Scriptural Myths in Two Contemporary British Novels

Abstract

The present article focuses on the ways the biblical myth of the Promised Land and the scriptural myth of the divinely inspired Holy Writ figure in two contemporary British novels: Jim Crace’s The Pesthouse (2007) and Will Self’s The Book of Dave (2006). Drawing on Gianni Vattimo’s concept of debolezza, the author of the article argues that both Crace and Self create “weak” versions of those myths, characterised both by a lucid grasp of the disintegration of the traditional forms of the myths, and by the resigned but charitable preservation of its bits. Shaped by the multi-faceted transformations the biblical myths have been undergoing, weak biblical/scriptural myths function as textual sites where the limits and potential of contemporary biblical/scriptural myths is probed.

Keywords

The Bible, contemporary British novel, weakness, myth, dystopia, Jim Crace, Will Self.

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Introduction

In 1976 Northrop Frye argued that the social function of biblical narratives was undergoing an important change. Having lost the status of myth, and no longer aiming at “the consent of silence,” based on “a certain quality of importance or authority for the community” (Frye, Secular 16), the Bible – now seen as man-made fiction – entertains or enthralls, rather than commands. This transformation, however, does not mean biblical myths have disappeared. As Frye contends, “genuine social mythology [...] is [...] to be transcended, but transcendence here does not mean repudiating or getting rid of it [...]. It means rather an individual recreation of the mythology, a transformation of it from accepted social values into axioms of one’s own activity” (Secular 170). Thus, recreated and incorporated into the “secular scripture” (man’s own creation), biblical myths persist in our culture, albeit in altered and displaced forms. Though the degree of its importance and the range of its authority are smaller, the biblical/scriptural myth can still be described as – to evoke one of the least rigid definitions of myth – “a story
about *something* significant,” (where *something* foregrounds a certain vagueness or openness), a story which “accomplishes *something* significant for adherents” (Segal 7-8, my emphases).

Admittedly, Frye is not the only scholar to advocate the persistence-*cum-*transformation model describing the status of the biblical myth in the West. In much the same vein (though from a different perspective, in a different vocabulary and with an earlier historical period in mind), Jonathan Sheehan, for one, argues that while in the eighteenth century the Bible finally lost its theological authority as a divinely inspired, unified and unifying text, it started to gain importance elsewhere: it became a *culturally* indispensable text. The Bible’s significance has been recreated, redefined and relocated; “its authority had no essential centre, but instead coalesced around four fundamental nuclei. Philology, pedagogy, poetry and history: each offered its own answer to the question of biblical authority” (Sheehan 91). To return to Segal’s phrase, biblical text still accomplished “something significant” for Western communities: it acted as singular philological document, offered moral lessons, provided the model for unique poetic quality and national feelings, hosted an archive of human customs. Although the Bible as the source of the sacred, revealed order lost its significance (and its mythical status in that respect), its mythical potential has not been exhausted. Made independent of theology, the Bible could become “one of the sturdiest pillars of Western culture” (Sheehan ix), a truly *culture*-supporting myth.

Frye’s “secular scripture” and Sheehan’s “cultural Bible” bring into focus three interesting problems concerning biblical myths. First, they bear witness to the admirable resilience and malleability of the Bible-based myth, measured on the one hand by the myth’s longevity, and on the other hand, by the subversiveness of some of its transformations, as well as by the gap separating the once theologically-grounded myth from today’s dispersed cultural myths. Second, Frye’s and Sheehan’s arguments seem to indicate that “[m]an cannot live without myth, and – in the West at least – he cannot live with it” (Schneidau, *Sacred* 28). The biblical myth is both necessary and superfluous, desired and loathed. The importance of the Bible is on the one hand seriously undermined – we observe the “shrinking of grandeur” (Sherwood 207) of the biblical text, which is today “as puzzled and alienated by us as we are by it” (Sherwood 205). On the other hand, however, that importance is recreated insofar as the Bible proves the very model of alienation, the source of “mythoclastic” (Schneidau, “Biblical” 148) mechanism. As Herbert Schneidau wrote in 1976, what the Bible singularly accomplishes for the Western culture is that it offers a model of incessant self-critique, and instils the West with the desire to dissociate itself from myth, to erode all comfortable assumptions likely to turn into stable mental patterns. According to Schneidau “the Bible can be used as a culture-supporting myth, but whenever it is, the insidious [mythoclastic] effect […] makes the support problematic at best” (*Sacred* 11). Thus, in a twist of the transcending motion, the Bible – no longer “a lofty cultural icon” (Sherwood 200) – can trade its changed status as a new badge of cultural importance. Indeed, “myth cannot be kept out; driven away, it returns from every side” (Schneidau, *Sacred* 32).

