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GOING DOWN IN HERSTORY: RE-WRITING WOMEN'S LIVES IN MICHÈLE ROBERTS'S "ON THE BEACH AT TROUVILLE"

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ABSTRACT. Throughout her writing career, Michèle Roberts has been one of the contemporary women writers who has re-constructed and retold the lives of previously forgotten, silenced or marginalised women. In an attempt to re-inscribe their voice, Roberts has re-written history from the female perspective by going back to the lives of female saints, Biblical figures and other female writers. In her last collection of short stories, *Mud: Stories of Sex and Love*, all the protagonists are women taken from historical or literary texts, to whom she has given voice, providing the reader with new visions of reality. This paper focuses on "On the Beach at Trouville", and analyses the strategies Roberts has used both to present the lives of Thérèse of Lisieux and Camille Monet from their own perspectives and to subvert the patriarchal construction of history.

Keywords: Michèle Roberts, herstory, women's historical fiction, re-writing, subversion, intertextuality.

"ON THE BEACH AT TROUVILLE" DE MICHÈLE ROBERTS: UNA REESCRITURA DE LA HISTORIA EN FEMENINO

RESUMEN. A lo largo de su carrera como escritora, Michèle Roberts ha sido una de las autoras contemporáneas que ha reconstruido y reescrito las vidas de mujeres previamente olvidadas, marginadas y silenciadas. En su intento por reinscribir sus voces en la historia, Roberts ha reescrito, desde una perspectiva femenina, las vidas de santas, figuras bíblicas y otras escritoras. En su última colección de relatos cortos, *Mud: Stories of Sex and Love*, todas las historias las protagonizan mujeres a las que Roberts da voz y con las que proporciona al lector nuevas visiones de la realidad previamente establecida. Este trabajo se centra en el análisis del relato "On the Beach at Trouville", donde se examinan las estrategias que Roberts utiliza para presentar las vidas de Teresa de Lisieux y de Camille Monet desde sus propias perspectivas, así como la subversión de la construcción patriarcal de la historia.

Palabras clave: Michèle Roberts, "herstoria", novela histórica escrita por mujeres, re-escritura, subversión, intertextualidad.

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1. INTRODUCTION

From the last decades of the twentieth century, historical fiction written by women has experimented an important development. As Katherine Cooper and Emma Short assert, historical fiction written by men had always been associated with "accuracy and historical fact" (2012: 2), whereas female historical writings were defined as historical romance, and therefore marginalised for being considered, using Diana Wallace's term, as "escapist" (2005: 2), and "dismissed as 'unhistorical', 'factually inaccurate' or merely 'irrelevant' according to a male-defined model" (15). This is the reason why, as Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn argue:

> Pushed to the margins of the literary and historical canon up until the latter third of the twentieth century, it is in part by reclaiming historical events and personages as subjects and participants in contemporary fictional accounts that women writers can begin to assert a sense of historical location. In this sense, it is by interrogating the male-centred past's treatment of women at the same time as seeking to undermine the 'fixed' or 'truthful' nature of the historical narrative itself that women can create their 'own' (counter-)histories. (2007: 2-3)

So, in an attempt to give voice and introduce the women's perspective into the patriarchal writings of the past from which they were erased, silenced or marginalised, acclaimed women writers as A.S. Byatt, Jeanette Winterson, Margaret Atwood, or Pat Barker, have gone back to different historical periods and rewritten them from a feminine perspective. In fact, not only have they reinvented such stories, but they have also presented female historical figures as protagonists in their

narratives, providing, in Cooper and Short's words, "a counter-narrative to the male-authored histories which precede them" (2012: 3). Amidst these female writers' re-imagining and reinserting the female experience in history, and therefore creating *herstory*, is Michèle Roberts. According to Sarah Falcus, "Roberts's novels engage creatively with the contemporary debate about the place of women in history and the ways in which women can tell their own stories" (2008: 133).

Based on postmodernism and concepts such as Linda Hutcheon's "historiographic metafiction" as well as building on Hélène Cixous's, Luce Irigaray's and other French feminists' theories, in her writings Roberts reflects on how the voice of women has been silenced in the construction of history. By means of an experimental and innovative style, the introduction of several points of view and the intertwining of stories and historical characters and events, she has been able to re-inscribe the voice of women in history. Following this path, her last collection of short stories, *Mud: Stories of Sex and Love* (2010), is also full of re-tellings from the female perspective. This paper focuses on one of these stories, "On the Beach at Trouville", which builds on the lives of two real women: Thérèse Martin (Saint Thérèse of Liseux) and Camille Doncieux (Claude Monet's wife). The main aim of this study is to analyse how the author reimagines and reconstructs both women's stories. To do it, a revision of Roberts's previous rewritings is presented. Then, the paper focuses on the main techniques the author uses to (re)construct these herstories: the use of language, structure, and intertextuality. Finally, it delves into the subversion of patriarchal dualistic logic and linearity, examining also the way these women's fragmented and unreliable accounts reflect how history is constructed and the resultant impossibility to offer a consistent historical re-telling.

