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THE LOVING GAZE OF THE EVERYDAY IN THE WORDS OF MICHÈLE ROBERTS'S PROSE

The first novel (*A Piece of the Night*, 1978) of Michèle Roberts's varied literary production, comprising also poetry, short stories and literary criticism, was published in the late 1970s and although it won immediate critical acclaim (The Gay News Book Award), her novel writing fits more comfortably within the context of the 80s and the 90s. It is not only her feminist perspective, her feminist critique of the sexism of the Catholic Church and the patriarchal society, but first and foremost her postmodern experimental play with the language and form of prose that are the main attributes of the novels that Roberts created in the last two decades of the twentieth century.

The mode of Michèle Roberts's novel writing is characterised by a paradox. It resides in contrasts of detailed, clearly outlined though poetic descriptions of things and her mistily nebulous story. Which of the two components is largely foregrounded and to what end follows from Roberts's view that 'the surrealism in the novel will come from details being heightened from the ordinary and the mundane just a little into the bizarre—so you'll still see the connection to the everyday'.¹ The keywords here seem to be 'details' and 'the everyday'. The latter has always been connected with women's writing, whether feminine or feminist, traditional or experimental. The kind of detail that Roberts employs may be viewed against the background of the era of visual presentation as reflecting the visual culture of our time. In Roberts's text words paint vivid, often emotional or even erotic pictures of things that are mostly part of the everyday in the domestic space. In one of her most acclaimed novels, *Daughters of the House* (1992), shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1992, she gives multiple roles to play to such ordinary things: they entitle the short chapters of which the novel is composed and in which they appear, sometimes prominently, sometimes marginally, sometimes hardly at all. The eponymous "Red Suitcase" is the unri-

¹ Michèle Roberts, "Making It Up", in A.S. Byatt and Alan Hollinghurst, eds., *New Writing 4*. London: Vintage 1995, 191.

valled star in its fifteen-line long chapter: it has come to loom large in a recurring nightmare, the consequence of a traumatic experience of war-time travelling, the fear of 10-year-old Leonie of Nazi border control, still re-lived vividly twenty years on. "The Quimper Dish", too heavy and too precious for Leonie's hands to carry, was a large oblong serving dish with rounded sides, its thickness and weight visually enhanced by the bold strokes of its painted decoration in dark orange, dark pink and navy blue. In the centre, her clogged feet firmly planted in bright green grass, stood a Breton countrywoman in white bonnet and striped blue dress. The detailed description of the Quimper dish testifies to the intimate knowledge all family members had of the dish and their genuine sadness when it is broken, not least because it was tied to their memory of the recently deceased Antoinette and their pleasures at her table. However what Roberts leaves unclear is who had actually broken the dish and why Leonie had hidden a secretly pocketed shard which she never admitted to, not even when the distressed widower Uncle Louis tried to piece the dish together and mend it. Formally a marginal, though emblematic role is played by the coffee bowls of the thus entitled chapter. They remain deserted on the kitchen table with skin creasing and thickening on the untouched cafe-au-lait after the bereaved family have left for the funeral mass in the local church. Unlike that, the chapter called "The Frying Pan" offers no such direct pictorial connections, but relies on circumstantial metaphorical links. The pan of the title, even though missing in the following text, illustrates the kitchen scene, suggesting not just frying of the vegetables being prepared on the table, but also the protagonists of the local gossip that spices the kitchen talk. Robert's kitchen space is far from banal. It is filled with mouth-watering foods and fruits and fragrant ingredients of French home-made cooking as well as the mystery of living.

In comparison with *Daughters in the House*, the stories in the generically more adventurous *Flesh and Blood* (1994) use language that sounds distinctly more sensual and voluptuously sensuous. It is as if what the transvestite painter George/Georgina strives to get on the canvases of his/her paintings, Roberts wants to record in the words of her text: 'The cream-coloured silk sheets, flung back, reveal Gladys's pink and cream body, like petals torn from a rose to display its heart. Can you remember the sound of ripping silk?'² In a postmodern way, Roberts's rendering of the everyday is eroticised. The attention to clothing and food becomes increasingly hedonistic, complete with erotic symbolism, like Félicité's prenuptial, virginal notion of the pristine whiteness of her trousseau:

White sheets, pillowcases, bolster-cases, counterpanes.

Tablecloths, table-napkins, traycloths.

Face-towels, towels for the hands, the body, the feet. Face-cloths.