The third issue Frye and Sheehan help to bring into view is the problem of diminishing returns which seem to regulate the transformations of biblical myth, but
which do not bring about its ultimate disintegration. For Frye, the myths of the Bible are displaced from their “central mythical area,” their “vast mythological universe” (Secular 7, 15), to the less consolidated world of “nomadic” (Secular 9) narratives, where they interact at random with various other stories. Absorbed into secular mythology, biblical tales return to the state of (relative) stability, but their “mythological imperialism” (Frye, Secular 13), displayed up to the Middle Ages, is lost. Put another way, the biblical myth returns as a choice not the chooser, as an element of culture, not its elemental constitution. As Frye observes, “[t]he normal human reaction to a great cultural achievement like the Bible is to do with it what the Philistines did to Samson: reduce it to impotence, then lock it in a mill to grind our aggressions and prejudices” (Great 233). The centripetal pull biblical myths retain and exert in the Renaissance mill of secular-sacred “correlative circulation” (Shuger 3), the pull which provides emergent secular disciplines with the otherwise unavailable means for negotiating their new speculations, now belongs to biblical myths transformed into “disintegrating myths,” or “end myths,” which no longer operate as coherence-providers, but expose the failure of the “dominant myth.” “The end myth does not validate traditional symbols but discloses their inadequacy to provide moral coherence, stable boundaries between right and wrong, strategies for escaping dread” (Shuger 90). Concerned with the crumbling of cultural values, it articulates rather than resolves paradoxes, re-lives rather than relieves anxieties. It is a wobbly myth, whose overdetermined meaning invites conflicting readings, but whose disintegration – quite symptomatically – starts to function as the basis of the myth’s sustained currency.

Later on that currency comes to depend on the idea of culture, deemed “the new rock atop which legitimacy of the Bible was built” (Sheehan xiv). Predictably, the authority of the seemingly rock-stable biblical myth is soon compromised. Today, when we notice how incessantly the claim about the Bible’s cultural centrality is repeated, we may wonder if such emphasis should not be read as a symptom of anxiety about the truthfulness of this claim rather than the sign of the claim’s self-evidence. If biblical stories do energise contemporary life, they do it in far less obvious way than ever before. Seen from the wider perspective of secularization,1 the Bible is legitimised by contemporary culture largely because culture “plays out its concerns and disaffections within the forum of the biblical text” (Sherwood 203, original emphasis). Biblical myth seems to mediate the process of coming to terms with the world in which the Bible “lives on by an increasingly slim metonymic margin” (Sherwood 198). The fact that the Bible rather than anything else is chosen for the narrative interrogation of biblical myth, shows that biblical stories continue to be seen as viable explorers of some of our problems. To borrow from Laurence Coupe’s terminology, biblical narratives may no longer “explain” the world, but they do help to “explore” (87-8) the world which is repelled and attracted by biblical-mythic explanations. Biblical myths are interrogated and found wanting, but the instrument chosen for probing its shortcomings is the Bible.

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1 The changing status of the Bible is deeply intertwined with the problem of secularization. Not to complicate my argument, I have decided, however, to leave that relationship in the background, hoping that an attentive reader will recognise its presence, e.g., in the Vattimian elements of my paper. For similarly inspiring problematisations of secularization, see e.g., Pecora or Gauchet.
itself. Because they explore the decay of biblical myths, scriptural narratives today resemble the end myth described by Shuger. Unlike the end myth, however, they do not merely offer their internal divisions for the articulation of cultural border-problems and diffusions, but function as frameworks within which culture’s disappointment with and detachment from the biblical myth itself is expressed.

