

SURROGATE DADS: INTERROGATING FATHERHOOD IN WILL SELF'S *THE BOOK OF DAVE*

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“A father is a man who fails every day.”¹

Abstract

Will Self's sixth novel, The Book of Dave (2006) develops the British writer's ongoing interest in fathers and children, and fatherhood as a key nexus where masculinity and patriarchy are reproduced. The novel channels and critiques various types of narrative, including the "dad lit" genre, best represented by the popular novels of Nick Hornby and Tony Parsons, the post-apocalyptic and dystopian idiolect science fiction tradition of Anthony Burgess' A Clockwork Orange and Russell Hoban's Riddley Walker, and social phenomena such as "new" fatherhood and the "fathers' rights" movement. With wit, insight, anger, and compassion, Self's novel engages and interrogates matters of paternity, patriarchy, power, the religions of the father, the malaise of millennial British working-class masculinities, and the question of what it might mean to be a post-patriarchal dad.

The topic of fatherhood is one of Will Self's major concerns, and spans the writer's *oeuvre* from his early satirical fictions to his latter, weightier works. Self, who has four children, has gravitated throughout his writing to narratives concerning fathers and children, and father-son relationships, in particular ones that involve surrogate, non-biological, foster- and father-figure mentors. As one of the central places where masculinity is reproduced, and the male body fashioned and coerced into citizenship, Self's fiction recognizes how fatherhood

¹ Michael Chabon, *Manhood for Amateurs*, New York: HarperCollins, 2000, 7.

is worthy of particular critical attention, and hovers over this node, returning to it again and again, with observations on how through the paternal junction boys are, or fail to be, molded into men. Fatherhood and its failings are thus central to Self's interrogation of contemporary British and Anglophone social mores, class, and gender relations. This essay will consider Self's *The Book of Dave: A Revelation of the Recent Past and the Distant Future* (2006)² as a privileged point within Self's corpus: one that gathers, channels, and critiques various literary genres and socio-cultural discourses on the topic of fatherhood. The novel, which tells the story of a Jewish British cab driver whose frustrated rants against his ex-wife become the template for a brutal and repressive religion of the future, represents a culmination of Self's meditations on fatherhood, its redefinitions, and the problematic relation between patriarchal authority and sacred text.

Self's debut novel *My Idea of Fun* (1993), a sordid and skewed *Bildungsroman* of mental illness and coming-of-age awkwardness, focuses on the odd relationship between protagonist and narrator Ian Wharton, whose biological father departed when he was a small child, and his mephistophelic guardian and mentor, Mr Broadhurst AKA The Fat Controller. This chameleonic businessman initiates Ian into the male world of business and finance, requiring of him a fealty paid in homicidal acts, including the request for an Abraham-style sacrifice of his child-to-be. In this novel, fatherhood is represented as a double trauma: first of absence, then of perverse and murderous patriarchal homosocial mentorship. Self's second novel, *Great Apes* (1997), tells of Simon Dykes, an artist who wakes up one day to find every human in the world except himself transformed into an ape. By envisioning humans as apes, who groom each other, and mate repeatedly, seemingly indiscriminately, Self views human interactions through a zoological lens, foregrounding and de-familiarizing behaviors, relating to gender difference, hierarchy and competitiveness, that polite and civilized human society carries out partly through forms of disavowal. Dykes, an estranged father yearning to reconnect with his brood, embodies a double alienation, cut off as he is from his own animality as well as from the animal bond with his pack. Typically, the critical eye

² Will Self, *The Book of Dave: A Revelation of the Recent Past and the Distant Future*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2006. All quotations from Will Self's *The Book of Dave* are from this edition.

of Self's fiction encompasses how the biological is subsumed as narrative within the social.

With *The Book of Dave*, Self intensifies his gaze toward the topic of fatherhood, explicitly positioning it at the center of the novel's concerns, along with such questions as what it means to be a father and how those meanings have changed over the last couple of generations and continue to change; what those changes entail for men, especially those slow or resistant to grasp them; how masculinity is affected and the male body redefined by epistemic and biopolitical shifts regarding fatherhood and the passing of patriarchal systems of social organization; how recalcitrant patriarchal positions and neopatriarchal backlash discourses prey on and trap vulnerable and/or subaltern men; how, within Self's literary universe which is particularly resistant to happy endings or redemption, the fallout of fathers who fail at being fathers create dangers for us all.

An inextricable combination of satire, social realist novel, and work of dystopian/apocalyptic fantasy, *The Book of Dave* ingests, reworks, and reconfigures various literary strands. One is "dad lit", a sub-genre of the "lad lit" tradition with which Self is often associated, and which explicitly tackles the topic of fatherhood in contemporary Britain. This sub-genre, as best represented by Tony Parsons' *Man and Boy* (1999) and Nick Hornby's *About a Boy* (1998), is generally perceived as characterized by portrayals of fatherhood depicted through the particular brand of light humor involved in watching a man "out of his element". A man fumbling as he tries to take care of kids has become a stock character in contemporary Western modernity: an archetype revelatory of epistemic shifts in paternal masculinities in the process of moving, often with considerable discomfort, towards the ability to nurture. Self's *The Book of Dave* gives this genre a once-over in the key of unpleasant, providing an acerbic commentary on its upwardly mobile paternal aspirations and its desire to depict fathers winning the battle of their re-adjustment to a changed gender landscape. Where other dads muddle through, coming up trumps in the struggle to become a good dad, Dave fails spectacularly, falling from one failure to the next, reaching out from his oblivion by "screaming at the future" (as his second partner Phyllis puts it) in an angry, avenging voice.³ of his total failure to perform fatherhood.³

³ *Ibid.*, 418.

