WHY SHOULD THE HARLOT BE A WOMAN?

GENDER IDENTITY AS ALLEGORICAL STRATEGY OF REPRESENTATION IN PROPHETIC TEXTS

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In a reading that is at once literary and psychological, this essay traces the representation of the 'harlot' in prophetic biblical texts, especially those of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Hosea. A consistent symbolic universe of harlotry begins to come together, one that is crucial to the deeper masculine logic of abasement, judgement, repentance and salvation, but one in which woman also, in a curious twist, becomes the figure for the human.

The harlot is an obsessive figure in biblical representation. She may be a character, a 'person' of certain psychological autonomy in narrative texts, as well as an allegory, a rhetorical strategy of symbolic imagination in prophetic discourse. Here I will consider the second case. In spite of the fact that the prophetic books of the Old Testament were written in different epochs and under various historical circumstances, it is not impossible to construct an imaginary realm of resemblance, a paradigm of symbolic harlotry, valid for all of the texts. The main books upon which I shall base my analysis are *Isaiah*, *Hosea*, *Jeremiah* and *Ezekiel*, although I will keep searching for examples throughout the rest of the prophetic body.

If I single out *Isaiah*, *Hosea*, *Jeremiah* and *Ezekiel*, it is because the symbolism of harlotry in these books is of a highly systematic and persistent character. What is more, the discourse is lush, voluptuous and sensual; sexual fantasy overtakes the means of representation, sometimes on the edge of pornography. The narrator seems to experience intense emotions, mixing sadistic pleasure (the delight to punish) with masochistic throb (identification with the punished harlot who is actually the entire Jewish community).

The fundamental sin which the biblical prophets symbolise as harlotry is the one of retreat from Yahweh, the one of religious adultery. According to them, the Chosen people often forget the responsibilities of their monotheistic Covenant and render religious worship to foreign deities, performing idolatrous rituals and sacrifices. Betrayal has a key meaning in the allegorical rhetoric of the prophetic text – and it is 'naturally' linked to the chain of stereotypical views of female behaviour. This seems an inevitable psychological strategy of a society in which the polygamous matrimonial system, the intermediate institution of concubinage, the sexual abuse of slaves and the advanced routine of prostitution (as a sacred practice, too) – all stay on the side of the male sexual desire. There is no sense in reasoning whether women in such a society could have been unfaithful and whether this was done at a special – higher or more specific – level. Such reflections carry an interpretative character only; they are beyond the logic of biblical (patriarchal) mentality. It is more important to comprehend the mechanism of psychological projection according to which a dominating (in our case – a male) group of people identify their own (sexual) needs and desires as (secret) needs and desires of another (female and marginal) group of people. And since it is clear for everyone that women have had no legitimate way to possess another man but their own possessor/husband, there were only two possibilities left to materialise 'their' inmost wishes: unfaithfulness and harlotry. No wonder that in the metaphorical regime of prophetic authorship these two (otherwise quite different) social practices have a strong tendency to equalisation.

Following the paradoxical scheme of (male) imagination in both cases the wronged/suffering ones could only be men. This is how the generalised allegorical figure of the biblical harlot comes into view. She is every woman who deviates from the rules of feminine (marital) behaviour, and every human being who refuses to be 'him/herself' according to the laws of patriarchal creation.

In spite of all my efforts I cannot discover one single story in which a man/husband chasing another woman has been described by the concepts of harlotry or (marital) betrayal. That way – the way of verbally constructed social psychology – the capability for unfaithfulness and harlotry turns into an emblem of femininity, into a label of the sinful, and hence *every*, female presence. The harlot is an exceptionally productive figure in the mythological (allegorical) imagery of the Old Testament; she is the human in a situation of double fall: a woman who is unfaithful to her husband (consequently to the Divine in her marital status), and also – to (the feminine in) herself.

Since betrayal is defined as a specific signature of female nature, it is easy to arrange a line of its symbolic manifestations where both ideas (of harlotry and femininity) exchange traits and qualities. The city, for instance, is traditionally thought of by the mythic mind as of female gender. No wonder that in prophetic discourse it appears on one hand as a harlot, and on the other as a woman who cries and bemoans herself, having obtained righteous retribution for her sins. Curiously, the 'feminine' in this case is stronger than the necessity to think the 'own' in positive terms: the strange towns, as well as the Jewish ones, are harlots. Not just any but the holy city of Jerusalem itself is most often depicted as an allegorical woman of infamy. Isaiah is probably the first one to express astonishment: 'How is the faithful city, that was full of judgement, become a harlot?' (Isa 1:21). Female symbolism of the city is a steady trait in his text; there is, for instance, a picturesque metaphor of Tyre as an old and forgotten harlot who is dancing and singing, trying to draw attention to herself (Isa 23:15-16).

