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Be(com)ing Dispossessed: Relationality and Violence in Naomi Alderman's *The Liars' Gospels*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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- 1 Naomi Alderman was included in the 2013 Granta selection of most promising British novelists under 40. She has written four novels so far, the last one being *The Power* (2016). After *Disobedience* (2006)—which recalls Jeanette Winterson's lesbian *Bildungsroman* *Oranges are not the Only Fruit*—and *The Lessons* (2010), Alderman's *The Liars' Gospels* (2012) constitutes a problematic return to the past. I say problematic because, as Tom Holland suggests in his review, the novel results in an aporia since 'hanging over the bare bones of Alderman's revisionist narrative [...] is the poetry of Christian doctrine and myth' (2012). The novel mostly received positive reviews, which often focus on its visceral discourse and its cultural relevance. For instance, Arifa Abkar underlines that the life of Christ is brilliantly depicted from a Jewish perspective (2012). The present article goes beyond. Indeed, it is my contention that *The Liars' Gospels* responds to Géza Vermes's (and others') reappraisal of Jesus for Judaism. In her review of the novel for the Jewish Book Council, Ada Brunstein also praises the text as one that voices Jewish sacrifice and revises the humanness of the deified Jesus (2014). The title of the novel itself poses an ethical problem because, as Shoshi Ish-Horowicz argues, 'the reading is enjoyable as far as Christ's futility is acknowledged' (52).¹ The sophistication of the text puts forward ethical

dilemmas that the author apparently unravels restoring the limits between fiction and history in a postscript. This article deals with this ethical dilemma, but, more especially, with that between humanness and divinity. Miryam and Jesus are not deified in the way Christian tradition has done. They are, the novel reclaims, humans who played their roles in a concrete socio-cultural and political scenario. However, as will be shown, in insisting on their humanness, characters paradoxically get a spark of the divine. In fact, *The Liars' Gospels* insinuates that their bare humanness is perhaps the reason why Christian tradition chose them as spiritual leaders. Yet, the main aim of this paper is precisely to delve into Alderman's 'Jewification' of Christian narratives as a complex act of dispossession and reparation. Alderman herself explains in an interview with Brunstein that she devised *The Liars' Gospels* when, being still a teenager, her Hebrew teacher told her: 'Nobody should write a book about the Jewish Jesus' (2014).

- 2 The novel reappraises the events surrounding Christ's last days from the viewpoint of four relevant, albeit marginal, figures—namely the Virgin, Judas, Caiaphas and Barabbas. The four-voiced format of the canonical Gospels is thus used against them as well as to expose the precarious lives of Jews/the Other under Roman rule/the rule of the Same. In being prefaced by the *dramatis personae*, Alderman's text makes historical figures embody the aporia between the alleged truth of the Gospels and the 'lies' of fictional characters, the Christian canon and Jewish revisionism. Hence, this paper not only focuses on how *The Liars' Gospels* makes the margins of the Holy History visible, but particularly on the poetics of dispossession around the characters' stories. With this aim, I will draw on Judith Butler's concept of dispossession as a bifurcation of Lévinas's politics of alterity, and on Slavoj Žižek's conception of violence. Butler and Athena Athanasiou claim themselves to return to Greek myths 'to understand the present, which means that those myths are animated in new ways' (2013, x). *The Liars' Gospels* delves into Jewish 'myths' to give them a new meaning, to approach the biofictional side of historiography and of religious scriptures. The ultimate act of dispossession consists in questioning the four main characters' aura, to which the present analysis contributes. In this sense, I wonder whether Alderman (and myself) is performing an 'act of ethical violence', not so much in showing the actual violence in the siege of Jerusalem, but in demystifying figures like Christ and the Virgin. At the same time, is fiction exempted from the responsibility fact-based historiography is supposed to fulfil? Does it mean that literature 'erodes' life? Does it dispossess or make vulnerable the (textual) Other? Or does it open new formulas to solve ethical issues, particularly the confrontation between Christian and Jewish traditions?
- 3 Of the four sections of the novel, the main focus will be placed on the first and the last ones. The first one, which is prefaced by a Passover sacrifice, deals with Miryam, the Jewish name for the Virgin. The second, followed by the siege of Jerusalem, addresses the figure of Bar-Avo, the Jewish spelling of Barabbas. Both sections bear witness to the Romans' violent dispossession of Palestine. Yet, I will mostly focus on relationality and biofictionality as ethical events of dispossession to analyse the section on 'Miryam', and on violence when dealing with that on 'Barabbas'. Hence, and continuing the thread of the questions above, the paper explores the actual ethical and/or political efficiency of biofictionalising dispossession practices in first-century Palestine. The question is whether dis-possessing already dispossessed historical figures is just a fashionable move or is an ethically-charged performance which intervenes politically denouncing coercive practices.

