

TELLING WOMEN'S LIVES: VISION AS HISTORICAL REVISION IN THE WORK OF MICHÈLE ROBERTS

Sonia Villegas López

Universidad de Huelva

Within the recent trend in postmodern fiction which disavows the *grand récit* of History and promotes individual stories by means of autobiography, in *Impossible Saints* (1997) the feminist author Michèle Roberts rewrites an important body of texts belonging to the Christian tradition: hagiographies, or the lives of women saints, in her case. In this novel, the former inspired texts appear merely as accounts of "personal history", since they go through a process of revision that results in the demystification of both the patriarchal discourse, and the female prototypes imposed by the gender construction of femininity, and fostered by Christianity. In *Impossible Saints*, the constant fictionalization of Josephine's experiences, similar in many respects to Teresa of Ávila's, as well as the rewriting of many female saints's life stories, illustrate, in the first place, the end of history as we know it, and secondly, the political end of autobiography, in so far as it provides the only space for female representation in the official discourse of Christianity, and eludes a unique interpretation in favor of plurality and heterogeneity.

In *Impossible Saints* (1997), the British writer of French origin Michèle Roberts sets out on a journey towards the origins of women's (auto)biography, and thus, of women's history. In this novel, the author alludes to the historical figure of Teresa of Ávila through Sister Josephine, a character of her invention, whose life story becomes the object of analysis and reflection for her niece Isabel. Josephine's private and public experiences become fictionalized by the skilled pen of an intuitive she-narrator who is believed to know most of Josephine's life first hand, but who does not claim to be telling the truth at all times. The central, though elusive and fragmented, narrative of Teresa-Josephine, is interspersed with other minor portraits of famous women mystics and saints of the Christian tradition, which differ in various degrees from the conventional account of their lives. It is my contention in this paper that Michèle Roberts makes use of genres and subgenres like (auto)biography and hagiography in order to rewrite history from a feminist perspective. In fact, precisely by writing other(s') lives the author manages to revise

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the aims of the historical discipline and our notion of historical time.¹ Yet Roberts does not stop at the customary rewriting common among most postmodern writers nowadays, but chooses to focus on further revising the lives of religious women. By so doing, she is not only making a statement about the doubtful miraculous nature of their lives, but also analyses the predictable results of the transmission to and the reception by a female audience of the documents themselves, (auto)biographies in the main, customarily taken as pieces of quasi-historical evidence.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE END OF HISTORY?

The end of traditional history has been the object of concern among contemporary historians. In structuralist circles, for example, critical voices like Lévi-Strauss' rejected the view of a universal and monolithic history and supported instead more partial readings of so-called historical events. A very similar position would be later adopted by some of his disciples, notably Michel Foucault, who subscribed to some of his predecessor's assumptions and focused on the discontinuities of history and on the new role of the historian-archeologist. In the same line, Philip Carrard also spoke about a new appraisal of the discipline, according to which history was but a cultural construct which varied through time; moreover, conventional "historical" texts are not enough for contemporary historians, for whom context acquires a special significance.²

Many of these assumptions have been adopted by postmodern theoreticians and critics alike, who also acknowledge "the end of history". Probably the major contribution of postmodernism is the assertion that history is a fictional construct and, therefore, the figure of the "truthful" historian and historical records themselves become unreliable. Especially from the 1970s onwards there has been a tendency to challenge the *grand récit* of History and to promote instead individual stories. The quotidian, and what has been previously anonymous, become objects of interest for the critical eye of postmodernism. Not only that, there is a return in literature to famous historical figures of the past, though this time new sides to their character and their historical relevance are revealed. In general terms, the notions of history as narrative and as a process instead of as a result, are also promoted. Questions about the ontological status of history, or even about issues of power and control behind the role and function of the chroniclers, are constantly raised (Elias 1995: 105). Furthermore, radically different concepts of historical time are provided by contemporary theoreticians of all denominations from Foucault onwards. Elizabeth Deeds Ermath, for example, speaks about the crisis of representational time, and

¹ The expression "historical time" is extracted from Elizabeth Deeds Ermath's influential work *Sequel to History*.