Another prophet, Nahum, foretells the destruction of Nineveh with quite detailed argument: 'Because of the multitude of the fornication of the harlot that was beautiful and agreeable, and that made use of witchcraft, that sold nations through her fornications, and families through her witchcrafts' (Nah 3:4). This example lets us see the open succession of female images, in which lechery takes part. The ones we already know are joined by that of the witch, even the merchant-witch, who buys and sells by fraud. The writer (under the name of) Jeremiah, well known for his Lamentations, demonstrates how the symbolism of harlotry may beget descriptive detailing and realistic scrutiny in the feminine characteristic of the city. It is about Jerusalem again, the capital of Judah in Jeremiah's time: 'I have seen thy adulteries, and thy neighing, the wickedness of thy fornication: and thy abominations, upon the hills in the field. Woe to thee, Jerusalem, wilt thou not be made clean after me: how long yet?' And right after this comes the extremely 'female' picture of the forthcoming divine punishment: 'Wherefore I have also bared thy thighs against thy face, and thy shame hath appeared' (Jer 13:26-27). Obviously, the vision of the city tends to expand into the field of symbolic reasoning and metonymically overflows into the visions of the country and the nation; sometimes it is difficult to draw a boundary between the three images, with all of them conceived in the gender of female fornication.

The 'apocalyptic' imagery, articulated in the regime of female – somatic or spiritual - suffering, derives from the historic circumstances, which define the golden age of prophetic discourse. All texts from that era were formed at the time of social/national stress and catastrophic changes. The earliest prophets, such as Amos and Hosea, wrote in the North Kingdom, Israel, before it's fall in 722 B.C.; the later ones – during the collapse of the South Kingdom, Judah, at the time

of the Exile and immediately after the return to the devastated land. These historic trials, usually seen as a forthcoming reality, impose the metaphors of the demonic, the perilous and the excessive. The harlotry paradigm is also presented in the line of the abnormal and shockingly-repulsive experience. I shall try to follow it in two successive allegorical directions.

The first one begets and motivates the second. It depicts the religious 'filthiness' and 'abominations' committed by the Jewish people in their retreat (betrayal) from Yahweh. The Lord says it in a direct and unrestrained manner, speaking for himself through different prophets: 'Because you have surpassed the Gentiles that are round about you, and have not walked in my commandments, and have not kept my judgements' (Ezek 5:7). Some texts present a broad picture of the moral collapse, which accompanies the religious retreat. Hosea for instance describes in detail the chaos 'in this land' where 'there is no truth, and there is no mercy, and there is no knowledge of God'.

> Cursing, and lying, and killing, and theft, and adultery have overflowed, and blood hath touched blood (4:2).
>
> Fornication, and wine, and drunkenness take away the understanding (4:11).
>
> Their banquet is separated, they have gone astray by fornication: they that should have protected them have loved to bring shame upon them (4:18).

The syncretism of this example is clearly visible, as the ideas of the moral merge with the ideas of the sacred. The lack of faithfulness to Yahweh is categorised as social and common disgrace. In general, prophetic allegory is syncretic. The ominous picture usually mixes various regimes of human existence; a sensation of nuances and degrees of suggestion is missing; there is no need to differentiate certain carriers of infamy, for the entire society is infamous.

This scene of the religious harlotry is detailed meticulously, with realistic precision. Idolatrous practices are narrated, performed not just in some temples, but in sanctuaries, spread 'upon the hills in the field' (Jer 13:27), 'upon the tops of the mountains…', 'under the oak, and the poplar, and the turpentine tree, because the shadow thereof was good' (Hos 4:13); the hyperbolic imagination sees them 'upon every high mountain' (Jer 3:6), 'in every street…at every head of the way' (Ezek 16:24-25). Despite the command not to make idols, the Jewish people deify various objects: 'My people have consulted their stocks, and their staff hath declared unto them' (Hos 4:12); they 'played the harlot with sticks and with stones' (Jer 3:9). One of the most wicked rites, often narrated by the prophets, is the sacrifice of young children in honour of the Canaanite deity Molloch. We can imagine the shock of the biblical author for whom the increase of the Chosen nation has always been a task of sacred meaning. Fury thunders with the voice of the deprived God – husband and father:

> And thou hast taken thy sons, and thy daughters, whom thou hast born to me: and hast sacrificed the same to them to be devoured.
>
> Thou hast sacrificed and given my children to them, consecrating them by fire (Ezek 16:20-21).

> Because they have committed adultery, and blood is in their hands, and they have committed fornication with their idols: moreover also their children, whom they bore to me, they have offered to them to be devoured (Ezek 23:37).

A typical feature of symbolic thinking in the prophetic text is the tendency to naturalise the idea of fornication by physiological descriptions of the female body and of the procedures of punishment, meant to re-establish it in the right path. The system of the allegorical imagery is presupposed by the gender politics of the text. I shall try to illustrate this point with the parable of the two sisters Oholah and Oholibah, told by the (Lord through the) prophet Ezekiel (Ezek 23).

> And the word of the Lord came to me, saying: Son of man, there were two women, daughters of one mother.
>
> And they committed fornication in Egypt, in their youth they committed fornication: there were their breasts pressed down, and the teats of their virginity were bruised.
>
> And their names were Oholah - the elder and Oholibah, her younger sister: and I took them and they bore sons and daughters. Now for their names, Samaria is Oholah and Jerusalem is Oholibah.

Some symptomatic features of the mythological historicism (if I may use such a paradox, trying to define the attempt to narrate history in symbolic pictures) – which characterises the principles of prophetic discourse – appear in the introduction. This parable synthesises the history of the Jewish society for a period of six to seven centuries – from their arrival in Egypt to the time of the destruction of Judah. History is told through the paradigm of family ties. The narrative frame can be defined as a 'tale of a Family': *Once upon a time God – the father – and Zion – the mother – had two daughters…* Anything that happens further could be fitted (and comprehended) within the frame of this fairy tale. What is general and impersonal gains meaning as the personal truth of a small domestic group and is presented in the imagery/mentality of everyday life. This strategy 'psychologises' the text, brings down to earth the flight of its catastrophic imagery. What I mean, of course, is 'psychologism' of a mythological type; its 'realism' doesn't have support in the psychology of any individual, it rather aims to achieve/prove the homogeneity of some 'universal' and 'eternal' suggestion.