- 4 Butler and Athanasiou regard dispossession as a troubling twofold concept. In one sense it 'encompasses the constituted, pre-emptive losses that condition one's being dispossessed by another: one is moved to the other and by the other—exposed to and affected by the other's vulnerability' (1). But dispossession also refers to the 'processes and ideologies by which persons are disowned and abjected by normative and normalising powers that define cultural intelligibility and that regulate the distribution of vulnerability: loss of land and community; ownership of one's living body by another person, as in histories of slavery' (2). In the first case it is enabling, for it is related to dependency and relationality, 'one's disposition to alterity . . . as a necessary condition of [...] survival' (2). In the second case, it is imposed by a violence that 'determines the terms of subjectivity, survival and livability' (2). It is in this sense that both critics make a difference between 'being' and 'becoming' dispossessed. *The Liars' Gospels* often addresses this dichotomy; the one between Miryam and Barabbas being central to this analysis. Miryam is not less deprived of her land and less submitted to (epistemic) violence by Roman colonial rule than Barabbas. It is only that they conceive different agency strategies against becoming dispossessed. If 'staying in place is precisely an act of resistance' (28), this is what they both do, be it from a metaphysical or political position. However, it is precisely their dissimilar agency practices—like that of social leaders who currently claim against Mbembe's necropolitics and living dead (2003)—that set them apart.²
- 5 Lévinas's radical alterity informs Butler's ethical discourse. Despite these differences, the former rejects any agency of the One with respect to the Other. Indeed, he points out: 'The Other [Autrui] would count more than me' (277). In other words, One surrenders in front of 'the face of the Other', unable to come to terms with its radical Otherness. This radicality is informed by the irreducibility of the Other to the logic of the Same/One, which makes identity, alterity and mutuality unutterable in classic ontological terms. In fact, Lévinas's ethical discourse, whereby the Other is 'not reduced to somebody or something in the world' (Critchley 65), defies political agency. Butler and Athanasiou understand relationality in a rather different fashion. Thus, although they argue that the human 'is always the event of its multiple exposures' (42) and is conditioned to 'a set of dispossessions' (48), s/he is not the passive Lévinas puts forward, but a potentially performative agent. In being essentially dispossessed, One is rendered human as different from the Other, i.e. being deferred by/from the different Other in Derridean terms. In this case, One and Other are engaged on equal terms. Indeed, unlike Lévinas's One, when Butler's is violently dispossessed, s/he is legitimised to challenge normative and normalising powers that perpetuate precariousness and disposability. In these very terms, the logic of survivability configures the processes of dispossession of Miryam and Barabbas as paradigmatic. In pronouncing themselves a female Palestine and a young prisoner respectively, they inscribe themselves in a matrix of twenty-first-century recognition and responsiveness. The latter are complex and interrelated issues that govern the ethics and politics of *The Liars' Gospels*. To counteract precariousness, dispossession and disposal, both characters demand the response and recognition of the Other: Jesus in Miryam's case, and his anti-Roman compatriots in Barabbas's. Paradoxically though, the novel itself constitutes an act of dispossession because, being biofictional, it appropriates historical/religious figures against themselves. Dispossession proves thus a bio-textual issue in Alderman's trans-cultural/religious discourse.

