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THE "LIFE OF MARY" AS TOLD BY CONTEMPORARY NOVELISTS

in Novels Published in the United States
during the Last Fifteen Years

*François Rossier, S.M.**

One of the reasons why mariologists may want to study the presence of Mary in recent novels is because these books are where most people do read about Mary. Even famous theological essays or popular spiritual writings do not compete with the outreach of best-selling novels. People prefer to read stories, especially when they are asking the question "Who is this person?"—in this case, Mary. As M. Díez Presa observes, "Human lives become more understandable and closer when they are interpreted through a narrated story; as if the narrative identity would free the human person from isolation in his or her own subjectivity and, at the same time, from his or her reduction to pure objectivity; as if one would need a narrator in order to be identified."¹

Today, theologians, biblical scholars themselves have come to acknowledge the value of storytelling and some of them have even started to write theological works in narrative forms, adapted though to modern readers.² For, in doing so, they have

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¹ M. Díez Presa, "María en la narrativa española des siglo XX," *Ephemerides Mariologicae* 53 (2003): 322-323.

² See, for instance, Gerd Theissen, *The Shadow of the Galilean: The Quest of the Historical Jesus in Narrative Form* (London: SCM, 1987).

retrieved a most ancient form of writing about theology, the form we already find in biblical books where God's revelation often takes on the aspect of narratives and stories. In the case of Mary, we cannot but acknowledge that she is first of all the well-known character of a well-known narrative: the gospels.

The gospels are part of Scripture, of a sacred text. And the very sacredness of the text also implies that the narratives it contains are canonically "frozen." Since Mary's story is found within a narrative that is primarily about Jesus Christ, only a few episodes in Mary's life are reported by the New Testament. They are, according to a possible chronological order: the annunciation, the visitation, the reaction of Joseph, the journey to Bethlehem, the birth of Jesus and the adoration of the shepherds, the circumcision of Jesus, the visit of the magi, the flight into Egypt, the presentation of Jesus, the return to Nazareth, the loss and finding of Jesus in the Temple, the wedding at Cana, the approaching of Jesus as he speaks to disciples, the cross, and the prayer with the apostles waiting for Pentecost.³

These episodes do not cover the entirety of Mary's life. Moreover, as it is usually the case for biblical narratives, they do not convey much substance to the character of Mary.⁴ At that level, they are rather sober and do not say much about, for instance, the emotions and feelings of Mary. If Luke expands a little on that when Mary sings her Magnificat (Luke 1:46-47), when he reports Mary's perplexity (Luke 1:29; 2:19.50-51) or her anxiety (Luke 2:48), John discloses nothing about Mary's emotions while she is standing at the foot of the cross. The intention of the biblical narrators was first of all theological and not biographical or literary.⁵

³ Since the debate around the identity of the woman in Revelation 12 remains open, and given the difficulty of the interpretation of that passage, it is safer not to consider it as telling about a particular episode in Mary's life.

⁴ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 114ff., speaks for instance of "characterization and the art of reticence."

⁵ Jan P. Fokkerman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* (Leiden: Deo Publishing/Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 71, observes that "If the narrator leaves the action for a moment and tells us of a woman that she is 'fair of face,' this is never just because of this quality in its own right. He will only mention something like that if it is going to be a factor in a plot."

Because of their canonicity, the Marian episodes reported by the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles belong to the framework of Mary's story as passed on from generation to generation. Because they are also limited in number, and because they tell of the mother of the Lord, they are well known. This does not mean, however, that the same story has been told and retold word-for-word. Christianity has unfortunately split over the centuries, and many different Christian denominations now coexist, as is the case in the United States. Biblical episodes about Mary may thus be understood and therefore transmitted in different ways, according to the religious community in which they are read and told. The differences of interpretation do not only apply to the theological or spiritual meaning Marian episodes may bear, but also, and plainly, to the very facts they report. For instance, who are the "brothers of Jesus" who are with Mary in Mark 3:31, or John 2:12, or Acts 1:14? The different possible answers to this question—that they are Jesus' siblings, or half-brothers, or cousins—may tell very different stories of Mary's life. Otherwise, and theoretically, any believer who wants to tell the story of Mary's life should cling to the framework defined and canonized by Scripture.

Very early though, other episodes were added to the story of Mary's life. Already in the middle of the second century an apocryphal narrative was written focusing mainly on the origin (conception, birth, childhood) of Mary: the *Protogospel of James*. The abundance of manuscripts found shows that this text enjoyed great popularity and can even be labeled as an antique bestseller. Among early Christians, there was a definite increasing interest in learning and knowing more about the mother of Jesus.⁶

This growing interest in the figure of Mary was sparked off by Scripture itself. If we list the four gospels according to their probable date of composition, the earliest one is by Mark, followed by Matthew, Luke, and eventually John. Compared to

⁶ Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 47, reckons that the "personalities and histories [of the biblical characters] attract the reader's attention to a greater extent than do other components of the narrative (explanations, settings, etc.) . . . We want to know them, to see how they act within their environment, and to understand their motives and desires."

what Mark says about Mary, all the other three gospels have added episodes and substance. In Mark, we encounter Mary as a discrete figure who appears once during Jesus' ministry in Mark (3:31-33); in Matthew, besides the episode reported in Mark, we see her in a series of new episodes preparing, surrounding and following the birth of Jesus, but as a rather passive figure compared to Joseph; in Luke, the focus switches to Mary who appears in other episodes preparing, surrounding, and following the birth of Jesus up to the end of his childhood. Mary becomes a most active character, one who speaks moreover; in Acts, we spot Mary singled out as she prays with the Apostles between Ascension and Pentecost; in John, finally, we discover Mary who initiates Jesus' public life and who is also present as her son's life is about to end. According to this chronological overview, more episodes and substance are added about Mary. A momentum is launched which has lasted through the centuries to our own time. Thus, the telling of the story of Mary as reported in the New Testament has called for further expansions of the narratives about Mary.

However, the Marian texts in the New Testament themselves are already expanding on previous texts. It is interesting to notice that, when we open the New Testament, the first quotation of the Old Testament we encounter is about Mary: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel" (Matt. 1:23 quoting Isa. 7:14). The biblical texts on Mary in the New Testament are built on many other texts; suffice it to mention, among others, the flight into Egypt (Matt. 2:13-23) which reminds us of the Exodus, or the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-51) which echoes Anna's canticle (1 Sam. 2:1-10). This convocation of a text within another text means that each text helps us to understand the other. Matthew 1:23 gives new meaning to Isaiah 7:14, which, in turn, helps to understand the text of Matthew.

The Bible is a library within which cross references are plentiful, and biblical books themselves have borrowed from earlier non-biblical texts.⁷ This "literal (more or less) presence of

⁷ Proverbs 22:17-23, for instance, shows close parallels with *The Teaching of Ane-menope*, a text from the Egyptian XXII dynasty; see A. Barucq et al., *Écrits de l'Orient ancien et sources bibliques* (Paris: Desclée, 1986), 93.

a text within another one" is what scholars define as "intertextuality."⁸ Quotation—which is an explicit convocation of a text—can be regarded as the most obvious example of the phenomenon. But since intertextuality also means expanding over a previous text or adding to a sequence, it is particularly typical of narratives.⁹ The different books in the Bible refer thus constantly to other texts. The *Targumim*, an Aramaic translation of the Torah, filled with interpolations, gives another witness to the fact that intertextuality was an intrinsic part of the telling and retelling of the events of the Revelation. Once the Canon of Scripture was closed, intertextuality had already produced quantities of other Scripture-looking texts, the so-called apocrypha. The closing of the Canon could not end the process. Can we then conclude, about Mary, that non-canonical stories of her life give new meanings to the canonical one as the canonical story of her life helps us understand the non-canonical ones?

