Introduction

Although in the cultural landscape of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first century Britain, the Bible[1] is no longer an unequivocally dominant or unquestionably authoritative text, it continues to attract attention of novelists, poets and film-makers. Seemingly unaffected by the decline of the traditionally understood biblical literacy, or by the fact that – to paraphrase György Lukacs's familiar quip – the novel is a world abandoned by the God of Scripture, biblical stories and characters remain attractive even for artists who do not harbour any religious beliefs or for those who wear their atheism on their sleeve. When scholars of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first century Bible-related fiction try to identify the problems raised today by the imaginatively transformed Bible, most of them point towards theology or religion. It is either claimed that these narratives help to explore theological issues (Tate 2008; Tate 2019; Holderness 2015), or it is asserted that biblical rewrites supplement the recent philosophical recuperations of Christianity, offer a metafictional reflection on processes otherwise studied in biblical criticism (Mączyńska 2015), and engage in intricate intertextual relations with the Bible and extra-biblical literature (Wright 2007). Few critics, however, are interested in the possibility that contemporary biblical rewritings engage with something else than religious issues, and those who do notice that biblical fiction is animated by non-theological concerns tend to prioritize non-British fiction (Benedix 2009) or focus on the way the Bible-related novels respond to whole traditions or discourses rather than to particular contemporary crises (King 2000). This book attempts to show that the post-1970s British biblical rewritings use the Bible to address the issues of national identity, women's cooperation and British liberal tradition, all of which have been raised during the transformations of – or the acutely felt crises in – British cultural, social or political life of

[1] Insofar as "the Bible" as such does not exist (there are only multiple Bibles, i.e. divergent and competing constructions of the scriptural content, its selection and sequence), the term "the Bible" used in this book, unless otherwise indicated, is to be understood as the Protestant Bible. Quotations are taken from the Revised Standard Version.

the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Responding to the late twentieth-century challenges posed by Thatcherism, Women's Liberation Movement and the Rushdie affair, British fictional revisions of the Bible not only examine and challenge the existing mythical dimension of the discourses of national identity, women's cooperation or liberal democracy, but also attempt to offer different, more opportune rearticulations of ideas which used to be shaped by the Protestant interpretation of the Bible.

To capture the character of these rearticulations and to conceptualize the ways in which contemporary British biblical rewritings operate, this study introduces the concept of the echoing myth, which can be defined as a weak form of myth – a modified version of the once-powerful and dominant myth, whose normative function has been not so much lost as belittled, whose elements are open to multiple reinterpretations and whose meanings are provisional. Compared to the strong form, the echoing myth has smaller cultural importance, and its (diminished) significance is predicated on the critical reflection on (and the revealing transformations of) the authoritative forms. This enfeebled status – a mere echo of the former prestige – allows the echoing myth to adjust the refurbished form of the Christian Bible to the challenges in British culture, to reinterpret biblical myths in the changing cultural context, and to allow the voice of the Bible to be still heard. One can say that in the form of the echoing myth, the Bible speaks today in the "still small voice" or "gentle whisper", a phrase that comes from a well-known narrative from the Hebrew Bible, a story of the prophet Elijah and his encounter with God. Admittedly, as a story of the sacred returning in a remarkably fragile form, a story of God reappearing in a weak manner, this biblical narrative itself can serve as a metaphorical illustration of what the echoing myth is.

In 1 Kings 19:8–12, there is a story of the prophet Elijah and of the curious divine epiphany on Mount Horeb. Strengthened by an angel-proffered meal, Elijah walks to the mountain for forty days and nights, and when already there, he is questioned by God as to the reasons of his presence at the holy place. Elijah explains that he seeks shelter against Israelites, who are unfaithful to God's commands and who want to kill him. What follows is a memorable and quite ambiguous revelation of God in front of Elijah: "And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice" (1 Kings 19:11–12). The notable phrase "a still small voice", which is a translation of an enigmatic, oxymoronic Hebrew phrase "a voice of thin silence", is meant to represent God and to mark his true manifestation. As Stephen Prickett observes, however, the revelation of God's presence is not so much confined to the "still small voice", as played out in the tension between the display of power through

the natural phenomena and the ambivalence of the gentle (in)audibility. "Any attempt at 'explaining' the contrast between the fire and the 'voice of thin silence' is in danger of losing that sense of an immediate but unstated connection between the two that is emphasized even by the very act of dissociation" (Prickett 1986: 12). Thus, on the one hand, contrary to what Elijah must have expected to experience at Horeb (which is another name for Sinai, the place of Moses's encounter with God in the burning bush), God does not actually show himself through the images of strength and domination, but resides in what could be described as the resounding silence. Yet, on the other hand, the thunder and fire retain a distinct divine connotation insofar as they are unleashed at God's command and insofar as they are part of his historical repertoire of epiphanies. "The story seems to insist", Prickett points out, "that at each level these two modes are both completely discontinuous and yet inseparable" (1986: 12). "The still small voice" characterizes God's current, more adequate manifestation, and puts the clamorous revelations typical of his past epiphanies *sous rature*.

The biblical "still small voice" and its fraught relationship with the more thunderous, imperious and violent epiphany can be seen as a metaphor for my argument about the Bible in contemporary British culture. First of all (and quite generally), the still small voice is a metaphor for the current cultural condition of the Bible. Secondly (and more specifically), it symbolizes the way contemporary rewritings of biblical texts combine criticism of the Bible with a desire for eliciting a different voice from it. Thus, on the one hand, I claim that like the voice of thin silence – discontinuous yet inseparable from the thunder and fire after which it comes – the Bible today shows itself as a weak cultural presence, whose former glory and dominance, though not exactly forgotten, are seen as no longer representative of what the Bible is for the contemporary British society. Not unlike God in 1 Kings 19:8–12, both evoking and absenting himself from the once characteristic manners of revelation and assuming a feeble form, the Bible no longer functions in its formerly typical ways of the vociferous, dominant and all-determining text, but becomes a weak and barely noticeable cultural presence, whose strength and authority is acknowledged only as a historical record. The Bible today speaks only in "the still small voice", whose weakness stands in contrast with the still remembered but no longer determinative cultural strength of the past.