² See Sonia Corcuera's thorough analysis of late tendencies in historiography in *Voces y silencios en la historia. Siglos XIX y XX* (1997). In this text, Corcuera presents differing visions of the demise of traditional historiography, and only at the end offers anti-postmodern views like that of Gertrude Himmelfarb. In exposing her controversial stance, Corcuera focuses mainly on Himmelfarb's rejection of a new history written from a feminist perspective, especially as the interest in detecting fragmentations and discontinuities would narrow, the historian argues, the "universal" aim of the discipline (Corcuera 1997: 407-08). Nonetheless, for the purposes of this article we will be adopting a postmodern and revisionist position more akin to feminist concerns in the debate of "the end of history".

conceives historical time as “a thing of the past” (1992: 25). In this way, she demystifies the idea of temporality as such, especially by presenting it only as a convention, and not as a natural result (Ermath 1992: 30). Fredric Jameson argues for an understanding of history which contains necessarily the condition of a previous textualization or narrativization of the Real (1989: 35). In a similar vein, Frederick M. Holmes agrees that this very conviction affects fundamentally the status of history as a privileged discourse based on facts: “The basis of historical activity, in this view, is thus not a reality to which historiography can be proved unequivocally to correspond but a hypothetical construction” (1997: 74). This hybrid condition reinforces the affinity between historical writing and imagination, to be discussed later.

There is no doubt the postmodern view of history has been greatly beneficial for women, usually absent, or erased from, historical narratives both as individuals and as a collective. Feminist historians like Linda Gordon and Joan Scott have been concerned with the relationship between historical writing and the power/knowledge binarism, in so far as historical interpretation leads to questions of agency and representation (Landry and MacLean 1993: 128-29). They envisage, for instance, how the revaluation of the *petites histoires*, and even the acknowledgment of a plurality of historical representations, has enabled women to occupy new spaces and to deauthorize dominant discourses, and has given them the opportunity to “name” their experiences.³ In this light, Julia Kristeva’s theory about historical time, and more specifically about women’s insertion into history, has been instrumental for feminist readings, and, later, also very useful for the aims of women’s historiographic metafiction. Kristeva’s notion of the inseparability of the subject from history made her conceive a ‘historical’ or ‘cursive time’, which is associated to a linear concept of history, and a ‘monumental or cyclical time’, where the history-story of events transcends linear time (1986: 189). Kristeva relates these two perspectives to the evolution and changing aims of feminism, the first stage (‘cursive’) corresponding to women’s desire to become historically visible, and to create a female genealogy, and the second one (‘monumental’) with the second wave of feminism, with female subjectivity and the maternal (Kristeva 1986: 193-95). Still she envisages a third state that apparently encompasses the previous two, although it cannot fully reconcile them, and consists again in an insertion within historical coordinates, but this time with a rejection of the limitations imposed by a linear perception of history. This rather elusive third view, which Kristeva never seems to explain clearly, indicates a third space of historical signification, or in Linda Anderson’s words a “mental state” (1990: 136), in which the shaping of historical knowledge about women through imagination plays a fundamental role. Anderson uses precisely the term “re-imagining” (1990: 129) to refer to the double process of women’s insertion in history —what she considers their textual presence—, and of actively contributing to women’s historical “archive”.

³ Accordingly, Susan Stanford Friedman reminds us of the interchangeability of the terms history-story: “We need to recognize the way in which any history represents *a* history, all the more dangerously if it assumes itself to be *the* history” (1995: 24).

One of the main points that the women theoreticians and critics above agree upon is the need for other women to recover female memories from oblivion. Many of these experiences in the form of life stories have recently peopled historical novels written by women, which are markedly different from those written by men, as Lyn Pykett observes:

When one turns to 'historical novels', however, it does seem to be the case that at this particular point of the twentieth century, while male writers seek to challenge the authority of the past by deconstructing the idea of history and converting it into a series of fictions, female writers are more likely to seek to recuperate the past from a female perspective and make tell a different story: her story not history. (1987: 77)

In that sense, the use of historiographic metafiction for feminist purposes has contributed, on the one hand, to emphasize the fictionality of the historical construct, and on the other, to outline the obvious connections between the historical discipline and the genre of (auto)biography. As we will see, particularly in the case of women's texts there is a clear aim to reflect on the construction of gendered discourses and on their narrative representation (Cranny-Francis 1990: 12).