A second genre *The Book of Dave* explicitly channels and reworks is science fiction of the future slang/idiolect variant, in the vein of Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), but most closely Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (1980). In many ways *The Book of Dave* acts as a tribute to Hoban's novel, digging up the topic of failed fatherhood which pervades it in the form of its cold war and anti-nuclear political critique: the politician fathers who have failed us by driving us into nuclear Armageddon. For *The Book of Dave*, in late 1980s-to-early 2000s Britain, the cold war is the one fought on the front of gender, no apocalypse in sight but the mental collapse of the socially defeated and alienated individual who has lost all dignity and purpose: the eponymous protagonist caught in the grip of his own nervous breakdown, between the mental health ward and the psychopharmaceuticals he has turned to. This delirious condition will spawn the writing of the book that gives the novel its name, an angry misogynistic rant against his ex-wife Michelle Brodie, that will become the foundational text of a brutal post-apocalyptic theocracy to come, five-hundred years after an apocalyptic flood has transformed the British Isles into the neomedieval wasteland of Ing. "Dävinanity", in which men and women conduct separate, segregated purdah lives according to the "Breakup" and children are subject to the "Changeover" at risk of death for disobedience.⁴

Finally, woven into and through its fantastical elements, *The Book of Dave* also acts as a repository for syntheses and commentaries on sociological perspectives on and narratives concerning "new" fatherhood, and critical understandings of how manifestations of fatherhood unfurl within a post-patriarchal landscape. One in which notions of paternity have undergone legal and socio-cultural mutation, from patriarchal models of fatherhood defined by legitimacy and authority, to current and feminist-inspired ones defined by economic support, domesticity and nurture (and their absence), and technology-produced models of biological and genetic paternity. *The Book of Dave's* world is one of custody courts and lawyers, restraining orders, visitation rights, and child support (or, in the book's future slang "chylde-sup-pawt", which has ironically taken on the new meaning of "bride price"). Within this domain which for Dave and his friends takes on shades of the Kafka-esque, the dubiously-cast voice of fathers' rights activists makes itself heard, giving form to a masculinity of defeat that

⁴ *Ibid.*, 58-59.

retreats into fatherhood as a compensatory fiction for socio-economic failure and social alienation.

Will Self's achievement, with *The Book of Dave*, is to have woven together these diverse strands into a compellingly organic narrative of fatherhood, failure, and failure to father: a novel that rises above Self's customary satiric sneer to rare, and for him uncharacteristic heights of empathy and catharsis, to form a sustained portrait of millennial masculine malaise; one which also acts as a cautionary tale regarding both unchecked individual male failure, the construction of gender politics as a form of separatist "battle of the sexes", and the socialized misogynistic seductions of patriarchal monotheisms alike.

Making nonsense out of fatherhood

Though it comfortably sits alongside such British literary fiction portrayals of uncertain and ambiguous fatherhood, as Hanif Kureishi's *Intimacy* (1998) and *Midnight All Day* (1999), and Ian McEwan's *The Child in Time* (1987) and *Solar* (2010), as I have indicated the genre that *The Book of Dave* most visibly channels is idiolect science fiction in the tradition of Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* and Russell Hoban's masterpiece *Riddley Walker*.

Both those books treat the topic of fatherhood with different degrees of explicit attention: in *A Clockwork Orange*, protagonist Alex's weak, docile, and conformist parents mirror and complement the state's abusive parenting and the protagonist's lawless youthful masculinity; in *Riddley Walker* it is the state itself that has reverted to a neomedieval form of homosocial mentorship, founded on violence and submission to a spurious patriarchal theology. In *The Book of Dave* children – and their posthuman counterparts, the "motos" – are relentlessly dragged between parents and slaughtered respectively, by violent state-sanctioned parental separation, upheld by a passive and complicit populace. All three novels share the use of a de-familiarizing idiolect, employed in different ways to undermine, question, and interrogate issues of authority and language, power and resistance. All three negotiate through mockery the triangulation of fatherhood, divinity, and absence: *A Clockwork Orange*'s "Bog or God", *Riddley Walker*'s Eusa, *The Book of Dave*'s Dave.

A Clockwork Orange ostensibly makes use of the Russian-inflected future slang ("Nadsat") adopted by protagonist Alex (a-lex: lawless) and his cohorts, to recreate the gulf of generational separation. From the perspective of parents and children, this novel is about how the

young and the old fail to understand each other, and talk across one another. Alex and his cohorts' adopted language emphasizes and iterates their self-imposed separation and difference from the generations that precede them: parents and other adults they perceive as sheepish worker drones ("rabbits") deserving of being despised. Where Alex linguistically performs a rejection and pooh-poohing of his society's conventional morality, the novel's authority figures – particularly the writer character F. Alexander, Alex's victim and brief fatherly stand-in – appear suspicious and motivated by political intrigue or ineffectual, as is the case of his parents. There is no Stalinesque dictator father figure or strong man in Burgess' partly Soviet-inspired dystopia. State power appears in the form of ministers, officers, and doctors with a soft paternalist touch and gilded upper-middle-class tongue, assisted by the fists and heavy boots of working-class foot soldiers. As for his family, both Alex's mother and father are characters he looks down upon for their weakness, sentimentality and petty bourgeois conformism: their relationship ends in the novel with Alex's father capitulating to his son's opinion that he is now boss of the household. Alex has finally asserted himself, partly through his linguistic innovations, challenging his parents' world through a new idiom and linguistic displacement he will then abandon when he joins that world.

The novel closes with Alex wishing to become a father. With characteristic awkwardness, Burgess describes this desire, which in another, lesser-known dystopian novel, *The Wanting Seed* (1962), he terms "paternity lust":⁵ the touchy subject of men wanting children. Touchy, perhaps partly because once a product of patriarchal culture (men wanting children, specifically male children, to carry on the family line), the topic of men wanting and seeking children is one our culture has some trouble dealing with. Contemporary fatherhood narratives are thus often narratives about the lack of adequate contemporary fatherhood narratives: where maternity is normalized, expected, and imposed on women, paternity desire is frequently conceptualized through confusion, even embarrassment. As a man, one does not go around telling people that one wants children: it might be awkward, a counterpart to the discourse of women saying they do not want kids. *A Clockwork Orange* ends with Alex being discovered by his new "droogies" with a photograph of a baby in his wallet, and being roundly mocked for carrying it: what he now desires is to have a baby, and

⁵ Anthony Burgess, *The Wanting Seed*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1963, 67.

the note the book ends on, after a meeting with his old friend Pete and his new wife, is his contemplation of the task of going out into the cold world to look for a mate.

Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* takes Burgess' future slang concept to fascinating new places. Set over two thousand years after a nuclear war, Riddley Walker's world has regressed to a new Middle Age, one in which technology is iron age-level, and a theocracy reigns, whose savior figure Eusa (St Eustace/USA/USSR) has seemingly replaced Jesus Christ. Language itself has "devolved" into a new Middle English rich in misspellings, puns, and verbal games ("trants mission", "party cools", "tack ticks", "Inner G", etc.). Life is harsh, and guided by the politically-imposed "Eusa Shows": politicians are also travelling puppeteers who re-enact Eusa's tribulations. As during the near thousand years of the Middle Ages when only religious drama was allowed, Eusa shows are permitted exclusively: theology imposed through state-sanctioned ideological entertainment. Language itself is strictly controlled by the fathers in power, and it will be Riddley's innovation to introduce a new and heretic narrative into his world: a new show, based around Punch, of the British seaside resort characters Punch and Judy.

Self directly praises *Riddley Walker* in his Introduction to the 2002 Bloomsbury edition. Dismissing what he calls the "cod-naturalism" of contemporary realistic literature as "one of the most prosaic delusions of this most neurotic age", Self reads "Riddleyspeak" as a process of "True fictional praxis", a linguistic and literary methodology that rather than offering comforting falsehoods in the form of appeasing and familiar bourgeois naturalist narratives, forces the reader to slow down and rediscover the world through the lens of the unfamiliar:

Riddley writes-cum-speaks to us from the cusp of literate culture, and, in the very phonetic crudeness (from our angle) of his orthography, lies the vigor of his coming-into-being. Riddley wrestles sense out of the inchoate written language, and in doing so demands that we do the same.⁶

The very textual difficulty of the novel, and its need for constant decoding – reading as an act of translation – presents an ethical chal-

⁶ Will Self, Introduction, in Russell Hoban, *Riddley Walker*, London: Bloomsbury, 2002, ix.

lence to the reader, one that “naturalistic” literature may comfortably side-step.

Where *A Clockwork Orange* employs cold war malaise to comment on generational miscommunication, *Riddley Walker* breaks down and re-builds language to consider the political implications of historical and social miscommunication: how we are cut off from each other, throughout history, by means of the very adaptability, liquidity, and slipperiness of language itself. In a scene of dismally black comedy, the prime minister (“pry mincer”) Abel Goodparley performs an act of theological exegesis ripe with error:

St is short for sent. Meaning this bloak Eustace he dint just tern up he were sent. *A.D.* 120 thats the year count they used to have it gone from Year 1 right the way to Bad Time. *A.D.* means All Done.⁷

Religion itself, that narrative which binds and gives official luster to political power, is in *Riddley Walker* an encyclopedia of errors, misunderstandings, and meanings entirely severed from their original intent.⁸

Riddley Walker is riddled with meditations on fathers and father figures: the narrative opens with the narrator protagonist coming of age, partly through the death of his father: his place is then taken by a variety of substitutes, some more symbolic than others. The figure of Punch, who would fry and eat his baby, lingers heavily over the novel’s panoply of devilish politician-types responsible for the nuclear holocaust that has sent history hurtling backwards: the old white men in suits wrestling with each other in Frankie Goes To Hollywood’s “Two Tribes” video (1983). *Riddley Walker*’s leaders, all men – this neomedievalist post-apocalyptic future has reverted to a homosocial world in which women are generally reduced to their wombs – betray each other with ease, pouncing on, selling out, and abandoning each other and their sons in the name of survival. An implicit yet harsh critique of patriarchal systems of homosocial power reproduction, which finds apotheosis in the slippery Punch character: a bad father if ever there was one.

⁷ Hoban, *Riddley Walker*, 124-25 (emphases in the original).

⁸ See also Walter M. Miller, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1960 for a comparable meditation on the intersecting roles of religion, error, misunderstanding, knowledge, and power in the context of neomedieval post-nuclear fantasy, and a possible model for *Riddley Walker*.

From both novels *The Book of Dave* appropriates the use of broken and reconstituted language as a tool for the critique of systems of authority, power reproduction, and linguistic complicity and resistance. Where *A Clockwork Orange* and *Riddley Walker* are both “voice” novels, offering proud and performative first person monologues from the perspective of the adolescent coming of age, *The Book of Dave* instead gives the reader a considerably more troubled, muddled, and alienated play of perspectives: a third-person, stream-of-consciousness-heavy perspective of the father, which is doubly broken up by being expressed in the form of alternating chapters set in the present and ones set in a post-apocalyptic/dystopian future. Dave’s inner and outer voice grumbles from the front of the cab like a backing track turned down low, to then reappear, mutated and chopped up almost beyond recognition, in the mouths of the inhabitants and cruel rulers of Ing. Deprived of a voice in the present, Dave’s subaltern mumble is transmogrified into the absurd dogma of the future.

Where Burgess and Hoban concern themselves primarily with how language reproduces and resists power structures, and how the individual stakes their place in relation to the punishing mechanisms of late modernity, with the literary self brought into being by way of the resistance of linguistic estrangement, Self’s *The Book of Dave* turns this process on its head, emptying out the alienated individual’s head of the frustrations it has been absorbing over a lifetime, and imagining a state re-organized through that nonsense logic, with help from the absolving hand of religion, and its alchemical transformations of the seemingly fantastic and the nonsensical into the official, the accepted, the *status quo*. The absurdities of Dave’s theocracy, with its priests with taxi cab mirrors attached to their heads (“Drivers”), its rituals of gender and parental separation, its rigorous bans on heresy (“flying”) not only underscore the extent to which contemporary secular Western life disavows and provides special dispensation to the religious and comment on how, in today’s Britain, epistemic social discourse itself, with its secular medical and legal apparatuses, medicalizations of negative affect, and essentializing gender narratives, assumes the unshakeable certainty of a faith for the era in which it operates, only seeming absurd in retrospect, or prospectively as speculative fiction. We are living in Dave’s world: we just do not know it yet.

Mistranslating fatherhood: beyond dad lit

As its Gulliveresque incursions into the alien land of Ing traffic in traditional Enlightenment rationalism, *The Book of Dave*'s novelistic strength also draws deeply from the well of Swiftian disgust, envisioning the predicaments of fatherhood through the category of the abject. Self has been here before, with *The Book of Dave* marking his return to gender science fiction territory, which he'd first broached in his Angela Carter style tale of sexual metamorphosis and Greek myth-type male pregnancy, *Cock and Bull* (1992). In the fable that constitutes the second half of that book, the eponymous Bull, a "large and heavysset young man" develops a vagina behind his left knee,⁹ and ends up impregnated by his doctor. The book's tone is one of whimsy, its meditations on the deconstructions of the gender binary characterized by comic aloofness and fantastical conceit. *The Book of Dave* offers a deeper, lower register, one more interested in the particular juxtapositions created by social realism, satire, and fantasy: while the present-tense sections have something of the Houellebecquian about them, the future dystopian passages in places recall the fantastical urban worlds of China Miéville.

