

## **"You can be your own prophet." Remembering the Scriptural in Will Self's *The Book of Dave***

Ewa Rychter

*This article focuses on the ways Will Self's novel The Book of Dave (2006) evokes and problematises the constraining and constructive dimensions of what Wesley Kort labelled "scriptures", i.e., of special-status, but non-transcendent texts. In Self's novel, scriptures display both their coercive/destructive and supportive/preserving potential, released, as I want to argue, when scripture's partiality is (respectively) forgotten or remembered. Making the role of memory pivotal for the functioning of scripture (and drawing on Charles E. Scott's conceptualisation of memory's complexities), the article claims that scriptures can be positively transformational when they are kept afloat, i.e., when they are guarded against oblivion but also maintained in a mercurial state.*

Among the ancient narratives which enjoy the unabated interest of contemporary novelists, the story of a great flood undoubtedly takes pride of place. The biblical Deluge is the warp and weft of Timothy Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (1984), Jeanette Winterson's *Boating for Beginners* (1985), Geraldine McCaughrean's *Not the End of the World* (2004), David Maine's *The Preservationist* (2004; *The Flood* [2005] in Britain), and features prominently in Michèle Roberts's *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987) and Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (1989). As Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg argues, the biblical Flood narrative – these days usually rendered in a starkly realistic way – serves contemporary novelists as a mean to demythologise the Bible and undermine its claim to authority. The graphic realism of Barnes's or Winterson's all-the-world's-animals-in-one-vessel narrative exposes the sheer impossibility of such a story happening in reality. The key to the continued resonance of the Flood story seems to lie in its provocative "absurdity" (Stahlberg 28), its irritating flamboyance, its unforgettable implausibility which "must be taken seriously [...] and made more meaningful" (Stahlberg 37), the preferred strategy being a ruthlessly anachronistic exposure of the scriptural story to the demands of realistic conventions.

Yet, not all contemporary novelists who turn towards the flood narrative capitalise on the biblical story's unbelievability or insist on its subversive authentication. Some novelists – for example, Will Self in his *The Book of Dave* (2006) – gesture towards the flood myth as unattached to any *specific* scriptural tradition, leaving their story free-floating in that respect. Marked with apocalyptic logic (so incisively discussed by Frank Kermode, Northrop Frye, Jacques Derrida and James Berger, and so distinctly present in a variety of contemporary discourses), the flood in *The Book of Dave* is a pivot on which Self's ends-and-continuities story rests. As an iteration of other Deluges, as a predictably ineffective "ultimate" closure, Self's flood feeds on what Derrida identified as an impossibility in apocalyptic discourse – the impossibility of uttering the master word/Word, of closing the chain of meanings, of lifting the final veil. Like other apocalyptic images, the flood in *The Book of Dave* "announces [...] the end of the world, but then the text does not end, nor does the world represented in the text" (Berger 5). Self's flood, which on the one hand marks the demise of twentieth-century culture and, on the other hand, indicates the emergence of a disconcertingly familiar post-deluvian civilisation, is a sign of what Kermode described as "our lack of confidence in ends" (99). More than a definitive, all-wiping cataclysm, the apocalypse in Self's novel resembles the ever-receding horizon – something of which we know to be permanently out of grasp and which we see as always to come. Since "[e]very apocalypse is a sequel", Self's deluge can only become a part of "the neverending story", one in a series of "ever-evolving renditions" (Pippin 1).

Admittedly, without indicating the Bible as *the* reference point, Will Self's apocalypse – like many other apocalyptic texts – cannot but drift towards the biblical text, though the drift is anything but smooth. Self's handling of the flood may be seen as an ironic take on Northrop Frye's Bible-based, radically open-ended "participating apocalypse" (137). The stepping-stone-like character of the catastrophe in *The Book of Dave* seems to attest to what Frye envisages as the closure-proof, apocalyptic desire for more abundant life, the desire which informs the secular imagination and is modelled on the biblical Great Code. Simultaneously, however, Self compromises Frye's "ideal world" (139) of the apocalyptic imagination, its allegedly "upward metamorphosis to a new beginning" (137), and uses the flood to probe the limits of such transformation, as well as to indicate the dystopian underside of Frye's "blueprint that gives direction and purpose to man's energies" (139-140). Significantly, Will Self's interrogation of the Bible-related apocalyptic mechanisms goes hand in hand with his exploration of other issues, broader

