceived by Mary in the disciples who write and propagate their gospel, defamiliarizes such a benign image of the Christian Bible.

In the world seen by Mary as infected with a nameless menace, poisoned with cruelty and fear (which edge their way into her "as something poisonous will crawl along the ground" [Tóibin 61]), no one and nothing is untainted. Faced with "something ferocious and exact, something dark and evil beyond anyone's comprehension" (Tóibin 63), presumably unleashed by Jesus' teaching and miracles, not only Mary or the crowds but also the disciples and their gospel are blighted with it. Not altogether different from the Hebrew scripture, in which "something dark and disturbed [...] lurked between the words of the book as though in waiting like hunters, or trappers" (Tóibin 18), the Christian scripture will partake of the darkness of its predecessor text and of its creators. Read in the context of the contagious brutality that dominates the novel, Mary's prediction that the disciples will thrive and prevail sounds like a premonition of religious violence and "scriptural imperialism" (Sugirtharajah 2001: 45), where the Bible is a vehicle for the dissemination of imperialist values and an instrument in establishing and maintaining the cultural and political dominance of Britain. In its insistence on the permeating but nameless threat surrounding the composition of the Bible, *The Testament of Mary* defamiliarizes the image of the Bible as a liberal text opposing tyranny, terror and oppression.

4 Defamiliarizing through images of fragmentation and contamination

By exposing the manipulations lying behind the creation of the largely quiescent Bible, contemporary rewritings defamiliarize the currently popular image of the Bible – that of a whitewashed text which inculcates morality, conserves social order and teaches love and tolerance. Interestingly, this effect of defamiliarization is often intensified by the use of imagery related to de- and re-composition, contamination or the open body, i.e., images reminiscent of those employed in "prophetic scatology". Those images can be read as metaphors of fragility, permeability, impurity and flexibility, and also – once placed in the context of the creation of the biblical text – as epitomes (and remainders) of certain features of the Bible which are rarely part of the popular understanding, namely its heterogeneity, its inclusion of morally offensive materials, its self-contradictions. By foregrounding tropes of de- and reintegration, of contagion and

porous borders, contemporary biblical rewrites defamiliarize the image of the closed, homogeneous, fixed and morally aseptic Bible.

Barnes's "Stowaway" – a text which challenges and corrects the biblical account of the flood – opens with a matter-of-fact observation about the stench and refuse produced by a shipful of representatives of the whole animal kingdom. As in other contemporary rewritings of the biblical flood story, in Barnes the preoccupation with dung has a "demythologizing" effect (Stahlberg 2009:24). Since "there was no-one to muck out" (Barnes 3), the ark sailed filled not only with its human and beastly load, but also with a growing mass of filth and pollution. The idea that the ark holds both the acceptable and the objectionable cargo is repeated in the motif of the stowaway. Though some species were "Not Wanted On the Voyage" (Barnes 7), and "stowaways, when detected, were immediately put to death," (Barnes 9) strict rules and punishments "were never enough to deter the desperate" (Barnes 9). One such determined stowaway is the focalizer-narrator – a woodworm, who survives hidden in the very building material of the ark and whose presence theoretically poses a lethal danger to the survival of the ship itself. In a text intent on making the reader aware of various *dirty* secrets allegedly suppressed by the Bible – secrets that would mar its moral and cultural message (e.g., that there was a brothel ship in Noah's eight-vessel flotilla, and that humans had sex with animals), the accumulation of images showing the persistence and inevitability of undesirable elements on the biblical ark additionally draws attention to the unsterile character of the Bible. Thus, in the logic of Barnes's text, an image of ineffective cleaning of the biggest animals – of "monsters being manicured in a sewer" (Barnes 3) – becomes a striking metaphor of the inexorable moral or ideological impurity of the biblical text. Significantly, part of the defamiliarizing effect of the metaphors of the unhygienic and the unlawful is related to the observation that the unwanted does not harm its (textual) environment: the woodworm does not damage the ship's wood, and the monsters act as the much needed stabilising "ballast" (Barnes 3) in the ark. Analogously and contrary to what some people think of the Bible, it contains elements which, though seen by many readers as unacceptable, actually function as part of its self-regulating system. As Hugh Pyper (2012) contends in his essay "The Offensiveness of Scripture", although the Bible contains a fair amount of contaminating material, "the tensions of the offensive are negotiated in the Bible itself" (21).