Further to the family relationship model, the story is simultaneously delivered through the body and through the troubles of its social handling. The stay in Egypt has turned into the debauchery of two young girls, the idea of slavery into 'their breasts pressed down', 'the teats of their virginity bruised'.

After the introduction, the narrative continues in the same fashion:

> And Oholah committed fornication against me, and doted on her lovers, on the Assyrians that came to her.
>
> Who were clothed with blue, princes and rulers, beautiful youths, all horsemen, mounted upon horses.

> And she committed her fornications with those chosen men, all sons of Assyrians: and she defiled herself with the uncleanness of all of them on whom she doted.
>
> Moreover also she did not forsake her fornications which she had committed in Egypt; for they also lay with her in her youth, and they bruised the breasts of her virginity, and poured out their fornication upon her (Ezek. 23:5-8).

Egyptians, Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Babylonians… the ancient Jewish history unfolds in the tortures of the sexual body, and comes out somewhat from 'under the bed'. The metaphor of the bed itself is frequently present in 'adulterous' symbolism. Isaiah, for example, fits it into quite a naturalistic picture of lechery as a professional occupation:

> And behind the door, and behind the post thou hast set up thy remembrance: for thy hast discovered thyself near me, and hast received an adulterer: thou hast enlarged thy bed, and made a covenant with them: thou hast loved their bed with open hand (Isa 57:8).

Ezekiel also pays attention to the bed: the 'vast' or 'very fine' bed turns into a symbol of vast and lewd sex. In addition he details some intimate cosmetic procedures of the female body:

> … for whom thou didst wash thyself, and didst paint thy eyes, and wast adorned with women's ornamentations.
>
> Thou sattest on a very fine bed, and a table was decked before thee: whereupon thou didst set my incense, and my ointments (Ezek 23:40-41).

While in the next citation, again from Ezekiel, we shall see how the text treats the naturalistic imagery of the feminine body in order to suggest revulsion to what is a religious, though idolatrous, act: 'At every head of the way thou hast set up a sign of thy prostitution: and hast made thy beauty to be abominable: and hast prostituted thyself to everyone that passed by' (Ezek 16:25).

The clothes are part of the body. Beyond prophetic discourse, beautiful clothes usually signify the virtues of the person clad in them. (Remember the parable of the good wife told by King Lemuel in *Wisdom of Solomon 31*– the expensive clothes mean the high value of the virtuous woman.) These meanings appear to be reversed in the system of prophetic symbolism. Let's have a look at the careful description of the clothing of those men, who passed through the bed of debauchery. Oholah evidently prefers 'beautiful youths' who are 'mounted upon horses' and wear 'clothes with blue'. Oholibah, being younger, begins her adulteries later, but was 'mad with lust' more than her sister, 'and she carried her fornications beyond the fornication of her sister'; Oholibah chooses her lovers by the rich clothes as well (these clothes, let us suppose, make them better payers). Unexpectedly though, her harlotry is brought not so much by ambition to gain wealth but by sincere (although lewd, of course) feelings. In a certain moment Oholibah sees:

> … men painted on the wall, the images of the Chaldeans set forth in colours,
>
> And girded with girdles about their reins, and with dyed turbans on their heads the resemblance of all the captains, the likeness of the sons of Babylon, and of the land of the Chaldeans wherein they were born.

> She doted upon them with the lust of her eyes, and she sent messengers to them into Chaldea.

Being modern people of certain experience, we might say that Oholibah is a pretty romantic adulteress and a woman of character. She is fastidious about her visitors, minds their good looks, proves to have initiative, and is capable of falling in love… On the whole, she resembles Julia Roberts' character in the movie 'Pretty Woman'. But it is exactly these 'modern' qualities which seem to be the most horrendous in the mind of the biblical narrator. The allegorical harlot goes beyond the rules of being a prostitute who practises her profession out of need and poverty. She has sexual wishes and romantic feelings; that makes her a figure of abnormal femininity. The desire for 'lawlessness' is hidden deep into her soul, it has always been there – a mark of her 'essence'. Fornication is an inner need, which turns the allegorical character into a personification of elusiveness in the frames of the law. 'Lift up thy eyes on high and see: where hast thou not prostituted thyself? Thou didst sit, waiting for them as a robber in the wilderness…' says Jeremiah (Jer 3:2). And since the soul of this woman is the soul of a harlot, metonymically similar are all parts of her body. She has a 'harlot's forehead', a 'harlot's heart', 'harlot's eyes' (Ezek 5:9).

The highest point of female infamy, and what differentiates the prophetic adulteress from the common prostitute, is the fact that she does not work to make a living. Quite on the contrary, she herself seduces the desired men with money and presents. Ezekiel tells the story in all details:

> Gifts are given to all harlots: but thou hast given hire to all thy lovers, and thou hast given them gifts to come to thee from every side, to commit fornication with thee.
>
> And it hath happened in thee contrary to the custom of women in thy fornications, and after thee there shall be no such fornication, for in that thou gavest rewards, and didst not take rewards, the contrary hath been done in thee (Ezek 16:33-34).