The emergence of such paradoxical frameworks raises the question of the contemporary status of biblical myth. Apparently, biblical myth has metamorphosed into “myth,” the quotation indicating the alienation of the term from its usual meaning, and signalling the suspension – but not cancellation – of the established sense. Such biblical “myths” seem, on the one hand, to embody the antinomy occurring, as Leszek Kołakowski describes, between the participation in myth and its interpretation, and on the other hand, to mark “the embarrassing illness” (104) constituted in contemporary culture by the clash between the need for myth and the defence against the threat of myth. “Myth” is the site where the process of going through this “embarrassing illness” can be observed, where the “despotism” (Kołakowski 104) of myth and its violence are suspended thanks to the permanent possibility of myth accomplishing something important for us. Moreover, while for psychological reasons, we normally do not tolerate simultaneous awareness of myth’s mechanisms and adherence to myth, biblical “myth” acts out this conflict, abandoning the futile search for the points from which the sides of conflict could be judged.

Thus, the status of “myth” allows for abrasive but not destructive relationship between the tendency to adhere to and reject myth. In their “attachments to, in detachment from, the biblical text” (Sherwood 201), those biblical “myths” display a quality of Vattimian debolezza – a certain weakness, an incurable frailty, which neither allows them to return to the position of strength nor leads to their final demise. Biblical “myth” practises a weak overcoming (Verwindung) described by Gianni Vattimo, insofar as it neither surpasses nor accepts biblical myth in its previous forms. The weak biblical “myth” is characterised both by a lucid grasp of the disintegration of myth, and by the resigned preservation of its bits. Biblical “myth” retains traces of myth, treating them “as the possibility for a change, the chance that it might twist in a direction that is not foreseen in its own nature” (Vattimo 12-13). Always convalescing from the potential violence of dominant myth, but lacking the poignancy of the disintegrating myth, the weak biblical “myth” seems to make a lot of sense today. Adapting Frye’s shaven-Samson metaphor to our purposes, we can say that the biblical “myth,” unlikely to grow its power-giving hair back but resigned to that loss, displays “the iron constitution of the chronic invalid. It enjoys poor health” (Schneidau, Sacred 43).

In the rest of this paper, I will attend to the ways end myth and weak “myth” are enacted in two contemporary British novels: in Jim Crace’s The Pesthouse (2007) and Will Self’s The Book of Dave (2006). Both novels build a dystopia within which various versions of biblical (or in wider sense, scriptural) myths/“myths” are operating. Since these dystopian worlds, like all utopias and dystopias, are “histories of the present” (Grondin 1), the novels can be read as articulations of the complex character of contemporary scriptural myths/“myths,” and as textual sites where the limits and potential of scriptural “myth” is probed. If utopia, as Paul Ricoeur maintains, is the
reinvigorating element of myth (and something that undoes the stagnation induced by myth’s other (ideological) element), dystopia represents that which went wrong within that flexibility-boosting impulse in myth. Thus, Crace’s and Self’s dystopias offer a glimpse not so much onto the ossification of biblical/scriptural myths, but onto their change-gone-wrong character, i.e., their disintegration. But also, since dystopia indicates a possibility of a solution, a glimmer of hope, we should not be surprised to find in the distopic worlds constructed by Self and Crace an alternative project for biblical/scriptural myth. As some inhabitants of the dystopic worlds try to carve up a space for themselves, they not only expose the disintegrating myths abiding in their worlds, but also work out their own Bible-related “myths,” which – weak as they are – endow their lives with meaning and offer hope.