On the other hand, I argue that "the still small voice" is what can be heard in contemporary British novels which rewrite various biblical narratives. It is a voice of transformed, weakened, self-reflexive versions of biblical narrative, a thin voice produced by what remains of the biblical myth when its grip on the contemporary British society is loosened but not released altogether. This voice is called here "the echoing myth", and it is seen as related both to the characteristic, echoing strategies of contemporary literary adaptations, and to the recent attempts to describe the state in which myth finds itself in the late twentieth cen-

tury. The echoing myth emerges when myth is neither entirely gone nor strong enough to assert itself in the traditional way. Imploded yet weakly present, biblical stories in the form of echoing myths still help to explore the world and to think about some new possibilities for being-in-common in British society. For better or worse, the echoing myth resonates with the currently important issues, which will be discussed in the subsequent chapters of this book: the problem related to the feminist ideals of the l970s and relationships between women (Chapter 2), the crisis of national identity and meaning of Britishness (Chapter 3), the issue of the protection against intolerance in British society (Chapter 4).

The concept of the echoing myth will be central both for the particular interpretations in the subsequent chapters and for the larger argument in this study. As I will be arguing in the closing part of the book, the use of the echoing myth in fiction of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first century can be construed as a symptom of the emergent structure of feeling, whose character simultaneously partakes of postmodernism and goes beyond it. Not yet univocally defined or labelled, this structure of feeling is most frequently identified as a tension or oscillation between the postmodern doubt about sense and the post-postmodern search for sense (e.g. Toth 2015; Vermeulen and den Akker 2010; Holland 2013; Boxall 2013). The echoing myth is a discursive space in which postmodernism is still operative yet begins to be adulterated. Seen that way, the echoing myth can be treated as a literary form which, though dependent on the residual and dominant strategies, makes room for the emergent forms and stays relevant in the transformed cultural context. While the echoing myth deconstructs mythic narratives, exposing their metaphysical violence and ideological underpinnings, its functioning cannot be reduced to the complacently postmodernist incredulity towards (and suspension of) ideas like community or sincerity. The echoing myth not only dissects and criticizes the way biblical narratives pervade contemporary British culture, but also treats this site-clearing operation as an opportunity to articulate a more post-postmodernist – both unironic and self-consciously non-idealistic – desire for commonality. In the echoing myth, the postmodern self-reflexivity and scepticism acquire a new shape and direction, i.e. they become instruments of the neither cynical nor naive struggle for the (somewhat outmoded) ideas such as responsibility or decency. In its mixture of detachment and sincerity, the echoing myth bears witness to the changing inflection of contemporary culture, which "attempts in spite of its inevitable failure, […and] seeks forever for a truth that it never expects to find" (Vermeulen and den Akker 2010: 5). Spanning the shared, biblical myths, the recognizably postmodern devices and the emergent cultural tendencies, the echoing myth gives a more palpable shape to transformations and the incipient cultural phenomena.

The most immediate context for the echoing myths examined in this book is the post-war, deep-going change in the character and intensity of Christianity in Britain. The change has been discussed by Callum Brown and Hugh McLeod,

both of whom argue that the post-1960s Britain has been experiencing the effects of radical transformations in the religious profile of the society, changes which, though precipitated by the more immediate phenomena and events, were the culmination of very long secularization processes. Both Brown and McLeod identify the 1960s as the critical decade in the story of the decline of Christian religion in Britain, and both claim that the most evident and most significant shift that occurred at that time was the vanishing of Christianity from the British culture. McLeod calls this phenomenon "the end of Christendom" (2007: 265), by which he means the disappearance of Christianity as the basis of common language, shared moral teachings and taken-for-granted elements of social environment. Callum Brown describes the change as the end of "discursive Christianity" (2009: 13), i.e. the decay of protocols of personal identity derived from Christian discourses. For Brown, the 1960s mark the moment when Christianity stops infusing public culture and individual identities, and when, no longer subjectified, it ceases to act as an implied touchstone for social and private life. Although Brown and McLeod differ in their diagnoses of the abruptness of the change (the former arguing that it was a sudden and violent rupture, the latter that it was a culmination of both long-term and immediate causes), they agree that in the 1970s, 1980s and after, British culture no longer drew on the previously readily presupposed Christian discourse.

Read against the cultural context whose important characteristic is the alleged decay of discursive Christianity, biblical echoing myths examined in this book probe the limitations of both Brown's and McLeod's theory. The persistence of biblical narratives and their unabated (though markedly transformed) relation with the various current cultural discourses is a sign that the Bible and its Christian-culture-based dissemination are not altogether lost in contemporary Britain. The presence of biblical echoing myths indicates that a religious (Christian) discourse continues to inform British culture, albeit this discourse takes now a more diffuse, covert and equivocal form. Linda Woodhead explains that in the big and continuously growing group of British people who declare they have "no religion" (forty-eight per cent in 2016), "most draw on select elements of religion which they still find meaningful (e.g. life-course rituals, various symbols and narratives), abandon other elements (e.g. membership and regular churchgoing), and meld them all together with a wide range of other sources of significance" (2016: 45). As Yvonne Sherwood cogently puts it, despite the well-established truisms about the ill-health of the Bible, scriptural elements survive in contemporary culture – not only by being subverted, twisted and carnivalized, but also by "becoming a place for probing strange secular attachments to, *in detachment from*, the biblical text" (2000: 200, original emphasis). Thus, the Bible continues to be evoked if only to reflect on its weakened impact and resorted significance. As the argument in this book shows, the secular discourse employed in contemporary British fiction falls back on biblical narratives and

employs them both in order to interrogate or criticize various politically, socially, or culturally significant discourses, and to redeploy the Bible with a view to articulating an alternative to those discourses. Contrary to the claim of the inexorable and incontrovertible decay of the Christian discourse and its adjacent biblical base, scriptural myths and secular culture continue to interact and echo each other. To quote Sherwood again, "the 'secular' and the 'biblical' are not as alienated from one another as popular wisdom would have us believe, and […] they are finding all kinds of mutually provocative ways of changing, interrogating, and indeed goading one another" (2000: 201).