The novel's eight present-tense chapters, set in non-chronological order between 1987 and 2003, draw from, conflate and critique at least one contemporary literary tradition: dad lit. Sociologists Abigail Gregory and Susan Milner see contemporary understandings of fatherhood as defined between two narratives: an "optimistic" model connected with "new fatherhood", and fathers who offer a positive presence in their children's lives, even in post-divorce scenarios; and a "pessimistic" model defined by paternal absence, alienation, and child support negligence.¹⁰ The dad lit genre offers a narrative that aspires to move from the latter towards the former, or rather, from a position in which fatherhood is disavowed or rejected, towards one in which it is desired and accepted. The genre thus represents a type of discourse of male nurture, of men yearning to be fathers, of the struggle to express the male desire for fatherhood and paternity, and to arrive at a form of adulthood equated with fatherhood. As in *A Clockwork Orange*, fatherhood represents an end to aimless adolescence and the

⁹ Will Self, *Cock and Bull*, New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1992, 149.

¹⁰ Abigail Gregory and Susan Milner, "What is 'New' about Fatherhood? The Social Construction of Fatherhood in France and the UK", *Men and Masculinities*, XIV/5 (December 2011), 589.

beginning of adulthood defined by “settling down”. Under usually fairly light-hearted guises, dad lit’s narratives embody portrayals of fatherhood depicted through the particular brand of humor involved in watching a man “out of his element”, though slowly coming into it.

Tony Parsons’ *Man and Boy* and Nick Hornby’s *About a Boy* are both positive narratives, close to the self-help genre, embodying lessons on how to integrate as a father, and how to grow up as a man by becoming a father. In *Man and Boy* the protagonist narrator Harry Silver is abandoned with a four-year-old child by his wife after he cheats on her, before losing his job. Though the birth of his child had, by his own account, made him into a man – “Today I became a man” – where the other “supposed landmarks of manhood – losing my virginity, getting my driving license, voting for the first time” – had merely left him “fundamentally unchanged, still a boy”,¹¹ it is only when his partner leaves (for Japan, fulfilling the novel’s notion of upwardly-mobile, global business-woman) that he is forced to learn to become a full-time dad. Up to this point he had played a marginal role in his child’s upbringing, leaving the heavy work of rearing to his partner, whereas now he is forced to take on the role of the primary care-giver. The bittersweet narrative that *Man and Boy* articulates is a now-familiar one also expressed by countless television adverts featuring a similar scenario: dad left at home with the kids learns to manage somehow, whether it be cleaning the house or cooking something that is not burnt or inedible for the kids to eat. At the end mum comes home and order is restored: and in Parsons’ novel Silver will find another woman to recreate the postmodern nuclear family with.

Hornby’s *About a Boy* is a little more cunning and interesting, and comes at the topic of fatherhood awry: protagonist Will Freeman lives up to his name by being rich enough to not need a job, and free of emotional entanglements, a “kidult” who spends his time watching television, listening to music, and going for long drives. He shuns fatherhood and looks down on his friends who settle down to family life, as fools who have capitulated to a thankless ideology of servitude and bourgeois dullness. After one breakup too many however, he hits upon the idea of pretending to be the father of a young boy, in order to hit on single mothers: an action that buys into, and calls attention to ideas about men with family ties being perceived as less threatening than a man alone, and the difference between single men and those

¹¹ Tony Parsons, *Man and Boy*, London: HarperCollins, 2000, 4.

more socially integrated due to fatherhood. At a party he thus becomes interesting to a woman he will end up dating only after getting her to believe that he is a single dad – the single dad being a particularly poignant character, as exemplified by Harry Dean Stanton’s portrayal of Jack Walsh, the single, unemployed father of Molly Ringwald’s character in the film *Pretty in Pink* (1986). Part of the book’s humor revolves around the short-sightedness and immaturity of this dating strategy.

Central to *About a Boy* is the relationship between Will and Marcus, a teenager who actually takes Will at face value concerning his desire to be a father, his own being a rather absent one since breaking up with his mother. Comedy is produced from Will being cajoled, even bullied by the awkward teenager into this role, his own personal development taking place between the teenager status he wishes to cling to, seemingly forever, and adulthood in the form of the surrogate fatherhood imposed on him, by a child no less. The novel ends with a meditation against reductionist biological notions of fatherhood, putting forward the idea that there is a lot more to fatherhood than mere biology: the novel’s happy ending involves an acceptance that as families become more susceptible to reconfiguration, and surrogate parenthood more common, friendship becomes a more valuable model through which to understand parenting rather than blood. New families forge, involving fathers and children not biologically related, and with these new links, new levels of psychological and emotional growth and development may be achieved for those involved, as families contort to fit the shape of a changing world in which divorce is a common occurrence.

The Book of Dave embodies a darker response to lad-lit’s optimism, focusing on two aspects of the contemporary fatherhood narrative identified by Gregory and Milner, which Parsons and Hornby’s books respectively tackle: “matricentrality” and “geneticization”,¹² two often interconnected nodes.

Matricentrality refers to how the making and looking after babies and children still continue to be largely considered women’s work, a position which risks the production of fatherhood as alienated from the process. “‘Whatchew knowabout kids? Wotchew know? You push them out, yeah?’ She slapped her bellies and they shivered. ‘You push

¹² See Gregory and Milner, “What is ‘New’ about Fatherhood?”, 589-90.

them out your cock?”¹³ yells Berenice to Dave, who is helping his friend Gary look for his children after their mother has left with them in tow. For sociologist Michael Kimmel, rekindling nurture is where paths for new masculinities lie. Men must become more caring. Referring to Robert Bly's *Iron John*, Kimmel writes that “We need more Ironing Johns, not more Iron Johns”.¹⁴ In its depictions of fatherly domesticity, Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic tale of father-son bonding *The Road* (2006) successfully takes on board this challenge. Unfortunately for Dave, who is not equipped with the right tools for this particular task, nurturing fatherhood offers no such redemption, and he takes out his frustrations upon the child by beating him, ultimately replicating the retrograde relationship of fierce silence and misunderstanding he had had with his own father.