2. MICHÈLE ROBERTS: RE-WRITING WOMEN'S LIVES

Michèle Roberts's narrative production has always shown a preoccupation with re-writing women's lives. From a more radical tone in the expression of her socio-political views in her first novels to the experimentation with different narrative forms, she has given voice to forgotten, marginalised or silenced women and re-told their stories from new viewpoints, denouncing the exclusion of the female's perspective in the construction of history.

Throughout her writing career, she has fictionalised the lives of various female historical characters, above all women writers. Published in 1999, *Fair Exchange* is the first novel where Roberts finds inspiration in other women's lives. Under the guise of a romantic plot, this novel deals in fact with revolutionary feminists from the eighteenth century and the study of how history is constructed. Roberts presents a story told from multiple points of view, all of them belonging to women, which are not the ones we usually get in traditional historical texts: lovers, servants, muses…, and it is from their marginal perspectives that readers get to know the whole story.

This technique of constructing history through different women's perspectives is repeated in *The Looking Glass* (2000). Here, the lives of two French poets, Stéphane Mallarmé and Gustave Flaubert, are used to construct the character of Gerard Colbert, whose voice is never heard. The main story is that of Geneviève, Colbert's servant and lover, but it is constantly disrupted by the stories of four different women who provide an account of the events they have lived from their own perspective. Hence, memories, situations and characters are described from more than one point of view, each one giving preference to some facts or emphasising particular details that may have been overlooked in the other narratives or not mentioned at all. In this vein, Roberts again gives voice to marginal women mainly forgotten in history —Colbert's servant, his lover, his niece and her governess or her niece's friend— and shows, through the use of five different and contradicting perspectives, how history is constructed and its unreliability.

Another instance of a multiplicity of voices and plots when re-constructing history can be found in *The Mistressclass* (2002), where two storylines unfold: while we read the story of two sisters in love with the same man, there are some chapters with a series of fictionalised letters that Charlotte Brontë writes to her Belgian mentor, Monsieur Heger, whom she is in love with.

Apart from these novels, Roberts has also written short stories about the lives of other female writers such as George Sand ("Remembering George Sand", 2011) or Colette ("Colette Looks Back", 2011). Besides, she has re-written epic stories as Beowulf with a young woman as a protagonist in "The Lay of Bee Wolf" (2011). All of them were published in the collection *Mud: Stories of Sex and Love*, which Marta Goszczynska describes as "an act of feminist revision" and links with Adrienne Rich's idea of "revisionary writing as a vital act of survival for women" (2018: 91).

Albeit having written on women from diverse origins in different times of history, a special emphasis has been put in retelling the lives of female saints. Although Roberts was born and raised a Catholic, she rejected religion at an early age and has criticised Catholicism because of its denial of women and the feminine. As Roberts herself has declared, "Catholicism was a misogynistic religion and I needed to write my way out of it (…) I wanted to smash up the old stories, which I felt had damaged me, and make something new with them" ("FAQ"), and that is exactly what she did in the novels which have Catholic female characters as protagonists. To her, as she told María Soraya García Sánchez, "the Church has been an institution of great oppression to women", and that is the reason why Roberts decided to tell "stories about women who fight back" (2005: 140).

Therefore, Roberts chooses hagiography as a narrative form in several publications and goes back to both the Bible and biographies of different female saints for inspiration. *The Visitation* (1983), her second novel, is a fragmented narrative told in a feminist confessional mode whose protagonist is a woman writer suffering from writer's block and trying to find an identity for herself as a woman. Roberts uses the Bible to construct her story; however, she does so to subvert a biblical myth. Quoting Jayita Sengupta, Roberts "leans on The Bible to render the

torment of a woman's isolation from her male counterpart" (2006: 104), and that is why the protagonist's story "reads like a parody of the Bible" (105). This has led Roberts to reinterpret the Catholic myth of the fall of paradise and to analyse and discuss how motherhood, the feminine or the place of women in society have been dealt with under the patriarchal law.

In *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987), Roberts re-invents and re-writes the biblical story of the Flood and the construction of the Ark, a job which is, this time, accomplished by a woman: Mrs. Noah. What Mrs. Noah provides with the creation of her Ark is a place where women can tell their own stories, as a way to fight back the canonical and male-dominated narratives that have forgotten women in literature, history and religion; Mrs Noah's Ark is a place for women who have been silenced because they did not fit in the role imposed on them by men. The third novel based on a Biblical story is *The Wild Girl* (1984), a re-writing of the life of Jesus from a feminist perspective. The novel, written in the form of a fifth Gospel, is a recreation of Mary Magdalene's life told by herself, denouncing the denial of women in Catholicism and inserting them in this way into the Christian tradition.