- 6 The debate on the relation between fiction and biography is not a new one. This Caroline Lusin synthesises in the opposition between the 'truth of fiction' and the 'truth of fact,' which 'has always figured prominently in discussions about the faults and merits of worldmaking in fictional (auto)-biography' (269). Michael Lackey's approach to biofiction as 'the literature that names its protagonist after an actual biographical figure' (3) is particularly relevant in my approach to Alderman's novel. If critics like Georg Lukács questioned the genre, for transgressing the detachment of historiography, Lackey examines how the shift in 'theories of consciousness and history have led to the rise of the contemporary biographical novel and the fall of [...] the classical historical novel' (3). This is particularly intricate in *The Liars' Gospels* as consciousness and historiographic factuality clash with religious mythical discourse and fiction. In Lackey's view the confusing relation between fiction and biography, always to the detriment of the former, comes from Paul Murray Kendall's *The Art of Biography* (1965). With a more or less positive attitude to biofiction, Lackey argues, most critics (Buisine 1991; Keener 2001; Latham 2012) approach the genre 'in relation to the goals and techniques of biography' (5). Likewise, many writers of biofictional novels (George Garrett, David Malouf, Carol Joyce Oates and Bruce Duffy, to name a few) claim (even apologise) that theirs is not biography (5). Alderman is no exception. The epilogue to the novel starts as a documentary on the Roman siege of Jerusalem and finishes being an essay on storytelling and lying. Indeed, the text addresses the Western appropriation of Jesus as a 'lie', a raw material to be manufactured: 'A new god rose in Rome. [...] And although some might say: this was the triumph of the Jews, this Jew-god risen to a high place in Roman esteem, nonetheless by the time he arrived there he was no longer a Jew at all, quite the reverse in a sense' (259). From the testimony of pro-Roman evangelists Jesus emerged as a bio-text. Moreover, his very re-naming from Yehoshuah to Jesus, 'for that sat more easily on their [Roman] tongues', confirms the act of paralinguistic dispossession. The political denunciation of Alderman's biographical novel loses effect, though, when, in line with the writers mentioned above, she apologetically claims: 'This is, of course, a work of fiction. [...] However, many of the most surprising parts [...] are based on fact' (261). Alderman simultaneously contests her own words, making good Jay Parini's unapologetic view of biofiction as authentic, as true as writing can be (250). *The Liars' Gospels* make use of biographical subjects to render a new vision of religious, cultural and identity consciousness as an aesthetic event and a political tool. In fact, drawing on Lackey, unlike traditional or fictional biographies, Alderman's biographical novel does not 'seek to represent the life of an actual historical figure as clearly and accurately as possible, [...] but] to get the biographical subject's life 'right' [...] in order to project [a new] vision of life and the world' (7). Yet, the ethical dilemma continues. Is not the biographical novelist dispossessing the biographical subject from his/her life to make new statements, in this case the negotiation of Miryam, Christ and Barabbas with their Jewishness?
- 7 Colm Tóibín's novella *The Testament of Mary* (2012) constitutes a brilliant attempt to detach Mary from Christian orthodoxy and restore her original humanness. She is rendered vulnerable, bare life in the hands of her son's followers who hold her captive to make up Christian narratives: 'Of the two men who come, one was there with us until the end [Jesus's death]. There were moments then when he was soft, ready to hold me and comfort me as he is ready now to scowl impatiently when the story I tell does not stretch to whatever limits he has ordained' (5). Both Tóibín's Mary and Alderman's Miryam invite contemporary readers to return to early Christianity. However, whereas *The Testament*