Besides the moral infamy this is a bad deal, a waste of labour. And yet, the root of all evil remains the impossibility of religious and moral control over the lecherous body. The discourse makes an obsessive use of one symptomatic characteristic, usually translated as an epithet – 'mad'. 'Mad with lust' is the body after 'lying with them whose flesh is as the flesh of asses; and whose issue is as the issue of horses' (Ezek 23:20). Here we ought to mention the paradigm of the animal symbolism in prophetic discourse. 'For Israel hath gone astray like a wanton heifer' – says Hosea (Hos 4:16). 'A wild ass accustomed to the wilderness in the desire of his heart…' – adds Jeremiah (Jer 2:24). Just as it is in other (non-prophetic) texts, the beastly is a sign of the chaos - caused by the instincts - in the lecherous behaviour. The good animal of the biblical text is the lamb – the one whose gentle character and adaptability to human care are proverbial. The good (religiously correct) person is a lamb in God's hands. The verse in which Hosea calls Israel a 'wanton heifer' ends with: 'now will the Lord feed them, as a lamb in a spacious place'. The harlot woman and the lustful man are (like) wanton beasts; they don't fit into the Law because their flesh threatens to destroy it. As it is in Ezekiel – 'flesh of asses and issue of horses'. Apart from other reasons the harlot is a woman because the idea that femininity is less malleable to

social regulations has already taken shape in prophetic discourse: 'the woman' is closer to the non-laws of nature, thus more easily degrading towards the chaos of the pre-Yahwist world.

Homological to the overwhelming power of the sin, inscribed in the harlot's body, is the excessiveness of the ensuing (divine) punishment. It is clearly visible how the mythological thinking unites – in the sphere of the sacred act and through the mechanism of the prophetic vision – the lowest (the beastly in a human creature) and the highest (Divine Judgement). All prophets speak of that judgement; it brings the apocalyptic perspective into their predictions. However the subjects of punishment are two. The first one, of course, is the Lord – Yahweh's fury is terrifying, undue, and irresistible. Prophetic discourse feebly attempts to imply some human motivation into his exhausted patience, but the beyond-natural and the excessive are ontological signs of the idea of the sacred. God's behaviour does not need any psychological motivation; the very lack of human motivation guarantees the non-human (divine) in it.

The second subject of the punishment of the Jewish harlot may seem irrational if we stick to the self-others paradigm. These are the foreign lovers who visited upon the time her 'very fine' bed. Once again we see the priority of gender thinking in the structure of prophetic allegory. Foreign tribes and nations – Egyptians, Assyrians, Chaldeans – are indisputable enemies of the Jewish people in their ancient history and the text wouldn't have any (rational) reason to seek their help in order to chastise its own lecherous femininity. These foreigners though, however hateful, are allegorical *men*. The male point regarding women, as we know, symbolises the Lord's attitude to everything (imperfectly) human. An enemy, represented as a male subject, is closer to (the rage of) Yahweh than his own people, depicted as a guilty woman, can be. Thus (paradoxically in our view), the foreign lovers assume judgemental and vindictive actions in prophetic discourse (although they have nothing to avenge for, since up to this moment they have been favoured with gifts and money). Their gender obliges them to be furious and extremely cruel in their 'revenge'; they are the extension of the Lord's hand, the weapon, stretched out of it.

The scene of the male punishment is described (again) in a most detailed fashion in Ezekiel's text:

> Behold, I will gather together all thy lovers with whom thou hast taken pleasure, and all whom thou hast loved, with all whom thou hast hated: and I will gather them together against thee on every side, and will discover thy shame in their sight, and they shall see all thy nakedness.
>
> And I will judge thee as adulteresses and I will give thee blood in fury and jealousy.
>
> And I will deliver thee into their hands, and they shall destroy thy brothel house, and throw down thy stews: and they shall strip thee of thy garments, and shall take away the vessels of thy beauty: and leave thee naked and full of disgrace.
>
> And they shall bring upon thee a multitude, and they shall stone thee with stones, and they shall slay thee with their swords.
>
> And they shall burn thy houses with fire, and shall execute judgments upon thee in the sight of many women: and thou shalt cease from fornication, and shalt give no hire anymore (Ezek 16:37-41).

Here we have many motifs and components of the vision of punishment gathered together: they reappear – in a more concise and fragmentary way – in other prophetic books. I shall begin with the motif of *shame and disgrace*.

The punishment is supposed to produce a psychological effect on the woman-adulteress; only then will she take the path of repentance: '…therefore be thou also confounded, and bear thy shame' – says Ezekiel (16:52); also, 'And thou shalt remember thy ways, and be ashamed…' (Ezek 16:61). Still, God does not rely on the accomplished harlot to bring herself to blush and feel ashamed of her deeds. That state must be reached using every possible procedure of disgracing which may be applied to the female body. In the first place and in accordance with the biblical symbolism of punishment, comes the public exposure to ridicule and violence.

> And I shall make thee desolate, and a reproach… on the sight of every one that passed by.
>
> And thou shalt be a reproach, and a scoff, an example, and an astonishment amongst the nations that are round about thee… (Ezek 5:14-15).