than those concerning the Bible, issues pertaining to what Wesley A. Kort defined as "scripture". Kort's "scripture", corresponding in some respects to Northrop Frye's religious and secular "myth", is any text bestowed at a given time with a special status, a text which on the one hand, helps to construct, sustain, reconfigure or interrogate an individual's or group's world, but which on the other hand, "constrains, inhibits, creates fears and sets limits" (5). Moreover, "scripture" is never characterised by transcendence and is never elevated beyond the textual field. "This means that all scriptures and the worlds drawn and sustained by them are partial [...] in the sense of not being all-inclusive, and [...] in the sense of being invested with interests" (Kort 5). *The Book of Dave* makes ample use of a variety of scriptures, evoking the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Qur'an, and, last but not least, the fictitious Book of Dave, written in twentieth-century London but discovered and venerated in Ingerland. In Self's novel, scriptures display both their coercive/destructive and enhancing/preserving potential, which, as I want to argue, is released when scripture's partiality is (respectively) forgotten or remembered.

The flood narrative is a good starting point for the discussion of the ambivalent power wielded by Self's scriptures insofar as the narrative frames and helps to articulate the complexity of the scriptures' memory-related status, so vital for the construction of the novel. As a scripture-based story predicated on interrelated obliteration and preservation, on continuity maintained in spite of disruption, the flood neatly mediates the problem of remembering and forgetting in/through scripture. First of all, the flood provides a convenient optics for the ways in which Self's scriptures figure as preserved or remembered remnants of the past, as salvaged elements that are evidently partial, selective and "invested with interests" (Kort 5). Secondly, the flood story allegorically indicates the fact that scriptures can be supportive and positively transformational when they are kept *afloat*, i.e., when they are guarded against oblivion but also maintained in a mercurial state, when they "provide and indicate *location* on the textual field" (Kort 2, emphasis mine), without losing their flotsam-like, imperfect and fragmentary character. As I want to argue, such a "floating" status of scripture depends on the investment in (or abandon to) the work of pliable, heterogeneous and transfiguring memory, whose operations will be explained in the course of my argument by means of Charles E. Scott's conceptualisation of memory. Generally speaking, the flood myth in *The Book of Dave* effectively foregrounds and problematises the ambiguous role texts invested with a special cultural/personal weight assume these days.

In *The Book of Dave*, Will Self not only spares his deluge a detailed, realistic depiction, but also keeps it outside the precincts of all representation whatsoever. Thus, his flood is literally a gap between the two parts of the novel – the twentieth-century story of Dave, a London cabbie, and the sixth-century AD (After Dave) story of post-deluvian Ingerland. Evidently, for Self the attractiveness of the flood lies elsewhere than in the possibility of parading its horrifying particulars in front of the reader. As a recognisable story of the world emptied of everything save, let us say, one wooden, tightly-packed rescue vessel, the flood seems a good choice for the novel in which (1) most twentieth-century characters, who have “nothing to hold on to” (Self 396), either cling or construct ark-like ideas for their vacuous lives, and in which (2) the post-deluvian characters struggle over their surviving, ark-like cultural entities. It is quite symptomatic that Self decides to pivot his novel on the narrative which plays preservation against destruction, which – in a properly apocalyptic fashion – puts the world in jeopardy but steers clear of total destruction, and which stakes survival of the world on the durability of one, (actually) free-floating construction. The residual (apocalyptic) duality of the flood story, so important for *The Book of Dave*, is strengthened and exacerbated by other scriptures, which in the course of the novel come to signify both the highly equivocal refuge from the vacuity of contemporary life, and a limiting (if not lethal) capacity of ark-like havens.

On the most basic level, by filling in the time-gap that separates two mutually alienated cultures, the flood in *The Book of Dave* ensures narrative continuity between late twentieth-century London (wiped away by the cataclysm), and that of the later, new-calendar-based civilisation of Ingerland (largely unaware of the earlier, now extinct, populace). The sense of apocalyptic (i.e., sequel-like) continuity depends on the reader, who infers what has happened to twentieth-century England by gleaning the scattered flood-related utterances from the novel: there are some wry commentaries on the potential catastrophe: “*What is it with these fowl? [...] have they come inland because they anticipate a deluge? Should we get Maintenance to start building an ark?*” (Self 279, italics in original); Dave’s prophetic visions of the coming “tsunami of meltwater that dashed up the estuary” (Self 405) and the oddly similar film scenario of a guy who “thinks the river’s [the Thames] gonna flood [...] like shit” (Self 263); in Ing there is “the Sentrul Stac [...] rising up sheer out of the waves” (Self 131), whose ruins are, in fact, the earlier “towering stack of Centrepont rising up from the swell of masonry” (Self 147). In *The Book of Dave* the flood is a narrative glue, whose structure, however, remains distinctly