Jim Crace’s The Pesthouse

Taking place in a hardly recognisable America of unspecified future, The Pesthouse features two main characters, Margaret and Franklin, who – like hundreds of other Americans – travel through the uniformly rural territories of the once heavily industrialised country in order to reach the fabled east coast and catch the ships that would take them to the Europe-based Promised Land, the place of safety, prosperity and “opportunity” (Crace 52, original emphasis). More of a “nightmare” (199) than the land of abundance, America in Crace’s novel is afflicted with poverty, murder, rape, slavery, theft and widespread hostility. Although America – itself the Promised Land of Puritan mythopoeia, a re-imagined biblical Canaan – is no longer the blessed divine gift, the biblical myth survives, if only in a resorted or diluted form. The myth has its central figure – Abraham, featured on an old coin Margaret treasures as a talisman. Interestingly, he is a conflation of (1) the biblical patriarch (the original addressee of the promise), (2) Abraham Lincoln (the author of the famous Second Presidential Address) and (3) a hero who “would come back to help America one day with his enormous promises” (Crace 27). Detached from any distinct paradigm but preserving their traces, Crace’s Abraham is an epitome of subserviveness and ambivalence of contemporary biblical myths. Overdetermined by its divergent hypotexts, “the tiny [...] floating man [...] , the floating man who [...] was Abraham” (Crace 27, my emphases) is both a deliverer America is waiting for, and somebody to be delivered. A floating figure, Abraham brings together opposites and opens up the space where myth cannot help disintegrating.

Relocated to Europe – the one-time departure-point for people driven by the myth, the Promised Land ironises the idea of restoration and return. To reach the Promised Land, American travellers unwittingly retrace the steps of the past travellers and repeat their journey backwards, rewinding it, as it were, in space. Yet, the future does not lie in the past because what was lost on the way cannot be found and enjoyed in its untainted, unmodified shape. Nothing – including the myth of the Promised Land – is untouched by time. If one wants to find the Promised Land, one has to brace oneself for a transformed promise. Like Margaret and Franklin, who had to part with many people during the journey, and who lost, left or had to give away various objects,
one has to come to terms with the loss of some of one’s past. But like Margaret and Franklin, one will come across new elements, which – similarly to Baby Belle, spying glass, and a horse – will provide a different perspective on both the past and the future. On the way to the east coast, the myth of the Promised Land loses its apparently definitive elements and is remade with the help of some new ones.

Displaying remarkable malleability and resilience, Crace’s myth of the Promised Land proves to be able to energise people who populate the world of his novel. The energy, however, is that of a “fever, burning them up, driving them on” (Crace 83), a fever which simultaneously emboldens and incapacitates them, a disease shared in its disintegrating power. Admittedly, to write about the myth of the Promised Land in terms of an illness, is to identify something unhealthy about it, to spot some degeneration in its mechanisms. The illness, diagnosed by Crace as being myth-related and myth-spread, shows in violence towards the other, in greed and in craving for power. It has incubated in the biblical myth, legitimising the violent conquest of Canaan; its germs have been reinvigorated in the American myth of the Wild West, which drove the settlers to conquer the land they believed to be theirs. *The Pesthouse* interrogates both the biblical myth and its later variant by pointing out to their less dignified but unavoidable aspects. To reach the Promised Land, the people who believe the promise, be they Israelis or Americans, have to be violent, suspicious, self-centred, even ruthless.

The nightmarish quality of America is not merely aggravated but produced by the myth of the Promised Land. Ferrytown people prosper, first, because they charge a lot for a passage across a dangerous river on the way to the Promised Land, and second, because they never allow the wounded and the disillusioned who return from the east to cross their place in the opposite, non-mythical direction, preventing in that way the spread of discouraging, profit-wrecking stories. Their greed energises the myth, which, in turn, brings more suffering. Also, the myth forces people to join those already energised by the myth. Acton Bose, for example, leaves his depopulated village when there is hardly anybody left to buy the fish he caught. Preferring the “Deliverance” (Crace 243) promised by the myth to the life in his “ill fated” (Crace 121), myth-shaped village, he starts his unfortunate journey east.