Public disgrace goes almost compulsorily with nudity; infamy is present in the exhibition of the body, especially of its intimate parts. They *are* female sexuality, therefore must remain forever hidden in the darkness of the private body. We may suppose that their disgracing in the public space had been a trial not only for the naked woman but also for the entire (watching) community by challenging the norm not to think of/not to see the female sexuality. It is a fact that the prophets are unanimous in their wish to 'undress' – to expose – the harlot:

> …and now I will lay open her folly in the eyes of her lovers… Lest I strip her naked, and set her as in the day she was born… (Hos 2:10, 3).
>
> Therefore have I delivered her into the hands of her lovers…
>
> They discovered her disgrace, took away her sons and daughters, and slew her with the sword (Ezek 23:9-10).

It would be efficient enough to recall Jeremiah, should there be any hesitation about which exactly is the most shameful part, *the very shame* of a woman:

> Wherefore I have also bared thy thighs against thy face, and thy shame hath appeared (Jer 13:26).

It must be spelt out that the punishment and God's fury in these passages of prophetic discourse are directed entirely upon the stage of the female body. The symbolic imagination manages to include an extreme versatility of picturesque techniques of vindication: from infamous nudity to hacking with a sword, from taking property ('…and they shall take away all thy labours.., Ezek 23:29) to holocaust, from beating with stones to cutting into pieces with a dagger, and best of all – in a combination of various methods:

> And I will set my jealousy against thee, which they shall execute upon thee with fury: they shall cut off thy nose and thy ears: and what remains shall fall by the

> sword: they shall take thy sons and thy daughters, and thy residue shall be devoured by fire.
>
> And they shall strip thee of thy garments, and take away the instruments of glory (Ezek 23:25-26).

Despite the abundance of examples I have already given, I wouldn't like to miss yet another one – the scene of retaliation in Isaiah's verses. It is symptomatic, with its ability to think of the Day of Judgment in everyday-naturalistic imagery:

> And the Lord said: Because the daughters of Sion are haughty, and have walked with stretched out necks, and wanton glances of their eyes, and made a noise as they walked with their feet, and moved in a set pace:
>
> The Lord will make bald the crown of the head of the daughters of Sion, and the Lord will discover their hair.
>
> And instead of a sweet smell there shall be stench, and instead of a girdle, a cord, and instead of curled hair, baldness, and instead of a stomacher, haircloth (Isa 3:16-17, 24).

The legal process that shall be raised against the Jewish harlot fits into the picturesquely ferocious punishment in a peculiarly tenacious way. Indeed, this procedure takes place following the rules of a primitive public trial, with no proof or witnesses sought.

> For thus said the Lord God: Bring a multitude upon them, and deliver them over to tumult and rapine:
>
> And let the people stone them with stones, and let them be stabbed with their swords: they shall kill their sons and daughters, and their houses they shall burn with fire. (Ezek 23:46-47)

The only prosecutor and judge in this process is Lord's anger. But since the adulteress is actually the entire community of Israel, the 'court room' must include other, non-Jewish participants. This is how we come to the need of the 'foreign lovers', once again they turn into a subject of punishment: 'And I will set judgment before them, and they shall judge thee by their judgments'. (Ezek 23:24). Once again the idea of ethnic homogeneity is dominated by the gender politics of the symbolic imagination. A male subject is needed, the one who would undertake judicial functions, the one who would become the (earthly) hand of God's fury. Only that way would we comprehend the vast metamorphosis of the hateful stranger playing the role of a 'just man', or minister of divine justice, who will judge the sisters Oholah and Oholibah as 'adulteresses' and as 'shedders of blood': '…because they are adulteresses and blood is in their hands' (Ezek 23:45). The prophetic judgment, we might say, reminds of a legal process in wartime conditions. Outside it, even the gender austere Ben Sirach will propose 'a civil procedure', including 'legal investigation' (Sir. 23:33). But the juridicial practice in prophetic discourse is not a 'realistic' procedure; it is a symbolic transfiguration of the Day of Judgement, an image of God's retribution which cannot/must not be limited by the rules of earthly existence.

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The symbolic plot of prophetic allegory remains, after all, a verbal vision, an imagined reality only, even if it is based upon details of everyday life. There is, however, an exceptional case, in which text and life's habitualness are bound together in an unusual way. It is the story of the prophet Hosea who married the prostitute Gomer and the story of their marriage foretells the destiny of the entire Jewish nation, sunk into harlotry.

One beautiful day, 'in the days of Oziah, Joathan, Achaz, Ezechia – kings of Juda, and in the days of Jeroboam – the son of Joas King of Israel' the Lord spoke to Hosea, the son of Beeri: 'Go, take thee a wife of fornications and have of her children of fornications: for the land of fornication shall depart from the Lord' (Hos 1:1-2). The obedient Hosea received his *zonah*, after payment: '15 pieces of silver and for a core of barley and for half a core of barley'. He than tells Gomer: 'Thou shalt wait for me many days: thou shalt not play the harlot and thou shalt be no man's, and I also will wait for thee' (Hos 3:2-3). During their marriage they have three children: two sons and a daughter. They are each given allegorical names, by the Lord's command. A symbolic transcription of the relationship between the Jewish society and their God, the names signify the fiasco of the once agreed on covenant.