porous or crack-ridden. Self's flood is an obviously incomplete or partial story, only vaguely gesturing towards the Bible as one of its hypotexts, and never allowing the biblical scripture to dominate or constrain the novel. Incidentally, unlike other contemporary novelists attracted to the flood myth, Self does not meticulously and subversively (re)construct the full reality of the biblical narrative, but, as it might be argued, remaining faithful to the "suggestive influence of the unexpressed, 'background quality'" (Auerbach 19) of the hypotext, imbues his version of the flood with silences and disruptions. It is this lacunae-ridden flood that sustains the novel's organisation, initiates the reconfiguration of one of its worlds, and, through its emphatic truncation (rather than through the purported completeness of the larger-than-life realism), emphasises the textual vulnerability and partiality of all scripture.

Although the flood engulfs the life of late twentieth-century London and drowns its accurate memory, it does not push it into total oblivion. Self's flood carries some flotsam and jetsam of the previous civilisation and pushes it, so to say, through the gap at the centre of the novel's chronological scheme, thus using the post-deluvian refuse to form a default link between the otherwise sharply divided times. As Berger contends, "[i]n nearly every apocalyptic presentation, something remains after the end. [...] The apocalypse as eschaton is just as importantly the vehicle for clearing away the world as it is and making possible the post-apocalypse paradise or wasteland" (5-6). Significantly, most of the resurfaced elements are disconnected, deformed, fragmented, and creatively re-membered parts of the earlier world; their shape is determined by the reading of Ing's scripture (the Book of Dave), which preserved their memory in a textual form. Like the shattered London Brick dug out by the inhabitants of Ham and used to build "Nu Lundun" (the perfect city envisioned by Dave), those various elements of the submerged twentieth-century civilisation are brought to the surface, salvaged and re-membered in a different chronotope. What their functioning highlights is that "one kind of movement that occurs in memory is the turning of one thing into another thing, a play of transformation with a carryover, a trace, of what is lost" (Scott 9). Frequently, the materiality of the flotsam resurfacing in Ingerland, dislocated as it is from its original context, cannot be accounted for otherwise than by being interpreted in the light of the verbal memory of the past, i.e., scripture, itself an isolated and obscure remnant of the twentieth-century. While the loss of memory is thus compensated for, it is never totally overcome, since, from the point of view of the reader, the loss persists – is visible as a loss – and seems to be an integral part of the new memory's vividness. On the

one hand, *The Book of Dave* shows the mechanism thanks to which scripture constructs the world and construes its meaning, and on the other hand, it foregrounds the limited, fissured and leaky character of this mechanism, and the inescapable partiality of the resulting worldview.

The nearly literal flotsam in the post-deluvian world is plastic, “floating in to lodge in the sand and shingle” (Self 75) on the shores of Ham (formerly Hampstead), where it is considered sacred. The most desired pieces of plastic, the so-called Daveworks, are inscribed with letters, e.g., “M-A-D-E, H-O-N-G or .C-O-M; [...] E-N-G-L-A-N-D and C-H-I-N-A” (Self 75), and are “therefore fragments of the Book” (Self 74). Interestingly, unlike the Book of Dave, whose number of words is fixed, “the supply of Daveworks [...] is] inexhaustible” (Self 75), and includes pieces with words absent from the “scripture”: “of .COM there was no mention in the Book” (Self 75). This indicates that the Book itself is only part of a larger text, and as such is necessarily incomplete and limited. While Drivers (the priests of Ing) proscribe Daveworks as heretic, Hamsters treat them as an antidote against the coercive belief in the Book of Dave as the only and complete scripture. Surprisingly for the reader, the condemnable inexhaustibility of plastic, from which the contemporary world suffers, becomes a symbol of openness and profound insight into the character of the important cultural text. Thanks to the transformative effect of the flood, this notoriously ubiquitous twentieth-century material, a symbol of inauthenticity, complicity and polluting surplus, becomes – as the Ing’s scripture teaches – “the vital clay from which the world had been moulded” (Self 75). Malleable and flexible, capable of assuming any shape and serving any purpose, plastic seems the perfect icon of pliable and enduring memory, informed and energised by partial scripture.