We guess that intertextuality within the Bible does not work the same way that intertextuality between the Bible and subsequent texts does. Yet, the closing of the Canon did not happen until the fourth century, and it is not unlikely that early apocryphal writings, such as the popular ones about Mary, were aiming at a kind of sacred recognition. To a certain extent, they have achieved some consensual, if not sacred, recognition as they have been contributing to the building up of tradition. Even if some elements in the life of Mary, such as her parents being Joachim and Anna or her going to Ephesus with John, are not reported in Scripture, they are nonetheless believed by many to belong to the story of her life. As far as the Catholic tradition is concerned though, Marian dogmas have sanctioned some episodes in Mary's life, like her assumption for instance,¹⁰ told by Marian apocrypha, which are therefore to be held true by Catholic believers. They are to believe that "having completed

⁸ Gérard Genette, *Introduction à l'architexte* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1979), 87.

⁹ Margaret Waller, "An Interview with Julia Kristeva," in *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*, ed. Patrick O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 283.

¹⁰ See *The Transitus Mariae*, for example.

the course of her earthly life, [Mary] was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory."¹¹ Catholics must consider these events in Mary's life to be held as true as those told in Scripture. So even after the closing of the biblical canon, some texts of the tradition—the definitions of dogmas are texts—in particular of the Catholic tradition, have added episodes or elements to the story of Mary's life that some faithful, the Catholic ones in this case, must regard as authentic and true, and binding.

Once the Canon closed, the Bible was assumed as the sacred text of Christianity, and has, unlike papal statements, become the reference text par excellence for the Western civilization, to the point that the Bible has been labeled as "the great code" of Western Literature.¹² Without dismissing other influences such as the ones from Latin, Greek or Nordic cultures, once Europe turned to Christianity, the text of reference was the Bible. It performed this role of supreme norm (*norma normans*)¹³ not only for theology but also for literature in modern Western languages which were springing up precisely at the time Christianity was taking hold. Historically, literature has its origin in sacred texts. Biblical stories and themes, such as the Marian one, inspired Western literature at its very birth. The tradition of literary works with Marian themes is, then, as old as Western literature itself. With so ancient roots, it still bears fruits nowadays for, if Western civilization is no longer predominantly Christian, it still has a Christian heritage. So, even at the dawn of the third millennium, novels continue to be written in which the figure of Mary is present. The recent novels—by this we mean those not more than fifteen years old—published in the United States about Mary are at the current end of a long chain of such texts.

The continuity is formal. The biblical texts about Mary are narratives; so are the recent novels about her. There is also continuity in the object; not only because this object is Mary, but

¹¹ See Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus* (Rome, 1950).

¹² Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York/London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publ., 1982).

¹³ Stefano De Fiore, "La 'Via della Bellezza' come approccio per la conoscenza di Maria," in *Maria Vergine nella letteratura italiana*, ed. Florinda M. Iannace (New York: Forum Italicum Publ., 2000), 42.

because this object is singular. Like theology, for which the object Jesus Christ is unique, but unlike other sciences, literature—and novels, whatever their literary quality, are literature—is the science of the singular. Literature cannot do without the individual character, nor without crowds of individuals. This similarity, then, encompasses form and object.

For sure, the Canon of the Bible is closed and, within Christian traditions, no other text will ever be recognized as being divinely inspired, thus delivering divine revelation the way the gospels do. Yet some writers still show a certain ambition in this regard; for example, on the back cover of a recent novel that is retelling the story of Mary, we find the following slogan: "Discover the truth through fiction."¹⁴ How are we to understand such a statement? Is it totally out of place or does it contain some truth?

Besides sharing—even remotely—sacred origin and narrative form with the biblical texts about Mary, recent novels about her, furthermore and obviously, share some content with the gospels, if only for the presence of Mary, since intertextuality is at play in them. But all these similarities do not make novels about Mary into new "gospels" with equal authority in revealing truth. Novelists are not divinely inspired authors. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that novelists may help people understand the truth contained in Scripture, may provide possible new interpretations of Scripture, as do theologians and exegetes.

Intertextuality, as we have explained, is a dialogue between texts, in the case of narratives about Mary, between gospels and novels. A dialogue, though, is a reciprocal exchange. Thus, reading a novel about Mary implies that the readers, according to Nicholas Boyle, enter "a two-way journey, from the Bible to literature and from literature back to the Bible."¹⁵ In doing so, readers discover, as David Tracy puts it, "that understanding *happens* in precisely this deeply subjective, yet intersubjective, shareable, public, indeed historical movement of authentic

¹⁴ Bodie and Brock Thoene, *Fourth Dawn* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 2005).

¹⁵ Nicholas Boyle, *Sacred and Secular Scriptures: A Catholic Approach to Literature* (Notre Dame, In.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 6.

conversation."¹⁶ T. S. Eliot already noted that "if we, as readers, keep our religious and moral convictions in one compartment, and take our reading merely for entertainment, or on a higher plane, for aesthetic pleasure, I would point out that the author, whatever his conscious intention in writing, in practice recognizes no such distinctions. The author of a work of imagination is trying to affect us wholly, as human beings, whether he knows it or not; and we are affected by it, as human beings, whether we intend to be or not."¹⁷

Even though some of the recent novels we are going to look at may not have any theological or religious agenda, the presence of Mary in them is, therefore, of some religious or theological consequence. The reference text about Mary is a sacred text. Borrowing the figure of Mary from it implies that the novelist cannot ignore the religious background from which the figure of Mary has emerged. Likewise, a novel that depicts a portrait of Mary totally deprived of sacred aura offers at least an alternative to the way Mary is presented in the reference text, that is as a religious figure, and, therefore, questions the reference text. Willingly or not, a novel in which Mary is present, cannot be read as if nothing had been previously written on Mary. Novelists speak of Mary as a figure already well-known to the readers. The presence of Mary—even a limited one—in a novel has to do with religion. A simple mention of Mary makes religion part of the intertextual network to which the novel belongs. This mention of Mary does not necessarily make the novel a religious work, but it connects it with a religious context, be it to a small or a large extent.

Like theologians and exegetes, recent novelists who have written about Mary do have an impact on how people understand this religious figure, maybe even a greater one since their works are more widely read. The difference between novelists and theologians is, however, not just about styles—stories versus treatises—that translate into greater numbers of readers.

¹⁶ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 101.

¹⁷ Quoted in *Religion and Literature: A Reader*, ed. Robert Detweiler and David Jasper (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 11.

As artists, and in contrast to scholars, novelists enjoy a freedom alien to theologians, which is probably why they deserve some attention: they provide readers with "free" or alternative views on Mary. As Catherine O'Brien states it, "unlike theologians and biblical historians who must defend their theories before Church and academic authorities, secular artists are at liberty to follow their individual beliefs and creativity within the restriction of censorship."¹⁸ Novelists may enjoy such a privilege and, sometimes, take advantage of it.