Apart from the Bible, in her attempt to recover female voices, Roberts focuses on re-telling the stories of women saints, which have always been narrated from a male perspective. Recovering women's autobiographies is for Roberts a "kind of political homage: because women's autobiographies have been lost, because women have not been encouraged to tell their life stories, I want to tell them; I want to rescue women from history" (Bastida Rodríguez 2003: 98). *Impossible Saints* (1997) is the clearest example. Based on Jacobus de Voragine's *The Golden Legend*, a compilation of the lives of saints written in the thirteenth century and considered as a key text of medieval Christian hagiography, and taking also the life of Saint Teresa of Ávila as a source for the main character, Roberts retells the life of eleven women saints. As Sonia Villegas López points out in her study of this novel, by giving voice to these female saints, Roberts "makes clear that there were no miracles or self-sacrifices behind their legends, but only instances of patriarchal abuse" (2001: 179). Therefore, Roberts rewrites these saints' stories in which they try to liberate themselves from patriarchal norms in order to find their own identities and independence, thus subverting the tales told in hagiographic texts, criticising and rebelling against the definition of femininity imposed by the patriarchal system, which had led women to a state of alienation, submission and obedience.

Considered as a precedent for *Impossible Saints*, in *Daughters of the House* (1992) Roberts already used the life of a saint to construct a different story. Based on St. Thérèse of Lisieux's autobiography, the novel presents the two women protagonists' search for identity. Thérèse is presented as a nun that comes back from the convent to her former house as she is trying to write the story of her past. As she revises her childhood, in opposition to the account of her cousin-sister Léonie, with whom she shared the house, the reader is presented with a very different portrayal of the life of the saint. As Susanne Gruss argues, the use of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux's life is "a way to parody and subvert the topic of female mysticism", since "it is Léonie, the ordinary housewife, who is the true mystic, although her vision is not compliant

enough for the Catholic Church", while Thérèse, "the (ex)nun and seemingly 'orthodox' visionary, is merely a fraud" (2009: 86).

Roberts goes back to Thérèse de Lisieux's autobiography one more time to establish the background for "On the Beach at Trouville", a short story included in the collection *Mud: Stories of Sex and Love*, published in 2010. As in all the narratives mentioned in this section, by means of intertextuality and the mixture of different voices, Roberts creates an account of the lives of two real women in this short story: a young Thérèse de Lisieux before entering the convent, and Camille Doncieux, Claude Monet's wife, from their representation in Monet's canvas "The Beach at Trouville" (1870).

3. AN ANALYSIS OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF HERSTORY IN "ON THE BEACH AT TROUVILLE"

In the attempt to rewrite women's lives and construct herstory, Michèle Roberts follows in the footsteps of other female authors and challenges the use of several narrative elements to which male have traditionally turned, thus subverting the patriarchal account of the lives of the female protagonists. The most relevant ones would be the type of language utilised, the way the story is structured, the use of intertextuality, and the subversion of topics and de-construction of binary opposites, which are analysed in the following subsections.

3.1. THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE AND STRUCTURE

In accordance with several studies on female (re)writing of historical fiction, in order to provide a counter-narrative to the official male vision of history, the latter must be deconstructed, while the women's voice cannot remain unwritten. As Liedeke Plate puts it, "it is because woman's experience is excluded from the literature of the past, because her lifeworld remains unarticulated in language, that twentieth-century feminist theorists from Virginia Woolf to Hélène Cixous have encouraged women to write. And to rewrite … as a remedy to women's silencing" (2011: 100). Therefore, it could be said that women's herstory will only be legitimised if it is actually written.

For this purpose, however, using the same language and syntactic structures that male accounts employ does not seem to operate. As Minsky indicates, when dealing with women's writing, "Kristeva's work highlights what she sees as the need for women to make language their own so that they can communicate their "feminine" experience" (1996: 188), and it is poetic language that Hélène Cixous, also a poet herself, claims as necessary to deconstruct the phallocentric discourse. As Jerinic suggests when describing Cixous's perception of *écriture feminine*, "poetry subverts ordinary language and is, consequently, writes Conley 'necessary to social transformation'", and it is precisely "the lyricism of her [Cixous's] essays" that "defy linearity or phallocentric logic" (1996: 110).

In this respect, Roberts herself has also alleged "the preponderance of the written over the spoken word" in novels like *The Wild Girl* (Plate 2011: 163) among other writings, and she repeats it in "On the Beach at Trouville". As is explained later on, young Thérèse is trying to write the story of her life, as well as Camille Doncieux is trying to be part of that written account too so that her story is not forgotten. As for the use of language, Roberts incorporates poetic elements to re-inscribe women's stories in this short narrative too through different metaphors and images. Similarly, she also draws on other approaches to structure that will enable her to subvert the male linearity Cixous discusses, as well as defy the patriarchal representation of history.