Another example of flotsam is language. Many late twentieth-century words which have entered the Ingerlanders’ dictionary via the Book of Dave acquired different, though not unrelated to their original, meanings. For example, “bambi” in Arpee-English means “deer”; “gherkin” signifies “penis”; “opares” are “women from adolescence until childbearing age”; “queer” means “childless man”, while “flying rats” are “pigeons”. Besides those rather evident tropological transformations, there are more opaque semantic shifts, grounded in the cabbie-turned-god vocabulary: “first tariff” means “the time between 6 a.m. and 2. p.m.”; “screenwash” stands for “rain”; “fare” denotes “a believer in Dave”. There are also ominous metamorphoses, e.g., when grotesque passages from the Book of Dave, originally expressing the twentieth-century cabbie’s fear about his licence, are understood literally. Dave’s exaggerated worry that

the Public Carriage Office will "break him on the wheel and tear his fucking tongue out" (Self 264), becomes a real punishment for heresy (see Self 184), sanctioned by the sacred status of Ing's scripture. Words may preserve the memory of the milieu to which they once belonged, but they also provide disposition for the transformation of this memory. As they "gather things, they transfigure, dispose, dissimulate and disperse those things" (Scott 155). Words remember the past, maintain continuity between the bygone times and the present, but they do so not so much by preserving a solidified signification, but by bringing with them "differences of perspective" (Scott 10) and a feeling that something yet absent may arise out of the past phrase. Dependent on the way language works, scriptures simultaneously accumulate and scatter elements of the past, dispose of them and provide (new) dispositions for their occurrence. The Book of Dave, from which all of the Arpee words come, carries forth the dispossessed dictionary, allowing its new users to invest it with their own, often morbid, interests, and to make it explain as well as resonate with their current world.

The most puzzling type of jetsam are the motos – mysteriously gentle, cross-species hybrids, whose origin and status are hotly debated in Ingerland. Insofar as moto skins bear the CalBioTech inscriptions (Self 19), the novel suggests that the motos were created in the Hampstead-based National Institute for Medical Research, which cooperated with the American CalBioTech institute in its work over a human genome patent (Self 32, 39). On another level, the motos embody children's innocence and vulnerability: if the child was described by Dave as belonging to "another species, half human, half something else [...] engineered only to be loved and then sacrificed, his corpse rendered down for whatever psychic balm it might provide" (Self 419), the life and usual fate of a moto literalise such description. Native only to Ham, the motos, who have "the functional intelligence of a two-and-a-half-year-old human child" (Self 491) and remain "untroubled by any taboo" (Self 193), act as loving playmates and dedicated nurses for the young inhabitants of Ham. Once ritually slaughtered, they are the source of precious meat and healing oil. Hamsters consider the motos sacred – "ordained as such by the Book [of Dave]" (Self 13) – and stage their sacrifice as a part of the initiation rite into manhood. Drivers contend, however, that "in those passages of the Book that describe the moto, it is clear that Dave didn't mean these. . . creatures but conveyances" of the kind that can be seen in London streets (Self 122). As hybrid creatures of a highly contested status, as the simultaneously sacrosanct and reviled product of genetic manipulation, only vaguely described in Ing's scriptures, the motos

are rooted in the heterogeneous, pliable and equivocal character of scriptural memory. While the flood keeps those creatures literally afloat, Ing's scripture keeps them culturally/discursively afloat. The moto-related past utterances preserved in *The Book of Dave* offer enough of "differential continuities and enablements" (Scott 12) to sustain the ambivalent status of those creatures.

The most important piece of jetsam, one which in Ingerland gains the status of scripture, is the *Book of Dave* – a "revelatory text" (Self 280) written by a raving London cabbie named Dave Rudman. The *Book* contains the *Knowledge*, i.e., "the encyclopaedic grasp of London streets that a licensed cab driver has to have" (Self 280), and a set of doctrines and covenants regulating community life, the rules for marriage, birth, death, etc. The rules are "a bundle of proscriptions and injunctions that seem to be derived from the working life of London cabbies, a cock-eyed grasp on a mélange of fundamentalism, but mostly from Rudman's own vindictive misogynism" (Self 281). Dave has been deceived by a woman with whom he had incidental sex and who made him believe she is pregnant by him. Not until their marriage proved a grave mistake did she tell him the truth about "his" son, Carl. When Dave became psychotic and violent, the court issued an order restraining him from seeing the boy. Unable to meet him, the mentally-disturbed Dave writes a book by means of which he wants to "tell Carl MAN-TO-MAN what truly happened between his mother THE BITCH and his POOR OLD DAD" (Self 348) and "givvim some fatherly advice" (Self 346).