For, to a certain extent, fictions or novels may disclose truth even about such a religious figure as Mary, but not the way gospels do. Novels about Mary set in motion the mechanism of intertextuality; they are texts echoing previous texts. Even though novels are texts that do not share the canonized status of the first texts written about Mary, mutual interpretation and reinterpretation is nonetheless at work between such novels and the gospels. Quite often, after having read novels about Mary, people look at the biblical texts about her in a different way. Scholars and theologians may lament that, but the fact remains.

Novels do not simply repeat the words of the story of Mary as told in the New Testament. They do it in a different way, by adding to it new episodes or by transforming the understanding of those found in Scripture. Novels share with other arts the capacity of expressing and manifesting ideas, but also emotions, feelings, values, and mentalities that are meaningful within the socio-cultural context of their readers. Concerning Mary, novels published in the United States during the past fifteen years do reveal how she is perceived, experienced and expressed by some people in this country at this time.

The recent novels with a presence of Mary published in the United States are to be read within this broader history and context. They suppose that their readers are familiar with the figure of Mary as first encountered in the Bible. On the one hand, as Christopher Moore puts it in the afterword of his novel, "another problem with telling a story that has been told

¹⁸ Catherine O'Brien, "Mary in Modern European Literature," in *Mary: The Complete Resource*, ed. Sara Jane Boss (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 521.

so many times is that people are looking for elements with which they are familiar."¹⁹ He speaks of a "problem" because the novelist who treats a familiar character must give up part of the artist's freedom; if the original framework is no longer retrievable, the reader may lose all references to the original text, so meaningful in the context of intertextuality. On the other hand, retelling Mary's story offers great opportunities to a novelist. As Catherine O'Brien points out, since Mary is a biblical and "iconic figure without a complete biographical history,"²⁰ the blanks in her history have indeed, from very early, inspired cohorts of authors to fill the voids. Even if it may be a problem for novelists, people enjoy reading about figures with whom they are already familiar.

Some recent novels telling about Mary's life will be examined within the context of intertextuality, that is, by trying to answer the question "Why do contemporary novelists choose to take up that story?" according to the way they retell it. The options in this regard are the following ones: novelists retell the story of Mary's life either by expanding on the biblical narratives—including on the normative texts of tradition—or by modifying them, by adding to the framework or by breaking it.

1. WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

Some novels set Mary within the framework of her story as reported by the biblical narrative. They go into the details of Mary's life and, thus, tell more episodes of her life than we find in the New Testament, but these episodes are among the ones we may legitimately infer from the biblical narrative or from what we know today about the religious, cultural, sociological, or historical context in which Mary lived in her days and in her land. Such new episodes offer to the novelists the possibility of providing their readers not only with more facts about Mary's life, but also with more information about what her thoughts, feelings and emotions might possibly have been. These episodes add substance to Mary, flesh out the biblical character.

¹⁹ Christopher Moore, *Lamb: The Gospel according to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 2003), 442.

²⁰ O'Brien, "Mary in Modern European Literature," 521.

Bodie and Brock Thoene's novel, *Fourth Dawn*, Book Four of their series A.D. Chronicles, tells of an episode not reported in the New Testament: the reaction of Mary's family to her early pregnancy. Such an episode involves a lot of dramatic emotions, of course:

The argument between Mama and Papa in the workshop increased in volume, reaching the ears of the three sisters huddled on the stone wall of the garden. Even the milk cows raised their heads and ruminated as the noise of commotion grew.

Papa's accusation.

Mama's outrage.

Mary, pale and stricken by the unexpected fury of her father's response, could scarcely raise her eyes from the chickens that scavenged for bugs in the furrows of the garden.

How can it be that Papa doesn't believe me? I am your servant, Lord.

But what about Papa?

Twelve-year old Salome grasped Mary's arm in indignation at Papa's words. "I believe you, Mary!"

Nine-year-old Naomi, eyes brimming with tears, said, "Me too. I believe you. But Mary, what did you do? Why is Papa so angry?"²¹

The novel also adds to Scripture as it tells of Mary's love for Joseph when it describes his first reaction to her pregnancy:

Yosef, hand to his brow as if shielding his eyes from seeing something terrible, stepped out into the sunlight. Storming down the gravel walk, he cast a single glance of reproach at Mary, then left without a word.

*Yosef! Yosef! You hate me now. Hatred in your eyes. I've broken your fine heart . . . a good heart. I love you still and remained true to you. Yosef. Who am I that my strength can bear the hatred of such a good man—the man I love? I am only a girl, and not so strong that I can walk away from loving you. He hates me now. Lord, I am your servant. I believe what you say. But . . . Lord, look! I've lost Yosef!*²²

The Thoenes' novel distinguishes itself from the biblical narrative not only because it tells of episodes and emotions that are not found in Scripture, but also in matter of point of view.

²¹ Bodie and Brock Thoene, *Fourth Dawn*, 81.

²² Bodie and Brock Thoene, *Fourth Dawn*, 87.

The narrators of the gospels tell their stories in the third person from a point of view that is of none of the characters. Though also in the third person, the novel is told from Mary's perspective. Her parents are referred to as "Mama" and "Papa," her thoughts are immediately delivered in italics, as if Mary is becoming an indirect narrator. Readers have a more direct access to the character. As such, they are, of course, invited to take side with her, to identify with her.

Something similar can be observed in Francine Rivers' novel, *Unafraid*, narrated in the third person; here, too, Mary's thoughts and reflections are also given in italics and, moreover, sometimes in bold print:

Her heart filled with a mother's pride as she stared down at Jesus. The men of Nazareth surrounded him and celebrated his first time reading the Torah before the congregation. It was a great and glorious day! The women around her pressed closer, congratulating her for such a fine son. "He reads so well, Mary . . . He has such dignity . . ." One of the elders began to sing a song of celebration, and the other men joined in until the sound of their voices swelled deep and strong, rising.

My son! My son!

Mary stared down at Jesus. When he looked up at her, she was surprised by the look of disquiet on his face. He looked straight at her, and she suddenly realized the direction of the thoughts racing through her head.

My son.

My blood.

My child will reign!

Staring back at Jesus, she pressed cold hands to her burning cheeks.

Oh, Lord God of Israel, forgive me! Jesus is your Son. He is a child of the Holy Spirit. I am only the vessel you used to fulfill your promise.²³

The novel tells again of an episode not found in Scripture—Jesus' *bar mitzvah*—and emotions are detailed again: in this case Mary's maternal love and pride about Jesus. Her feelings are in line with a point of the biblical text that may have been overlooked, namely that the promise, made by the angel Gabriel to Mary (Luke 1:32-33), of a son who will reign forever

²³ Francine Rivers, *Unafraid* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 2001), 73-75.

also implies that Mary will be second in status and power in her son's kingdom since, in ancient Israelite society, the First Lady was the king's mother, who is seated at the king's right hand (see 1 Kings 2:19). The novel sheds light on an aspect of Mary's call that has been confirmed by the findings of sociological and historical sciences.

In some novels, like *Mary Called Magdalene* by Margaret George, Mary's emotions or feelings are rendered in a much more discrete tone:

Mary leaned toward Jesus's mother, suddenly struck by the idea that the five of them—herself, the elder Mary, Joanna, Susanna, and John—could help Jesus escape. They could together cause enough confusion to make it possible for Jesus to slip away. "Mary, when we get near this place—wherever it may be—will you help him escape? We can create such a disturbance that we may be able to do this."