Drying-up cloths for glass. Drying-up cloths for plates, for saucepans.

² Michèle Roberts, *Flesh and Blood*. London: Virago 1994, paperback 1995, 165

All reposed quietly in place, uncreased, gleaming white, in this sweet-smelling interior where no moth dared venture. Félicité counted and checked her treasures. She smoothed and stroked them.

(28)

Roberts's feminine sensibility of pleasure does not however preclude feminist critique. Félicité's pleasurable lingering over the purity of her linen is followed by a passionate act of seduction on a hot summer afternoon, all of it eventually brutalized by rape. The contrasts of pleasure and pain go beyond the bodily and the social critique goes beyond the feminist.

In *In the Red Kitchen* (1990) the loving gaze at lived-in interiors alternates with raw images of homelessness in London—a cardboard city under the railway bridge and a bag lady who sleeps in the entrance to the chemist's. Nevertheless, Roberts's joy at contemplating everyday objects in one's surroundings knows no social boundaries. The Egyptian princess lying 'on a heap of cushions—jade, sour yellow, lime' (7) appears to be no richer or more contented than the contemporary Londoner in her tumble-down house, in love with her 'wicker armchair; [her] worn kelim, blue rose indigo' (17). *In the Red Kitchen* Roberts travels effortlessly across temporal, cultural and class boundaries, from Egyptian hieroglyphs through a pastiche of Victorian letters to fashionable contemporary cookery-books produced, probably alongside all the other narratives in the novel, by a young imaginative Londoner who has thus 'found ways of turning gritty pain to pearls' (27).

Michèle Roberts's imaginative energies in portraying the feminine everyday and her feminist critique conjoin in what Kathleen Wheeler calls her 'rewriting of Christianity.'³ Roberts weaves female religiosity into her texts as part of the everyday, but largely at variance with the patriarchal institution of the Church. It seems that Roberts's attitude is close to that of the feminist theology of liberation as formulated by Jana Opočenská:

Women as new theological subjects have resolutely discarded the role of mere consumers of religion. They do not want to passively consume the theologies of others. They are discovering theology as a creative act in which a person or a group informed from the sources of their own tradition bring into theological debate their experience of God's presence.⁴

The intense relationship of the village women in Roberts's *Daughters of the House* to a statue of a nameless woman saint in the forest can be interpreted in this light. She is a popular saint, worshipped by solitary prayer, votive gift offerings for healing sick children as well as semi-pagan summer night ritual with

³ Kathleen Wheeler, *A Critical Guide to Twentieth-Century Women Novelists*. Oxford: Blackwell 1997, 224.

⁴ Jana Opočenská, *Zpovzdál se dívaly také ženy. Výzva feministické teologie*. Praha: Kalich 1995, 13 (translation mine).

prayer and dance. This old and respected local tradition is forbidden by a new village priest, who has the saint removed from her plinth in the forest and broken up. The women however resist the unpopular authoritarian priest and meet secretly again to celebrate their saint, in addition to keeping the damaged statue hidden under a load of sand. In the light of feminist theology, Roberts's women may be read as participating creatively in 'their experience of God's presence.'

Another, and very dangerous act of revolt against the authority of the Church Fathers is more or less unwittingly embarked upon by the young Abbess Bona Casollin in the second diary record of "Frederigo" in *Flesh and Blood*. Several years after writing the novel, Roberts said in an article in *The European Messenger* that she 'loathe[s] most traditional institutions, their bureaucracies, pyramidal power structures and jargons.'⁵ In their dangerous as well as ridiculous form she reveals the mechanisms of power in Frederigo's diary record of the Inquisition trial with his sister—Abbess Bona Casollin and her nun and childhood friend. The abbess's refusal to obey to the letter the patriarchal guidance of the Church Fathers automatically becomes her accusation, because 'a woman should not do these things. It was a grave sin for her to usurp the authority vested in her superiors' (126). Just as unpardonable and treasonable for the Inquisitor are the feminine changes in the ritual or a relaxation of some of its rigors that the abbess allowed in her convent. Abbess Bona Casolin will burn at the stake for moving night prayers from the icy church to her cell and allowing the nuns to worship without the veil. The sexual interpretation of Bona Casolin's modified rituals and in some cases their undisguised sexuality, in the eyes of the Church Fathers defined as lewd, is defended by Roberts in terms of femaleness and the natural femininity of such behaviour. The kindly commonsense opinions of the young abbess that 'merry hearts love God well' or that 'if the nuns were bored they might succumb to spiritual despair' (228) stand in contrast to the masochistic penitent faith of Madame de Dureville, who, in the words and eyes of her confessor, 'so perfectly exemplified feminine virtue' (*Flesh and Blood*, "Eugénie", 57).