Dave's book is initially planned to reach across the great divide in his broken family and carry an important message to the "lost boy". It is also supposed to maintain inter-generational continuity, apparently best secured by the faithful recording of the *Knowledge*, which the traumatised Dave considers a "Kaddish" for his grandfather (also a cab driver) as well as "his son's birthright" (Self 230). For Dave, the *Knowledge* changes into something like a life saver, offering some stability in the world he experiences as insecure: "[h]e could envision it, the streets superimposed on the whorls of his cerebellum and I'm holding on to it" (Self 94). Soon, however, the *Knowledge* becomes more than a personal life saver or a precious but idiosyncratic family memory urgently demanding protection from loss and oblivion. Its partiality is eclipsed by a new, universal form, to some extent modelled on the belief Dave learnt from his grandfather's friend, who deemed cabbieing "some sorta secret government or sumffing running the whole bloody country" (Self 215). As a body of fixed regulations, the *Knowledge* becomes a template for constructing and sustaining people's lives: "*Peepul, they gotta be kept in line ... there hasta be orforitë*"



... [...] *There hasta be a Book of rules ... A set of instructions you can follow to the letter ... Like the Knowledge*" (Self 345, emphasis in original). Unquestionable and inflated to universal dimensions, the Knowledge seems to Dave a foothold in ever-fluctuating contemporary existence. Surrounded by "the teeming crowds" (Self 294) of "the aqueous city" (Self 231), and attacked by the "apocalyptic vision" of a flood-evoking advertisement in which "without warning, water began to flood between the buildings, a tidal bore that came surging along the rivers of light" (Self 294), Dave imagines the Knowledge at first, as one-family life-boat, and later, as an ark-like, massive construction meant to rescue humanity. His personal scripture changes into one with a transcendent status.

Before the change occurs, however, a curious affinity between the Knowledge and other, already recognised types of scripture comes to the fore. While cabbage lore has a grasp of the city, the Qur'an is said to contain a design of the whole world. As Dave's acquaintance, Faisal, explains, "it was all in the Koran, right down to diagrams of the microcircuitry in each and ever warhead. [...] It's like a blueprint [...], it's got everything in it that ever has been and ever will be" (Self 209). A similarly total command of life characterises the the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon) vision of human existence. While the cabbage Knowledge channels movement in the city along fixed routes, Dave realises "the Mormon Knowledge was a simple grid pattern" (Self 231) marshalling everyone's life through exactly the same stages. This affinity re-emerges when Dave starts to suffer from serious mental disorders; it then comes to inform Dave's scripture, built no longer as a "plain cloth word-map, but a rich brocade of parable, chiasmus and homily" (Self 347).

Characteristically, though Dave "claw[s] in *his* memory" (Self 233, emphasis mine) before he lapses into disease, to retrieve information about Joseph Smith, the founder of the Latter-day Saint movement, and about the sacred golden tablets Smith dug out, no such clawing would help him to recover *his* memories of palpable support gained from an all-embracing scripture because he has none. He is critical of Gladys's and Faisal's investment into their totalising scriptures. As he observes of his aunt, who joined the Mormons, "*She has found something, she's not kidding. [...] What a load of cobbles – still, you gotta give this lot credit for being getters*" (Self 233, emphasis in original). Surprised by Faisal's trust in the Qur'an as the ultimate source of everything, Dave protests, "Give over, mate! [...] you must understand that some bloke, thousands of years ago, couldn't possibly –" (Self 209). However, when he

develops psychosis, he forgets about the partiality of those scriptures and is inspired by the belief of his aunt and friend. Desperate for something to “hold on to”, Dave clings to Gladys’s and Faisal’s cosmic narrations, which he forgot to be imperfect flotsam left by “some bloke” from the distant past. Now, he supplements his memory of the Knowledge and his “warped recollection” (Self 351) of being wronged by his wife and other people, with what Charles E. Scott calls “stolen memories” (46), i.e., traces of several different pasts, memories of various narrations that are not his own, but which he can use in the process of giving shape to his wrecked life. “A memory can draw from many sources in its formation and can compose a composite of events and qualities that seem not to have a common origin or even a common occurrence outside the memory that brings them together” (Scott 45). Himself not a believer in any religion nor a pious reader of any sacred Book, Dave steals from the Muslim and Mormon revered texts and creates a hybrid scripture, a “mélange” (Self 280) sustained by the memory of scriptures’ powerful and reinvigorating grip, and the oblivion of the grip’s incapacitating side-effect.