mostly vindicates the role of women in early Christianity, *The Liars' Gospels* addresses the whole cultural confrontation in first-century Palestine from different angles. Tóibín's economy of language and austere literary style prove valid to portray the intimate face of Mary; Alderman's Jewish revisionism is all-embracing, ranging from Jesus's mother, his (in the novel) favourite follower Iehuda (Judas), Caiaphas, the High Priest of the Temple, to Barabbas, a rebel and a murderer. That is why, while the novella is a testimony narrated in the first person, an intimate memoir of a vulnerable (albeit strong) woman, *The Liars' Gospel* is a biographical novel narrated in the third person. Mary's story turns around Mary, much in line with Catholic Marian tradition, from beginning to end. Miryam exists from Christ and through Christ, almost to a Levinasian degree. Indeed, the novel starts with Gidon, a young follower of a recently dead Christ, reaching his Master's village in search of his traces: 'I have come to seek the village of Yehoshuah the Teacher, to find his friends and family here, to meet them and to befriend them' (14). Miryam thus gives access to her son, being almost a sign in his absence. Jesus having been her favourite son, her double loss (when he rejected her and when he actually died) explains the radical Otherness he represents in Miryam's discourse. To Gidon's questions about the Messiah, she answers laconically: 'He was a traitor, a rabble-dealer, a rebel, a liar and a pretender to the throne. We have tried to forget him here' (14). Indeed, she later reveals: 'I was his mother' (15, emphasis added). Miryam's discourse is one of disenfranchisement because she was both disposed and dispossessed by her son as she was disposable and dispossessable by the Roman invaders. She condemns Jesus's essential lack of engagement with the Other as an ethical and political act, which paradoxically contravenes his teachings: as a traitor and a rebel, he disregards the allegiance he owes to the neighbour; as a liar, rabble-dealer and pretender to the throne, he infringes truth and humility. Despite steering away from her son, Miryam cannot disengage from his memory, which recurs throughout the whole section. It is in this sense that *The Gospels* inscribes Lévinas's and Laplanche's conceptualization of the primacy of the Other 'as a traumatic event that precedes the constitution of the subject' (Butler 2013, 118). In other words, Miryam is defined through the primacy of Jesus as her Other, particularly through their traumatic splitting that has eventually rendered her the Other of the Other. In being dispossessed by her son's vulnerability and loss (as far as he is eventually crucified), she shows a disposition to alterity that, drawing on Butler and Athanasiou, 'is a necessary condition of ... survival' (2) and consubstantial to Jewish culture. Miryam questions Jesus's misappropriation of Jewish tradition: 'When Yehoshuah said, "Treat others as you hope they'd treat you", it was not a new teaching. Rabbi Hillel was an old man when Yehoshuah was born' (Alderman 43). Indeed, being herself a child, 'she had learned when her parents took her to hear the great Rabbi Hillel speak, that our duty to love each other is the highest of the commandments of God' (20). Thus, relationality is restored to pre-Christian Jewish culture through the mother of Christ. Moreover, the novel renders Christ grievable not only for Christians but also for Jews. Miryam keeps performing Jewish religion while she is given the chance to grieve her son with Gidon's arrival.

- 8 Being a secondary character, Gidon galvanises Miryam's mourning, which reconciles Christ with the tradition he rebelled against and that considered him a traitor. As a follower of Jesus, Gidon is an early Christian. However, he still bears witness to his Master through Jewish eyes, namely those of Christ's family. That is, Gidon addresses the birth of Christianity as an act of mutual dispossession: Christ performs the Jewish 'treason' of Rome against the Jews becoming the idol of new Roman religion; and conversely, Jews rebuff Christ as a Jew himself. The narrator bears witness to this reciprocal

misrecognition: 'No one in the village spoke of him. Her own children had tried to forget him. It had been as if she had never born that first son, until Gidon came to Nazaret' (65). The figure of Jesus is dismantled in the first section of the novel. Instead of the gentle supernatural son of God that Christianity has built up, he is an eccentric idol in this biographical novel. He is labelled a distant charming child (22), 'different to other boys' (23), weak (23), enraged (24, 37), a fool (26, 28, 31), lazy (28), 'a stumbling infant, a complaining child, a petulant boy-man' (33), arrogant (36), a worshipper of 'a foreign god like Ba'al Zvuv' (36), and stupid (48). Yet, *The Liars' Gospels* still puts him at the centre of Miryam's biography. In fact, parallel to Miryam's 'true' story runs the official 'lie'. The novel tells the story of love between mother and son (34), of ingratitude (45, 47) and of disavowal when he rejects his family in the voice of Iehuda (39). Eventually, it is a story of mutual misrecognition (when paradoxically, I contend, the novel is one on transcultural recognition) and grievability. Miryam had other children, but 'not one can fill the place of another, and she would have never another firstborn' (40). That is why mourning seems unfeasible to her. Indeed, (mis)recognising her firstborn renders her vulnerable, which makes unclear whether the demised or the survivor is the one to be grieved. Although the Virgin claims to have forgotten Jesus, his loss still matters, for his life is still grievable, making good Butler's conundrum: 'Grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters' (2009, 14). Miryam even conveys a pre-emptive mourning to prevent Jesus's unresponsiveness much in line with Butler's concept of 'future anterior' in *Frames of War*. The future anterior, "'a life [which] has been lived", is presupposed at the beginning of a life that will have been lived' (15). In this light, Butler continues: 'Grievability precedes and makes possible the apprehension of the living being as living, exposed to non-life from the start' (15). Miryam's pre-emptive mourning in 'the future anterior' takes Butler's argument to the extreme, making life essentially traumatic and unliveable and, hence, (un)grievable in advance:

'My son is dead' and [I] beg[a]n to mourn him. As if it were possible. As if we can begin to mourn for a death a moment before it comes, as if we can grieve for any destruction before it arises. Even if we had known for a hundred years that it must be so. Nothing can be anticipated in grief—for if we could bring our sorrow forward, would we not mourn for a baby on the day of its nativity? She should have mourned for him then, on the day he was born. (Alderman 40)

- 9 Against Miryam's 'true' story, she eventually confesses the 'official lie'. She wanted, according to the narrator: 'To mingle truth with lies' (40), which is, so to speak, the essence of the biographical novel. As mentioned above, biographical novels aim at projecting and understanding a new image of life and the world. Through Miryam, *The Liars' Gospels* reveals a lie which dispossesses Christianity of its poetry or, rather, replaces it with a new one that bridges the gap between religious traditions. This message of compromise constitutes the new image of life and the world the novel addresses. When Gidon talks about Jesus's resurrection as a miracle made by God (51) she cannot help laughing and wondering why Jesus is not with her (52). She remembers her son's actual martyrdom calling out 'when he is nailed to a cross-beam' (61). Yet, she turns down the poetry of suffering and opts for one of hope, restoration and reconciliation; no matter that it is based on a 'lie', for it is a beautiful one. It is allegorical because it blends the wish fulfilment desire of a pre-Christian Jewish woman with Christianity as a transcendent narrative:

'Now I think of it', she says, and her voice has taken on the singsong quality of a child's storyteller, '[...] there were signs that his birth would be special'. [...] 'And once, there was a stranger [...]' She pauses. Anyone who has read the Torah knows

what a stranger is. A stranger could be anyone. A stranger could be the angel of the Lord come with a test of kindness and hospitality, and if you passed the test the angel might bless you. A stranger could be the Lord walking among you. [...] She thinks of how all the stories she has ever heard must have come to be. There are only three ways: either they are true, or someone was mistaken, or someone lied. She knows that the story she is telling is a lie, but she says it anyway [...] because it brings comfort to see that he [Gidon] believes it. (63–64)

- 10 Miryam's story is one of recognition of the stranger (as the paradigm of Otherness) to whom One owes hospitality. Opening to the actual other, be it an angel, the Lord or a bare human, is transformed into a metaphysical event, namely the recognition of the Virgin as the addressee of the Lord. In the end, the narrative transformation of actual events—she meets a stranger who blesses her pregnancy (63)—into a religious encounter responds to an ethical motivation. Miryam's intimate desire to bring her son back, albeit vicariously through Gidon, dovetails with her desire to accommodate Christians' desire to believe in a recognisable and legitimate narrative. She opens to herself, as well as to the Other in an act of generosity that bridges cultural and religious conflict between Jewish tradition and Christianity.
- 11 The second part of this article moves to the fourth section of the novel, which focuses on Barabbas. As happens with Miryam and Jesus, *The Liars' Gospels* dismantles the Christian representation of the most famous prisoner in the Bible. Thus, even though he is labelled a rebel and a murderer in the *dramatis personae*, he is a much more ambiguous character than the character of the official gospels. As a rebel against Roman domination, he stands for freedom and justice in opposition to religious leaders, like Jerusalem High Priest Ananus and Christ himself, who stick to peace. Alderman's rewriting of the myth is thus particularly problematic. Yet, rather than the conflict between ones and other, it is the dispossessed position of them all against a foreign force that prevails. Whereas in Jesus's and Miryam's discourses the human 'is' essentially dispossessed, Barabbas fights to avoid 'becoming' dispossessed by external rule according to Butler's and Athanizou's second sense of dispossession. His violence, which is met by greater violence on the part of the Romans, eventually results in his defeat. This contrasts with Ananus's pragmatic dispossession, which allows him to survive, and even more with Miryam's radical alterity and sense of sacrifice. Violence determines Barabbas's subjectivity and 'livability'. His land and community being lost to the Romans, he feels submitted to a foreign power that determines the frames of recognition, vulnerability and victimhood. In this sense, Barabbas's story is ethically and politically meaningful. It mostly addresses the way violence is regulated as legitimate or illegitimate according to cultural intelligibility. Obviously *The Liars' Gospels* not only refers to a biblical figure and narrative. It is opening to current politics and ethics on violence and terrorism. Hence, the Levinasian ontological conception of radical alterity does not apply and the epistemological logic of justice as reciprocity prevails. Barabbas's violence claims reparation against precariousness and dispossession in a clear reference to the Palestinian Intifada. He is part of a gang of adolescents running towards Roman soldiers 'roaring and throwing cobblestones with both hands' (199) just as Palestinians currently do against Israeli occupation. The debate on who is to be blamed for violence and whether and, if so, when it is legitimate to use it is thus behind Alderman's biofiction on the biblical prisoner.
- 12 The first time Barabbas is gathering followers to fight against Roman rule in Palestine, he addresses God's will in what is obviously a reference to Christ's narratives:

'Come and follow me,' he says to the fishermen ...