Roberts's affinity to the ideas of feminist theology is best exemplified by her 1984 novel *The Wild Girl*. By rewriting the biblical story of Mary Magdalene, she wanted, she notes, to dissect a myth, but at the same time found herself recreating one.⁶ Retelling old tales is nothing new whether in literary history or current literary practice. In the Middle Ages and still throughout the Renaissance it was rather unusual to present a new and original story. Towards the end of the twentieth century it seems to have become a postmodern fashion to recreate old as well as not so old stories or other authors' texts. Feminist writing shows a special liking for retelling myths and fairy tales. The work of Michèle Roberts fits this category, including the feminist aim of revealing the roots and paths of patriarchal attitudes towards women, of which myths and fairy stories are a rich source.

⁵ *The European Messenger* VIII/2, 1999, 31

⁶ "Author's Note" in Michèle Roberts's *The Wild Girl*. London: Methuen 1984; London: Vintage 1999.

The story of Mary Magdalene is certainly not Michèle Roberts's invention, although the New Testament contains only a few confusing references to several Marys who have in traditional simplification merged into one: Mary Magdalene of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus, reformed sinner who washed, dried with her own hair and anointed with precious balm Christ's feet. It was also the same Mary Magdalene who was the first to see the resurrected Christ. In the end of the novel Roberts follows the 'Western folklore' about Mary Magdalene and in keeping with Jacobus de Varagine's *Golden Legend*, her heroine ends her earthly life in France, on whose Provence coast she was rescued from a shipwreck after her flight from pursuers.⁷ Roberts's novel works with a whole range of details that the popular story accrued over the millennia and does not fail to add some more details of the author's invention. The feminist agenda of the novel is clear: to retell the story from Mary Magdalene's point of view in the spirit of the feminist thesis and also the thesis of feminist theology that 'the Bible is a document of patriarchal culture, written in androcentric language, presenting first and foremost androcentric images of God and an androcentric idea of life in which liberating traditions for all God's people including women are yet to be discovered.'⁸

Roberts tells the story of Mary Magdalene as her testimony written at the command of the Saviour and his blessed mother Mary, for the greater glory of God (*The Wild Girl*, 11), which she is writing in France, as we learn at the end of the novel. But not even this idea of Magdalene's own testimony is a feminist one. Marina Warner refers to the apocryphal *Gospel According to Mary*, in which Mary Magdalene, initiated in Christ's mystery, teaches the other apostles. Warner also makes mention of the Gnostics in the second century celebrating a love relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene.⁹ Roberts of course goes even further. Her Mary Magdalene not only has a love relationship with Jesus and is commanded by him to bring the news of his resurrection to the others and spread his teaching with them, but she even gives birth to Jesus' child. With his daughter Deborah, Salome, sister Martha and Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene lives in seclusion in the mountains, trying to write her gospel. But instead of the hermit-penitent who according to the *Golden Legend* taught Christianity to the local people of the Sainte Baume forests and did penance for her sinful life¹⁰, Roberts's Mary Magdalene lives in loving harmony with her family and in spite of the painful and fervent attempts to make sense of her experience and describe it truthfully, she can find pleasure in the simple joys of living. In the conclusion Roberts does not speculate about the assumption of Mary Magdalene, who,

7 The 'Western folklore' about Mary Magdalene is analysed by Marina Warner in her study of the Marian cult *Alone of All Her Sex. The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1976; New York: Randomhouse Vintage Books 1983, 224-236.

8 Jana Opočenská, *Zpovzdálí se dívaly také ženy*, 15 (translation mine).

9 Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 229.

10 *Ibid.*

according to the *Golden Legend*, was raised to Heaven in ecstasy.¹¹ Rather, in keeping with the ambiguous dénouements of her other novels, she lets Magdalene follow a long-expected call and go away.