The language Roberts uses in "On the Beach at Trouville" is highly appealing to our senses, almost poetic at some points. Her prose is full of vivid descriptions and images related to colours that help create a special environment and a connection with the characters, to the point that Roberts has been considered "one of those writers descended perhaps as much from Monet and Debussy as Virginia Woolf or Keats… To read a book by her is to savour colour, sound, taste, texture and touch as never before" (Reviews).[1]

The fact that her narrative is full of metaphors and powerful imagery is undoubtedly linked to her work as a poet. As an author of several collections of poetry, Roberts has acknowledged that she does not feel her poetry and prose are different since "my novels are structured through metaphor" (Galván 1998: 373). Similarly, she has declared that short stories "seem like poems to me in that they may work through metaphor at some level, may connect two disparate images" (Aesthetica 2010). And this is precisely what she does in "On the Beach at Trouville" with the encounter she creates as the two women tell their stories. As expressed in the narrative, the women protagonists in "On the Beach at Trouville" represent "separate ends of the monochromatic scale" (Roberts 2011: 226), as one is dressed in white and the other in black. Each of them seems to be placed on one edge as an instance of the "disparate images" the author referred to. However, the two protagonists actually merge in the middle of this colour scale, which works as a metaphor to explain that nothing is what we have been told: black or white. Indeed, colours and visual images, as well as the use of olfactory and gustatory images, will have an important impact on the construction of the lives of both women in this short story, as is examined in depth later in this article, mainly in connection with the deconstruction of binary opposites.

Going back to the previous reference to the defying of linearity in women's fictional rewritings, Roberts's short narrative is in line with other theorists and writers

[1] In more than one occasion, Roberts's narrative production has been praised for the language she uses. For instance, *Daughters of the House* has been described as a novel that "unfolds due to its rich imagery, poetic language and seemingly loose structure" and that "is situated somewhere "in-between" poetry, short story and novel (Plumer 2001: 63). In a similar vein, Hertel defined *Flesh and Blood* as "almost and edible book … in which the very language is suffused with gustatory experience" (2005: 132).

of feminine historical novels. Wallace uses Humm's words to recall how "Woolf presents history as circular not linear, as a series of scenes obliquely positioned in relation to the traditional ground narratives of political, imperial and literary history and biography" (2005: 35). In the same way, Wallace goes back once again to the French feminist Kristeva, who defined "women's time (1981) as 'cyclical' while men's time is "linear" (136). In "On the Beach at Trouville", we find this circular structure too: in the very first page of the story, Thérèse asks the painter "what's that?" (Roberts 2011: 213), referring to the forms he was painting, and the narrative ends with Thérèse asking "what's it [the painting] of?" (225). In doing so, the construction of the stories is neither linear nor chronological: ideas, events, and feelings come and go and reappear in different sequences. Although this cyclical pattern keeps both women somehow trapped, their voices are heard. While initially there is a stark contrast between them implied by black and white colours, at the end, after the painting has been completed, both women are still separated but "in between them [there is] blue and blue-grey and dark blue and indigo" (Roberts 2011: 226), the colours of the elements that metaphorically link their stories in the narrative.

3.2. THE USE OF INTERTEXTUALITY

Another important feature of any rewriting is the use of intertextuality. As Hutcheon explains, "it is only as part of prior discourses that any text derives meaning and significance" (1988: 126). If we move into historical female rewritings and to Roberts's in particular, Villegas describes how "the search for new forms of female expression, for new spaces of the feminine, ends with the recovery of long-lost voices", and "for that purpose, she [Roberts] chooses to rewrite and interpret some of the canonical texts of the Christian tradition, peopled by relevant women who have lived in men's shadows most times" (2001: 177). In this vein, "On the Beach at Trouville" presents the lives of two real women: Camille Doncieux and Thérèse of Lisieux, who happen to meet at the beach. The story begins with Monet in the process of painting his wife, Camille, dressed in white. While he is working, a girl dressed in total black, Thérèse, approaches them and takes a look at the picture. Roberts hence creates a fictionalised encounter between the painter and his muse/wife, and Thérèse, who is invited to sit next to Camille. The image that Roberts presents resembles the scene in the real picture: two young women, one dressed in white and the other in black, each sitting on a chair in the sand with the beach in the background.[2]

As a means to give voice and re-tell both women's stories, Roberts establishes a double dialogic relationship with two different texts: a literary one —*The Story of a Soul*, St. Thérèse of Lisieux's official autobiography, published in 1898—, and a pictorial one: Claude Monet's impressionist oil on canvas "The Beach at Trouville", painted in 1870. In the case of Thérèse, Roberts goes back to her official

[2] Roberts changes the real character dressed in black in the real picture, who has been identified by several researchers as Madame Boudin, the wife of Monet's mentor, Eugène Boudin.

autobiography to subvert it in the story. As for Camille, we find an intertextual, intersemiotic or, using Hutcheon's term, interdiscursive relation between how she is represented in Monet's pictures and what has transcended of her life through Claude Monet's biography and personal correspondence. In this way, Roberts takes what could be considered as biased accounts of both women's lives and re-imagines them.