It can be said that Crace’s novel discloses the myth of the Promised Land to be functioning as a vicious circle rather than a breakthrough narrative. Instead of gesturing towards the possibility of release, the myth turns out to perpetrate fears, feed inter-human tensions, and, most ironically, disintegrate families. In a climactic moment in the novel, when the pilgrims finally reach the anchorage and try to get aboard the ships heading for the Promised Land, they learn that only men – strong ones or those with a skill, or young and marriageable girls, or the rich, are eligible for the ocean passage. “The salt air seemed to have robbed the world of value” (Crace 265), not only because on the coast the would-be emigrants sell their horses for a sack of flour or their furniture for a red hat, but also because the pursuit of the myth reduces the value of people and relationships. Mothers and wives – marked with a red cross on their sleeves, a sign ominously reminiscent of the WWII ghetto badges – are deemed worthless. Rejected by the shipmen, abandoned by their families, they epitomise the failure of the myth of the Promised Land to relieve suffering.
Apart from offering insight into the disintegrating effects of the (biblical) myth, Crace’s novel also delineates an alternative to the end-myth form of the Promised Land story. This alternative is the “myth” worked out by Margaret and Franklin and based on the belief that the ocean is “an obstacle and not the route to liberty” (Crace 249), that “[t]here had to be another dream” (Crace 269), another Promised Land where they could find their own happiness. The new “myth” does not look for the recuperation of the past, yet neither does it deny its power. The “myth’s” complex negotiations with the past can be traced in the role metal – the icon of the past – plays in the life of Margaret and Franklin. Unlike the religious community of Helpless Gentlemen, who “set their minds and bodies against the country’s ferrous history” (Crace 193), and unlike rustlers who actualise the history by putting metal weapon to its deadly work, Margaret and Franklin recognise both metal’s potential and its limitations. While the Gentlemen (also called the Finger Baptists) do not tolerate metal calling it the “Devil’s work” (Crace 192) and do not use their hands considering them the instrument of the Devil’s work, and while rustlers fetishise metal and thrive on its lethal power, Margaret neither totally trusts nor completely distrusts metal. She is sceptical of the enormous metal “hulks and carcasses” (Crace 261) of old-style ships she sees on the coast, considering them inhuman debris of the past with no floating, future-exploring potential. She finds comfort, however, in her metal talismans – a necklace and coins, the two relics of the past lost at the beginning of the novel and retrieved at the end. Their Abraham-centred, opaque yet appealing engravings keep the past floating, i.e., open to future-building explorations. Interestingly, this capacity is released by gentle touch, so different from rustler’s fierce grip on their weapons or the complete flabbiness of Baptists’ hands. “Fingered,” “rubbed,” “stroked” (Crace 27), the talismans are patiently and lovingly turned and turned again, making those bits of the past quicken imagination and fan the desire for more abundant life. Running one’s fingers over something/somebody does not yield any new knowledge, but revives the tarnished or the ailing. It is thanks to Franklin’s dedicated fingering of Margaret’s feet that she fights off her fever and starts convalescing. Similarly, it is through imaginative fingering of the past – through a weak overcoming of the unhealthy “fever” consuming the Bible-based myth – that the myth of the Promised Land loses its violent edge, and, entering the state of debolezza or recovery, changes into a “myth.”

When Franklin decides against boarding one of the ships going towards the Promised Land, he and Margaret start their journey back to where they began. Traversing America in the old, westward direction and following in the footsteps of ancient American adherents of the myth of the Promised Land, they show that their “myth” “was not the future but the past” (Crace 249), the past, however, accessible only through the logic of re-turning. Margaret and Franklin re-turn the myth to its previous form, simultaneously re-turning – fingering, re-thinking, renegotiating, transforming – it, giving a new twist to the always already flexible biblical myth and its later variants. Thus, they understand that the condition on which you can hope to reach their Promised Land is neither wealth, nor strength (both required at the east coast), but weakness. The “myth” of the Promised Land unfolds when Margaret shaves Franklin’s whole body clean, marking him with the traditional sign of flux, a life-
threatening illness. This deliberate display of post-illness frailty, which makes Franklin “undisguised” and shockingly [...] vulnerable” (Crace 283), differs from Baptists’ pitiful helplessness, in that the former does not yield easily to violence but effectively keeps it at a distance. The moment the would-be attackers register Franklin’s shaven head and chin, they retreat immediately. Built on such power-confusing weakness, the “myth” of the Promised Land does not encourage fantasies about the elimination of violence any more than it believes brutality can be a ticket to the Promised Land. Exposing his own weakness, the pilgrim to the Promised Land avoids defeat. The “myth” he is driven by is not the consuming fever but its echo, re-turning the myth’s mechanisms in a distorted, reduced shape.