Jana Opočenská claims that in the past women were denied the possibility of theological reflection and their experience of God and their faith were not regarded as being of equal value. She believes that even the 'preserved testimonies of e.g. Anežka Přemyslovna, Julian of Norwich, Joan of Arc, Therese of Avile, Hildegard of Bingen and others, testify to a constant conflict between the experience of these women and the authority of the Church' (Opočenská, 20). In *The Wild Girl* Roberts gives the possibility of theological reflection to her fictional character Mary Magdalene, and of course also to her readers. This late twentieth-century reconstruction of her experience played in interaction with the other actors of the New Testament drama raises all the arguments and accusations of the feminist critique of the patriarchal context of Christianity. On the other hand, like feminist theology, it assesses not only the oppressive, but also the liberating influence of biblical teaching. In *The Wild Girl* Roberts creates Mary Magdalene the fighter who loved Jesus and believed in him, but at the same time defended her womanhood and the rights of mutuality in faith and life instead of subordination or subjection.

The cult of the Virgin Mary in the education and life of Catholic girls and women appears as an important motif in a great deal of Roberts's prose. The autobiographical impulse for this interest comes across clearly from her own words: 'Religion is in the unconscious and erupts up from there.'¹² Michèle Roberts was educated at a Catholic convent school before going on to Somerville College in Oxford, and she names religious ritual among the most important influences on her literary work.¹³ Like Marina Warner in the above-mentioned historical study *Alone of All Her Sex*, Roberts, too, in imaginative prose, traces the ways in which the cult of the Virgin Mary has been perceived and used by various people, particularly from the point of view of gender and generation relations. However, while Warner openly voices her doubts about the Marian cult, because in her opinion 'in the very celebration of the perfect human woman, both humanity and women were subtly denigrated' (xxi), Roberts veils unambiguous judgement in the poetic literariness of her text. Nevertheless, both writers are undoubtedly connected by the same early educational experience and a similar aim—to look at the myth of the Virgin Mary from a feminist perspective. Roberts's Freddy (*Flesh and Blood*) falls in love with a statue of the Virgin Mary on her first day at her convent school:

The Virgin wore a white silk veil anchored by a crown of silvery stars, a white silk cloak dotted with gold over a blue dress. She held both her

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *New Writing* 4, 196.

¹³ Lorna Sage, *The Cambridge Guide to Women's Writing in English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999, 536.

hands out to me in a gesture of complete acceptance. She bent her eyes on me very sweetly. She was my mother and she loved me.

(17-18)

Freddy's own mother cannot match up to the love of the Virgin Mary, because she never even gives Freddy her full attention: 'To reach her my voice had to compete with waltz music on the radio, the flushing of the lavatory, the gurgle of the water spilling out of the bath' (18). And what is more, no other mother would be good enough for Freddy, not even as a physical model for Our Lady: 'She had to be smooth, not curved, almost flat. Like a boy' (22).

Similarly, in *Daughters of the House* Therese's 'vision' of the Virgin Mary corresponds exactly to the typical iconic representation of Catholic statues: an ethereal being with a fine, sweet face clad in blue and white with a golden crown. 'She was the Virgin Mother of God. She was flat as a boy. She was the perfect mother who'd never had sex. To whom all earthly mothers had to aspire' (164). The feminist critique of the asexual ideal in Michèle Roberts's literary rendering corresponds exactly to the above words of Marina Warner about the denigration of women. Roberts blames the Church Fathers for manipulating the cult of perfection. When Therese's mother Antoinette died of cancer, 'she'd found herself another mother, she'd been sold one ready-made by the priest of her church. Perfect, that Mother of God, that pure Virgin, a holy doll who never felt angry or sexy and never went away' (165). Marina Warner explains how it happened that the ideal picture of matriarchy in the image of the Virgin Mary became a tool of misogyny with a contemptuous view of women's role in reproduction:

And it was this shift, from virgin birth to virginity, from religious sign to moral doctrine, that transformed a mother goddess like the Virgin Mary into an effective instrument of asceticism and female subjection.

(49)

Nevertheless, Roberts's criticism of religious dogmatism and the Marian cult betrays a deeply involved interest in Christian themes rather than a condemnation of Christianity.¹⁴ We can agree with Kathleen Wheeler that 'by "rewriting" or reinterpreting Christian history, legend, myth and gospels, Roberts has created a female-friendly theology, which is far more genuinely Christian than the sexist, priestly overlays of the last several centuries.'¹⁵

In *The Wild Girl* not only did Roberts remove the overlays of recent centuries and recreate the story of Mary Magdalene, but she also rehabilitated the figure of 'Mary, the mother of the Lord' by discarding the ballast of the virginity cult. She created Mary as a woman of flesh and blood, albeit a mild and subtle figure

¹⁴ Also, see for instance Roberts's poem „The Heretic's Feast", *The European Messenger* VIII/2, 1999, 32.