As a matter of fact, the official accounts of these women's lives have been either silenced or revised by patriarchal authorities, hence the need to retell them. On the one hand, there is no authorised biography or autobiography of Camille Doncieux and little is known about her life. Apart from Ruth Butler's study of Camille's figure, she is only recognised by how she has been portrayed by her husband (and other painters), and by what Monet told about her in different letters he sent to family or colleague painters. On the other hand, although there is an autobiography written by St Thérèse of Lisieux, the story of her life was finally published after having been heavily revised and edited by Mother Agnes of Jesus, one of St. Thérèse's sisters, and by several male Church authorities, so the accuracy of the final text can be considered highly unreliable. As a result, and using Roberts's words from the story, "the picture", both the one told in the real canvas and the official accounts of these women's lives, "is not whole, doesn't offer a coherent story" (Roberts 2011: 213) for any of them.

Yet another instance of intertextuality lies here in connection with how the story is structured. In this sense, Camille and Thérèse's stories unfold while Monet is painting the picture. Interestingly enough, his picture seems to be what provides a frame for the narrative, but although both women converse with him, his few words are irrelevant, and his presence serves only to link the construction of both women's herstories. Despite having taken the male perspective out of the narrative, intertextuality comes into play again as Roberts divides her short story into different subheadings, mirroring a formal analysis of the painting itself. The story is introduced by an "Abstract" that acquaints the reader with the scene and the three characters. This is followed by an "Autobiography", probably playing with the fact that Monet was actually capturing a special moment in his own life. However, it refers to the autobiography Thérèse is writing and the account of her day on the beach and other childhood memories.

The next subheading is "Annunciation", a biblical term that at first sight would make sense for Thérèse due to her religious beliefs, but which introduces the story of Camille's honeymoon and pregnancy, and describes her happy moments at Trouville. The following chapters, entitled "Blue", "Clouds" and "Darkness", make reference to some of the most relevant features of the painting. In them, the stories of both women merge with the study of the different pictorial elements which serve as one-word metaphors for these women's feelings. While "Annunciation" and "Autobiography" talk about Camille and Thérèse respectively as a way of presenting both characters and their backgrounds, from there both stories converge from white to blue elements, and it is in the subsequent chapters where both women talk about their feelings and fears and the stories get connected.

3.3. SUBVERTED TOPICS, DUALISMS AND UNRELIABLE VOICES

In her study of women's historical narratives, Harris makes reference to the "inherent unreliability and mutability of history itself", and goes on to claim that "there is no such thing as a neutral narrative" (2012: 173). Having this in mind, even though Robert rewrites these women's lives in order to get their voices heard, we do not get a reliable account either. Whilst it becomes apparent from the outset that Roberts wants to re-write the protagonists' herstories, it is still paramount to bear in mind that there is no reliable narrative voice and therefore, the stories she constructs are inconsistent too. As Falcus avers, "all of Roberts's historical and mythical reconfigurations are notable for their insistence upon the textual nature of any remake and the inability to 'tell the truth' in any narrative, questioning the process of both history and historical retelling" (2008: 133). Following this line of thought, "On the Beach at Trouville" is not different, because even though it offers the women's perspective and voice, it also presents the readers with the unreliability of a historical account. This idea is reinforced by two main elements: first, the structure of the short story, which is, as explained above, divided into different subheadings that mix both stories, while at the same time relying on the official/patriarchal historical records; second, the use of different narrative voices which are sometimes in stark contrast to the characters' actions. In connection with the latter element, Roberts has said in an interview with Newman that she never trusted the omniscient narrator and "preferred to invent new forms of the novel in which you might have several voices telling a story because they make a quarrel: voices not from up high looking down, but on the ground, or coming from the weak and the dispossessed" (2004: 126).

At first sight, and regarding the presence of binary opposition, the story presents the two female characters as polar opposites in the colour of their clothes. This playing with perspectives, colours and dualisms, and what they represent, will operate throughout the story. For instance, the black colour is for the nun-to-be, the saint (Thérèse), who chooses confinement but enjoys freedom. On the other hand, Camille, the sinner who enjoys sex, is dressed in white and compared to the pregnant Madonna, and while she has freedom, Camille asks to be kept behind bars at least metaphorically, so as not to get lost.

Regarding these opposing views, as Humm explains, Kristeva and Irigaray "argue that the feminine is represented in language by process, by heterogeneity and fluidity, whereas the masculine is represented by fixed forms like binary opposition" (2013: 148). Similarly, Rosalind Minsky suggests that "the existing categories and binary structures do not reflect this [feminine] experience" (1996: 188). In the case of Roberts in this short story, these binary opposition (black and white, sinner and saint, good and bad, freedom and confinement) are actually blurred as the story develops. The story shows a mixture of the official accounts of both women's lives and Roberts's re-imaginings; therefore, the women's identities are fragmented, as the narrative is. When sat at the beach as models for Monet's picture, they are just performing a role, a perfect display of opposites. According to the story, Monet does not know who the girl in black is, but "he doesn't care; sharp-edged, she suits his

composition, and that's what matters" (Roberts 2011: 222). These words reflect how women have always been portrayed in history: as well as in his painting, women have just been *models*, but their real voices and identities have not been considered relevant, and the image perceived is therefore given through a biased male perspective.