Geneticization denotes how new technologies have introduced notable qualitative differences in how paternity is understood as located between the intersections of biology, kinship, and economics. As sociologist Nancy E. Dowd explains: “For much of the history of common law, paternity was not a certainty. Based on modern technology, it now is.”¹⁵ Michelle's pregnancy had been the reason they had married, with Dave, “the sap”¹⁶ taking on the cuckoo-like responsibility foisted upon him. Michelle had had an affair with a married man, and later on will return to that man, restoring the child to his biological father. The discovery that Dave's son is not biologically his own occurs gradually, like the unfolding of a trauma, providing a biological narrative which Dave half-consciously grasps at in order to explain to himself his fatherly failings:

Fucker Finch had said, ‘Iss uncanny, yeah, but you’ll recognize ’em from the off. Thass what iss bin like wiv awluv mine. I fought ‘Oh, so iss *you* issit’ But Dave didn’t recognize this miraculous, shiny fruit at all; it had fallen from a strange tree.¹⁷

¹³ Self, *The Book of Dave*, 221.

¹⁴ Michael S. Kimmel and Michael Kaufman, “Weekend Warriors: The New Men's Movement”, in *The Politics of Manhood: Profeminist Men Respond to the Mythopoetic Men's Movement (And the Mythopoetic Leaders Answer)*, ed. Michael S. Kimmel, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995, 19.

¹⁵ Nancy E. Dowd, *Redefining Fatherhood*, New York: New York University Press, 2000, 130.

¹⁶ Self, *The Book of Dave*, 332.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 207.

The slow discovery of this lack of a biological tie to his son complements and overshadows Dave's inability to maintain a relationship with the child: the separation is then rendered complete and given official sanction by the injunction barring him from visiting rights.

Self here tackles an ages-old topic, one given great importance within the Judeo-Christian tradition: paternity anxiety. The central preoccupation that according to Friedrich Engels, in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), underwrites the newly agricultural society's installation of the patriarchal model. Self tackles the subject by way of the new spin and new-fangled knowledge of genetic paternity testing. Yet geneticization here takes on the guise of a reduction of fatherhood to paternity, and thus insemination, providing a biological narrative that problematically complements the centrality of child-rearing: if fatherhood is reduced to insemination, what role do fathers have in bringing up children? Where Parsons and Hornby seek to fill that gap and provide optimistic readings of surrogate (social) fatherhood and paternal nurture, *The Book of Dave's* focus on biology opens up and underscores those gaps: the weaknesses, vulnerabilities and blind spots that emerge between these various and intersecting economic, legal, social, and biological conceptions of fatherhood, as we move from frameworks of legitimacy and marriage to ones of biology, genetic determination, and economic responsibility (child support).

Within the context of late twentieth-century and contemporary speculative fiction that rejects and looks beyond patriarchal paradigms, and critical theory that deconstructs and expresses wariness about biologicality as generative of new forms of patriarchal power reproduction, *The Book of Dave* is in good company. In *State of Exception* (2003) Giorgio Agamben traces the difference between *auctoritas* and *potestas* in Roman law, the former based on biological fatherhood which is naturalized as a form of legal power.¹⁸ Toni Tripp-Reimer and Susan E. Wilson discuss the ancient Roman rite of *amphidromies*, in which fatherhood was established thus: a man "picked up the infant in his arms and, before witnesses, walked around the house

¹⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. And let us once again reflect on the etymological relationships between author and authority, between *actor* (literally he who grows, raises, increases) and *auctoritas*.

three times”.¹⁹ Contemporary British fantastic and speculative literature offers various enactments of performative rejections of patriarchal “nature” or “God”-given rights of fathers to assert their authority over women and children through appeals to biology or blood. Iain Banks’ debut *The Wasp Factory* (1984) depicts a family constituted by such centrifugal movements out and away from de-legitimized paternal authority: Angus Cauldhame is a man who has hidden his teenage son Frank from the authorities for his entire existence, constructing out of his life an elaborate mythology of castration and gender confusion. The novel ends with Frank assembling his identity as an adult human being through the discovery of the truth about himself and the rejection of his father’s usurped authority over him. China Miéville’s debut novel *King Rat* (1998) centers around the struggle between the protagonist, Saul Garamond, and his biological father, the eponymous King Rat, who has murdered Saul’s surrogate father who raised him. “We’re blood”,²⁰ King Rat keeps telling Saul after his crime has been discovered, but Saul does not want to know, asserting himself against and beyond this tenuous claim based on biology alone.

The final lesson of *The Book of Dave*’s future parts reprises Hornby’s insistence on the value of social/surrogate fatherhood over reductionist notions of biological paternity, deconstructing the father from the one to the many: “The only recrimination that Carl allowed himself was to mourn this foolish quest for a dad he’d never known – when right at hand there had always been a bloke who was prepared to be a true father to him U, Uve awlways bin a dad 2 me, Tonë, nah cummon me öl mayt.”²¹

The Book of Dave also dedicates ample space to chronicling the British Fathers’ Rights movement, which has been given mainstream publicity in the UK by Bob Geldof in recent decades, through Dave’s involvement with “Fathers First”, after a restraining order denies him access to his son. The movement is portrayed by Self with a mixture of both scorn and sympathy, as a motley assortment of increasingly desperate men, easy targets for an unscrupulous shark such as the “Skip Tracer” who takes advantage of their tendencies to see them-

¹⁹ Toni Tripp-Reimer and Susan E. Wilson, “Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Fatherhood”, in *Fatherhood and Families in Cultural Context*, eds Frederick W. Bozett and Shirley M.H. Hanson, New York: Springer, 1991, 7.

²⁰ China Miéville, *King Rat*, New York: Tor, 1998, 218.