"I—I do not—" His mother, deep in stunned sorrow, was unable to respond.²⁴

Or:

"It's all in one piece," he said. "A fine job of weaving!"

Jesus's mother—who had woven it—now moved slightly, but only slightly, as she stared ahead. She clutched Mary's hand.

"So I say, let's cast lots for it!" the captain said. "No need to destroy it by dividing it up into four pieces." He pulled out a small leather bag and extracted dice. The soldiers squatted down while they cast lots.²⁵

Or again:

Jesus was standing there. Full-bodied and among them, despite the locked doors. "Peace be with you," he said.

"Lord!" said John, rushing toward him.

"Oh, my son!" His mother held out her hands.

Jesus smiled at them, and motioned them forward.²⁶

The discretion about Mary, mother of Jesus, is due to the fact that the novel is, as indicated in its title, about another Mary,

²⁴ Margaret George, *Mary Called Magdalene* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 525-526.

²⁵ George, *Mary Called Magdalene*, 529-530.

²⁶ George, *Mary Called Magdalene*, 556.

the Magdalene. Mary mother of Jesus is present as a secondary character. Here again, however, the little we learn about Mary's feelings is reported through details that are not found in Scripture, but rather borrowed from apocrypha or from lives of Mary told on the basis of private revelations that Catholic mystics, like Mary of Agreda, Spanish nun of the seventeenth century, claim to have received.²⁷

In the first two novels of Anne Rice's series *Christ the Lord*, *Out of Egypt* and *The Road to Cana*, a fictionalized life of Jesus narrated by himself, Mary is a secondary character, too. Rice also borrows from the apocrypha in, for instance, presenting Jesus' half-brothers as sons of a previous marriage of Joseph,²⁸ or, as she claims it herself, from solid socio-historical research about what was going on in the Middle East in Jesus' times, in order to answer questions not addressed in the New Testament, such as: "Why did they run out of wine at the wedding at Cana?"

My mother came to me, and put her hand on my arm. I saw panic in her eyes. She glanced at all the company round, the hundreds gathered under the roof and outdoors in the tents, at those who nudged each other and laughed and talked at the tables quite oblivious to the distant knot of servants, or the expression on my mother's face.

"Son," she said. "The wine is running out."

I looked at her. I saw the cause of it. She didn't have to tell me. The caravan carrying the wine south had been struck on the road by brigands. Cartloads of wine had been stolen, carried off into the hills. Word had only just reached the house, even as dozens of men and women still arrived for the banquet which would go on throughout all of the new day.

It was a disaster of unlikely and dreadful proportions.²⁹

²⁷ For the tunic of Jesus as having been woven by Mary, see María de Jesus de Ágreda, *Mystical City of God: The Miracle of His Omnipotence and the Abyss of His Grace, The Divine History and Life of the Virgin Mother of God . . .*, 4 vols. (Albuquerque: Corcoran Publ. Co., 1914), 2:585. For the apparition of the risen Jesus to his mother, see the apocryphal *Book of the Resurrection of Jesus-Christ. By Bartholomew the Apostle*, ed. and trans. E.A.W. Budge (1913), 9:1-10:6.

²⁸ See *The Other Gospels: Non-Canonical Gospel Texts*, ed. Ron Cameron (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 114.

²⁹ Anne Rice, *Christ the Lord: The Road to Cana* (New York/Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 232-233.

As a narrator, Jesus is not a neutral observer, but a narrator who tells about what he thought and felt, about how he became aware of his identity and mission as Christ, about how he perceived the people around him, in particular his mother.

These different points of view on Mary also provide the novels' readers with information about a dimension of hers that is totally overlooked in Scripture, namely her physical aspect. The New Testament lacks any description of Mary's appearance. This gap has been repeatedly filled in by artists throughout the centuries. Modern novelists perpetuate this tradition. In Elizabeth Berg's novel, *The Handmaid and the Carpenter*, readers see Mary as she is discovered by Joseph when he approaches her for the first time:

Joseph turned to see a girl squatting just behind him. "You have found the seat of honor," she said. "May I join you here?"

There was something familiar about her. "We are known to each other?" he asked.

She nodded. "You have seen me many times. And you spoke to me when last you saw me. You came to the well when I was there last summer. I was gathering water with my mother; you were passing by with your father, Jacob."

"Your memory serves you well. And I remember now, also. You are called Mary." She was a wonder to behold, with her black curls escaped from her braid, her cheeks flushed dusky rose, her gaze so direct and yet mysterious. She tucked her hair behind her ears, and he saw the lines of her high cheekbones beginning to assert themselves. Her lips were full and pink. He was suddenly dry-mouthed, his heart knocking about in his chest like a caged animal wild to be released.

"Yes, I am Mary," she said. "And you are called Joseph."³⁰

A physical portrait of Mary is sketched as the novel explores another episode not alluded to in the gospels, namely the first encounter between Joseph and Mary. In Anne Rice's novels, Jesus' point of view is also given to the readers in the course of the narration of his own life:

³⁰ Elizabeth Berg, *The Handmaid and the Carpenter* (New York: Random House, 2006), 8-9.

She looked down.

The noise of the city was gone. The torchlight made her look beautiful to me. Beautiful perhaps as Sarah looked to Pharaoh, beautiful as Rachel to Jacob. My mother was beautiful. Modest, but beautiful, no matter how many veils she wore to hide it, no matter how she bowed her head or blushed.

I wanted to be in her lap, in her arms, but I didn't move. It wasn't right to move or say a word.

"And so it happened," she said, looking up again. "I have never been with a man, not then, not now, nor will I ever. I am consecrated to the Lord."³¹

Sometimes the elements that contribute to deliver a sense of Mary's physical aspect are done with humor, which is another dimension of human life that is absent from the gospels:

"Your father is old, huh, Josh?"

"Not too old."

"When he dies, will your mother marry his brother?"

"My father has no brothers. Why?"

"No reason. What would you think if your father was shorter than you?"

"He isn't."

"But when your father dies, your mother could marry someone shorter than you, and he would be your father. You would have to do what he says."

"My father will never die. He is eternal."

"So you say. But I think that when I'm a man, and your father dies, I will take your mother as my wife."

Joshua made a face now as if he had bitten into an unripe fig. "Don't say that, Biff."

"I don't mind that she's mad. I like her blue cloak. And her smile. I'll be a good father, I'll teach you how to be a stonemason, and I'll only beat you when you are a snot."

"I would rather play with lepers than listen to this." Joshua began to walk away.³²

In this novel, *Lamb: The Gospel according to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal*, Christopher Moore presents a narrator who, as

³¹ Anne Rice, *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt* (New York/Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 49-51.

³² Moore, *Lamb, the Gospel according to Biff*, 14-15.

indicated in the title, is a childhood companion of Jesus. Significantly, he is, even though a kid, in love with his pal's mother, namely Mary. The points-of-view on Mary's appearance are thus congruent: the mother of Jesus was a beautiful and most lovable woman.

The facts, emotions, feelings, descriptions added to the framework of the biblical story of Mary's life are so far in agreement with what we can legitimately suppose of Mary's life from Scripture and our knowledge of first-century Galilee. They are also in harmony with Tradition.³³ These novels add flesh to the framework, but, since all additions are plausible ones, they stay within this framework.