History and (auto)biography share a number of similarities. In *Sisters & Strangers*, critic and novelist Patricia Duncker enumerates some of the "fears" that autobiography reflects, that could be easily applied to history: "the fear of ever finding the self who made that past, the fear of unearthing the dead, the conflicts unresolved, the griefs unmourned, the fear of betraying the living, of being seen naked" (1992: 56). As it follows from Duncker's argument, they both rely on memory as the basis of the (re)search, since the two genres imply above all the search for an explanation, and try to offer coherent answers to unresolved questions. Most crucially, these two kinds of narrative, seen in a postmodern light, can be read as ways of accounting for the particular and the individual, and in the end as attempts to give a sense of purpose to "fractured self[ves]" (Duncker 1992: 57). This same notion of the multiplicity of the self, quite liberating in a sense, is appealing especially for women writers of fiction and history, for whom these practices seem to go hand in hand, since they tend to entail processes of reconstruction and remembering.⁴

Akin to this are Leigh Gilmore's assumptions about autobiography. To start with, Gilmore points out in *Autobiographics* that the close attention lately paid to autobiography is partly due to the renewed interest in subjects like history. In an ideal sense, their function is primarily to tell the "truth" (Gilmore 1994: 19), or else, as we will see in the case of Roberts's novel, to tell "other truths". Again the question of gender, as a feature of the other's identity, lies at the centre of both autobiographical and historical discourse:

⁴ The act of re-membering the past is one invoked by Roberts in many of her novels. See, for example, Luckhurst's article on the use of memory as source of historical research in order to recover "the unspeakable past" in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Michèle Roberts's *Daughters of the House*.

[A]utobiographies pull together such a variety of kinds of writing (history, memoir, confession, even parody) that the “unifying” *I* at their “center” is already fractured by its place in varying discourses (political, philosophical, psychological, aesthetic), and what frequently fractures such totalizing theories of identity is gender. (Gilmore 1994: 45)

In this light, the use of the autobiographical genre, particularly that of female *herstory*, amounts to a political act, “because it asserts a right to speak rather than to be spoken for” (1994: 40).

In the same line, Patricia Waugh speaks about the tendency of many contemporary women writers like Angela Carter, Jeanette Winterson and Margaret Atwood, to name a few of them, to “re-imagine the world in which we live” (Waugh 1992: 129). As she remarks, this is not a new practice for women, whose experience has been always akin to postmodernist values —especially as they have perceived themselves as decentred and fragmented. Therefore, postmodern rewritings of history include new forms of fabulation which bear a strong relation with other literary forms (Wallace 1998: 258). In the cases of history and (auto)biography, there is a concern for revealing the fictionality of history and literature, and for offering new patterns of expression. In general terms, contemporary historical novels seek to present history “as an open work in order to defamiliarize and revitalize (a) the process of historical reconstruction and (b) the cultural assumptions about what constitutes ‘fact’, what constitutes ‘history’, and what constitutes the very boundaries between the real and the linguistic” (Elias 1995: 109). As suggested above, this demystification of the historical discipline is carried out through an (auto)biographical discourse, raised in women’s novels to the condition of female historiography, and favouring the end of history as we know it.

2. TELLING WOMEN’S LIVES: MICHÈLE ROBERTS AND *IMPOSSIBLE SAINTS*

The common ground most women writers from the sixties onwards seem to share is the new conception of the novel as “revision”, formulated by Adrienne Rich as “the art of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” (1980: 35). As Rich had begun to apprehend, this process of revision becomes a fundamental mechanism of vindication for female authors, particularly because by means of this practice they could bring about the renewal of narrative conventions. This notwithstanding, these female innovators do not reject tradition; on the contrary, they assimilate the canon in order to revisit it. In the case of contemporary writers like Michèle Roberts, as Stowers maintains, the act of looking back usually takes place in the heart of a female collectivity which tries to restore an absent or marginalised *herstory* (1996: 70). The search for new forms of female expression, for new spaces of the feminine, ends with the recovery of long-lost voices that come to life in Roberts’s novels. For that purpose, she chooses to rewrite and interpret some of the canonical texts of the Christian tradition, peopled by relevant women who have lived in men’s shadow most times. In *The Visitation* (1983) Roberts evoked the Biblical characters of the Virgin Mary and her cousin

Elizabeth to discuss the validity of the diad feminism-Christianism. Also in *The Wild Girl* (1984) she offered a different picture of Mary Magdalen, and vindicated her role in Christ's life as witness and later as chronicler of a fifth gospel. In 1987 she published *The Book of Mrs Noah*, in which she aired her desire to counteract the effects of the gendered discourse of Christianity, mentioned above, and to that end she revised canonical texts and female figures from the Christian and classical traditions. In this light, if Mary Magdalen inaugurated a genealogy of women writers in Roberts's early novel, since her (auto)biography is handed down to her daughter, Noah's wife starts a quest for self-discovery on board a peculiar ark-archive. Finally, *In the Red Kitchen* (1991), though not drawing on biblical sources, she presents the stories of four women, whose not too-evident attachments defy the narrow ties of space and time—in fact these women's lives are embedded in a temporal substratum, very similar to Kristeva's notion of "monumental time"—, but who are nonetheless connected by a "communal past" (Stowers 1996: 71).