Similar images that defamiliarize the image of the aseptic Bible also appear in other biblical rewritings. In Winterson's novel, there is not only the motif of goo-turned-god, but also other shocking images of the decomposition of the body and the violation of its borders. For example, there is an image of false teeth swapping, the idea of recycling cut-off organs from the sex-change clinic

as food, or the image of a cook's arm accidentally minced into "six neat quarter-pounders" (Winterson 86) in the Hallelujah Hamburger machine. Since all of these over-the-top images are related to Noah's vast religious project and illustrate "just a different end of the business" (Winterson 33) initiated by the publication of Genesis, they can be read as disclosing an important – if unacknowledged – facet of the whole Bible-based enterprise. In their deliberate assault on the idea of homogeneity, integrity, purity and propriety, the images run counter the dominant understanding of the Bible as a venerable, closed text with clearly defined and inviolable borders. The disorganised, changeable and fragmented bodies in Winterson's rewriting function as defamiliarizing metaphors of the morally untidy and ideologically disunified body of biblical writing.

Michèle Roberts, in turn, associates the composition of the gospel with images of sex and erotic union. In *The Wild Girl*, we see the (probably) divine and sexually pure body of Jesus come into the most intimate contact with the human, sexually experienced (even exploited) body of Mary Magdalene, who will later write down her own version of the gospel. As the pure and impure irrupt into each other, facilitating the spiritual growth of both, Mary's sexual encounter with Jesus de-automatises both the common image of the puritan stance of the Bible on sexual love, and the popular image of the biblical text as a sealed off, dignified and no longer culturally fertile text. The novel entrusts the writing of the alternative gospel to the character whose open (sexual, maternal) and unruly body stands in stark contrast with the closed, self-denying and infertile bodies of male disciples. Though it is their gospel that eventually succeeds, Roberts shows us its alternative, and as she does so, she defamiliarizes our facile identification of the Bible with the static, ascetic, non-secreting bodies of male writers, like Peter in her novel.

In *Quarantine*, Crace defamiliarizes the standard trope of Jesus' body as the incarnated Logos, and reverses the well-known formula according to which in Jesus "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14). In Crace's rewriting of the wilderness episode, Jesus takes biblical texts (its commandments and rules of fasting) literally and lives it, only to find himself reduced to their lifeless form: when he dies, he becomes "a dry, discarded page of scripture" (Crace 193). The collapse of the word (biblical text) and the painful and realistically described physical disintegration and slow death, produces a number of interlocked effects. The affinity between the decaying body and scripture is not only a criticism of obsessive and naïve religiosity, which cannot but literalize tropes, but also a remainder of both the transformative power of the Bible and of its brittleness and susceptibility to corruption, quite forgotten in the times when it is treated as a stabilised and unchanging cultural heritage, or as "the most revered book never read" (Beal 2011:33). Moreover, when the novel shows the

transformed Jesus, "weightless and invincible" (Crace 205), walking through the wilderness after his death, and his Satan-like tempter Musa resolving to propagate a story about him, it expands on the motif of the body-text transformation and shows the flexibility, mutability and adaptability of the biblical word. From the "discarded page of scripture," through a "glowing" (Crace 206) and mobile presence, to a marketable text created by Musa the merchant, Crace's Jesus functions as the defamiliarizing figure of the Bible's destructive and creative force, of its changeability and manipulability.

The problem of the double-edged, redemptive and/or destructive character of the Bible is sometimes approached via the metaphor of poison. Some contemporary rewritings of the Bible, like the already discussed novels by Tóibin or Alderman, link the Bible with malignant substances which infiltrate bodies, penetrate their darkest recesses, and undo their integrity and health. While in Tóibin such Bible-related poison is associated with raw violence and insatiable desire for power, in Alderman it is linked with relativity, moral chaos and waste. In *The Liars' Gospel*, the uncertain, *pharmakon*-like status of the potentially toxic Bible is best visible in the episode of Caiaphas and his wife. The High Priest suspects his learned and intelligent wife of adultery and, relying on the ordeal of bitter water described in Numbers 5:12, makes her drink water in which he rinsed a parchment with God's name and the biblical curse formula written on it. The water contains a "curse which cannot harm unless harm has already been done" (Alderman 184), i.e., a poison which will kill the woman if she has already contaminated herself with marital infidelity. Thus, the Bible may be lethal, but, interestingly, it may also become an antidote to its own poisonous effects because "if a woman has studied Torah in great detail, [...] her knowledge is a shield" (Alderman 191), protecting her against the toxicity of the biblical curse.