Seen from a different perspective, the present study of biblical rewritings could be an interesting companion piece to the recent inquiries carried out in the field of the sociology of religion or in the branch of philosophy that is interested in the reason of the current significance of religious myths, symbols, beliefs and traditions. Like those other areas of research, the examination of echoing myths asks questions about the ways in which contemporary culture draws on the sacred and the spiritual, about the manner in which today's culture transforms the once-religious elements and adjusts them to the present context, and about the problems which the culture addresses via the metamorphosed religious narratives. Thus, while sociologists and philosophers concentrate on the idea that religion haunts the imagination of the otherwise faithless West (Ward 2003: vii; Berry 2004: 170), the echoing myth investigates the ways the biblical haunts the largely secular space of the contemporary British novel. Seen in such a conjunction, the echoing myth can be classified as an epiphenomenon of the more general reality in which the significance and visibility of religion is re-established. Moreover, while sociologists and philosophers talk about the re-enchantment of the world (Bauman 1992; Partridge 2004), pointing out that the calculating, instrumental reason is mistrusted today, while mystery or irrationality is sought and respected, the echoing myth acknowledges a limit to an authoritarian, controlling and self-legitimizing reason. In being a myth (albeit a self-conscious, weak one), the echoing myth corroborates the significance of those approaches to contemporary problems which do not simply rely on rational justification or on prejudice-free ratiocinations, but which simultaneously draw on ambivalence, aporia, excess, on consciously evoked intertextuality, as well as on complex imagery and symbolism often introduced through storytelling. Such "new intellectual nexus" (Berry 2004: 174), which allows the rational and the "quasi-religious" (Berry 2004: 174) to complicate and inflect each other, can be discerned in the writings of many influential philosophers today: Luce Irigaray, Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben, Slavoj Žižek, to name only a few. Philippa Berry points out that today's religion differs significantly both from secularism and from the dogmatic religion, becoming something she describes as "post-religious, post-sceptical, and, crucially, post-dualistic consciousness" (2004: 171). The echoing myth captures something of the contested, hard-to-define status

of the religious today because it similarly goes beyond the dualistic thinking of myth-versus-demythologized-consciousness and plays one through and against the other.

Also, there is another sociological outlook on contemporary religion that could be usefully evoked here. Since the echoing myth can be perceived as a means through which novelists regard certain Bible-based ideas as both the source of problems and as a medium for formulating and giving expression to various social or cultural issues, such myth turns out to concur with what a sociologist James A. Beckford identifies as the contemporary tendency to use religion as an "expedient" (2011: 58). While in Western countries (especially in Britain, as Beckford argues) religious symbols, beliefs or narratives can be used not only to frame social grievances, express demands or justify violence but also to promote and seek social cohesion, the echoing myth explores and reflects on the expediency of biblical narratives and ideas in both of its forms: as a space espousing critical and corrective thinking, and as a space of problem-production. As will be demonstrated in the ensuing chapters, the Bible rewritten into myths shows itself to be, on the one hand, a source of such problems as nationalistic thinking, patriarchalism, or the sense of culture-related siege mentality, and on the other hand, a framework within which issues like the current crisis of national identity, the problem of women's cooperation and the problem of protective reactions to the culturally other, can be articulated and explored.

As indicated above, the examination of the rewritten biblical myth in contemporary British novel can function as a companion piece or a supplement (in the Derridean sense of the term) to the sociological/philosophical investigation. The present study puts emphasis on the idea that what was once a religious element (the Bible) has never been simply lost or sublated, but continues to be heard in Western culture (albeit in a transformed, ambivalent form). This emphasis concurs with the general tenor of many recent conceptualizations concerning the status of the broadly conceived religion in the West, especially with those conceptualizations which develop the idea of "the new visibility of religion" (Ward and Hoelzl 2008). The concept of "the new visibility of religion" is meant to capture the idea that the increase in the today's presence of religion is not simply caused by the re-emergence of old forms or by the restoration of some lost elements, but that it is related to the fact that "[r]eligious believing might have always been there, but not visible in the ways we see it today" (Ward and Hoelzl 2008: 2). As Ward and Hoelzl emphasize, there is "a *new awareness* of religion" (2008: 2, original emphasis), which allows us to see religion in phenomena much more diversified and episodic than just the traditionally understood religious rituals and beliefs. "Religious citations, the employment of the myths and symbols of traditional faiths", Ward and Hoelzl argue, "is far more pervasive than the institutions that appear to represent these faiths or the politicians now ready to confess their faith" (2008: 4). It is this overlooked and surprising pervasiveness, this unre-

cognized or unnoticed latency of the biblical in contemporary culture that the echoing myth makes visible. To change Ward and Hoelzl's visual metaphorics to my aural one, the echoing myth makes the contemporary British novel reverberate with the Bible, thereby fostering a new awareness of the continuous presence of religious elements. It turns out that the important issues – the current crisis of national identity, the contours of women's cooperation, the sense of security in the insecure world – are the warped, often unregistered echoes of the Bible, which the biblical rewritings reprocess and put in front of the reader.