However, in this case, we the readers know there is something else, as the picture is incomplete: because of the painting style, if we look at these women's faces, they are blurred, diffused, unfinished, as the ambivalent account that Roberts presents and, if we extrapolate the concept, as history is. The stories of these women are yet to be told, and we cannot just look at the picture to learn about them: their voices are needed, and will be introduced through the use of metaphor and intertextual reference. The story begins with white and ends in darkness, and the narrator keeps making the difference between black and white, but both women seem to be comfortable at some point of the colour scale: blue. In fact, the blue colour and the connections Roberts makes with blue elements in reference to both the real picture and the real autobiography are what eventually uncover both women's real feelings as stated earlier, and it is there where these binary opposites get subverted.

On the one hand, Camille is painted under a blue parasol which represents a blue sky and matches the blue sea. For her, "blue indicates the time for dreaming, imagining. Camille is living in blue time. *L'heure bleue*, when the sky changes day into evening. Radiant blue darkness" (Roberts 2011: 222). The French term, meaning "the blue hour", refers to the time of the day when there is no light of day nor complete darkness. In painting, it is considered as one of the very best moments, because the lighting is soft, diffused, and warm. In this case, it would serve to represent Camille's relaxed placid mood.

As we learn from the narrative in the subheading entitled "Annunciation", she is enjoying her honeymoon with her husband, and she is pregnant. She feels happy and surrounded by light as her white dress represents. Camille goes back to the biblical image of the virgin Mary and how the birth of a baby means a new beginning (218), probably thinking that this baby will change her fate. She recalls how the annunciation of Jesus' birth is sometimes represented "as a beam of light. God's decision falls into his chosen one's lap in a blaze of radiance" (218). And this is exactly how she is being portrayed in the picture. Then, she compares herself again with the virgin Mary by equating the image in church paintings where she appears with "a crown of bright flowers" (219) with her own new hat also adorned with colourful flowers. She is clearly defined as "part of the pale, light-bleached landscape", which reminds fictional Monet "of Piero della Francesca's image of the pregnant Madonna pointing at the slit in her gown, the swell of the baby dancing inside" (220). Here is where we get a first distortion of binary thought: Roberts plays with the dichotomies sinner/saint, virgin/mother, being the next reference to the white of the sheets and curtains of the room where Camille would have sex with her husband after a delicious feast which is described as a metaphor for sexual practice.

Yet from the white of the morning and all the light and happiness that surround her, at midday, she shelters under her blue parasol and is surrounded by the blue of the sea and the sky. It is at this moment, surrounded by blue, when Monet starts painting Thérèse. At first, it is the white light that connects the two women by "splashing onto Camille's frock, sliding across the back of the chair, touching the edge of the page of Thérèse's book. The light knots them together in a white net of secret thoughts" (223). It is those "secret thoughts" that are not verbalised that Roberts's narrative will tell. Again, the idea of a woman's account of her own life and feelings being lost, silenced and forgotten is present here. Camille's comments indicate that she will just be seen as some woman who modelled for the painter, but that her story, and her feelings, will be forgotten: nobody will care about them. As Ruth Butler states, real Camille knew "she was at the centre of the event, yet everything was out of her control" (2008: 132), and that she was performing "an actress role showing off an appealing display of her current life, or at least the life she wanted, though, in actuality, it was barely hers" (144). Hence Camille's need of being observed at that very moment of happiness before it was lost, for she knows that "once a painting's finished, packed up, sold, who cares about the model? She needs to be appreciated now, this moment. Camille needs Thérèse to raise her eyes and admire a blissful married couple" (Roberts 2011: 223).

This reinforces the idea of women's need to have their story written if they do not want to be erased from history and therefore forgotten. Camille asks Thérèse twice throughout the story to sit next to her; she needs Thérèse there, as "a witness of her happiness" before it fades, as the white light does. She can see Thérèse is writing and, if she reflects this encounter in her book and learns how Camille feels, she could maybe record it in words so that her story is remembered every time someone reads Thérèse's book. As the blue hour approaches, Camille goes from happiness to distress, above all when Thérèse refuses to stay and eat with them, for she knows that moment of happiness will be lost and forgotten, that is why Thérèse suddenly becomes a threatening image for Camille.

Indeed, Camille becomes afraid of the darkness Thérèse represents and which matches the dark clouds approaching, maybe as a metaphor for what will come next in her life, to the point that, having realised that her story of happiness will be lost forever, does not know who she is anymore: "Camille begins to loosen, her edges start to flow out, she could be anyone, anything. Who am I? What's a self? She might get lost, never get back to herself" (224). It is at this moment when, according to the story, "she wants Monet to paint neat black lines around her, holding her in; to paint a chair between herself and the girl in black; like bars. Keep off. Don't touch me." (224). The reader never knows whether Monet does as she asks, but it is worth mentioning that if we observe the real painting, we can actually see black strokes in Camille's white dress around the sleeves, and the chair is there too. Camille's fears are therefore portrayed in the story in the figure of Thérèse, she feels threatened and sees Thérèse as "a ghost come to warn of approaching death" (224). And even though she tries to concentrate on the happiness of the moment, and she tries to

convince herself of the happy life with her husband and child that awaits her, she is afraid of losing that feeling forever.