However, perhaps the closest reference to *Impossible Saints* may be *Daughters of the House* (1992), which won Roberts the WH Smith Literary Award and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. In this novel, the author imagines "what a modern female saint would be like" (Roberts 1998: 195), narrating the life of Thérèse de Lisieux. Thérèse and Josephine share a number of features: both are assaulted by doubts, fears and sexual whims; their lives are marked by a father figure; but above all, both write an autobiography as the "definitive" version of their lives (Galván 1998: 68). Hence, Roberts's desire to reproduce Josephine's own voice was anticipated in earlier works. By focussing on the lives of religious women, in her previous novel, *Daughters of the House*, Roberts finds, in the search for a personal language in which her heroines may convey their mystical experiences, the perfect combination, the image of inspiration proper (Galván 1998: 64). To a greater degree than in *Daughters of the House*, Roberts's process of revision in *Impossible Saints* affects primarily the definition of history, and the limits of traditional historiography. Furthermore, her re-vision results in the demystification of both patriarchal gendered discourse and the female prototypes fostered by the dominant discourse of Christianity. In fact, Roberts's novel provides a space for female representation that eludes a single interpretation in favour of heterogeneity. Therefore, in offering a wide range of "true testimonies" from varied perspectives, Roberts is not trying to impose a single view, but promotes a plurality of voices instead, "[a] chaotic, plural narrative coming from the inside, the underneath, the edge" (Roberts 1998: 191-92).

In *Impossible Saints* the inspired texts lose the aura of the sacred only to appear as accounts of personal experience. In fact, the truthfulness of the stories that have been transmitted as articles of faith is questioned, at the same time as official hagiography is parodied in a double process of creation and criticism (Waugh 1984: 68). First of all, Roberts' novel features the revision of Josephine's *Life*—the figure representing Teresa of Avila—who, after having some supernatural visions which aroused the suspicions of some church authorities, writes an autobiography in consonance with ecclesiastical orthodoxy. She finally avoids the charge of heresy by consciously exploiting gender stereotypes:

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She escaped by not telling the truth. Not telling the whole truth. You could say she protected herself from accusations of heresy by lying and dissembling. By speaking the language they understood. Being careful to use the words they used, the concepts they were familiar with, that they had designed. (Roberts 1997: 33)

More specifically, Josephine's biography, offered by her niece Isabel, amounts to another fictionalization of her experience, as the narrator herself admits. On the other hand, *The Golden Legend* by De la Voragine can be found in the gaps between the life stories of these women saints, presented in a form that distorts the original. In presenting both Josephine's and the saints' testimonies through their own voices, Roberts adopts at all times a female perspective, and makes clear that there were no miracles or self-sacrifices behind their legends, but only instances of patriarchal abuse.

Although the connections between Josephine and the real referent of Teresa of Avila are self-evident, the author seems to reject a one-to-one identification between the historical figure and the fictional one, "Josephine is precisely *not* Teresa", she claims in the Author's Note to the novel. Nonetheless, the real woman and the character of Roberts's narrative share a passion for writing, which accounts for the importance they give to the creation and re-vision of their (auto)biographies. For Teresa, the literary medium was a form of expression which would correspond to her mystical climaxes, as Maitland and Mulford imagine in their recreation of the saint's life: "Mother is writing ... writing ... writing. Mother is always writing" (1998: 354). In *Impossible Saints*, once Josephine leaves the houses of the f/Father—both her home and the convent—, and finds a place of her own, a former pig-sty in the natural surroundings of her cousin Magdalena's house, she begins to write, feverishly and without rest, fragments of her second autobiography, supposedly her "real" life.⁵ Her crucial encounter with her mother's manuscripts, her discovery of a symbolic mother in the guise of Mother Nature, as well as some worldly experiences, like an intimate relationship with her former confessor, Lucian, prepare Josephine to formulate, and later to bring about, her ideal of an all-female collective:

In one of those medical books of her mother's, that she had snatched a glance at so long ago, Josephine had seen a drawing of some Siamese twins. Now this served as her model for a house, and for how she wanted to live. Two houses together, back to back; two bodies joined by a single skin.... Each woman who lived here would be able to live two lives: a double life, it was that simple. (Roberts 1997: 192)

⁵ Josephine's recovery of her mother's presence through her inheritance—the bulk of her written materials—together with her privileged contact with nature are responsible for the new "earth language" she inherits, which evokes notions of *l'écriture féminine* promoted by French feminism: "The earth spoke to her. What the earth said was untranslatable. It was a language Josephine was drawn into. ... What was going on was this earth language, with Josephine now a part of its grammar, earth sentences, the earth was the speech she could hear, that spoke her and spoke to her, that attached her into its structure and dissolved her into a part of speech, a part of earth" (Roberts 1997: 189-90). For a definition of *l'écriture féminine*, see Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa" and "Castration or Decapitation?"

Taking into account some of Roberts's interests, like the new conception of female community, or even of female spirituality, Teresa of Avila's spirit of reform is mirrored or even radicalized by Josephine's project for religious women, as we see "a place of female gossip, communion and communication, a place of nurturing in the decidedly female house" (Stowers 1996: 71; Roberts 1998: 167). It is in the domestic setting of this wordly convent of her design that Josephine continues writing the account of her real life, again in a very fragmentary fashion, since she used as writing paper "the backs of recipes, prayer cards, bills, other people's letters, and so on" (Roberts 1997: 233).⁶ Her random and chaotic form of composition defied detection and transmission alike, at the same time as it hindered the task of her chronicler, Isabel in this case.

As stated above, both Teresa's *Vida* and Josephine's *Life* are said to have been written under the supervision of spiritual directors, for whom their autobiographies amounted to lawful forms of public confession. The official imposition on Teresa and Josephine to write an autobiography to atone for their "visibility" in the past is not arbitrary, and responds to a carefully contrived plan of the Inspectors to simulate the truth, on the whole, the main purpose of autobiography: "The autobiography ... makes claim to historical veracity as the account of part or all of the life of a real individual written by that individual" (Felski 1989: 90). As Felski and Gilmore have noticed, the confessional text has played a relevant role especially in the experience of women mystics, originating nonetheless a considerable paradox. On the one hand, (auto)biographies were the only vent permitted to them to appear in public, and to express themselves in discourse, particularly in a written one. On the other hand, they became political practices in a sense, as they were regulated and sanctioned by the Church. Confession seems to have encompassed, then, both truth and skepticism:

Mysticism provided an interesting test for the possibility of a counterdiscourse, as it revealed the limits of the church/state's tolerance in authorizing women's speech as "truth". Although mysticism was busily assimilated to an orthodox agenda, it was a counterhegemonic form of worship and, most important, began to generate its own discourse. Significantly, it was practiced largely by women. (Gilmore 1994: 118)

Though not all feminist confessional writing is necessarily fragmented, some reputed feminist literary critics seem to imply that this is often the case with autobiographies written by women. Patricia Duncker, for example, relates the profusion of feminist autobiographical writing with women's actual need to achieve an identity, or else to become reconciled to themselves to "a series of multiple identities, some chosen, others imposed upon us" (Duncker 1992: 58). Rita Felski's view of feminist confessional practices follows the same line, since she argues that they try to reproduce inner lives, and not merely a description of what happened:

⁶ The comparison between cooking and writing as expressions of the female imagination is a commonplace in Roberts's production. Particularly in *Impossible Saints*, Josephine is said to develop her gifts as an inspired cook, preparing wonderful dishes with leftovers, and writer, pouring words on various scraps of paper.

"the feminist confession seeks to reduce the patterning and organization of experience which characterizes historical narrative; its structure is episodic and fragmented, not chronological and linear" (1989: 99). In general terms, the fragmented structure of Josephine's autobiographics⁷ corresponds to this pattern, and in that sense, it rejects the order imposed by traditional historiography. Precisely, this same fragmented composition announces Josephine's fate after death in another way. Especially evident in this light is the allegory drawn between the autobiographical or confessional text and the mystic's body. The ruptures and fragments of the text find their parallel in the disturbances the body is subjected to, particularly as Josephine is literally dismembered by the faithful, and her limbs made into a stew by Sister Maria to avoid detection by the Church. Only her bones remain, and they will be scattered in a mosaic in "The Golden House", the setting of the beginning and the end of the novel, and Josephine's, as well as other women saints', resting place. This motif, which propitiates the circular structure of the work, represents the rejection of a conventional and definite closure, and ironically provides the final and most vivid example of fragmentation, as Josephine's body, the only feasible record of her life, vanishes, leaving only traces of "her unobstrusive sort of sanctity" as "the most humble and self-effacing of her sex" (Roberts 1997: 308).