They return to the Pesthouse, the place on a hill above Ferrytown, where the diseased are left either to die or to recuperate. Yet, they do not treat the hut as the obvious end of their journey – the Promised Land achieved, but treat this “safest acre in America, [as] a place of remedy and recovery where, surely, they could at least spend the night or spend the month or spend eternity” (Crace 306). Their “myth” does not thrive on finality, but on the constant tension between the sense of the realised promise and the horizon open for the “myth’s” future re-turns. Like the ancient spyglass Margaret and Franklin have found, the “myth” enables them to “view the distance sharply,” and simultaneously, to understand that any device which makes you believe that distant things you are looking are close at hand only “fools your thinking” (Crace 240). The Promised Land might be the little house standing on the hill; Margaret, however, seems to suggest otherwise as she calls out standing in front of the Pesthouse, “So this is it?” [...] An exclamation and a question” (Crace 306).

Will Self’s The Book of Dave.
A Revelation of the Recent Past and the Distant Future

In Will Self’s novel, there are two interrelated worlds and temporalities: the twentieth-century London, and the sixth-century AD (After Dave) post-catastrophic England, renamed as Ingerland. Since the former has been wiped away by a cataclysm (most probably, a flood), the latter – a new-calendar-based civilisation of the far-off future – stays largely unaware of the earlier, now extinct, populace. Among the few things the post-deluvian society inherits from the twentieth century is a book – the Book of Dave – believed to possess sacred, scriptural significance. As we gather from the second line of narration, the book was written by Dave Rudman, a late-twentieth century mentally disturbed cabbie. Rudman has been unhappily married to a woman who makes him believe she is pregnant by him, but who later decides to abandon Dave and live with her son’s real father. Dave suffers mental collapse during which he writes his book modelled on scriptures his friends or family venerate (the Bible, the Qur’an, the Book of Mormons). Addressed to his son, the book is meant to explain the world, provide an authoritarian reference point for all aspects of existence, and offer guidance to the boy. In its final form, the book proves “a bundle of proscriptions and injunctions that seem to be derived from the working life of London cabbies,”
mixed with “a cock-eyed grasp on a mélange of fundamentalism,” and “Rudman’s own vindictive misogyny” (Self 281). The framework for the book’s “doctrines and covenants” is the Knowledge (London cabbing lore) with its “runs and points” defining all driving routes in London. This basic structure is fleshed out with “a rich brocade of parable, chiasmus and homily,” in which Dave gives vent to his racism, expounds on the necessity of strict division of post-divorce parental access to their children, and requires “A COMPLETE RE-EVALUATION OF THE WAY MEN AND WOMEN should conduct their life together,” which means men avoid women, or “[k] nock ‘em up – then fuck off!” (Self 347-8).

Discovered by people of Ingerland, the book becomes their Holy Writ enveloping their world and informing all aspects of their religious, social, private lives. In raising the Book of Dave to the status of the central text of the post-apocalyptic England, Self evokes and interrogates the myth essential for all Book-based religions – the myth of the divine origin of Scriptures. Such myth usually (1) focuses on deities’ demand to write down, to read or and disseminate their sacred words (e.g., the myth of Moses at Sinai or St John the Divine on Patmos; the myth of the origin of the Book of Mormon or of the Qur’an), or (2) tells the story of the divine inspiration guiding the work of scribes or translators (e.g., the myth of the Septuagint). Alluding to this myth’s reliance on the originary and divine Word/Logos, yet making the alleged Word the product of a diseased and rather primitive mind, Self not only creates a grotesquely overdrawn vision of the myth gone totalitarian, but also conjures up the world in which the myth’s inability to sustain the society’s and its own stability can be anatomised. Interestingly, probing the myth of divine origin, Self provocatively turns it into the myth of davine (“dävine” in the novel’s spelling), i.e., Dave-based origin, and toys with such distortion as the possibility of the basis for a weak, convalescing “myth.”