If we turn into the other edge of the painting, blue is not only important in the construction of Camille's identity but it also plays a significant role in Thérèse's life. The search for identity in Thérèse's case and her connection with blue elements are more related with the loss of the maternal figure. As mentioned above, both women are not so different and even though they are presented as opposites from the colour of their clothes, Thérèse also moves from white to blue even if she is dressed in black, where her story will end. Despite the fact that when she looks at it "the picture makes her feel smashed up inside" (214), the first element that gets Thérèse's interest in the painting is its whiteness. The white brushstrokes shaping parts of the sky, the sea, and Camille's dress make Thérèse think about babies' souls, maybe after having noticed Camille's pregnancy. To her, "babies' souls are white except for the dark stain of original sin; the human fingerprint" (213).

After this first reference to religious terms, we soon learn that Thérèse wants to be a nun at the convent in Lisieux, and that she is trying to record her memories in a notebook to write her autobiography. In point of fact, the details presented rely heavily on Thérèse's official autobiography, as we analyse in the following paragraphs. However, what we get in Roberts's narrative is an ambivalent account and the reader can immediately realise that Thérèse's words do not match her feelings entirely. In the subheading "Autobiography", Thérèse records this episode on the beach at Trouville after thinking how writing from the convent would probably be quite different to writing then. At this point it is important to remember how freely she could write back then and how her real autobiography was revised and censored by male church authorities, going back to the idea of history being constructed from patriarchal authority even if a woman was the author.

The account of her childhood begins with the loss of her mother. This loss, either real or metaphorical, is actually one of Roberts's more recurrent topics. In this case, the loss is real. As we learn from *The Story of a Soul* (1975), Thérèse Martin's mother died of cancer when she was a little girl, and then she continued losing other maternal figures she attached to. As in real life, the same happens to fictional Thérèse: first, her mother dies; then, her older sisters enter the convent, so, for her, "motherless time never ends. Mothers slip like sand through Thérèse's fingers: birth mothers, foster mothers, godmothers. At her fingertip touch the hourglass tilts; sand runs through; repeatedly. Mothers like grains of sand vanish: into death, back onto the farm; into the convent." (215). For this reason, Thérèse feels alone and cries quite often: "Tides of loss that repeat, repeat. Water lashes Thérèse's eyes and her family reproach her from crying so often: such weakness, such self-indulgence. Where's your faith? Your mother's in heaven." (216). The strong religious culture she has grown up with, as well as the fact that her sisters are nuns in the convent, have led her to believe that her destiny is to devote her life to the convent as well: visiting her older sister at the convent is the only way to go back to a maternal figure, the only way to feel cherished.

However, during the summer she spends on the beach with her aunt's family in Trouville, there seems to be another way of being near God and her mother: if she melted with the blue ocean, she would reunite with her mother and she "will inhabit heaven, play in God's garden, be sheltered in God's house" (216). When Thérèse looks at the sea from the cliff, she thinks of jumping and smashing into the rocks to end with her suffering of having to live without a mother and even though she feels afraid of being drowned, "she longs to jump in. Gods' there. Her mother's there. Fall off the cliff and let them catch you" (225). The image of being surrounded by water to find one's true identity and to go back to the maternal repeats in several of Roberts's works. A clear example is found in *Daughters of the House*, also based on the figure of Thérèse of Lisieux; whose protagonist only feels complete and finds her true identity in the waters of the sea. Once again, as the character based on Thérèse in *Daughters of the House*, the young Thérèse in this short story also sees water as an element that represents wholeness, where she can feel re-connected with her mother, safe in the ocean's water as we do in the water of the maternal womb.

Yet despite these thoughts, the influence of Thérèse's older sister is quite powerful, and we can see the clash between her feelings and desires for freedom the sea provides and the account of a life of self-imposed penance. A clear example of this ambivalence is told under the subheading "Blue", when Thérèse goes back to her childhood: it is raining in Normandy; the sky is blue. A servant girl looks at Thérèse from the path below the house and tells her: "enough blue to make a pair of sailor's trousers!", while Thérèse responds "no, a cloak for the Virgin" (221). At that moment, she is painting a holy picture of Child Jesus holding a ball, and she responds not according to her wishes, but as expected by using blue for the Virgin instead of the mundane sailor's trousers. So, rather than following her instincts and going to play under the rain, she goes on painting: "She wants to don a pair of clogs like the servant's girl, go out into the blue-grey drizzle, rock through the mud, feel wet on her face, spin round and dance and shriek. Instead, she sits back down at her desk and carries on painting" (221). What is more, right after repressing her urge to go and play under the rain