2. BEYOND THE FRAMEWORK OF BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

The story of Mary's life, however, offers to novelists opportunities to step beyond this biblical framework, for Mary has had a life after the last episode reported in the New Testament. The story of her life did not stop there. For Catholics and Orthodox Christians, she was assumed body and soul into heaven at the end of her earthly life, and, starting in the third century, numerous apparitions of Mary have been reported all over the world. In this new phase of her life, from her Assumption onward, Mary can be regarded as the heavenly Mary, compared to the earthly Mary of the biblical narrative framework. This new phase extends the story of Mary's life almost *ad infinitum*, providing artists and novelists with inexhaustible material on a well-known figure. It allows them to combine the benefits of both recalling features of an emblematic figure and using that creativity of which theologians, unlike artists, are deprived.

Diane Schoemperlen's novel *Our Lady of the Lost and Found* proposes, indeed, quite an original way of portraying Mary, of introducing her as a character. The novel has a narrator, a journalist in modern-day Canada. One afternoon, she spotted someone in her yard:

³³ In fact, we should here speak of "Traditions," with an "s." Rice's novels echo the Catholic tradition, since the "brothers" of Jesus are in fact Joseph's sons of a previous marriage; whereas Moore's work reflects the Protestant view, according to which Mary and Joseph had other children after Jesus' birth.

There was a woman standing in front of the fig tree.

She was wearing a navy blue trench coat and white running shoes. She had a white shawl draped over her hair like a hood. Over her right shoulder she carried a large leather purse. In her left hand she held the extended metal handle of a small suitcase on wheels that rested on an angle slightly behind her like an obedient dog.

—Fear not, she said.

I was too stunned to be scared. I put the watering can down on the coffee table and stared at her.

—It's me, Mary, she said. Mother of God.

I must have looked blank. She went on, smiling.

—You know. Mary. Lamb of the Redeemer. Queen of Heaven. Pilgrim of Peace. Daughter of Zion. Ark of the Covenant. Fount of Beauty. Summit of Virtue. Sublime Peak of Human Intellect.

She paused. I could not speak. Her eyes twinkled. She went on:

—Mother of the Mystical Body. Unplowed Field of Heaven's Bread. Cloud of Rain That Offers Drink to the Souls of the Saints. Virgin Most Venerable. Virgin Most Powerful. Virgin Most Merciful. More Holy Than the Cherubim, the Seraphim, and the Entire Angelic Hosts.

—Hello, I said.

She put down her purse and then set her suitcase upright beside it. She pushed a red button and the handle retracted. She slid back the shawl, and her fine hair, which was dark brown streaked with silver, fell in tangled waves around her shoulders. She rummaged in her coat pocket, pulled out an elastic band, gathered her hair in her hands, and tied it back at her neck.

Recovering my manners, I said:

—Come in, do come in.³⁴

The Mary who shows up, who appears to the narrator, is the Mary of apparitions, the Mary of Tradition. She introduces herself as "Mary . . . Mother of God." To make it clear, she adds: "You know. Mary. Lamb of the Redeemer. Queen of Heaven. Pilgrim of Peace. Daughter of Zion. Ark of the Covenant. Fount of Beauty. Summit of Virtue. Sublime Peak of Human Intellect" and so on. The contrast, however, of these many titles with the simple, ordinary woman standing in the living room is humorous.

³⁴ Diane Schoemperlen, *Our Lady of the Lost and Found* (New York: Viking, 2001), 30-31.

The novel builds on this contrast: on the one hand, this visiting Mary is a quite ordinary woman; for instance, the narrator and she go shopping at the mall, where Mary appears to possess a credit card in the name of "Mary Theotokos." On the other hand, during the many conversations Mary has with the narrator, she tells her about her ministry of apparitions and healings for centuries all over the world. The narrative itself is regularly interrupted by summaries of the development of Marian theology and devotion over the centuries. Among others, the novel is thus also a book recalling the many other books written about Mary, starting with Scripture. We have here an explicit example of intertextuality.

Combined with the above-mentioned contrast, it indicates that the novel aims at showing that the heavenly Mary, behind her multiple titles and her long-standing "powers," is basically the same person as the earthly Mary. Veneration, devotion, theology, miracles—all that has not altered the one Mary, has not made her aloof or unapproachable. It has just enabled her to perform her motherly mission to many more people. But she has remained the same person in-the-flesh that people could have seen in Galilee two thousand years ago.

In Bud MacFarlane's novels, *Pierced by a Sword* and *Conceived without Sin*, Mary also appears and speaks to the main characters, in order to guide them through most dramatic events, yet not the end of the world. Mary is seen and heard as a distinct person, like any other character, yet she is much more enveloped in mystery than the Mary in Schoemperlen's novel. The heavenly Mary prevails. What is important in her presence is the power she represents:

Then Lee Washington heard *her* voice. It was the same voice Maria DeGraffenreid Bonilla heard twenty-eight years earlier as she sat before the Pieta in San Nicholas. It was also the most beautiful sound Lee had ever heard. Her voice came from the direction of the chair behind him.

"I have waited so long to be with you, my son. Come to me and let me hold you."

Lec, seized with a fear of the strange events that were enveloping him one after another, yet buoyed by the beauty in the voice he heard, gathered himself and turned to look at the woman.

She is so beautiful! And young! She's younger than I am!

"Who are you?" he croaked, his throat already constricting with overwhelming emotions: joy, relief, contrition, awe, peacefulness.

The woman was wearing a long beige tunic with a royal purple shawl covered with stars, but wore no belt as the archangel had. Lee saw that her skin was brown but lighter than his own. She had a simple brown cross hanging around her neck. Now that he was looking directly at her, she seemed older than he had first thought. She was *ageless*.

"I am your mother, Lee. I am the mother of all mankind. Do not be afraid. We have time. There is much to explain. I know you are confused. First, come here," she gently invited as she held out her arms.

Tears welling in his eyes, Lee allowed himself to be drawn into the arms and lap of the beautiful woman in the chair. Huge sobs surged up from the depths of his body as he embraced the woman. She consoled him with tender words, much as she had consoled Saint Catherine de Laboure in a small chapel on the Rue du Bac of Paris in 1830.³⁵

Mary's apparition is described here with reference to previous ones, to previous stories. Here, however, the previous stories, as well as the Marian presence in the novel, confer a heavenly legitimacy to views or actions of the main characters. What they declare and what they do receive their authority from above. To a certain extent, in resorting to the heavenly Mary and in departing from the framework of the biblical narrative, novels try to rival Scripture in offering new "heavenly inspired" texts. This competition with Scripture for authority is another example of how intertextuality is at play when novels tell about Mary. In MacFarlane's novels, the titles suppose that the readers are familiar with what Scripture says about Mary—*Pierced by a Sword*—but also with what Tradition states about her—*Conceived without Sin*.

In the next example, taken from Steve Berry's novel *The Third Secret*, an extrinsic Marian apparition—one recognized as authentic by the Catholic Church—has happened. The novel's title of course alludes to Fatima where Mary is said to have entrusted three secrets to the little visionaries. The third, supposedly the most dramatic one, has been kept hidden since then, which provides for an ideal opportunity for another "conspiracy theory."

³⁵ Bud Macfarlane, *Pierced by a Sword* (Cleveland: Saint Jude Media, 1995), 159-160.

He sat and opened the envelope.