As the revealed and therefore unquestionable Word of god, the Book of Dave provides a total explanation of the world, by means of which social unity should be consolidated, and individual stability should be ensured. However, instead of smoothing social tensions or resolving individual anxieties, the myth of scriptures’ divine origin reinforces or even creates dread and disquiet. The divinely decreed truth of the separation of the sexes (the Breakup and Changeover) destroys family ties and ruins the possibility of intimate relationships between men (“dads”), women (“mummies”) and children. The “dark, mummy-hating underbelly” (Self 305) of the Book of Dave authorises violence against women, who can be raped at will, or executed for the “heinous malefaction, a profaning of the Book” (Self 387), i.e., for neglecting the Breakup. Moreover, the Book-based separation of the sexes prevents individuals from achieving inner balance and harmonising the softer part of the psyche (“the mummyself”) and a more resolute, violence-prone one (“the daddyself”). On becoming an adult who no longer stays with his mother, one loses contact with the feminine source of kindness and yields to the Book-licensed misogyny.

In Self’s novel the stability of the myth of scripture’s divine origin is threatened. The Book is under constant pressure of ever new heresies (“flying”) which either indicate a tension between Dave’s intended meaning of the Book and its present misprisions, or, more importantly, question the very identity/divinity of the Book’s
Author. The most significant heresy seems to be the one whose advocates—“strongly represented among the imprisoned flyers [i.e., heretics]”—hold that “Dave was a bloke in another Book, which had been set down by the true and only God” (Self 194). This heresy articulates the disintegration of the myth of the Book’s divine origin. First, if seen in the light of the twentieth-century part of the novel, it undermines Dave’s supernatural status, pointing to his human identity. Second, if seen in the context of the novel as such, it challenges the idea of God-the-source-of-scripture, since “another book” evoked in the heresy has been set down by Will Self, whose divinity—if any—is of purely literary type. Next, it challenges the myth of the divine origin of scriptures known outside the novel, i.e., those which were set down neither by Dave nor by Self. For example, it strengthens the doubt Dave himself expresses when he learns of his Muslim friend’s, Faisal’s, belief in the divine provenience of the Qur’an and in its resulting scientific, moral, political authority: “you must understand that some bloke, thousands of years ago, couldn’t possibly”—(Self 209).

For all its insistence on tracing the disintegration of the myth of the divine origin, *The Book of Dave* does not try to abolish it. On the contrary, the novel explores the possibility of a transformed form of the myth, i.e., of “myth” in which the divine presence legitimising scripture is bracketed off, weakened or playfully distorted. The novel makes it clear that it is under ill-prescribed antidepressants that Dave Rudman begins to think he is god. When Dave receives professional psychiatric treatment and starts to *re recuperate* after his mental collapse, he decides to write one more text—“a new Book” entitled “EPISTLE TO THE SON,” a thoroughly human document which simply preaches responsibility and respect. Dave realizes that the divine voice of his first Book cannot “be the final word. It’s bad enough that it’s there at all, [...] screaming at the future” (Self 418). The second Book, written by “Phyllis [Dave’s new partner] quite as much as Dave” (Self 420), is liberated from the straight-jacket of the Knowledge, and resonates with a purely human “still small voice,” too weak to claim for itself any finality, independence or perfection. Echoing various types of wisdom, which make a chorus of scriptural traditions, the new Book paraphrases the Gospels, and alludes to “STOICISM worthy of Roman citizens [...] , or Sumerian scribes” (Self 420). Composite rather than monologic, the new Book bears witness to Dave’s overcoming of his unhealthily self-validating divinity, to his recovery from the incapacitating bout of godhood, and his coming to terms with his human or *divine* finitude.