> she slides her hand into her apron pocket, touches the string of loose beads she keeps there. A discipline taught to her by her older sister the nun. She slips one bead along the string, to mark her gesture of self-denial in not going out to play in the rain; knots the bead into place. Come Sunday, she'll count up her acts of sacrifice, record her week's tally in her little blue notebook. (221)

This passage is recorded by Thérèse herself in her autobiography, where it is portrayed as a deed given that she is not yet allowed to enter the convent (Martin 1795: 13). Conversely, Roberts's account seems more conflicted, showing almost a struggle between Thérèse's joy of freedom and the (self)inflicted punishments. On the one hand, it seems that Thérèse behaves in this way to please her sister. It is the only maternal figure she has, so she is obedient and does as her sister says to make her proud and to feel loved and approved:

> When she visits her sister in the convent parlour on Sunday afternoon to give her the picture she'll tell her these memory-beads and her sister will stretch her hand through the grille and pat her. (…) Her sister will say: even on holiday at Trouville you'll find occasions for self-discipline, just you wait and see. (Roberts 2011: 221)

Thérèse informs her sister that her aunt is taking her on a summer holiday with her family and wants to buy her a new summer dress. While getting a new dress could be viewed as a treat and something to look forward to, Thérèse disguises it as another act of penance: "I'll be obedient and wear it. That's my mortification!". But her sister knows better and tells her: "make sure it's black, though, *ma chérie*" (222). And that is the reason why she is wearing a black dress in the hot summer at Trouville.

Despite this, in Roberts's account we see a fourteen-year-old Thérèse two years ahead of entering the convent, who goes to the beach with her aunt, uncle and cousins and appears to be enjoying the freedom it provides: "the beach offers liberty to the troop of cousins", as they:

> can run, yell, dive in and out of the waves, invent new games in the water, explore caves… Thérèse takes her boots off, rolls her stockings down. She walks barefoot over the flat expanse of sand towards the distant, shining line of the sea. She allows herself to paddle at the water's edge. A shock of cold water: strokes of hot sun. She discards her tight little black jacket, rolls up the black sleeves of her blouse. The air caresses her bare arms… (217)

She is enjoying her time at the beach so much that she does not feel she can read nor write what she is experiencing there. It is impossible for her to go on with her diary of "a saint" because there is "too much light. Too much beach, too much sea" (224-225). So as to write it, she needs the darkness and isolation of the convent, as she "wants to shape her life into the story of her search for God" and comments that "she'll delay writing her autobiography as long as possible, while she perfects herself" (215). With this in mind, it is clear how she is censuring her own account: a day of joy at the beach does not fit with the life of a saint, the appropriate version of her life cannot be written under the light but from the perspective of the convent where, instead of playing with the sand as she did on the beach, "she'll be sand in God's mortar and he can grind her to dust" (225) and therefore, her real life and identity will disappear, and it will be others who will tell her story.

As we have seen, both women are therefore in need to tell their own stories before they are silenced, adapted or forgotten. Camille's identity and her memories will vanish once the canvas is finished and sold, as no one else will know the real story behind the painting. The same happens with Thérèse, as in her search of God and as a nun, it will not be possible to recount this type of memories or feelings that would be seen as hysterical and heretic.

4. CONCLUSION

In "On the Beach at Trouville" Michèle Roberts re-tells the lives of Camille Doncieux and Thérèse Martin in an attempt to give voice to silenced women and re-construct their stories from new viewpoints, denouncing the exclusion of the women's perspective in the construction of history. In order to re-build these women's herstories, Roberts chooses one of Monet's real paintings as a frame for the story and invents a fictionalised encounter between the just-married couple and a young Thérèse of Lisieux. This time, even though it is Monet who is painting both women, it is their voice that gets heard, contrasting with the official accounts of their lives recorded from a biased male perspective.

In her re-construction of both women's stories, Roberts follows other female rewritings and feminist theories, and aligns with Wallace's idea that contemporary women writers "emphasise the subjective, fragmentary nature of historical knowledge through rewritings of canonical texts, through multiple or divided narrators, fragmentary or contradictory narratives, and disruptions of linear chronology" (2005: 204). Indeed, the story is told through poetic language and multiple voices, and it does not follow a linear but a circular structure. Similarly, the use of intertextuality is a key element in this short story: the accounts both women provide in Roberts's narrative are built upon the official version of Thérèse's life (her autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*), and how other male visions have portrayed Camille.

As we have seen in the previous analysis, the presence of all these elements makes Roberts's account an ambivalent one. As Falcus wisely pinpoints, "telling herstories is not unproblematic and the women in these texts struggle to find voices and order their tales, emphasizing the unreliability of language and narrative" (2008: 140), and this is exactly what we find in "On the Beach at Trouville". The accounts of both stories and the mix with the official records of both women's lives show these women's diffused and fragmented identities, just as their images are portrayed in the real painting. Despite this, although the (re)construction of both women's herstories can be considered as unreliable because of the way they are told, patriarchal binary oppositions are challenged and, what is more important, Roberts gives both women voice to retell their stories so that they can be rewritten and re-inscribed in history.

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