'We cannot follow you,' they say, 'we have hauls of fish to pull in and families to feed.'

And he says, 'Is not God the master of all?'

And they say 'yes.'

And he says, 'Then will not God provide for His children, if they will only follow Him?' (Alderman 213)

- 13 In blending the discourses of Barabbas and Christ *The Liars' Gospels* problematises the frames of legitimacy of violence and victimhood that determine what can be considered terrorism and what cannot. Butler tackles such thorny issue drawing on Michael Walzer and Talal Asad. The former argues that, unlike justified state-sponsored wars, terrorist violence 'falls outside the parameters of justified and unjustified violence' (in Butler 2009, 153). Asad answers to Walzer's restrictive conception of terrorism as the killing and use of fear by irregular forces, organizations and individuals to threaten so-called liberty (2004) by extending such threats to state-sponsored wars (16). Is the violence of the Intifada less legitimate than that of Israel military intervention? Or is the violence of Barabbas and his gang less legitimate than that of Roman forces? Alderman's novel addresses the problematics of who can frame violence as evil or necessary, as unjustified agency or justified self-defence. If one becomes dispossessed of one's land and culture (even of one's life, which turns 'unlivable') and thus made redundant and disposable, whose self-defence are we addressing? That of the aggressor as dispossessor, or that of the aggressed as dispossessed? In other words, what happens when 'the Governor or the Prefect of the Emperor seems to have the gift of life in his hands?' (Alderman 197). Are the rude slogans of Barabbas and his gang against the Romans closer to current terrorist groups or to Porto Alegre anti-globalisers? And even if they are akin to terrorist groups, to what extent is their violence exclusively their responsibility or a shared one with political leaders and the process of dispossession itself?
- 14 The novel not only blends but also sets apart Barabbas's and Jesus's discourses. They lead different revolutions as different types of 'criminals'. Christ's passive agency is more surreptitious than the rebel's revolutionary cry to 'free the country from tyranny' (213). As a biographical novel, *The Liars' Gospels* enters where historiography is not allowed to, namely the encounter between both prisoners before they were presented to the crowd by Pilate. In contrast with Christian historiographic tradition Jesus is arrogant, closer to the Jewish God-avenger of the Old Testament: "'Listen Bar-Avo, son of no one, don't you think that God himself will take his revenge for what has been done in this city? [...] Don't you know that He has sent the Romans to scourge us so that we'll repent and return to Him before the end of the world comes? [...] You are as much as a tool of His will in this as any Roman soldier'" (220). Since all are tools for God to convey His design, their agency is neutralised and put at the service of perfect justice and divine intervention, as Žižek puts it (169–171). In this sense, political performativity is more performative than ever. Agents are preceded by themselves as they and their performances have been devised beforehand. Barabbas, as any other terrorist agent, becomes essentially dispossessed by a major framework of violence, which is related to Butler's and Athaniso's second type of dispossession, and more specifically to Žižek's twofold conception of violence.
- 15 Žižek makes a difference between subjective and objective violence. Subjective violence is that 'performed by a clearly identifiable agent' (1). It is the most conspicuous form of violence as opposed to objective violence: 'a "symbolic" violence embodied in language and its forms, what Heidegger would call "our house of being" and a "systemic"