Conscious of the ideological uses of the Bible, whose shapes and effects it never fails to acknowledge, the echoing myth approaches biblical texts in a critical but not dismissive mood. As Gianni Vattimo puts it, only when one looks at the Bible with the awareness of its contingency and its historical grounding, does it "become possible to take the Bible seriously. Indeed, it becomes essential to take the Bible seriously, insofar as it is the principal book that has marked deeply the 'paradigm' of Western culture" (2002: 7). The seriousness with which the contemporary British novel approaches the Bible – this propensity to use the Bible to pose culturally important questions – stands in stark contrast to the overall superficiality which characterizes the way religious symbols, texts and traditions are most commonly employed today. As Berry observes, the "'post-religious or 'quasi-religious' phenomena direct our attention not to the putative spiritual *depth* that is concealed behind or underlies our culture, but rather to the way in which unexpected fusions of materiality with 'spirit' are constantly appearing on its most ephemeral surfaces" (2004: 172, original emphasis). Graham Ward points out that today's religion is marked by the withdrawal of God, by the sense of absence and void. Having effected "its own kenosis" (Ward 2003: 132), in which it is emptied of meaning, religion becomes "a special effect, inseparably bound to an entertainment value" (Ward 2003: 133). Devoid of depth, religious elements employed in contemporary culture most frequently offer only an illusion of transcendence, a simulation, which confers a mystical aura on phenomena to which it is applied, and a diversion from the uncertainties of postmodern life. While the echoing myth is not a symptom of some putatively emerging in-depth approach to religion, nor a sign of a serious pursuit of some strong religion-based communal identity, it cannot be reduced to what Ward calls the "customized transcendence" (2003: 132) or to an empty evocation of what used to be mysterious and deep. The echoing myth's serious engagement with the biblical is an interesting counterbalance to the frequently perfunctory attitude to the Bible today.

In the rewritten form, biblical myths as handled by the contemporary British novel offer much more than just mystical (though ephemeral) polish or an entertainingly exotic spin to a story. Biblical material in the echoing myth is not just used rhetorically but becomes the very tissue of the novel, its framing device as

well as its object of scrutiny. Whereas in the superficial evocations of the Bible, scriptural elements are vehicles of some displaced and objectless desires, or ersatz versions of "transporting events" (Ward 2003: 133), in the echoing myth the biblical is revisited to foreground and investigate the very process of displacing different desires (nation-, gender- or culture-related) onto the biblical text. Moreover, in some contemporary rewritings, superficiality and Bible-rooted, simulated euphoria is an object of scrutiny in its own right – a problem to be reflected on rather than an effect to be achieved. If hollowness is what the popular religious-symbol-based simulation of transcendence inadvertently produces, hollowness is what the echoing myth deliberately probes and inspects. Like echo constituting itself through reverberations in an empty space of a cave, the echoing myth feeds off the vacuity and illusiveness of some of the Bible-based ideas against which it establishes its own textual substance. This aspect of the biblical echoing myth dovetails with what the broadly conceived religion accomplishes, according to Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate, in contemporary fiction. In the recently published *The Routledge Companion to Twenty-First Century Literary Fiction*, they claim that alternative gospels and post-9/11 novels employ religious elements to expose the illusory character of various contemporary discourses. In today's fiction,

> religion is not merely one more source of false consciousness, *ressentiment* or delusion (though it is all of these things) but something that still possesses what Žižek calls a radical core. By taking religion seriously as an illusion – as the false consciousness that reveals the falsity of all consciousness – […] contemporary fiction reveals all the other deep fiduciary investments in Big Others that circulate unnoticed within the contemporary novel: family, work, and most destructively, capital. (Bradley and Tate 2019: 161)

Thanks to its critical, self-reflective character, the echoing myth probes and brings to light those ideological structures of thought which grew out of biblical ideas (and their interpretations), but whose provenance has been forgotten. The echoing myth exposes the falsehood and bias of these structures, simultaneously emphasizing the contingency (or the merely illusory conclusiveness) of its own status.

Biblical rewritings discussed in this study are only part of the bigger corpus of the existing twentieth- and twenty-first century British revisions of the Bible. Compared to the novels not included in this book, however, the rewritings considered here resonate more clearly with the political, cultural and social circumstances in which they were written. Thus, although Jenny Diski's *Only Human: A Comedy* (2000) and *After These Things: A Novel* (2004) can be read as feminist revisions of the (respectively) story of Abraham and Sarah, and the story of Isaac and Rebekah (Rychter 2015; Rychter 2016; Rychter 2018), these novels do not evoke the problems associated either with the British WLM or feminism.

Likewise, Howard Jacobson's rewriting of Cain and Abel in his *The Very Model of a Man* (1992) is more interested in the general reflection on originality and the shaping power of the ways stories are received than in more historically identifiable issues (cf. Rychter 2010). Concurrently, some of the available biblical novels which do resonate with some twentieth-century issues are examples of what Theodore Ziolkowski calls a "postfigurative" literary form, and as such remain outside the scope of this study's interest. In postfigurations of myths, a familiar mythic pattern is transposed into a contemporary setting while protagonists re-enact the lives of mythic heroes (Ziolkowski 1972: 7–8). This is the case of Simon Mawer's *The Gospel of Judas* (2000), in which the apocryphal gospel constitutes just a small fraction of the text, and of Muriel Spark's *The Only Problem* (1984), which updates the myth of Job. Also, this study does not discuss science-fiction biblical rewritings, such as Michael Moorcock's *Behold the Man* (1966), or "gospel thrillers" (Jacobs 2005: 126), such as Peter Van Greenaway's *The Judas Gospel* (1972), because these texts would require separate generic introductions and analyses. Other novels are excluded on the grounds of the limited scale of their actual rewriting of the Bible (the case of Sara Maitland's *Daughter of Jerusalem* [1978]), or on the grounds of their confinement to the liberal-theological formula of "fictionalized biography" (Ziolkowski 1972: 13). This is the case of Neil Boyd's *The Hidden Years* (1986) and Anthony Burgess's *Man of Nazareth* [1979]). Finally, some novels have been excluded on the grounds of their tangential relationship to the biblical material (the case of Anita Mason's *The Illusionist* [1983]).