In Teresa's and Josephine's stories, their "confessional" projects are viewed as instances of "personal history", which end by bearing only a slight resemblance to the truth. Josephine's claim for objectivity, as much as Isabel's, are thwarted all along, but especially when Josephine's niece confesses to having forged parts of her aunt's autobiography. After Josephine's death, Isabel tries to trace the remnants of her aunt's life, searching for evidence of her second *Life*, which she claims Josephine had written "from the margins ... between the lines of the first" (Roberts 1997: 34). From then onwards, even Josephine's unauthorized version will turn into the object of Isabel's narrative. Her use of the conventions of (auto)biography results in the blurring of the distinction between fact and fiction, to the extent that it is impossible to decide where memories begin and where imagination ends. In the last part of the novel Isabel confesses her role as narrator of Josephine's (auto)biographical project, as any postmodern narrator would do:

I, Isabel, write this account of my aunt's life. I shall no longer write in disguise, pretend to be a calm witness when I am not and never was. How can I recount the story of Josephine and not admit I am making it all up? I was not there, after all, for so much of her life. I am relying on hearsay, the stories she herself told me, the bits I put together for myself. (Roberts 1997: 261)

⁷ The use of the autobiographical genre that Roberts makes in *Impossible Saints* could apply to Gilmore's "autobiographics", defined as follows: "Autobiographics, as a description of self-representation and as a reading practice, is concerned with interruptions and eruptions, with resistance and contradiction as strategies of self-representation" (1994: 42).

To complete her biographical task, Isabel relies on various materials, as we read, some of which were provided by Josephine herself, like her first *Life*, some poems and translations, fragments from the saints' lives, and the original palimpsest of her unauthorized autobiography, written in single squares of paper and made into a rosary. When Isabel discovers the multiplicity of texts that the beads contain, it is for her to rearrange and give a certain order to the material: "Bubbles of narrative, that burst in all directions. A chaotic pattern which made no sense.... Her cupped hands were full of words which ran about like balls of mercury" (Roberts 1997: 238-39). The final narrative offered to us will be, then, Isabel's revised and reconstructed version, and thus the third *Life* of Josephine. As stated above, the image identifying this narrative composition, as provided by Roberts herself in the text, is that of a palimpsest, thus strengthening the ties with the act of writing history. Finally, Isabel's manipulation of the texts available to her is but another "ingenious transformation of materials" (1997: 234), very similar to the previous ones performed by Josephine herself. This endless revision by means of the destruction of "archives", and the subsequent process of invention has always entailed a maneuver of self-effacement on the part of the author(s), and most importantly, a challenge to traditional hagiography and historiography. With Isabel, the potential for change in the hands of the chronicler-biographer is foregrounded, since she represents history as "a mode of knowing that selects, organizes, orders, interprets, and allegorizes" (Friedman 1995: 12-13). Furthermore, Isabel stands for the link between different generations of women: her image taking her aunt's place in the pig-sty to complete her narrative, and the visit to the Golden Chapel with her granddaughter to see the remains of the women saints at the end of the novel reinforce the sense of female genealogy and *herstory* that Roberts seems to promote. In this case, the act of reception ensures the renewal of the conventions of history-making from a feminist perspective, essentially by resorting to memory.⁸

Josephine's plot centers mainly on narrative construction, and on her condition as agent and object of her own fictional (auto)biography. However, inserted within the episodes describing her life, are also included the stories of other women saints, martyrs most of them, who had served as examples of feminine conduct from the very origins of Christianity. These instances of hagiography can be considered as historical revisions in their own right, since they represent commonplaces in women's history. Following Josephine's model, the other saints are given a voice of their own, their new life stories appearing in a different place and time from the traditional ones, with the result that their autobiographies tend to deauthorize the old narratives, and also contribute to *herstory*-making with new ways of telling. In this peculiar instance of rewriting, most stories combine factual, or traditionally-accepted-as "objective" information, validated by authorized sources like *The Golden Legend*, or the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, with parts of Roberts's own device.