¹⁵ Kathleen Wheeler, *A Critical Guide to Twentieth-Century Women Novelists*. Oxford: Blackwell 1997, 301.

with great authority. There is little mention of the Virgin Mary in the New Testament and Roberts does not emphasize her role in her book about Mary Magdalene either although she gives her a constant presence imbued with spiritual power. With the weight of her authority Roberts then always has her take the women's side when they are disadvantaged by men or has her support Mary Magdalene when Jesus' male disciples want to silence her. In Mary Magdalene's feverish dream after witnessing Christ's resurrection, Roberts unfolds a picture of continuity of the Queen of Heaven from ancient Ishtar, through Aphrodite, Demeter, Hecate and others, ignored but feared by men, to a three-in-one Queen of Heaven who will rise again. In this image Mary is not the Virgin, the only one among women, but the mother of the Lord fulfilling one of the triple role of women:

— But I shall rise. I shall not let myself be divided and reviled. For I am she who is three in one. For I am Martha the housewife and I am Mary the mother of the Lord and I am Mary the prostitute. I am united, three in one, and I shall rise.

(125)

In the end of her life story and gospel, Roberts's Mary Magdalene writes about Mary 'our' mother (161), who is still respected as the mother of the Saviour, but lives the ordinary life of their small family of four women 'in work and contemplation.' Moreover, Mary *our* mother is in this phase described as a very talkative white-haired granny who 'mixes sermons and curses and jokes in a spicy stream ... as though she is trying to give us all of herself at once' (Ibid.). In Mary Magdalene's retelling Roberts never uses the iconic name the Virgin Mary and the character of the mother of the Lord or the mother of the Saviour is depicted to a large extent in contrast to the unreachable Virgin Mary of the Marian cult.

Roberts's rewriting of the gospel of Mary Magdalene and her discursive portrayal of the Marian cult should not be understood as merely a fashionable, postmodern literary experiment or as feminist exposure of Christian sexism. Of no less interest in the novels is the exploration of spirituality, or more precisely, the possibilities of Christian female spirituality in today's world, as commented on by the Forsaken Sibyl in Roberts's earlier *The Book of Mrs. Noah* (1987):

For her atheistical ex-Protestant friends religion means Christianity and backwardness. Other religions, foreign exotic ones, are on the other hand sympathetically respected, as being part of Third World cultures oppressed by imperialism. What hypocrites, what snobs we are, she thinks: to patronize in others what we deny in ourselves.¹⁶

¹⁶ Michèle Roberts, *The Book of Mrs. Noah*. London: Methuen 1987, London: Vintage 1999, 208.

Writing about religion and the feminist debate arises in Michèle Roberts from a deep conviction and need to tackle those themes, although she makes no secret of some misgivings ('I'm scared of writing about religion, of being mocked...'17) She also knows where her doubts come from:

Repression. Prohibition. Don't forget this. So it's not just fear of going mad when the self dissolves in order to create, it's also fear of what's inside me coming out, that it's bad because critics (e.g. Grandpere the old patriarch) said so in childhood, Don't forget this.¹⁸

Less feminist rhetoric, but an unequivocally feminist approach, also accompanies Roberts's last novel of the century, *Fair Exchange* (1999), which Andrew Barrow describes as an 'extremely juicy historical romance', advising readers to 'swallow it whole and then take flight.'¹⁹ Barrow would probably want to hear more about the French Revolution (1789-1810), against whose background the plot unfolds, rather than what goes on in the kitchen of an asymmetric household of two betrayed women and their illegitimate babies. Andrew Barrow's attitude appears to be a typical example of male rejection of a feminist aesthetic, a topic which Roberts's five Sibyls debate in *The Book of Mrs. Noah*. Still fighting against Alexander Pope's image of 'slipshod sibyls' condemned to marginalisation, they want to create *écriture féminine*, a language and style of writing by women, unburdened by patriarchal models. Authentic women's voices recording female experience as different from male: this is what Michèle Roberts's smorgasbord of everyday objects, food, women's activities, beliefs and dreams brings to the foreground of the British literary scene at the turn of the century.

¹⁷ *New Writing* 4, 193.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 197.

¹⁹ Andrew Barrow, "Food for puzzled thought", *The Spectator*, 10 January 1999.