Most novels studied in this book are full-scale adaptations of selected biblical narratives, i.e. novels in which the rewritten biblical material takes up the whole of their length. This preference for the full-blown type of biblical revision is dictated by the character of my focus: it is in the rewritten *longueurs* and rhythms of the Bible rather than in the episodic, fragment-based, one-off biblical references that I identify the most complex and thought-provoking instances of the echoing myth. It is through the wholesale rewriting of big portions of the biblical hypotext, and through the large-scale use of various rewriting strategies like emendations, replacements, rather than through inserting mere slivers of the Bible into the otherwise scripture-free narrative fiction that the anxieties of the contemporary culture are more fully revealed. Moreover, a comprehensive biblical rewriting evokes not only particular ideas or problems but also the very cultural authority of the scripture, into which – if only unwittingly – it taps and thereby signals the significance and weight of the issues it explores. A novel that runs its course within the biblical framework cannot but feed off the high status of the scripture. It evokes this high status and thereby it points to the desire of the rewriting to articulate and draw attention to serious cultural issues, a desire to give those issues a *gravitas* associated specifically with the authority of scripturally mediated ideas. Admittedly, the two novels that do not conform to this pattern of rewriting (*The Book of Mrs Noah* by Michèle Roberts, and *The*

Kingdom of the Wicked by Anthony Burgess) either make the rewritten part of the Bible the conceptual metaphor for the rest of the novel (the case of Roberts's book) or seamlessly weave the biblical material into the wider historical tapestry (the case of Burgess's novel).

With the exception of Winterson's *Boating for Beginners*, which is a highly playful text, the novels that will be studied here belong to the category labelled by Dominic Head "the serious literary novel" (2008: 12). This type of the novel "enlarges readers' social, historical or philosophical perceptions by means of the fictional projection of character and circumstance (usually), and/or through linguistic or formal innovation (not usually overtly)" (Head 2008: 12). It is deliberately difficult, frequently introspective, densely allusive and consciously literary, with self-reflexivity kept "low-key" (Head 2008: 15). The biblical rewritings which I selected belong to the broad spectrum of the serious literary novel, rather than to the group of novels that merely translate Bible-based faith into fiction and become what Graham Holderness calls "novelized piety" (2014: 20). Contemporary British rewritings of the Bible studied here approach the scriptural material in an aesthetically rewarding way,[2] quite unlike the often "failed novels" (Holderness 2014: 20) of piety-turned-fiction, which usually have little literary merit, but are weighed with pre-digested confessional message. Avoiding the facile, the oversentimental and the doctrinaire, British biblical rewrites chosen for this study offer enough discursive and textual space for the complexities of the echoing myth to appear. I will explore those complexities by focusing on different transpositional practices employed in the biblical rewrites: formal and thematic transformations of the biblical hypotext, i.e. various types of reduction, augmentation, substitution, transfocalization, transmotivation, transvaluation (Genette 1997).

An important premise of this book is that British biblical rewritings, like the contemporary British novel (the serious literary novel), engage critically and self-reflexively with the culture they inhabit, and maintain a dialogic relationship with the society from which they emerge. As Steven Connor claims, narrative fiction has three important functions: enlargement of our memories, thoughts, collective and individual selves; consolidation of identities and mentalities; and transformation of all these. The transformative function of narrative produces "the effects of diversifying, exploring, experimenting, undoing, disorientating, and dehabituating to be found in narrative. As well as enlarging and extending, narrative […] can also […] criticise, displace, limit, interrupt" (Connor 1996: 6). This study will examine each of these three functions, and will show how the biblical echoing myths combine them and play one against the other. Mindful of the caveat expressed by Dominic Head, namely that "a good deal of

[2] Jim Crace's *Quarantine* won the 1997 Whitbread Novel and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1997.

contemporary fiction in Britain is written under the sign of 'reaction' rather than of 'reinvention', more a form of commentary than a process of 'making new'" (2008: 9), I will develop the idea that British biblical rewrites manage to build an imaginative space of reinvention of the old and to open up a discursive area for investigating some socially and culturally important problems. Examining the rewritten Bible and its echoing myth form, I will look for textual details that could demonstrate that the novels in question offer some imaginative potential for the reinvention of British identity, women's solidarity or of the understanding of security.

My perspective will remain literary, with theological and religious issues introduced only heuristically, as elements of the discourses against which and in relation to which the biblical rewrites produce their own meanings. Apart from that, the religious-theological dimension can be observed in the novels studied here in a mediated form, i.e. through their engagement with the grand themes traditionally explored through religion: mortality, death, truth, hope, love, grief, suffering, compassion, ethics, responsibility, power. As Head argues apropos the serious literary novel, narratives that deal with such issues in an aesthetically satisfying and formally sophisticated way are "the contemporary manifestation of Matthew Arnold's idea that literature has come to take the place of religion" (2008: 14). Thus, if there is a religious element in contemporary biblical rewritings, it speaks with a still small voice of the intricately (but not blatantly) executed concern for some fundamental questions of human life, rather than for confessional issues.

Throughout the study, I will be using the term "contemporary" as a shorthand for the post-1970 period. Firstly, the long view is adopted in order to facilitate a reflection on the echoing myth as self-identical phenomenon, and to put in the spotlight its characteristic features, which have remained consistent during the past four decades. Secondly (and more importantly), the "contemporary" is not treated here as an equivalent of mere presentness, i.e. of the immediate experience, or the self-evident up-to-datedness. Rather, it is considered to be, in accordance with Theodore Martin's argument, "a critical concept. It must be imagined before it can be perceived; it is not just a moment that contains us but a moment that we must first conceive *as* a moment" (2017: 5, original emphasis). As a critical concept employed to divide the "present" from the "past", the "contemporary" in this book refers to the period following the late 1960s and its "crisis" (Brown 2014: 224–225) in the understanding and shape of Christianity. In the course of this crisis, centuries of consensus about Christian culture in Britain came to an end, and "British society as a whole – including the government and the churches – became *aware* of secularisation as an intense cultural and ecclesiastical revolution" (Brown 2014: 226, original emphasis). This deep-going, consciously experienced and culturally mediated shift in the ways British people perceived religion – the shift that started in the late 1960s and

consolidated itself at the beginning of the 1970s – can be treated as a marker of the division between the past and the present (or the "contemporary"). All the ensuing changes in the understanding and cultural position of religion – among others, the growing "militancy" in the 1990s, emerging within British Protestantism, evangelicalism, Islam, Catholicism and Judaism (Brown 2014: 297–312) – take place in the context of (and against the backdrop of) the decline in the traditionally understood piety. As Callum Brown explains, "In the last decade of the twentieth century, religions were getting militant through weakness, not strength. They were growing militant, first, because as they declined in size, the British churches were shedding their large and relaxed liberal wings, and, second, because as they lost control of British culture, they felt threatened by a hostile cultural environment" (2014: 314). All in all, the term "contemporary" in this book refers to the period from the 1970s until today, and describes Britain affected by and responding to the weakening of conventional Christianity.