Inside were two sheets of paper, one blue, one tan. He read the blue sheet first, penned in Clement's hand:

Colin, by now you know that the Virgin left more. Her words are now entrusted to you. Be wise with them.

His hands trembled as he laid the blue sheet aside. . . . A final read and he now knew what Sister Lucia had written in 1944—the remainder of what the Virgin told her in the third secret—what Father Tibor translated that day in 1960.

Before the Lady left She stated there was one last message which the Lord wished to convey only to Jacinta and me. She told us She was the Mother of God and asked us to make public this message to the entire world at the appropriate time. In so doing we will find strong resistance. Listen well and pay attention was Her command. Men have to correct themselves. They have sinned and trod upon the gift given them. My child, She said, marriage is a sanctified state. Its love knows no boundaries. What the heart feels is genuine, no matter to whom or why, and God has placed no limit on what makes a sound union. Know well that happiness is the only real test of love. Know also that women are as much a part of God's church as men. To be called to the service of the Lord is not a masculine endeavor. Priests of the Lord should not be forbidden from love and companionship, nor from the joy of a child. To serve God is not to forgo one's heart. Priests should be bountiful in every way. Finally, She said, know that your body is yours. Just as God entrusted me with His son, the Lord entrusts to you and all women their unborn. It is for you alone to decide what is best. Go my little ones and proclaim the glory of these words. For that purpose I will always be at your side. . . .

He slid out of the chair and fell to his knees. The implications were not in question.³⁶

Fatima's "third secret" has been written down by the few who happened to have known about its content. The novel is about unveiling a hidden text. And the dramatic power of the words it contains lies in the very person of their author, namely Mary as she appeared at Fatima. The novel reckons the power of the heavenly Mary, recognizes that she is a most powerful person. For novelists and their readers, she can be perceived as

³⁶ Steve Berry, *The Third Secret* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2006), 334-336.

an "acknowledged" heavenly messenger bringing "breaking" new revelation to humanity on earth. Jesus is believed to come back at the end of the world for the final revelation. There will be no more story to write after that. Meanwhile, in the course of our ordinary history, Mary's apparitions will not be seen as so dramatically conclusive. Her story goes on as she keeps delivering the word of God in messages that can be seen as aimed at giving meaning to history or at correcting it when needed, not as bringing it to its close. The message delivered from above wants to be immediately relevant for today's world: it is the views of today's Catholic Church on women, homosexuals, priesthood, and so on, that *The Third Secret* means to question, through Mary.

A similar intention can be spotted in Mary Elizabeth Murphy's novel *Virgin*. The main characters—a priest and a nun—hear of an object worthy of a quest. They discover that this object is Mary's body, kept unspoiled and unaltered over two millennia. They naturally have to bring it to the United States and they manage to do it. There, in New York City, the body comes back to life as Mary is about to start her Assumption. But before ascending into heaven and taking the nun and the priest with her, she also makes some statements challenging the Catholic Church's views on priestly celibacy³⁷ and so on:

Dan had listened raptly. She'd been speaking to the world, he knew, to all of humankind, but he'd felt as if she were speaking only to him. For what she'd said reflected exactly his innermost thoughts and feelings. Because of his vows, his membership in the priesthood, he'd been afraid to vocalize them, even to himself. But now that *she* had said them, he could acknowledge what he'd sensed, *known* all along.

He wondered if that was why he was here, in this house, in her presence—in *His* presence—why he'd been with her all along.

As the Virgin finished speaking, she touched Carrie's bowed head and said, "Come, my devoted one."

Carrie rose to her feet. The Virgin held out her hand and Carrie took it. The Virgin said, "Our time here is done."

³⁷ The title contains a double entendre: it refers, of course, to Mary, subject of the novel, but also to a Marian reality—virginity—that the novel eventually intends to question.

Our time is done. What did she mean by that?

Dan swallowed and addressed her again.

"Wait . . . please. Can't you . . . bring her back? Make her live again? You can do that, can't you?"

The Virgin shook her head. "Her time here is through. She is coming with me."

"With you? You're taking her away? Where?" Dan felt a sob building in his chest. He still hadn't come to terms with Carrie's death. "Oh, please. I've only just begun to know her. You can't take her away from me now."

"I haven't taken her away. One of your brothers did that."

And then Carrie and the Virgin began to rise.³⁸

This novel describes the lengthy process of Mary's Assumption. After having, as an unanimated "object," been in a dormition state for many centuries, Mary resumes the qualities of a living person or character. She can be seen and heard, and even touched in *Virgin*. On the other hand, Mary is definitely not a character like any other. While in dormition, she was like a chrysalis in a cocoon. Back to life, she is no longer the earthly Mary, but the heavenly one. She is now a person of authority and power. This is what gives weight to her condemnation of priestly celibacy. By the way, this explains why the Church regards apparitions—these other episodes added to Mary's story—as inauthentic when the Marian message they claim to deliver opposes the Church's teaching. But novelists do not have to care about getting the Church's approval. They are free to make up Marian apparitions the way they want them to have happened. In telling the story of Mary's life, expanding on the part that belongs to the heavenly Mary gives the novelists more liberty to use the figure of Mary against the tradition and the teaching of the Church, than expanding on the part that belongs to the earthly Mary as defined within the framework of the biblical narrative.

3. BREAKING THE FRAMEWORK OF THE BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

A few novelists, however, have used the story of the earthly Mary in order to make some point that dissents from the Church's tradition and teaching. But to do that, they had to

³⁸ Mary Elizabeth Murphy, *Virgin* (New York: Berkley Books, 1996), 334-335.

break the framework of the biblical narrative about Mary. This would be another way for novelists to make use of that creativity forbidden to theologians. In Marek Halter's novel *Mary of Nazareth* we find the earthly Mary again, very much rooted in her Israelite society. The title already speaks of a Mary defined by her home place.

"Father, I haven't been defiled. Believe me."

He looked at her now as if she were his enemy.

Miriam knelt before him and took his hands in hers. "Father, please try to understand. What can a woman do to free Israel from the Roman yoke, except give birth to its liberator? Remember the meeting Barabbas called to decide on the best time to start a rebellion? Even then, I talked about the Liberator. The man who will know no other authority than that of Yahweh, the Master of the Universe. The man who will revive his word and establish his law.

"I've thought a lot about it since then, Father. I've seen prophets. All men tarnished by blood and lies. There wasn't a single one among them who talked about love. Yet our holy Torah says, *Love your neighbor as yourself*.

"All of you think women are only there to give birth. Give birth to submissive men or rebellious men. But what if one of them gave birth to the man we have all been waiting for all these years—all of us, you and I and all the people of Israel?

"To give birth to the Liberator. No one ever thought of that. But I did. And it's what I'm going to do. I told you it would be like this. So why worry, why torture yourself, why ask all these questions?"

Joachim's lips moved, tears clinging to his beard. "What have I done for the Almighty to keep striking me down?" he moaned. "What have I done that's so unforgivable?"³⁹

Miriam is Mary's name in Hebrew or Aramaic, that is in her original Jewish culture. The author is a Jew himself who is willing to remind readers of the Jewish roots and identity of Mary or Miriam. The story he tells ends when Miriam becomes Mary. But the novel departs from the story of Mary as told in the New Testament. Though the gospels of Matthew and Luke clearly affirm the divine origin of Mary's son, the novel leaves the issue

³⁹ Marek Halter, *Mary of Nazareth: A Novel* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2008), 255.

in the shade: Mary "simply" declares being pregnant without the intervention of any "father." Moreover, the reclaiming of Mary as an authentic Jewish woman goes along with the traditional Jewish views on the resurrection of Jesus, simply explained by the fact that Jesus didn't really die but only experienced some kind of coma due to a heavy physical shock. Even though Halter's novel wants to elicit a Jewish point of view on Mary's story, with possibly some apologetical or "polemical" intention, it is interesting to notice that a Jewish novelist found Mary worth a book.