⁸ The chain connecting Beatrice, Josephine, Isabel, and finally Isabel's granddaughter brings to mind the feminist concern for a genealogical practice, which can be outlined as a task of "putting together the history of 'a woman whom patriarchal poetics dismembered and whom we have tried to remember'. Remembering thus becomes a process dedicated to unity; fragments of written selves are made to undergo a rite of matrilineal coherence" (Williams 1992: 54-55).

As with common (auto)biographies, in *Impossible Saints* hagiography stops being a quasi-historical genre to become only another form of narrative. The sections of the stories that receive closer attention and are subject to greater revision are those dealing with sexual politics. On the one hand, the conventional roles of ideal and monstrous femininity, for example, are demystified and often subverted in the novel, as the cases of Thais and Mary of Egypt evince, both being examples of the saintly prostitute. Moreover, Roberts exposes the mechanisms that favour the association of saintliness and asexuality in the historical discourse of Christianity, and denounces how this connection has been usually applied to women.

As we see, these episodes are fit critiques of the gendered discourses supported by both religion and patriarchy, which have in most cases erased women—especially those hailed as female saints—from history. In fact, Roberts's narrator seems to claim that the canonisation of women is only a strategy to promote "feminine virtues", and that it ends, nevertheless, in absence:

A saint is: what I am not. A saint is: over there. Not here. A saint is invisible, I can't see her, she has run away out of sight, she hovers just ahead of me, the air trembles with her departure, she has gone off and left me, she is a woman I want and whom I can't reach and can't find. She is a woman who is dead. A saint is absence. Always somewhere else, not here. (Roberts 1997: 273)

Although all the figures presented in this novel are "saints with a history, a pedigree, who could be looked up in books and their stories checked" (1997: 2), as Isabel reflects when she visits the Golden Chapel at St Ursula, there exist many anonymous ones whose bones are spread disorderly on the chapel's walls. They represent the words of a story still untold, and to decipher it constitutes Roberts's purpose in the novel. Let us try to briefly interpret some of their life stories.

In general terms, the female saints selected by Roberts are all inscribed in the gender construction supported by patriarchy, and they suffer from the same limitations that this system imposes on the rest of women. Their lives go through different stages, during which their identities—their selves and the gender features forced on them—enter into conflict. The first group of women has in common their blind obedience of a strict code of male values, and their supervision by a series of male spiritual guides who are in charge of preserving the *status quo*. In this sense, St Paula embodies a prototype that stands for those women who believe at heart the roles assigned to them by society. Actually, her case—she internalises Jerome's teachings about the need to transcend the body, with tragic results—, as much as that of the rest of female saints in the novel, speaks of the double standard applied to women in the Christian doctrine, according to which the body fully determines their lives. Secondly, St Petronila's is a story of female invisibility, and her failure is due to her isolation from other women. Though belonging to the same group we delineated above, St Thecla's and St Christine's experiences are similar in a sense. Both rebel against their allotted destiny, and counteract patriarchal discourse with other forms of expression like dancing. Just as many of the examples that follow,

however, they will be forced to bear the marks of “shame”, sentenced to live in exile as marginal beings or freaks of nature. The four portraits that follow —St Agnes, St Thais, St Dymphna and St Uncumber— speak about female martyrdom in sundry ways, and document cases of patriarchal abuse mainly in the form of pederasty. Quite frequently, these women are secluded in towers or exiled from the “father” country, and most significantly their lives denounce once more the lack of sympathetic female figures. By way of example, Thais’s pointless rivalry with her mother for her father’s love is regarded as a sin, and is punished accordingly: “She was so wicked she could not live in the world like other people. She had forfeited any rights to love or happiness. She had betrayed her mother. She was utterly lost” (Roberts 1997: 174).⁹

Furthermore, the strict vigilance of the father figures, together with the need to integrate in a man’s world, make some of Roberts’s female protagonists choose the strategy of masquerade and transvestism. A case in point is that of St Marina, whose episode reinforces women’s invisibility in everyday life, since in order to be accepted in a religious community, she opts for a permanent disguise. A transvestite during her life, her holiness had been hidden (1997: 241), and only after death will she be appointed as an example of renunciation for both men and women. Finally, the last two images Roberts offers us are those of female saints who challenge, perhaps to a greater degree than the previous ones, the official view about them transmitted and supported by tradition by providing a novel theology written in the feminine. St Barbara is condemned to die for her particular interpretation of the Holy Trinity —one in which the Holy Ghost is the spirit of the dead mother— whose novelty resembles Josephine’s daring theology. As for St Mary of Egypt, who stands, together with St Thais, for the prototype of the “penitent whore” (Warner 1976: 225), she preaches to her former boss, the retired priest Zozimus, the pleasures of the body. With her unconventional story, the only one which does not end tragically, Roberts leaves a door open to reconciliation and hope.¹⁰