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Many biblical myths left imprints on different areas of British cultural, social and political life. Some of the most recognizable are the myth of the Promised Land, the myth of the Messiah, the myth of the Antichrist, the myth of Sodom and Gomorrah, the myth of the Heavenly City, the myth of Judas, the myth of Samson and Delilah. A lot of the biblical myths discussed in the magisterial *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes* were inspirational for British culture. The myth of Abraham's trial (the sacrifice of Isaac), the myth of the Apocalypse, the myth of creation and of Eden, the myth of the Flood, the myth of the Tower of Babel, the myth of Jesus can be found in numerous British works across different periods and genres. British culture is replete with various Bible-derived myths which revolve around biblical figures. Cain is an important figure in the medieval Towneley Plays, in Byron's poem of 1821, and in Howard Jacobson's novel *The Very Model of a Man* (1992). David was a representational model for English Renaissance rulers (especially for Henry VIII), a model for Christian poets in the seventeenth century (Lewalski 1979: 231–250), and a model of Christian masculinity in the Victorian period (cf. Charles Kingsley, *David: Five Sermons* [1866]). Job animates Milton's *Paradise Regained* (1671), Blake's *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (1825), Muriel Spark's *The Only Problem* (1984) and arguably Beckett's drama, while the myth of Moses is the inspiration in the N-Town and York mystery plays, Blake's *The Book of Ahania* (1795), Handel's *Israel in Egypt* (1738), and in Anthony Burgess's long poem *Moses: A Narrative* (1976). While some biblical myths made stronger impact on particular aspects of culture (e.g. the myth of Salome primarily on literature and iconography, the myth of Abraham's trial on philosophical, moral and literary discourses, the myth of Samson and Delilah on popular culture),

or became vehicles of a particular idea (e.g. Sodom and Gomorrah as a Christian myth of divine punishment for homoeroticism), there were also biblical myths which functioned as more comprehensive vehicles of socially, culturally and politically significant ideas. The myth of the Promised Land, for example, was mobilized in political, literary and popular discourses during the Puritan Revolution of the seventeenth century, during the search for the new Canaan in America, or during the Glorious Revolution of 1688 (Coffey 2014: 57). A related myth of the Canaanite mandate (God's gift of the land of Canaan to Israelites and the command to exterminate the inhabitants) was used by Oliver Cromwell in Ireland and by the British during the Indian Mutiny in 1857. The myth of the Apocalypse, sometimes together with the adjacent myths of the Antichrist and the messianic ruler, was employed in the contexts of the emerging national identity in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, political turmoil of the Civil Wars, the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, and nourished not only political or popular discourses of these historical moments, but also the creative imagination of their artists (e.g. Romantic writers like Blake or Mary Shelley, or Romantic painters like John Martin). Employed in SF/dystopian films, literature and TV series, the myth of apocalypse has continued to articulate twentieth- and twenty-first century cultural fears of nuclear threat, the Cold War, climate crisis.

The biblical myths on which this book is going to focus are not the narrowly understood literary myths, i.e. biblical myths completely swathed in and channelled through literature (Brunel 2016: xii), but myths energized by and steeped in many different discourses. The biblical myths that are central in this study are those that either tacitly or overtly inform political speeches, journalistic writing, polemical publications, literary writing and popular entertainment. They re-emerged in the twentieth and twenty-first century in response to the social, political and cultural circumstances, and are used to represent and codify ideological conceptions of British culture and British society.

The echoing myths discussed in the following chapters bring together the Bible and Bible-derived contemporary myths important for today's British culture and society. These myths are as follows: the myth of the British election and exemplarity, the myth of the impossibility of sisterhood, and the myth of the benign, sanitized or "home" Bible, fully integrated with British democracy. While the first two are narratives constructed out of elements *from within* the Bible, the third myth is the myth *of* the Bible, i.e. a narrative that mythicizes the cultural role and status of the Christian (Protestant) Bible itself. The twentieth-century myth of election and the myth of the impossible sisterhood reinvigorate the very old, Bible-derived myths of the chosen people and of women rivals, and deploy these biblical myths to forge conceptual models for understanding national identity after the decline of the Empire and women's relationships in the context of the Women's Liberation Movement. The myth of the "home" Bible,

in turn, encodes the whole of the Protestant Bible as a vehicle of culturally significant meanings, representing Christian scripture as a foundation and token of liberalism, tolerance, democracy. While not identical, biblical myths and myth of the Bible are interrelated. The myth of the Bible reduces biblical complexity to a handful of easily recognizable stories and ideas, and turns the Bible into an iconic foundation of British culture. Particular biblical myths, in turn, function as the widely shared and culturally conspicuous elements of the Bible, and can offer a tacit support to the myth of the Bible. Thus, as used by the British, the myth of the chosen people positioned Britain as responsible for spreading the Bible, perceived as an icon of civilizing properties. Interestingly, even though the myth of female rivalry does not quite agree with the equality- and tolerance-endorsing myth of the home Bible, it is still co-opted to its functioning. At work here is a type of circular logic according to which the positive teachings of the Bible in the end trump over the more backward and malignant ones. Thus, biblical gender-bias is first attributed to the radically different, ancient context from which it emerged. Then, the argument is that Britons managed to work through and overcome such biased ideas because they learnt to reinterpret the Bible and absorbed from it elements fundamental for the concepts of democracy and equality (cf. Weldon 1989). In this study, biblical myths and the myth of the Bible are discussed separately, and their imbrication is considered whenever it becomes more prominent for the problem of the echoing myth.