The elder son is called Jezrahel, 'for yet a little while, and I will visit the blood of Jezrahel upon the house of Jehu, and I will cause to cease the kingdom of Israel' (Hos 1:4). The name Jezrahel (or Israel) is, on the other hand, the common name of the entire Jewish nation. It alludes to another figure, one of a primary importance in the biblical text. Long ago in *Genesis* , God gave to Jacob the name of Israel, meaning *He, who fights God*. Jacob is one of the greatest patriarchs in Jewish prehistory. It is through his body (the only body virtually touched by Yahweh), that the name of Israel acquires a sacred meaning: a body-covenant of the bond between God and His people. Centuries later the child Jezrahel, born from the impossible marriage of a prophet and a harlot, becomes an anti-metaphor of the idea of sacred bonds. That is the body of failure and faithlessness; *anti-Jacob* or *Untouched-by-God*; a destiny-rejection of the idea of 'choice-ness'.

A girl was born after Jezrahel, unambiguously called Loruhamah, meaning *Without-Mercy*: 'for I will not add any more to have mercy on the house of Israel, but I will utterly forget them' (Hos 1:6). The younger son of Hosea also has retribution inscribed in his name – Loami, meaning *Not-My-People* – 'for you are not my people and I will not be yours' (Hos 1:9).

To comprehend the symbolic meaning of this story we have to turn back to the historical figure of the prophet Hosea – one of the few orthodox leaders of Israel in the 8th century BC. With his conduct and authority he comes into the group of those 'just men' called upon to judge the Jewish harlot – according to Ezekiel. In traditional marital symbolics, Hosea – being a man – falls in the position of God, opposed to the debaucherous society of Israel. His (mortal) marriage to a prostitute performs the mystery of the sacred sexual union, turning it into a verbal (and hence ritual) reality. That reminds us of something that no biblical editor would have admitted: the sacred *hieros gamos*, practiced in the detested temples and pagan sanctuaries in the Palestinian region. Naturally, the biblical unconscious does not think as an editor or a theologian; it brings back the unwanted, the common in the religious mythology of this area.

It seems difficult and yet tempting to guess what the fate was of the real actors in Hosea's story. As I said earlier, the prophet himself is considered to be a realistic figure, whose life matches the 'worldly' facts, presented in the text. This takes us, firstly, to an interpretation of psychological, even romantic character. The words with which God prescribes Hosea to marry Gomer sound like a handy rationalisation of an otherwise impossible (personal) decision. Here is the drama of an ancient prophet, torn between his male love and his religious obligations. With the hardship of his complex feelings Hosea seems to come closer to the persistence and patience with which the Lord approaches the endless betrayals of his people. 'Since he loved Gomer despite her failings, Denise Carmody writes, this gave him profound insight into the long-suffering character of the divine love' (Carmody 1979, p.143).

In a different space of reading these events would be shaped in a reverse order. Text and ability to profess are the real life of a Chosen Man, while matrimony happens in order to turn religious inspiration into (discursive) reality. 'The prophet demonstrats this not only in words, but in the great symbolic action of his life: the marriage with Gomer, the harlot. This action represents the relationship between Yahweh and Israel as essentially perverted; in relation to Yahweh the people are like a wife unfaithful to her husband' (Jeppsen 1980, p. 109). The names of the children subsequently are interpreted as 'a nullification of the essential values which the Israelite relationship to God should have confirmed' (p. 109). Following this line our psychological conclusion would be in quite a different direction, opposite to the first one: for a holy man such as Hosea the marriage to a *zonah* was not a love demand, but a trial; a burden, a cross for the Chosen One.

There is, of course, a third option – the desire of the text to narrate History as a private story, the destiny of a nation – through the synecdoche of one specific destiny. In that case Hosea's book is religious literature, an 'auto-passional', structured to the rules of legendary thinking; here the 'private' is created according to a system of (symbolic, religious) requirements of the genre.

The necessity to narrate History in stories (of a single life) is a specific device which differentiates Jewish prophecy from the dominant tradition of the Near Eastern prophetic discourse. The narrative politic is developed almost completely within the frame of marital symbolism; rounds of family relationships are described either as a sequence or as a tangle of bonds, in which God invariably appears as a betrayed husband, and Israel – as his unfaithful wife. The social practice of polygamy makes possible the dissemination of a typical narrative of the prophetic imagination. According to this scenario Israel and Judah (sometimes Samaria and Jerusalem) are sisters to whom Yahweh (like Jacob from *Genesis*) is simultaneously married. And they, of course, are being unfaithful to him – one after the other, as the logic of the historic events goes. It would be pointless to recall that the legal discourse of the Torah prohibits this kind of marriage (because of the danger of disloyal rivalry between the two sisters); what's important for the prophetic text is not the norm of 'humanity', but the logic of legendary imagery and mythological relations.