Halter's portrayal of Mary remains highly positive. This can be expected since, when one claims a person back, that person must be deemed worthy of it. But if a Jew reclaims Mary, it may be for reasons that are distinct from those explaining why a Catholic may be attached to Mary. There is common ground: Halter shows us a Mary of faith and hope, filled with strength and resources, responsive to the will of God. But he also depicts her as someone, for instance, who "had learned the kind of things that in Israel were normally reserved for a few men: the Greek language, political philosophy."⁴⁰ The political issue of Roman occupation is predominant in *Mary of Nazareth*, up to the point of affecting the major event in Mary's life, namely, her becoming the mother of Jesus. She sees her son to be born as the one who would liberate Israel through a message of love. Halter's Mary could then be regarded as a narrative illustration of the "autonomous" Mary promoted by some feminist theologians who see in her the example of a woman who has been able to bring achievement—here, the coming of the savior—without the contribution of any man.⁴¹

Since, in the novel, readers have only Mary's words about Jesus as having been conceived without a father, this may enable them to dismiss any miraculous and divine origin of Jesus. This would be consistent with the intention of a narrative that also dismisses the notion of Jesus' resurrection. We

⁴⁰ Halter, *Mary of Nazareth*, 136.

⁴¹ For example, see Els Maeckelberghe, *Desperately Seeking Mary: A Feminist Appropriation of a Traditional Religious Symbol* (Kampen, The Netherlands: Pharos, 1991).

have here another example that what is said about Jesus has an impact on what is said about Mary, and vice versa—in this case, the connection between the perpetual virginity of Mary and the divinity of Jesus.

Evidently, Jews are not supposed to acknowledge the New Testament as Scripture. Because of that, *Mary of Nazareth* may claim that the earthly Mary encountered in Scripture does not necessarily coincide with what novelists describe as the historical Mary. This novel picks up elements about Mary that are mentioned in the New Testament—the political and even subversive verses of the Magnificat (Luke 1:52-55), but it focuses and expands on them at the expense of the rest of the canonical gospels. Likewise, the novel adopts traditional Catholic views about Mary that are made explicit in the apocrypha—like Joseph as already having children from a previous marriage or Mary's parents as being Joachim and Anne, but it leaves aside, for instance, the fact that the same apocrypha heavily insist on Mary's virginity as well as on Jesus' divinity. These views would not have fit into the picture of a Mary committing herself in preparing the coming of a very political liberator.

A political liberation and a woman deeply engaged in it are, however, deeply meaningful to people who, throughout history, have experienced evil as oppression by political and military earthly powers. *Mary of Nazareth* establishes a connection with Mary's personal fate and the Holocaust; at the end of the book, a text given as having been written by Mary herself is attached as an addendum. Presented there is a passage from a narrative in the third person, centered around Mary, to one in the first person, Mary.

In *Mary of Nazareth*, Mary's intervention as a narrator at the end of the novel serves two main functions. First, it creates empathy between her and the readers who are introduced into the very heart of her person. Second, as a consequence of this, the readers are led to give a certain kind of credit and assent to her point of views or, at least, they are invited to depart a little from their own views or pre-views about her and her story, especially since the novel's intention is, as stated on the cover leaf of the book jacket, to offer "a revealing, utterly captivating portrait of a woman whose story we only thought we knew."

A similar purpose can be retrieved from Nino Ricci's novel *Testament*, where Mary also appears as a narrator. She is one among several narrators, since the novel is made of four stories told by Judas Iscariot, Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of Jesus, and Simon Peter. The novel is given as a collection of four first-hand documents giving witness to Jesus. On the back cover, we read: "Nino Ricci offers a provocative portrait of the historical Jesus, an ordinary man living in a time of political turmoil and spiritual uncertainty." The novel as a whole is about Jesus, but the incidental portrait of Mary it delivers is also, as we may now expect it, quite "provocative":

As a child I lived in Jerusalem, this in the time of Herod who was called the Great. Through many favours my father had gained a place at court, as a clerk, and he began to think how he might further advance our family's fortunes by making a good marriage for me.

Even in those days there were many Romans who passed through the court, soldiers and officials who came down from Syria or Caesarea, which Herod had built, or even from Rome. One of these, a legate awaiting orders, my father befriended and presented me to, leaving us several times alone. In the end, because I was young and did not know better and because he threatened me with harm, I was forced to yield to him. I was never able to forget the smell of him—he did not smell like a Jew but had a perfumed odour underlain with a stench like rancid fat. After that time I was able to bear many things, because I knew always that the worst thing was behind me.

The legate did not take me as his wife as my father had planned, but abandoned me the moment he had received his commission. When he had gone it grew clear that I was with child, and so was disgraced. My father beat me when he discovered this, though as I said to him, it was you who put me in his way, which silenced him. To save me then from being outcast he began to search for a husband for me, asking among the lower orders, for surely no one of our own station would have had me.

As it happened there was a mason employed at the temple works by the name of Yehoceph who was in search of a wife. He was an old man, three times my years, who had put another wife away from him for barrenness and did not want to repeat his error. So it was an advantage to him that I was with child, because I had proved myself fertile, and also that I was young, being not yet fifteen years. Nonetheless, to make up for the dishonour of me and the expense of being saddled with a child not his own, he asked much above the usual dowry, all in coin, and offered no

bride price. It cost my father all his small fortune to satisfy him, in which however I took some bitter consolation, for he had ruined my life in the hope of advancing his own ambitions.⁴²

As in *Mary of Nazareth*, we have here a Mary who is deeply concerned and affected by the political situation of her country. In *Testament* also, Mary is called Miryam. In Ricci's novel too, the characters are just ordinary human beings and by no means holy ones. Both Mary's father and her husband take advantage of her for selfish purposes. Mary herself, as she discloses her feelings to the readers, shares some *schadenfreude* as her father's scheme fails. Jesus does die on the cross, but some of his disciples come and secretly remove his corpse from the tomb.⁴³ Ricci's novel gives credit to the rumor spread out by the chief priests who, informed of the resurrection by the tomb's guards, ordered them to "tell people that his disciples had come by night and stolen Jesus away while they were asleep" (Matt. 28:14). No resurrection and no virginal conception: Jesus is a bastard because Mary, his mother, has been seduced and abandoned by a Roman soldier. Here, Ricci's novel echoes the attack launched against Christians by the Greek philosopher Kelsos or Celsus who, in 178 a.d., wrote a pamphleteering text, the *True Discourse*, in which he denied that Jesus was born of a virgin by affirming that he was in fact fathered by a Roman soldier called Panthera who raped Mary. Celsus' work has been lost and is only known to us through its refutation written by Origen.⁴⁴ Intertextuality is at play again, but, in this case, Ricci decided to rely on ancient stories or texts that were anti-Christian. For, if being Christian means believing in the resurrection and divinity of Jesus, Ricci's novel cannot be labeled as Christian. Once again the issue about the identity of Jesus is closely related to the person of Mary.