In regrafting the mutated and secularized forms of these scriptural myths onto the Bible, i.e. in returning an echo to its original voice and effecting their multiple crossings and re-crossings, echoing myths interrogate not only the ancient text itself but also its later applications. In doing so, they expose the problematic character of both the Bible and its later mythic revisions, probing their limitations on the one hand, and their wherewithal or potentialities on the other hand. Couched in the form of novelistic rewritings, the biblical echoing myths provide a textual space for questioning and for sounding out the still vibrant, Bible-related ideas. The aim is to determine if these ideas still hold a promise of a new cultural community or sharing and if there is a new type of the still small voice.

Chapter 1 concentrates on the concept of myth, surveying its different definitions, looking upon its relationship with the Bible and foregrounding the fact that the Bible persists in British culture in the weak form, i.e. as the echoing myth. I argue that what myth becomes today is the result of a dynamic that opens between demythologization (the decline of the ideologically resonant and culturally strong narratives) and the persistence of myth, a dynamic conditioned by the vagaries of the deprivatization of religion, the new visibility of religion, the changed form of biblical literacy. Settling on the concept of myth as narrative ideology, I discuss the weakness and the curious resilience of the Bible in contemporary culture. Taking into account the vagaries of demythologization

as discussed by Hans Blumenberg, Odo Marquard, Paul Ricoeur and Jean-Luc Nancy, and the limits of de-biblicization, I explain the concept of the "echoing myth", which is meant to capture the ambivalent status of the biblical myth today and to pin down its oscillation between weakness and ineradicability. By coining the concept of the "echoing myth" and applying it to contemporary rewritings of the Bible, I try to emphasize a number of important features of the way biblical myths function in literary discourse. First, I capitalize on the semantic potential of "echo" and indicate that echo's repetition with a difference – its *descrescendo*, fragmentation and its revelation of what is implicit – make it an apt descriptor of the processes characteristic of revision, transposition and adaptation. Consequently, the *echoing* myth can become an apposite description of the novelistic rewriting of the Bible. Second, I point out that echo's features correspond with many of the characteristics of the contemporary weak myth, namely its disintegration, its diminishing returns and self-questioning. Referring to those ideas on myth which the metaphor of echo helps to better formulate (ideas proposed by Ricoeur, Blumenberg, Marquard, Vattimo and Nancy), I characterize the echoing myth as self-conscious, non-apodictically rational, weak and open-ended. I argue that as a narrative which not only acts out the implosion of biblical myth, but also recognizes its own limits and subtly probes new ways of thinking, the echoing myth is an apt description of contemporary British biblical rewritings.

Chapter 2 focuses on novels which rewrite the Bible from the point of view of women, and which relate selected biblical narratives to the problems that the British second-wave (and later) forms of feminism had to confront. The two analyzed novels – Michèle Roberts's *The Wild Girl* (1984) and *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987), were written when feminism was grappling with the problem of divisions in the women's movement. The novels rewrite the Bible with a view to rethinking gender myths that underlie and strengthen the idea that women cannot cooperate with one another and that they are programmed to remain competitors. Such gender myths, namely the virgin-vs-whore myth (the good woman vs the bad woman) and the related myth of women rivals, were – as many feminist biblical scholars argue – facilitated, encouraged, and promulgated by the biblical text. According to Esther Fuchs, Cheryl Exum, Mieke Bal, Deborah Sawyer, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Claudia V. Camp, and Adela Yarbro Collins, there are places in the Bible which either straightforwardly pit women against one another, or which make them inauspiciously ambivalent or fragmented, thereby making possible a patriarchal reading. Narratives of co-wives (Sarah and Hagar; Leah and Rachel), sisters (Martha and Mary) or paired symbolic female figures (Lady Wisdom and the Strange Woman; the Whore of Babylon and the sun-clad woman) depend on (and help to legitimize) the binary-oppositions-based structuring of reality, in which women are contrasted with one another and evaluated as either good or bad. I argue that such Bible-boosted myths have proved very permanent

and that their influence can be observed in the way British Women's Liberation Movement was depicted by the media in the 1970s and 1980s. Roberts's biblical rewritings construct their echoing myths around the critical exploration of both the biblical representation of women and the twentieth-century deployment of the virgin-whore myth. Drawing on the recent studies of British WLM – the studies which reveal a persistent, though not rosy-eyed, pursuit of commonality and sororal ideals, I show how feminists were trying to come to terms with the complex reality of differences-ridden togetherness and to demystify their own myth of sisterhood (which both essentialized and trivialized women's solidarity). I contrast this self-critical approach of the WLM members with the media coverage of the WLM, which continued to rely on stereotypical representations of women's relationships and to employ the good-vs-bad-woman myth. It is against this background that I read Michèle Roberts's two biblical rewritings. *The Wild Girl* and *The Book of Mrs Noah* rely on a number of strategies characteristic of women's revisionist writing: the hermeneutics of suspicion, hermeneutics of remembrance, and hermeneutics of imagination. Significantly, the novels not only critically reflect on biblical discourses which undermine the possibility of women's solidarity, but also self-consciously explore and imaginatively expand biblical narratives, searching for positive models and constructive images of non-hierarchic, egalitarian and sororal cooperation. In doing so, Roberts's echoing myths seek to rethink sisterhood, which, as an affirmation (and a dream) of the solidarity of women, was one of the fundamental feminist ideas in the 1970s, as well as one of the most acutely felt problems. Roberts's echoing myth of female rivals offers a weak, non-dogmatic vision of sisterhood, one in which women's community grows out of the fragile, flexible, makeshift bonding. Seen from the perspective of the early twenty-first century, this vision proves to be an artistic foreshadowing of the type of British feminist activism that became popular at the cusp of the new millennium.