Dave receives his calling in a scene reminiscent of the biblical episode in which the prophet Elijah witnesses God’s epiphany. While the ancient prophet encountered God in “a still, small voice” (1 Kings 19:12) rustling in the mountains, Dave hears “the still, small powdery voice of SmithKline Beecham” (Self 345), reverberating in the city’s sounds produced by dust mites, sponges and deep-fat fryers. The voice, echoing the Qur’an’s Shahada, whispers, “*There is no god but you, Dave, [...] and you can be your own prophet*” (Self 345, emphasis in original). Dave the god starts as “a purely local, contingent deity, a god for the day, who divvied up pay-per-view prophecy” (Self 345), but quickly transcends such status. He becomes a “fisher of fares” (Self 346), “a messiah” (Self 348), who “felt himself ascending [...] over the wide river valley. He was the Flying I [...]. He grasped the metropolis in its entirety, he held in his shaky, nicotine-stained fingers each and every one of the billions of tiny undertakings its inhabitants engaged in” (Self 347). Once the scripture written by the London messiah assumes truly imposing proportions and becomes all-inclusive, it is printed – Mormon-style – on metal plates, bound by metal rings, and buried in Dave’s ex-wife’s garden. Now, no longer associated with the volatile dust (the icon of perishability and forgetting) but mediated by the immutable letters carved in metal and deposited in the ground (the image of fixed rather than floating memory), Dave’s scripture is (ready to be) turned into a special-status, transcendent text.

Self never lets the reader forget that Rudman's scripture is a product of a disturbed mind and narrow world-view. Even Dave himself, once put on psychiatric medication and into a treatment programme, realises that if discovered, the Book "will fuck wiv [...the reader's] 'ed" (Self 407). A considerable portion of Self's twentieth-century narration revolves around the problem of undoing the fixity of Dave's scripture and keeping it afloat. Thus, the scripture is not retrieved and destroyed, but differently remembered, or unfixed from its previous position and (metaphorically speaking) sent drifting. This is accomplished, first of all, through the coordination between the vision of surging waters and the surge of memories: Dave's memory of what and where the book really is returns immediately after Dave sees the flood-related advertisement (Self 294). Simultaneously, he forgets the Knowledge, thus providing "gaps, as it were, in which other memories and present happenings provide texture and instance" (Scott 4). Dave's oblivion releases the city from the Knowledge's fierce grip and allows it to become a "nameless conurbation, [...] torn away by a tsunami of meltwater" (Self 404). Smacking of inevitable transformation, the image of the inundated city seems to agree with what underlies Dave's new Book. Meant to interrogate the first Book, the "extraordinary document" entitled "a new EPISTLE TO THE SON" preaches responsibility, respect, and the necessity to "DO YOUR BEST and live right" (Self 420) even in the face of an imminent catastrophe. Unlike the first scripture, which keeps "screaming at the future" (Self 418) with all the force of its monopolised authority, the second scripture "whispered" (Self 420) its non-unique, and therefore, non-transcendent truths. Sharing its ideas with "Roman stoicism", "Sumerian religion" (Self 420) and Christianity (compare the fragment "What profiteth a man who can call over all the POINTS and RUNS, if he still does not know where he truly is?" (Self 420) with Mark 8:36), Dave's new scripture figures as an unpretentious, positively heterogeneous text, able to construct and sustain Dave's transformed existence. Since "to remember is to regret" (Self 466), Dave's memory of the quality of his scripture triggers a serious and salutary interrogation of his life.