The idea that the Bible is simultaneously deadly and salutary is re-troped in other parts of the novel in the form of overdetermined images which disturb binary oppositions. In the part focusing on Bar-Avo (Barabbas), the rightful zeal for the freedom of one's country and religion, epitomised in the phrase "God alone as leader and master" (Alderman 213), easily slips into the ruthless slaughter of anyone (Jewish or Roman) who has different ideas about the relationships between Jerusalem and the Empire. The redemptive proves simultaneously deadly as the revolt brings the annihilation of Jerusalem. In the Judas' part, there is a scene modelled on Matthew 26:7, in which a whole jar of very expensive perfume is poured over Jesus' head. The smell was "beautiful, [...] but revolting, because it was too strong and because it had destroyed everything else" (Alderman 110). The "*stink* of that perfume" (Alderman 112, my emphasis) is unbearable to Judas, who sees it as "too much goodness gone to waste" (Alderman 110), and welcome to Jesus, who thinks the excess his due. Both good

(beautiful) and bad (sickening), the perfume eludes clear moral judgement. In the part focalised by Miriam, in turn, poison – though removed in one form – returns in another, making the whole protective effort useless. In her old age, Miriam remembers how she once saved the infant Jesus from a scorpion's poison, and doubts if there was any point in the self-sacrifice (she nearly died herself) because Jesus died a terrible death anyway. "What was the point of any of it, seeing what has happened," she asks (Alderman 19). There is something arbitrary and indeterminate about poison: it does not always kill the poisoned person (Miriam), while those untouched by it (Jesus) are nevertheless haunted by its malignancy.

5 Conclusion

As figures hinging on both/and logic, figures marking the point where right and wrong meet, figures of indecisiveness, the God-inspired murders, the stinking perfume and the whimsical poison defamiliarize the certainty of the either/or logic which to a large extent determines the popular image of the Bible today. The ambiguity of those metaphors stands in contrast with both the tendency to subordinate the Bible to the convenient or useful elements (supporting the image of the Cultural, Liberal or Radical Bible) and with the tendency to reject it wholesale as backward and oppressive. Seen through the *pharmakon* metaphors, the Bible proves neither whitewashed/anodyne, nor malignant/dangerous. The metaphors throw in doubt the act of seeing the Bible from preconceived and fixed positions. As Sherwood contends, because the standard response to the Bible today is determined by pre-given identities (Christian, Jew, atheist), and follows from the mutually exclusive positions of religious acceptance *or* respectful distance, the biblical text is rarely seen as a site where ideas or identities are "actively wrested" (94) from a tangle of contradictory or ambivalent images. The Bible has been "*transformed into that which draws some and not others, rather than that which simultaneously draws and repels*" (Sherwood 94, original emphasis). The equivocal metaphors of poison-*cum*-remedy de-automatise the understanding of the Bible as simply a potential danger or as merely a potential good, indicating that the Bible makes peril and peace its steady bedfellows.

The strategies of defamiliarization which operate in contemporary rewritings of the Bible are designed to keep the biblical text away from two extreme positions. The more obvious position – and the one easier to target – is the fundamentalist, unreflective and literal approach to the Bible, which takes

everything the Bible says at face value and which commits itself totally even to its most preposterous ideas. The other position is – as phrased by Crossley with the use of the Žižekean metaphor – a "decaffeinated" stance, which culturalises and domesticates the Bible by removing its potentially malignant properties and by fitting it within the system of generally accepted and commonly venerated secular values. Like Žižek's decaffeinated belief, "which does not hurt anyone and does not fully commit even ourselves" (2004), decaf Bible is a harmless text, evoking tolerance and indulgence, rather than passion or outrage. The novels discussed here on the one hand uncover the dark side of the direct, fundamentalist Bible-based belief and, on the other hand, reintroduce into their rewritten Bible the threatening or shocking element which was removed from the contemporary image of the biblical. As they simultaneously readmit the potential threat into what seems an anodyne and harmless text, *and* acknowledge the dangerous effects the biblical text may have on the audience, the biblical rewritings defamiliarize both of the simplified understandings of the Bible, indicating that one simplification is the obverse of the other. Though the whitewashed, domesticated Bible eliminates the menacing elements which the fundamentalist approach fans out, both fall short of the more complex attitude adopted by the novels rewriting the Bible, the attitude best epitomised in the *pharmakon*-like imagery. The contemporary biblical rewritings foreground the text's forgotten intricacy, playing at the interstices between good and bad, salutary and deadly, and allowing the otherwise impervious divisions established in the common discourse to decompose and turn porous. Thus, whatever Clines may think about the current status of the Bible in the English-language culture, we can see that when defamiliarized, the Bible in contemporary fictional rewritings tries to say things the culture does not want to hear.

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