²¹ Self, *The Book of Dave*, 451.

selves as victims. These are men who, feeling disenfranchised from traditional masculine identities related to work and feeling betrayed by the state, or the “bureaugamy” as sociologist and male rights activist Lionel Tiger terms the process of the state standing in for absentee fathers,²² turn instead to fetishize their children as a form of compensatory fiction. To these men, who fail to construct a meaningful social identity outside of an idealized version of the nuclear family, the apparent loss of their children comes to assist their self-definition as victims: “If I don’ ’ave those kids in me life I’ve got nuffing. Nuffing.”, says Finch,²³ whilst Dave, who had “made no investment in life beyond his wife and son”,²⁴ at one point worries “*I’m gonna be one of those blokes what doesn’t have kids – not ever.*”²⁵

With their propensity for stunts in super-hero costumes,²⁶ one of which will claim the life of a friend of Dave’s (Gary “Fucker” Finch), the Fathers First members appear as a British and sadly debased counterpart to the neo-fascistic male-bonding militias envisioned in Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*. A militia which also claims a victim: the breasted, testicle-less Robert Paulson, played in David Fincher’s 1999 film by Meat Loaf. Though the fathers’ rights scene, is according to many analysts, one of the last bastions of patriarchal male entitlement, invested in the production of a politics of resentment out of frustrated male privilege, Self treats these men with a sympathetic eye: he intuits the ridicule in their actions, yet also finds place for the melancholic, tragic component of their plight at the bottom of self-loathing masculinity; licking its wounds and helpless to self-rehabilitate. While Self may see their solutions, if not their entire worldview as misguided, he never fails to understand them as human beings helplessly caught up in the seismic socio-cultural shocks of epistemic shifts in gender relations and their correlating alterations within the social machinery.

²² Lionel Tiger, *The Decline of Males*, New York: Golden Books, 1999, 159.

²³ Self, *The Book of Dave*, 220.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 340.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 463 (emphasis in the original).

²⁶ This Fintan Walsh reads as a performative self-conscious attempt to recoup and restore a sense of masculinity that has been lost or damaged (see Fintan Walsh, *Male Trouble: Masculinity and the Performance of Crisis*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 151-65).

While it may be the case, as Kimmel argues, that most custody cases are settled to the satisfaction of both parents,²⁷ *The Book of Dave* maintains ears for the exception, constructing a nightmare machinery out of custody injustice. In a particularly grim court scene, Carl Dévúsh, the young protagonist of the Ing sections, and his teacher and surrogate father Antonë Böme are tried “for the most grievous flying”.²⁸ Within a Kafka-like view of justice as cathartic spectacle, of cruelty in the service of the upkeep of the state as dehumanizing mechanism, the neomedievalist courtroom and “Chief Examiner” are compared by Carl’s teacher to a machine: “The law is the very engine of Dave’s cab. Here the sacred and the secular aspects of the Knowledge gear into one another, each functionary is a part of that engine, his robe patterned so as to resemble cog, wheel and alternator”, explains the teacher to the student.²⁹ In this scenario, in a stroke of unfair dogma in the place of justice, Carl is denied knowledge of his father by a bureaugamous collusion against the paternal link thus defined by discontinuity:

No lad may be denied knowledge of his dad, [the Chief Examiner] barked, and nor shall you be, Carl Dévúsh. However, your crimes are of such an extent and so singular, your flying so high and fast, that no mitigation can be allowed for them. Petition denied!³⁰

The consequence of the state subsuming the fatherly role involves the necessary deletion of the father.

Gender dystopia of the present

From the perspective of genre, *The Book of Dave* also stands inside the neomedievalist gender dystopia subgenre, a field best exemplified by Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) and Doris Lessing’s *The Marriages between Zones Three, Four and Five* (1980). The dystopian format has in recent decades been harnessed to articulate commentaries on gender politics, ideologies, and discourses, and has to winning effect also been envisaged through a neomedievalist aesthetic framework. In *The Handmaid’s Tale* a theocratic state gov-

²⁷ Michael S. Kimmel and Michael Kaufman, *The Guy’s Guide to Feminism*, Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2011, 98.

²⁸ Self, *The Book of Dave*, 425.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 426.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 429.

erns and regulates procreation in strict pro-natalist fashion;³¹ Lessing's novel assembles a neomedievalist fantasy world in which unseen gods insist on politically-motivated arranged marriage, a solution upsetting to both male and female partners involved.

Post-apocalypses, by contrast, tend to be male-dominated affairs – *Riddley Walker* gets women out of the way rather quickly: “A womans voyce said, ‘You know there women here and carrying.’ Which there come some shuffling and that musve been them carrying women carrying their selfs out.”³² *The Book of Dave* takes on both traditions, incorporating both the post-apocalyptic homosocial model and the gender dystopia. Set in the Ing Archipelago five-hundred years from now after a flood that has seemingly destroyed British civilization, *The Book of Dave*'s world is a largely bucolic one, in which the country has replaced the city, and Nú Lundun is being re-built somewhere further up the Thames. As in *Riddley Walker* and other speculative fiction fantasies built around civilization-annihilating disasters,³³ a desire for nature permeates *The Book of Dave*, which also follows Burgess' *The Wanting Seed* (1962) and its *Brave New World* dialectic between dystopian society obsessed with rigorously controlling reproduction, and countryside world of nature in which reproduction occurs comparatively unchecked. In *The Wanting Seed*, Huxley's “natives” and “savages” have become a comic neomedieval world of bawdy and unleashed sexuality. *The Book of Dave*'s Middle Age, however, is closer to Atwood's, in its rigid gender separatism and theologically-ordained statist reproductive politics. What *The Book of Dave*'s structure of alternating chapters permits, however, is an ongoing conversation between contemporary present and neomedieval fantasy, weaving into the text a commentary on the dialectic between dystopian fantasy and its contemporaneous “real life” counterpart. In *The Book of Dave* it is the present with all of its biopolitical trapdoors that is represented as a gender dystopia, to which the repressive dystopian patriarchal theocracy of the future offers an even less appealing corollary.

³¹ Atwood has been prescient to the degree that the current war on women and arguments over women's bodies in the United States now resembles the novel's farcical sex act with the handmaid in question, reduced to a vessel of reproducibility.

³² Hoban, *Riddley Walker*, 215.

³³ See John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* (London: Hutchinson, 1951); and Brian Aldiss' *Greybeard* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), which depicts a world in which no more children are being born, almost thirty years before P.D. James' *The Children of Men* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992).

Describing the mystery of why courtly love poetry came about precisely when it did, Jacques Lacan refers to the Middle Ages as “a time when the historical circumstances are such that nothing seems to point to what might be called the advancement of women or indeed their emancipation”, and in which the woman, “is, strictly speaking ... nothing more than a correlative of the functions of social exchange”.³⁴ Gender dystopias such as Atwood's frequently adopt the Middle Ages as negative term of comparison to a liberal, democratic present, partly constructed by means of feminist and anti-patriarchal gender politics championing the emancipation of women, children, and LGBT citizens: they underscore the fragility of these gains and the necessity of defending them against conservative and neopatriarchal forces on the rise, especially in the contemporary US. *The Handmaid's Tale* in particular seeks to warn of what might occur should those forces once again become the *status quo*.