In Chapter 3, I discuss two novels which rewrite the Bible and which simultaneously employ myths related to the idea of Britishness: *The Kingdom of the Wicked* (1985) by Anthony Burgess and *Boating for Beginners* by Jeanette Winterson (1985). Written at a time when Britain's status is defined by the post-imperial situation, by the ever more globalized world, as well as by the Thatcherite appeal to the nostalgia for lost imperial greatness, the novels address the problem of Britain's marginalization and of its shrunken status. On the level of the plot, both Burgess and Winterson make Britain a peripheral, unimportant place, existing at the outskirts of the Roman Empire (Burgess) or of the civilized world in the times of Noah (Winterson). Beyond the literal level, however, the novels associate Britain with the dominant powers in their represented worlds, establishing parallelisms either between the Roman and the British, or between Britain and Noah's Ur of the Chaldees. The most important similarity that the two novels draw between Britain of the later ages and the dominant power in

the ancient/biblical world is the reliance of both on some form of the myth of election and exemplarity, which, as Anthony Smith, Jo Carruthers, Adrian Hastings and others point out, is the fundamental myth of British identity, derived from the Bible by way of Protestant interpretation. As a result of this complex set of (often parodic) echoes and proleptic resonances, Britain in the two novels is simultaneously diminished and aggrandized, depicted as weak and as powerful. Also, in making Rome and Ur resemble Britain, the novels place Britain in what looks like a great transhistorical cycle in which elements that at a given moment are emergent or residual finally displace those that are currently dominant, becoming another version of the hegemonic. Such a representation allows Burgess and Winterson not only to explore the constraints of the foundational myths of election and exemplarity but also to pose questions about the possibility of breaking from the circular logic and finding something different in the interruption of the cycle.

In Chapter 4, I concentrate on three recent New Testament rewritings, which challenge the popular myth of the Bible as the cultural pillar of Western liberalism and tolerance. Jim Crace's *Quarantine* (1997), Philip Pullman's *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* (2010), and Naomi Alderman's *The Liars' Gospel* (2012) echo and subvert the well-established perspective in Britain, according to which the Bible is a domesticated, "home" text (Sherwood 2012: 6). In this myth of the home Bible, Christian scripture is the source of liberal democratic values, associated with security and stability of the socio-cultural life, and correlated with what the British believe to be the Bible-boosted resistance of their culture to intolerance and religion-related violence. Such perspective came into full view during the so-called Rushdie affair of 1989, when a number of arguments defending Rushdie's right to free speech drew on the declared difference between Islamic and Christian scriptures and on the claims about the historic alliance between British liberalism and the Christian Bible. On the one hand, the three novels rewrite the Bible in ways that foreground the otherwise repressed or forgotten fundamentalist and illiberal streaks of the Bible, and, by exposing the manipulative and ideological underpinnings of the Christian Bible, question the myth of the home, domesticated Bible. On the other hand, Crace, Pullman and Alderman explore the consequences of the excessive insulation and purification of culture, i.e. of the exaggerated whitewashing of cultural and social life, of purging it of anything potentially threatening and alien. One important symptom of such whitewashing is the myth of the home Bible – a benign, de-alienated, fully sanitized "British" (or "our") text. Relying on the so-called "immuno-philosophers" (Roberto Esposito, Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, Peter Sloterdijk) and their recent theories of the immunitary logic visible in culture, I claim that the three novels rewrite the Bible to explore and contrast two different modes of cultural immunity, i.e. two different understandings of the need to protect and secure the well-being of individuals and communities. One mode is rooted in the idea

of defensive isolation and walling-in of the individual or communal body. It is based on the dichotomized relationship between the self and the other, and on the rhetoric of war, purity and inviolability of boundaries. The other mode, one which proves more effective and less deadly than the first, allows for the preventive incorporation of the lethal or threatening elements within the communal body or individual life. By developing biblical figures into the immunologically different characters – the literal-minded fasting Jesus, the naively pure Mary, the ambivalent Judas or Caiaphas, etc., and by inquiring into the effects of their various immunitary modes, the novels construct echoing myths in which the Bible is thought outside the ultimately debilitating categories of purity, homogeneity, or innocuousness. Although the composite, impure, unhygienic, undemocratic, morally "dirty" Bible is shown as dangerous, the biblical rewritings discussed in Chapter 4 seem to show that the risk involved in the non-dichotomous attitude to the protection of cultural health outweighs the detrimental effects of the insistence on the inviolable boundaries between the self and the other.

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All of the biblical rewritings discussed in this book touch on the problem of the community – one of the most urgent and troubling issues today. As Roberto Esposito cogently puts it, "Nothing seems more appropriate today than thinking community; nothing more necessary, demanded, and heralded by a situation that joins in a unique epochal knot the failure of all communisms with the misery of new individualisms" (2010: 1). In a homogenized and yet deeply divided world, in which "the common" is both disappointingly self-evident (a consequence of living in a global village) and seriously feared, community is an exceptionally weighty and challenging problem. On the one hand, the current prominence and ubiquity of the concept shows that people today are looking for something that could offer the sense of belonging, meaningful interactions with others, and the context for lasting commitment. Irreducible to one side of Ferdinand Tönnies's distinction between community (*Gemeinschaft*) and society (*Gesellschaft*), community in the sense of a dynamic network of non-homogenizing solidarities, responsibilities and togetherness is what various members of the society try to find. In the words of Gerard Delanty, "the idea of community is related to the search for belonging in the insecure conditions of modern society; perhaps this explains its enduring appeal. The popularity of community today can be seen as a response to the crisis in solidarity and belonging that has been exacerbated and at the same time induced by globalization" (2010: x). In the face of uncertainty, precariousness and insecurity produced by the liquid modernity, people see in the community a promise of better, deeper, more meaningful relationships (Bauman 2001: 1–3). "'Community' is a word most agreeable to modern ears, or so it would seem" (Blackshaw 2010: 19).