We remember the curious story of the sisters Oholah and Oholibah, narrated in *Ezekiel*. The prophet Jeremiah also has a similar story, but less detailed. Here, in Chapter 3, the Lord himself tells in most truthful details how perfidiously he has been cheated by the two sisters (his wives). The first one to betray him is the 'rebellious Israel' and he is forced to give her a 'bill of divorce'. Seeing this, her 'treacherous sister Judah was not afraid, but went and played the harlot herself' (Jer 3:8) The persistent symptom of the blood bond between the harlots is intriguing and I shall

return to it another time. I shall now discuss another story by Ezekiel which – detached from its allegorically prophetic context – could be read with interest as a period piece, perhaps a novelette. Its leading figure, Yahweh, with his attitude of a decent and yet sensual elderly man is reminiscent of a typical character from a 19th century bourgeois novel. Here is the story in brief:

At one point, the Jewish God Yahweh finds an abandoned baby girl left in a field by her parents. The father was an Amorite and the mother a Hittite. The child is obviously unwanted and unloved by her parents, irresponsible heretics: 'In the day of thy nativity thy navel was not cut, neither wast thou washed with water for thy health, nor salted with salt, nor swaddled with clouts' (Ezek 16:4). God takes the child and cares for her, assuming the position of a foster parent. 'Clothed with embroidery and shod with violet coloured shoes' (Ezek 16:10), the baby, barely alive, grows and becomes a young beauty: 'Thou didst increase and grow great, and advancedst and camest to a woman's ornament; thy breasts were fashioned and thy hair grew' (Ezek 16:7). Here we should note that breasts occupy a special place in the intimate topography of the lewd body. Being visible and hidden at the same time, they are in contrast to the invisibility of those lower parts that could be seen or thought of only in the excessive situation of public dishonour. In other words, breasts are a mid-topos in the allegorical imagery of the female body – low enough to be a sign of the adulterous behaviour, yet high enough to avoid the taboo over the inexpressible shame.

But let's return to Yahweh and his (adoptive) daughter. The blossoming of her youth turns his fatherly feelings into love and soon they get married. Here every psychoanalytical reading would notice the complicated position of the bride – semi-daughter and semi-wife, deprived of palpitations with her peers. What could be anticipated is a dialectic of gratitude and a lack of fulfilment in her behaviour. However God doesn't consider humans in psychological terms. This is perhaps why he was so astounded by his young wife's sudden passion for adultery. Notwithstanding masochistic pleasure, he lists her young lovers in expectation of the time when he shall punish her with the tremendous power of his (divine) fury.

Before approaching the end of this story it is clear how the prophetic text disposes the figure of Yahweh in a triple system of symbolic positions: father, lover and spouse (of his people Israel). But these are, in practicality, all the possible positions which a man occupies in the marital paradigm of human relations. Unlike the human though, Yahweh easily breaks through these borders; even more accurately, his presence is syncretic regarding the functions required by these roles. The attempt to allege some 'ethical' considerations here is absolutely groundless, because by definition God is beyond morality. It seems more interesting to see how the gender politic of the prophetic text reproduces with symbolic devices the wholeness of the epistemy in which patriarchy thinks the man and each of his roles linked with power over the woman and her body. The harlot in that sense is the compulsory other of the feminine normality. She satisfies the need to control and establish femininity through her symbolic inscription in the essence of the woman as a mark of the lowly (chaotic, primary, sexual) in human nature.

The summary of Ezekiel's parable brings forth the necessity to explicate one more observation which finds support in all other texts. It is not the prostitute – the moral stranger – who is the allegorical harlot of the biblical prophet, but *the married woman*, the wife adulteress; evil inside the matrimonial norm.[1] She is not someone who works with her body to make a living but the

one who has everything and yet throws it away giving in to lowly passion, to 'the disgraceful in human creature'. As Ezekiel clearly states:

> Because thou hast built thy brothel house at the head of every way, and thou hast made thy high place in every street: and wast not as a harlot that by disdain enhanceth her price,
>
> But as an adulteress, that bringeth in strangers over her husband (Ezek 16:31-32).

In this sense the prostitute Rahab is not even a harlot because she takes the reverse path – the one of faith and salvation. What interests the prophetic speaker is the conscious betrayal, the unfaithfulness, the rejection of the norms of decent behaviour. Harlotry is not a craft, neither is it insuppressible need of the flesh – it is a moral choice of the 'lawlessness', that of the soul. The harlot in her turn is a metaphor of the fallen person, of the humanly in rejection of the spiritual transcendence above the chaos and above primary powers. In this way we can understand one of the most important motifs of the paradigm: the motif of *repentance and return to God*.

The religious motivation of this idea stems from the idea of holistic nature of the divine presence. The alternative of the return is begotten by the ever-patient mercy of the Lord, by his ability to be as kind and generous as he has been cruel and furious before. 'For I am holy, saith the Lord, and I will not be angry forever' (Jer 3:12) and 'If thou will return, o Israel, return to me' (Jer 4:1). There is only one condition for this 'last return': the harlot must acknowledge her guilt: 'but yet acknowledge thy iniquity' (Jer 3:13), and must live to repent it. Then – having satisfied the horrendous drunkenness of his divine anger – Yahweh shall recall the past and the Covenant: 'And I will remember my covenant with thee in the days of thy youth and I will establish with thee an everlasting covenant' (Ezek 16:60).

In order to design the sequence of female repentance, the text introduces domestic techniques of influence on the sinful body. In a scene in *Hosea* the return is depicted as a domestication of a wild beast.

> Therefore behold I will hedge up thy way with thorns, and I will stop it up with a wall, and she shall not find her paths.
>
> And she shall follow after her lovers, and shall not overtake them: and she shall seek them and not find, and she shall say: I will go and return to my husband, because it was better with me then, than now (Hos 2:6-7).

On another occasion the exercise of influence resembles seduction and takes us to the romantic erotica of *Song of Songs*:

> Therefore, behold I will allure her, and will lead her into the wilderness: and I will speak to her heart (Hos 2:14).