The Book of Dave's position is possibly more troubling, and as is often the case with texts that deal with the politics of masculinities, less ideologically clear-cut: not only is it Dave's misery and loss in the present that appears to the reader as dystopian, but it is this very misery that provokes the rant that will act as founding theological text to the future theocracy of Dävinanity. Where dystopias generally leave to the reader the act of applying their teachings to the present or not (between the two positions “we must make sure this doesn't happen here” vs. “thankfully, *our* world isn't like that”), by means of an ongoing dialogue within the text between realist present and fantastic dystopia, Self here backs away from any chance of positing the Middle Ages as unilaterally negative and terrifying antithesis to a present that might remain unchallenged. Showing us instead how the dystopian genre should work, to critique the present rather than let us feel good about it, *The Book of Dave* depicts its protagonist slipping through the cracks of our world, not those of some dystopian otherworld. Self's novel thus works meta-dystopically to the degree that it explicitly articulates the genre's obligations to shine its critical lights not only on social injustices and failings of the past or global Other, but also of the contemporary Western present. In this case, attention is drawn to the plight of alienated, self-destructive men caught between the shifting

³⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*, trans. Dennis Porter, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, New York: Norton, 1992, 147.

gears of the transition from patriarchy to post-patriarchal socio-cultural arrangements, which claim victims through mental illness, suicide, early death.

Authority and text: written on the body, broken on the wheel

The Book of Dave's narrative catalyst depicts how under the strain of a breakup with his wife Michelle, who takes custody of their son Carl, Dave succumbs to depression, obesity, and psychopharmaceuticals, and in a psychotic delirium pens a lengthy rant which he then has printed on steel sheets, and which he buries in the garden of the house where Michelle is now living with former flame Cal Devenish, the man who turns out to be Carl's biological father.

Dave's document is many things: primarily, it is an attempt to communicate more honestly with his son than he has ever been able to do in life, a homosocial and fatherly attempt to pass "the Knowledge" (also the name for the mental map of London every cab driver must know) on to his son, a stab at carving out a father-to-son chat in print which circumstance has prevented him doing in the flesh. Like his stream of consciousness mumble, Dave's words come out garbled, producing what over time will become a nonsense idiolect ("Mokni"):

Epistles, the intent of which was to SET THE RECORD STRAIGHT and tell Carl MAN-TO-MAN what truly happened between his mother THE BITCH and his POOR OLD DAD ... nothing less than A COMPLETE RE-EVALUATION OF THE WAY MEN AND WOMEN should conduct their lives together. Which, as the Driver saw it, was mostly apart, the mummies crossing over into purdah on the far bank.³⁵

Five-hundred years and one apocalyptic flood later, a brutal and primitive neomedievalist theocratic society has emerged, with Dave's book acting as its foundational theological text: in Dävinanity "daddies" and "mummies" live separate lives – children must change hands, at penalty of death for transgressors, once a week between fathers and mothers:

This is a most revolting congress, and it must cease at once! Dave ordained the Breakup, and the Breakup must be entire! Only at Change-over can there be any communication between noble Dave and perfid-

³⁵ Self, *The Book of Dave*, 349-50 (emphases in capitals in the original).

ious Chelle! O Hamstermen! Speak only of childsupport to your mummies, as it is ordained in the Book!³⁶

The novel's odd and even chapters flit back and forth between Dave's unraveling present and England's feverish future, in which the seemingly endless reconstruction of "Nú Lundun" proceeds like a new Babel: a proliferating, pulsating urban sprawl in which heretics are "broken on the wheel". In "Ing" (the name for what is left of England), the *minutiae* of Dave's monadic world cooped up inside his London black cab, become the verbal reference points for the future England's washed-up society, in which our floating refuse, "dave-works", are recycled into meaning: the "screen" is the sky, "curry" is food, "kipper" is winter, the creation the "MadeinChina" and the common form of greeting the formula "ware2 guv?", the taxi driver's first question to his fare. A glossary helps keep track.³⁷

The Book of Dave's satirical charge concerns the origins of religion, and the regulating religious text as one born out of enmity, political intrigue, revenge and misogyny. As one of Dave's doctors describes the book:

"Oh, you know, the usual stuff, how the community should live righteously, the rules for marriage, birth, death, procreation. It's a bundle of proscriptions and injunctions that seem to be derived from the working life of London cabbies, a cock-eyed grasp on a mélange of fundamentalism, but mostly from Rudman's own vindictive misogyny."³⁸

From this perspective, *The Book of Dave* aligns itself with two arguments, one theoretical, the other literary, concerning the patriarchal and misogynistic origins of the religions of the book, both of which theorize some of their dogmas as the product of gender wars, specifically of masculine attempts to confine, regulate, and dominate women: Julia Kristeva's notions of "mother-phobia" and "semiotics of biblical abomination",³⁹ by which procreation, which supposedly renders women abject and impure, thus necessitates their regulation and

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 189.

³⁷ See *ibid.*, 479-96.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 281.

³⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, 65 (mother-phobia), 99 (semiotics of biblical abomination).

separation through the restrictions of the biblical text; and Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988), which sees the prophet Mohammed (Mahound) locked in a furious struggle with three goddesses he seeks to suppress and exclude from his monotheism. Dävinanity's purdah is similarly the product of Dave's vindictive frustration towards his ex-wife Michelle, whom he comes to feel unmanned by: Dave's "turn to religion", is here his own Hubbard-like creation of a new faith.

Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) argues that the monotheistic biblical text articulates and embodies a discourse and ideology of misogynistic patriarchal oppression, through which women are constituted as impure (because of their procreative purposes) and thus configured as needy of social ablutions and legal strictures. Women's reproductive capabilities are feared by men as a form of power, and women are thus regulated and confined: through categories of "filth", "defilement", "abomination", and "im/purity": the Jewish biblical text sanctions and endorses this oppression under the guise of the sacred, limiting and containing women through a matrilineal legitimacy anxiety officially sanctioned and codified as sacred law. Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988) makes a comparable argument regarding the Quran and misogyny, and Mahound's excision of the goddesses al-Lat, al-Uzza, and Manat from his revelations. His political and sexual struggle with Hind, the Machiavellian wife of the ruler of Jahilia, and renunciation of the "Satanic verses" as inspired by the devil and not God are then codified into the new faith. The initial command to worship the three female goddesses – referred to as "Exalted Birds"⁴⁰ – is reversed, and Islam, through the work of Mahound becomes a monotheistic patriarchal religion.