When Dave's first scripture is unearthed centuries later, when it is elevated – so to say – beyond its original context and given the status of ultimate, unquestionable law, it easily becomes an instrument of oppression. Consequently, in Self's post-deluvian world – like in other post-apocalyptic constructions – "desire and fear find their true objects; we see what we most want and most abhor" (Berger 11), sex, death and waste becoming

“emblematic” (Berger 14) in such post-apocalyptic representation. For Ingerland’s people, “the Book stood outside of the seasons and of the years” (Self 60), and if properly interpreted, it explained their past, present and future. The “craziest shit” (Self 415) contained by the Book of Dave not only informs Ing’s religion (e.g., the belief in intercom as prayer or divine/“dävine” voice), but also provides (absurd) projects for Nu Lundun’s public buildings and ideas for public executions. Furthermore, it fuels vicious hatred of women, and underlies “the brutal inequalities” (Self 298) of Ing’s London. Once the original partiality of the Book of Dave is forgotten (or repressed), the scripture turns into an instrument of coercion, inhibition and duress.

Significantly, the Book’s partiality is remembered when one of the Hamsters digs out Dave’s second scripture (earlier buried by Carl in his garden). Brought to the surface, the Epistle helps the inhabitants of Ham unfix the so-far immobilised vision of their world: what has been “an immutable given” is now “fluidly legible” (Self 76). In a scene similar to the one of Dave remembering the Book, the resurfacing of the new scripture is marked by metaphors of free-flowing water. The new scripture “flowed out of” Symun the Hamster, its prophet, “a flood of eloquence that slaked its audience’s thirst for poetry” (Self 79). Unlike the first scripture, which “circumscribed their [Hamsters’] conduct and governed their innermost thoughts” (Self 297), the Epistle “encourages them to [...] write their own books” (Self 81) and to think critically about the “gibberish” (Self 195) in the Book of Dave. The Epistle’s moral precepts, for instance “liv az bess we can an no wurri” (Self 78), are strikingly vague when compared with the Book’s rigid “runs and points”, yet, it is their fluidity that proves inspiring and liberating.

Though Self’s novel sceptically reminds the reader of the partiality of all scripture and encapsulates this observation in the formula “you can be your own prophet”, it balances such reflection with an acknowledgement of scriptures’ undeniable appeal. Thus, the novel exposes Symun’s private gain from the new scripture he invokes, indicating that the Epistle-based sexual license helps him win the woman he was in love with. Elsewhere in the novel, however, the New Testament Lord’s Prayer, recited at Dave’s funeral, proves the only element winning the heart of a disgruntled and sceptical Carl. The scriptural text is gripping, even though it is uttered by members of an impotent and dissipating Catholic church: “there was sincerity in these words that not even an adolescent could sneer away, no matter how desultory the hireling’s delivery” (Self 475). Moving around the whole circumference of the scriptural

problem, *The Book of Dave* also shows how precarious the balance between the constructive and coercive dimensions of the scriptures is, how easy the oblivion of scriptural limitations turns out, and how inevitable the search for its memory may be. Once Dave as scripture-writer is figuratively "lifted up" by the London Eye (Self 347), i.e., once he and his text become controlled by the Wheel's centripetal force, his "centrifugal striving" (Self 410) against the inexorably coercive forces starts to gain momentum. Represented in the novel by the London Eye, the circular, repetitive motions of "the widening gyre of history" (Self 410) go hand in hand with the gathering-dispersive work of memory (Scott 155), in the course of which scriptures are forgotten, remembered, transformed. Admittedly, there is a centrifugal-centripetal tension visible in the ways the Flying Eye itself morphs simultaneously into the scripture-sanctioned torture wheel *and* the posture known as "flying", i.e., scripture-related heresy. Like the Wheel, which in *The Book of Dave* spins its various connotations, scriptures keep shifting between their constraining dimension and their ability to evoke possibility and potential. Apparently, this aqueous condition cannot but be kept afloat even by the second, dispersedly remembered apocalyptic flood.

### Works Cited

- Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. New York: Anchor Books, 1957.
- Berger, James. *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- Frye, Northrop. *The Great Code. The Bible and Literature*. 1982. 3rd ed. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.
- Kermode, Frank. *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967.
- Kort, Wesley A. "Take, Read". *Scripture, Textuality, and Cultural Practice*. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996.
- Pippin, Tina. *Apocalyptic Bodies. The Biblical End of the World in Text and Image*. London and New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Scott, Charles E. *The Time of Memory*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1999.
- Self, Will. *The Book of Dave. A Revelation of the Recent Past and the Distant Future*. London: Penguin Books, 2006.

Stahlberg, Lesleigh Cushing. "Refuse, Realism, Retelling. Literal and Literary Reconstructions of Noah's Ark." *Subverting Scriptures. Critical Reflections On the Use of the Bible*. Ed. Beth Hawkins Benedix. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 23-39.