violence, or the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems' (1). Although Žižek's terms refer to early-twentieth-century politics, they also apply to Alderman's first-century Palestine. Like current terrorists, Barabbas and the rebels he leads stand for Žižek's subjective violence. However, behind this type of conspicuous violence that the Bible recalls and current media spectacularise lies the objective violence that Roman conquerors or today's nation-states and their apparatuses perform and which is 'inherent to this "normal" state of things' (2). In other words, Barabbas's violence would be the symptom as well as the alibi of a systemic violence, silent, rootless, akin to Walter Benjamin's 'divine violence' (1996). *The Liars' Gospels*, I contend, unveils violence as the consequence of misrecognition, the misrecognition of Barabbas being analogous to that of Christ's and present-day Palestinians'. Menachem Begin, a Jewish 'terrorist' against British forces in Palestine, argued: 'Our enemies call us terrorists [...] People who were neither our friends nor our enemies. [...] What has a struggle for the dignity of man, against oppression and subjugation, to do with terrorism?' (100–101). Begin's words could well be voiced by Alderman's Barabbas or a current terrorist. Thus works the chain of victimhood that justifies violence, be it state-sponsored by the Roman Empire, Israel and Western forces, or individual or state-sponsored acts of terrorism. The consequence is a dramatic reversal of Christ's alleged message of love into a politics of fear of the neighbour, who is an enemy by definition. In unveiling this chain of victimhood, misrecognition and violence Alderman's novel is bridging the gap between enemies. Somehow drawing on Lévinas's radical alterity, though assuming the need of political action, the text joins enemies in a common struggle. As Žižek claims: 'What unites us is the same struggle. A better formula would thus be: in spite of our differences, we can identify the basic antagonism or antagonistic struggle in which we are both caught; so let us share our *intolerance*' (133). A double misrecognition can thus turn into recognition as common struggle. I do not mean that Barabbas's subjective violence and Miryam and Jesus's non-violence are analogous, as they are not current Palestinian terrorism and Israel state-sponsored violence. On the contrary, uttering their radical asymmetry prompts a revision of each other's (mis)recognition. It is true that recognition is a form of dispossession, for one has to be recognised by an Other according to a regulatory frame. But, as Butler and Athanasiou point out: 'How do we survive without it?' (76). This is what prompts Barabbas's violence, the need of singularity and recognition from the intruding Other.

- 16 In fostering mutual trans-cultural and religious recognition *The Liars' Gospels* runs the risk of assimilating the dispossessed into the logic of the dispossessor. Barabbas's subjective violence is mostly a struggle for survival against a systemic violence that hides behind the spectacularisation of the former. This does not mean the novel endorses the youth's terrorist acts. On the contrary, violence is breeding ground for new violence, no matter what the reason of violence originally was. Indeed, after his first riot, Barabbas 'wants to do it again, and again, and again' (Alderman 202). He then becomes part of proto-terrorist group led by Av-Raham, who thinks 'there is nothing sweeter [...] than killing a Roman soldier with his own sword' (206). This is the ultimate act of dispossession. The Other (in this case the Romans) is de-subjectified and dehumanised so that only death can redeem one's hatred. Hence, it is not self-recognition that they aim in raiding Romans' military bases or their baths (207). The ultimate goal of these violent acts is the erasure of the Other and, more concretely, an idealised notion of divine justice. Yet, the ultimate wish of Barabbas and his men in erasing Romans is dis-possessing and replacing them as agents of control; that is, becoming Romans themselves. Otherwise, why would they dream of

holding a Roman sword against a Roman. It is a sort of surrender to the Other, though not in a Levinasian fashion.