The weight of Mary's witness is heightened by the fact that her witness is given in the first person. It is firsthand witness. Readers are likely to be dragged into the narrator's perspective

⁴² Nino Ricci, *Testament* (Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 227-228.

⁴³ Ricci, *Testament*, 375.

⁴⁴ See Origen, *Contra Celsum*, trans., introd., and notes by Henry Chadwick (Cambridge, Eng.: University Press, 1965), 31 (IV, 32).

and show understanding toward it. Even with some shortcomings, and because of what she had to go through, Mary emerges as a positive character, as someone with whom readers may identify. Yet, as far as credibility is concerned, a witness in the first person has its Achilles heel, for the entire text is controlled and, therefore, possibly manipulated by the narrator. After Agatha Christie's novel *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, where the narrator happens to be the murderer, readers of novels have been warned against the reliability of stories told in the first person and could apply to them some hermeneutics of suspicion. This being said, if there is manipulation, it is eventually the author's and not the narrator's.

CONCLUSION

All these novels are stories about Mary, if only partially. So, they draw the attention of the mariologists. Therefore, besides any literary or artistic considerations, the question about them is: How do they contribute to our knowledge of the mother of Jesus? Intertextuality gives us the background for such an assessment. There are quite a few givens about Mary in the original text about Mary, namely Scripture, that have made of Mary the person she is. This biblical framework or screenplay of Mary's story has been canonized, and is limited to the life of the earthly Mary. Tradition, whether popular or authoritative, has prolonged Mary's story: the portion of the earthly Mary was complemented with the portion of the heavenly Mary. Some episodes of the life of the heavenly Mary—such as her Assumption—have also been canonized. This canonization has ensured Mary's popularity and relevance. But some people, and among them novelists also, have rejected such canonization: instead of building on previous canonical stories, they have chosen to build on previous non- or anti-canonical ones. So, as we conclude this analysis about how the retelling of Mary's story in recent novels published in the United-States does contribute to our knowledge of Mary, we will consider first those who have retold the story of Mary within the framework of the biblical narrative, second those who have retold the story of Mary by going beyond that framework, and third those who have retold the story of Mary by discarding or breaking with—at least to some significant extent—that framework.

1. Novels Retelling the Story of Mary within the Biblical Framework

The portrait of Mary is here basically consonant with the one found in Scripture. We meet here the earthly Mary. We do not learn more about her in these novels than we already know from the New Testament or from socio-historical findings. The contribution of these novels is elsewhere. In developing the characters, in multiplying them, in telling about their thoughts and emotions, in unveiling their motivations, in detailing the setting of the story, in informing readers about what life was like—economically, sociologically, culturally, politically, religiously—in Galilee and Judea at that time, the novels add density, substance, presence to the story of Mary's life. They bring Mary's world back to life in ways that speak to modern readers, ways that reflect their concerns. For instance, in Anne Rice's *The Road to Cana*, two boys are stoned after having been accused of homosexual behavior.⁴⁵ Today, in the United States, the way stories are told differs from the way they were told two thousand years ago in Israel. Recent novelists are aware of this and retell the life of Mary in a way meaningful to modern readers so that they can, for example, more easily identify with characters. Moreover, even mariologists may find it useful to read such novels where they are reminded that biblical characters were also persons of flesh and blood, each one of them with distinctive thoughts and feelings, living in a particular world and culture, with all that implies. The Thoenes' novel reminds us, for instance, that Mary's pregnancy, even when authored by the Holy Spirit, might not have been as smoothly accepted by her entourage as the sober biblical narrative may suggest.

2. Novels Retelling the Story of Mary beyond the Biblical Framework

When novels retell the story of the heavenly Mary, readers are told of episodes in Mary's life that are not reported by either the narratives found in Scripture or the ones found in Church Tradition. Novelists find in their imaginations a vast

⁴⁵ Rice, *The Road to Cana*, 12-13.

domain to exploit and express their creativity. It is in such novels that the story of Mary's life experiences the most surprising and unexpected twists and turns. But, paradoxically, this is also consonant with the biblical narrative, where the divine intervention in Mary's life also happens in totally surprising and unheard-of ways. For there is nothing in the Old Testament foretelling that the Messiah to come will be God incarnate, in person. Biblical narratives, however, are replete with unexpected heavenly interventions. Adding a few more extraordinary episodes in Mary's life is not out of place when treating the little girl of Galilee who became the mother of God.

Besides, the combination of what is familiar about a character—here, Mary—with what is surprising is appealing to some readers. Schoemperlen's novel plays on this paradox and draws its strength from combining the little girl of Galilee and the mother of God, the earthly Mary with the heavenly one, the Marian figure of Scripture and Tradition with a most ordinary woman. Interestingly, what is extraordinary about Mary's presence in the novel is the fact that it is the presence of a most ordinary woman, at least as long as the novel lasts.

If in this novel the intervention from above is quite ordinary, this is not the case for the other novels discussed here. On the contrary, the point they want to make needs the authority of a heavenly figure, whether in order to uphold the teaching of the Catholic Church, as in McFarlane's novel, or to oppose it, as in Murphy's or Perry's novels. What these novels have in common, though, is a perception of Mary, in particular the heavenly Mary, as deeply connected to the Catholic Church and its Tradition; for they all refer to her in order either to support or to negate the Church or its teachings. What is told of the heavenly Mary affects the Catholic Church. All these novels acknowledge her powerful dimension and her identification with Catholicism, since she is seen as able either to boost it or to undermine it.

3. Novels Retelling the Story of Mary While Breaking the Biblical Framework

As far as the earthly Mary is concerned, what is at stake when her story is told is her connection with Jesus. What is said

about her affects the identity of Jesus. As we may expect, when Mary's story follows the biblical framework—as in the novels of Berg, Moore, Rice, Rivers, or the Thoenes—the identity of Jesus as Son of God remains basically the same as that found in the New Testament. When, however, Mary's story departs from the biblical framework or even breaks it, as in the novels of Halter or Ricci, readers discover a different Jesus. When the story of Mary distances itself from the biblical framework, what is told about the earthly Mary does not undermine just Catholicism, but Christianity itself. If Jesus is not God-made-flesh, the very basis of Christianity is removed. In Halter's and Ricci's novels, Jesus is indeed not the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity.

But, in all this, what is significant about Mary is twofold. First, Mary's stories told in recent novels acknowledge that speaking of Mary has to do with speaking of Jesus and speaking of the Catholic Church. Mary's story is inseparable from the story of Jesus and the story of the Church from their very beginning: her story affects their identity. Second, the very fact that even the novelists who want to offer a portrait of Jesus or of the Church different from those of the Christian and Catholic traditions choose to do so by retelling Mary's story—this time with the nuance of revisiting it—indicates that, for all the novelists who decide to speak of her, Mary remains a positive figure and a powerful source of inspiration. Whether recent novelists retell Mary's story in a way that is consonant with Christianity or Catholicism or in a way that is not, the fact that novels about her continue to be written in the beginning of the third millennium shows that Mary still has the power to inspire artists and she remains, two thousand years later, an important figure of reference.⁴⁶ These two consequences remain consonant with traditional views on Mary.

⁴⁶ Fernando Castelli, "Maria nella letteratura europea del XX secolo," *Ephemerides Mariologicae* 53 (2003): 403.