Crucial for our purposes here is that, in all cases, their bodies are nowhere to be traced. Paula’s bones are profaned, and then scattered; Thecla dies in a cave; Thais is thrown by her father into a well and “in time her flesh and bones rotted and disintegrated and became part of the filthy water” (Roberts 1997: 174); Uncumber ends her days as a servant, and is buried among the poor; nobody remembers where Marina’s body has been buried; Barbara is dismembered and eaten by vermin; and there is no sign of Mary of Egypt’s burial place. Once again, it is this peculiarity

⁹ Reading Freudian psychoanalysis in the light of Luce Irigaray’s critique, Jane Gallop identifies the daughter’s desire for her father, and her breaking ties with a mother figure, with “the daughter’s seduction”. This scene, which takes place in the bosom of patriarchy, involves a paradox which ensures the authority of the law of the Father. These four women saints in Roberts’s novel suffer from it: the daughter is irremediably drawn to seduce the father at the same time that she must forbear to fulfil her desire, and must respect the restrictions imposed by the law that protects the father from her (Gallop 1982: 71-ff).

¹⁰ Characters like Mary of Egypt, who chooses to end her life as a prostitute in the desert, conform to the model that Roberts herself identifies as the *hetaira* archetype, as Rowland makes explicit in her Jungian reading of her novels. This archetype subsumes the split virgin/whore which Roberts exploited in earlier novels, under a new “image of female completeness” (Rowland 1999: 90).

which announces the end of history as we know it. In this poststructuralist age in which texts matter “as evidence of themselves rather than as means to reconstruct events” (Fernández-Armesto 1995: 32), what can be done without textual/body evidence? As a principle, the “respectability of uncertainty” (1995: 31) will have to be allowed by contemporary readers of history and fiction. In fact, we never get to know the “real” Josephine, nor which parts of her story are taken from her autobiographies, and which were invented by Isabel. The immediate result of this instability is the fact that the texts that “tell” about her, as well as those which recover the lives of other women saints, share the same loose sense of authenticity. In all cases, then, it will be necessary to read between lines, and the process of “unearthing” parts of their stories will be endless. Also, these assumptions have obvious implications at the level of reader reception, since the image of a female audience, ready to receive the tales, and inheriting thus the legacy of their foremothers, is ever-present in the novel.

3. CONCLUSIONS

In *Impossible Saints*, historical revision results in the demystification of the very process of historical construction, which in this narrative centers on the quotidian, the individual and the particular (Connor 1996: 129). In the face of the absence of direct witnesses, or of documents that support the testimony of the protagonists, Roberts initiates in this novel the task of transmitting those stories, which sometimes run parallel to the official biographies, in a process of ‘recreation’ of history. In fact, as she has declared in an interview, she is interested in history as a medium to communicate between different time sequences, as a kind of “time-travel” (Galván 1998: 69). Hence, this “narcissistic narrative”, as Linda Hutcheon remarks, focuses primarily on the representation of the process which originates Josephine’s biography, and that of the other women saints’, and not on the actual texts themselves (Hutcheon 1984: 6).

As we would expect, *Impossible Saints* concludes without providing definite answers to the conflicts raised throughout the novel. Its open ending, the multiple testimonies, fragmented in form and content, the metafictional nature of the narrative, as much as the use of (auto)biographical voices, which go between reality and fiction, are essential elements which characterize this act of postmodernist revision. The expression of the marginalized female experience, which Roberts takes as her starting point, occupies in the novel a place of privilege, since those narratives, silenced so far, amplify the traditional texts they come from. This aim responds to one of Roberts’s main concerns in all her production, in her novels and her poetry alike, and that consists precisely in “reading” the old stories in new and empowering ways. In that sense, following the path the author had opened in previous works, like *The Wild Girl*, or *Daughters of the House*, in *Impossible Saints* she also manages to deauthorize the chroniclers of the past, that now, more than ever before, speak the feminine. Finally, this latter novel represents a landmark in the context of postmodern and feminist fiction, in so far as it consciously works to dissociate itself from the great metanarratives of western discourse, particularly in

this case from the religious doctrine of Christianity, and more specifically from the traditional messianic doctrine.

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