- 17 In more practical terms, Barabbas's (and his gang's) terrorist actions are problematic even from a Jewish stand. It is not only that violence, no matter which type, constitutes an act of dispossession that dehumanises both the aggressor and the victim. In fact, even Jerusalem is ef-faced when 'breached and penetrated by force' (230) as if a raped woman. The reaction of Barabbas and his men is iniquitous when, to originally fight Roman brutal repression, they ravage and define Jewishness univocally. That is, in their zeal to be recognised, they assimilate (and get assimilated by) Roman imperial discourse and repress their compatriots' different ways of living one's Jewishness. He approaches Jesus, not following the alleged message of empathy and love, but because 'a rabble army looking for a new leader could be useful to him' (234). In other words, Barabbas dispossesses Christ of his message (i.e. against himself) to meet his own political aims. Thus, although the novel rebukes Roman rule, it also rebuffs terrorists' violence, originally addressed against the invader and eventually intra-Jewish: If they want to 'be' Romans, is it not a way of rejecting their own Jewishness because of an inferiority complex? Moreover, is the Jewish baker that Barabbas and his men massacre less a Jew than they are because he sells his goods to the Romans (238)? Is Ananus's (the High Priest of the Temple of Jerusalem) murder acceptable taking that he has reached an agreement with the Romans to keep Jewish religion alive (251)? The answer is obviously no, because otherwise the novel would be endorsing Barabbas's 'lie' (his disinterested use of violence) rather than reconciliation and peace. Barabbas justifies Ananus's murder on the grounds that the Priest chooses peace rather than justice whereas the rebel thinks that 'peace and justice are enemies. Not vengeance, not loyalty, not pride, not family, not friends, not—on occasion—dignity. Only ever peace' (251). The position of Ananus and the novel as a whole is in this sense rather Levinasian. The poetics of peace, as encounter with the Other, precedes justice. Thus, in killing Ananus, Barabbas is killing what he considers a traitor, but also a Jew and a human, and especially the very will to encounter the Other.
- 18 Barabbas proves right when announcing: 'If Yehoshuah ends by being loved in Rome they will find a way to use him against us' (242). However, his is not the proper ethical response. In using violence and dispossession as instruments of affirmation, he is using Christ against Christ himself and his compatriots. In the end, the hatred of the Other returns to oneself not in the first sense of dispossession, but in the second. If, as Barabbas heralds, Jesus is bound to be appropriated by Rome and Christianity, are the latter's discourse and persona dispossessed? Or is the rebel's utterance itself an act of dispossession, for the novel re-appropriates him and what he represents for Jewishness? Be it as it may, *The Liars' Gospel* is (as far as a biographical novel) a 'lie' informed by current politics. Indeed, it tells a first-century tale of dispossession and violence to claim for restoration and trans-cultural/religious reconciliation. Yet, the novel is not suggesting that all three concepts are related, violence and dispossession being the source of mutual understanding. On the contrary, it is in displacing violence out of (Butler and Athanasiou's first-type) dispossession as an encounter with the Other that reconciliation is feasible. Addressing these issues vicariously in the form of a biographical novel not only responds to an aesthetic motivation. Revising biblical history and stories is mandatory to understand the logic of misrecognition between Jews and Christians as one embedded in tradition. Moreover, as a biographical novel, Alderman's text follows the logic of fiction rather than that of biography, which cancels the ethical reluctance that

intruding in actual people's lives entails. Hence, literature does not erode life. It just unveils human vulnerability as essentially (albeit resistant to becoming) dispossessed. All in all, life and the text blend in this biographical novel by uttering the irreducibility of the One to/in the Other as responsive recognition and trans-cultural dialogue.

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NOTES

1. Alderman's ironic and humanising approach to sacred figures constitutes an ethical challenge. Some distance from orthodoxy is needed to enjoy her reinterpretation and her merging of religious and historical discourses.
2. Drawing on Roman invaders, Barabbas makes use of Mbembe's necropolitics to dispose not only of the Romans but also of his compatriots. Against this politics of death, Miryam reacts to dispossession through (re)conciliation and resilience.

ABSTRACTS

This paper delves into Naomi Alderman's *The Liars' Gospels* (2013) as a biographical novel that draws on the official Gospels to address current issues. Focusing on the sections on Miryam (the Jewish spelling for the Virgin) and Barabbas, dispossession turns out to be the central subject, related to relationality in the former case and to violence in the latter. Hence, Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou's concept of dispossession as a bifurcation of Emmanuel Lévinas's ethics of alterity and Slavoj Žižek's conception of violence constitute the theoretical framework of the analysis. With all this in mind, my main contention is that in Alderman's novel acts of dispossession and violence are redirected towards ethical relationality and reconciliation between Jewishness and Christianity.

Cet article examine *The Liars' Gospels* (2013) de Naomi Alderman comme un roman biographique inspiré par les Évangiles officiels et qui, pourtant, aborde des questions d'actualité. En mettant l'accent sur les sections dédiées à Miryam (le nom hébraïque de la Vierge) et à Barabbas, la dépossession devient le sujet central, lié à la relationnalité pour la première et à la violence pour le second. Par conséquent, j'emploie le concept de dépossession proposé par Judith Butler et Athena Athanassiou comme étant au carrefour de l'éthique de l'altérité d'Emmanuel Lévinas et de la conception de la violence de Slavoj Žižek. En gardant cela à l'esprit, je soutiens que dans le roman d'Alderman les actes de dépossession et de violence sont redirigés vers une éthique relationnelle et la réconciliation de la judéité et du christianisme.

INDEX

Mots-clés: dépossession, relationnalité, violence, roman biographique, réconciliation

Keywords: dispossession, relationality, violence, biographical novel, reconciliation

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