The theme of repentance culminates in the picture of the last day – the day which will last forever, because it opens the perfect kingdom of Israel. I will quote its most compact vision from Hosea's book:

> And it shall be in that day, saith the Lord, that she shall call me: My husband, and she shall call me no more Baali.
>
> And I will take away the names of Baalim out of her mouth, and she shall no more remember their name.
>
> And in that day I will make a covenant with them, with the beasts in the field, and with the fowls of the air, and with the creeping things of the earth: and I will destroy the bow and the sword, and war out of the land: and I will make them sleep secure.
>
> And I will espouse thee to me for ever: and I will espouse thee me in justice, and judgement, and in mercy, and in commiserations.
>
> And I will espouse thee to me in faith: and thou shalt know, that I am the Lord.
>
> And it shall come to pass in that day: I will hear, saith the Lord< I will hear the heavens, and they shall hear the earth.
>
> And the earth shall hear the corn, and the wine, and the oil, and these shall hear Jezrahel.
>
> And I will sow her unto me in the earth, and I will have no mercy on her that was without mercy.
>
> And I will say to that which was not my people: Thou art my people: and they shall say: Thou art my God (Hos 2:16-23).

I permitted myself this long quotation because it is symptomatic for biblical apocalyptic thinking. The image of life-to-be in Hosea reminds of the famous imagery of Isaiah: a kingdom in which people and beasts live together; the extremes are reconciled with each other, evil is eradicated… What will return is paradise, being also the good beginning of human nature. A curious observation though is that the roles in this second Eden are re-cast. Everything human is drawn in the figure of 'the reborn' Eve, whereas Adam is immersing in divinity – clearly defined in terms of (male) gender. The last marriage, 'that time' of joy and mercy, is in fact the timelessness of post-history. Here relations are ever-ideal: the human being is forever bound to his God, the woman – to her man, the earth – to the heaven. This is the kingdom of the total connection in which every controversy of social existence is drown; the differences (including gender) complement themselves to the extent of a harmonic entirety; the otherness matches the sameness, and the end embraces the beginning of life.

If we return now to the image of the repentant harlot, we shall see another important manifestation of it in the biblical text. Besides having a lead role in prophetic discourse, it provides one of the most significant ways of continuity between Christian ideology and Jewish origin. The image travels from the colourful visions of the prophets through to the Gospels, especially *Luke* (8:2), who shapes the contours of a female sinner – Maria of Magdala, called Maria Magdalene. She also has a central position in many heterodox Christian streams from the early era AD. The symbolism of harlotry continues to develop within the orthodox discursive practice as well. An evidence of it is an interesting assembly of texts, called *Passionals of Harlots*. They

were written originally in Greek, later translated and edited in Latin; their primary task was to encourage the ascetic choice of men-hermits.

These are stories of great harlots who at first give in to the desire for sinning, but repent later and expiate for it the rest of their lives as hermits in the deserts. The most significant among them is Maria of Egypt. Her text has even become part of the liturgical tradition of the Orthodox Church. There also are Pellagia – an actress from Antiohia, Thais (not the Greek hetaera), another Maria, daughter of the hermit Abram…

And now I shall finally try to define the general meaning of the harlot's imagery in both Testaments of the Bible. The figure of the harlot signifies the lowest step a woman can descend to in her retreat from Lord's concept. And since woman *is* the human in the paradigm of the marital symbolism, the fallen woman, as we saw, becomes a metaphor of disgrace for every human being. This way repentance, too, suggests the idea that a person is capable of it in any situation; even the greatest sinner can return to the path of righteousness. If a *harlot* can, anyone can, suggests the logic of the biblical text; transcendence has authentic character, it is inscribed in human nature.

This idea lets us see from another point of view the tendency to use the lowered state of the harlot as an absolute, and the pathos of her moral rejection in the prophetic texts. 'Harlotry', being the worst – also an epitome of the repulsive – in human nature, is just one of the poles in the antinomian model of biblical thinking. Left on its own, it has no religious meaning; it acquires sense only if linked to a system of opposite values on the other pole, in other words – as an element of the structure of each one antinomy in a long procession: good and evil, man and woman, pure and tainted, inspirational and lowly, God and man… The degree of negativity on the 'low' pole is dependant on the degree of positivity on the 'high' one. The prostitute becomes a harlot, the harlot – a wild beast parallel to the process which turns the man into a judge and prophet, and the prophet – into God. The abundant mercy of one demands abundance of evil from the other. The symbolism of harlotry must be comprehended relatively: only worst is homologous to best. To allow the absolute triumph of heavenly Israel, the earthly one must pass the trials of depravity and infamy; the symbol of this 'history' is exactly the harlot of the prophetic text.

ENDNOTES

1 Here we have to distinguish between the harlot of the prophetic texts and the harlot of the 'historic' narative. I support the assertion of Phyllis Bird that in texts such as Gen 38:1–26, Josh 2:1–24 and 1 Kings 3:16–27 the harlot is 'contrasted to the 'normal' woman, that is, the married woman, from whom she is separated spatially and symbolically…' (Bird 1999, p. 100). There she is indeed the figure who bears the burden of otherness, depicted in images of everyday life. The situation changes though in the prophetic discourse where the representation moves to an allegorical regime.

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