As Dave empties himself of divinity—a gesture which cannot but bring to mind Jesus’s kenosis (*New Jerusalem Bible*, Philip. 2.6-7), he manages to better articulate human yearnings and to make his articulation commanding for people of later times. Like the Lord’s Prayer, whose appeal is indicated at the end of Self’s novel, Dave’s weak or emptied divinity (*davinity*) proves captivating long after Dave’s death. While Jesus’s gospel prayer, recited at Dave’s funeral, has undeniable drawing power untainted by the impotence of the dissipating Catholic church, Dave’s second Book intrigues people living in Ingerland, who are largely unaffected by the fact that the Book’s message is announced and guarded by somebody far from ideal. Significantly, in England of the distant future, the second Book figures not only as an antidote to the first Book’s totalitarianism, but also as a prevention against making any scripture the
final word. The second Book’s guardian maintains that since the scripture is no longer physically accessible, everyone should be making their own books. With the divine voice withdrawn, or irretrievably lost, people should rely on their divine potential and create their own scriptures, their own “myths.” Thus, in The Book of Dave the weakening of myth does not annihilate the mythic potential as much as sends it – its distorted “myth” version – flying. In Will Self, the myth of the Book’s divine origin is shorn of its supernatural traits and turned into the “myth” which detaches itself from the idea of otherworldly sources of inspiration but retains faith in the shaping/salutary power of scriptures.

Conclusions

Weak biblical/scriptural myth, or “myth,” bears witness to the fact that today biblical narratives are not merely remnants of the past, which lost their viability. Biblical myths participate in the temporal process of mythopoeia: they are capable of activating and re-activating the inner dynamism characteristic of myth, their “permanent possibility” (Coupe 93), which pushes them out of the state of finality, closure, and therefore, prevents myth from turning obsolete or dead. As weak myths, biblical/scriptural narratives keep responding to the present moment, acknowledging their historical condition, and grasping themselves as shaped by historical events. The weak biblical/scriptural myths created by Jim Crace and Will Self are responses to the way some scripture-related myths operate today, and to the imagined nightmarish results of their functioning. Crace’s dystopian America is the dream of the Promised Land gone wrong. The Pesthouse provides a bitter commentary on contemporary Americans thinking of themselves as of the elect and “indispensable” nation. Since contemporary Americans erroneously interpret their Promised Land as a manipulable object rather than an ongoing responsibility, they alienate themselves from it and from one another, leaving behind traces of their “perfect” but “unnatural” or “craziest” work, befitting not human beings but “something worse than men” (Crace 239, 261). While today’s America forgets that the Promised Land is more of a task than a taken for granted gift, Crace’s characters remember that and undertake the task, giving it a twist characteristic of weak biblical myth. Reflecting on the various Book-based fundamentalisms currently gaining strength in the West, Self offers a dystopian vision of a society which absolutises its Scripture, making it a blueprint of reality and totally subordinating the social life to the Word-become-flesh doctrine. His weak version of the myth of the Holy Writ – the “myth” of Scripture – is a salutary and self-consciously unassuming counterbalance to the rapacious but ultimately disintegrating myth.

Biblical “myth” is predicated on the understanding that no narrative is definitive, that every narrative is subject to change as it acquires new meanings and, in the meantime, loses its (frequently postulated) status of ultimate truth. To a large extent, the weakening of biblical myth is a process which remains faithful not only to the Bible’s mythoclastic streak, but also to “a particular hermeneutic stance” central for the Bible, the stance which makes “Bible stories seem to resist closure” (Fisch 5). Like the new
biblical narrative repeating and reinventing the old one, biblical “myths” reinterpret and recycle the recognisable biblical myths. They do not suppress or overcome biblical myths, but maintain a charitable relation with the past whose traces are preserved within their “mythic” narrative. While biblical myth of the past carried the weight of dogmatic assertion, while its words served to articulate the Word/Logos rather than to engender narrative exploration, weak biblical myth simultaneously impairs such dogmatism and accepts the inevitable vestiges of the crippled, or weakened, myth-as-explanation. Neither simply regaining strength nor dying from exhaustion, biblical “myth” self-consciously manoeuvres between those two extremes. On the one hand, resigned from the possibility of ultimate recuperation, the weak biblical myth invariably keeps convalescing from the effects of the dominant biblical myth. On the other hand, establishing charitable attitude towards the past as the limit of weakening, biblical “myth” never fails to piously (lovingly) remember the Bible – both in its arresting vibrance and in its endearing brittleness.
Works Cited