Self's *The Book of Dave* joins this debate by satirizing the birth of a monotheistic faith from the mind of a London cabbie, a premise which almost necessitates that the ensuing religion be an oppressive one, full of malice transformed into the mindless repetition of gestures entirely divorced from their original meanings and intents. Comic potential of a Monty Python stamp is thus wrought through the transformation of Dave's written rant, the only text that has survived the flood in full because it is printed on metal plates, into a religion in

⁴⁰ Salman Rushdie, "The Disappeared: How the fatwa changed a writer's life", *The New Yorker*, Monday 17 September 2012, 54: http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2012/09/17/120917fa_fact_rushdie.

which men and women are forced to repeat rituals of whose origin and purpose they have not the faintest knowledge. Religion and religious ritual themselves thus appear as not just empty but absurd signifiers, designed to merely regulate and discipline an oppressed populace which complicitly acquiesces, “passively conforming to an invented belief system”, as the narrator of Self’s 2008 postcolonial novel *The Butt* notes of its hapless protagonist.⁴¹ Heresy is met with torture, ostracism, and death, and the future portion of the novel in part revolves around the attempts of a heretic, Symun Dévúsh, to counter the prevailing theology by maintaining the existence of a second book of Dave which renounces the doctrines of the first – which Dave wrote once he had regained his mind, and which Cal and Carl Devenish had buried in a film canister alongside the first.

Central to *The Book of Dave* is a version of a debased and brutalized working-class male body. Comparable to the father in D.H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers* (1913), Dave is degraded by his job, physically damaged by being in the cab so long; but unlike Walter Morel, who is an outsider inside his own family and home, scorned and hated by his wife and children, who aspire higher and feel dragged down by his working-class and uncouth ways, Self’s Dave is an outsider outside his own family. In the novel’s geneticizing twist on Victorian family drama, Dave, as un-biological father, was never inside this family to begin with.

It is thus with sympathy that the Dave character is primarily depicted. The “Dave” figure first appears in Self’s short story “Dave Too” in *Tough, Tough Toys for Tough, Tough Boys* (1998). An everyman to be found wherever you look, an interchangeable “bloke”:

Dave is waiting for me in the café There are two other Daves who are usually in the café at this time of the morning. Dave and I call them respectively, Fat Dave and Old Dave My Dave is, I like to think, a kind of Ur-Dave, a primary Dave. His Daveness, his Davidity, his Davitude, is unquestionable. In a world with so many Daves, Daves running, Daves walking, and Daves standing, desolate, crumpled betting slips at their feet, it’s infinitely reassuring to feel that within my grasp is some part of the essential Dave.⁴²

⁴¹ Will Self, *The Butt*, London: Bloomsbury, 2009, 351.

⁴² Will Self, *Tough, Tough Toys for Tough, Tough Boys*, New York: Grove Press, 1998, 71-75.

Dave is an unavoidable, if unappealing presence: a ubiquitous interchangeable masculine one; a generic masculinity writ large. In *The Book of Dave* he is fully fleshed-out as individual, a victim. A victim of circumstance, of class, of culture and his adamant lack of it; a victim of gender, and the vilifying narratives of masculinity he has internalized; and a victim of sex, a loser, like Neil Strauss' "AFC – Average Frustrated Chump"⁴³ at the mercy of his unrequited libido – vulnerable to offers of affection such as the one seemingly put forth by the scheming Michelle, who is also stumbling through life without a rudder. Though also a victim of her less than auspicious circumstances, being more desperate and calculating than Dave, and determined to rise socially, Michelle's actions will turn out to have sadistic rather than masochistic results, along her journey from trodden-upon-by-life and miserable failure – modeling "had used her up"⁴⁴ – to a more successful position, living in Hampstead with her own boutique. Self depicts her ascent as a form of successful Darwinian self-preservation, via the cynical triumph of feminine masquerade. A contemporary Becky Sharp, "Her childhood had, she felt, been banal, her youth exposed and obvious – now her womanhood would be mysterious".⁴⁵ Michelle and Dave's time together is predictably disastrous, a physical and psychological mismatch: "it wasn't that she was too big for him – he was too small for her. Michelle hadn't meant to; it was a skill she'd sucked up with her mother's formula – belittling a man until he was the size of a toy soldier, then putting him away in a box."⁴⁶

As for Dave, Self injects copious humanity into the figure of the cab driver: that old chestnut of British yobbishness, and clichéd caricature of reactionary, backwards-looking white working-class masculinity, increasingly unsure of itself and its worth in a changing world. Self's satirical sympathy with the object of his scrutiny – bedraggled, self-loathing contemporary masculinity – reveals a Houellebecqian influence. Dave's self-effacement, expressed at the level of bodily disgust ("then down into the temple of hiss and piss, where he could wring the neck of his suicidal dick"⁴⁷) and his unhappiness with his

⁴³ Neil Strauss, *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pickup Artists*, New York: HarperCollins, 2005, 10.

⁴⁴ Self, *The Book of Dave*, 100.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 332.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 330.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 153.

overweight body and balding head recall the self-effacing corporeality of Bruno in *The Elementary Particles*, reduced to abject penis: "What was between his legs was a piece of oozing, putrefying meat devoured by worms."⁴⁸ Dave's descent, following the disappointments of love and family entanglement, into the contemporary *mise en abyme* of the mental ward also recalls Bruno. Self is vicious in his representations of Dave's low self-image: "Now what was he? A crushed carrot lying in the gutter, a headless doll, a pissed-upon shadow of a man."⁴⁹ As with Houellebecq, Dave is the kind of contemporary male who measures his self-worth in terms of sexual conquest, and similarly vulnerable to self-destruction when life has become devoid of sexual potential. In "The Gospel According to Dave", M. John Harrison describes the protagonist as defined by a kind of gendered inertia, a masculinity defined by a dangerous lack of self-understanding:

Despite his evident articulacy, Dave can't say what's happened to him – he can't lay blame. It wasn't his upbringing, it wasn't the job, it wasn't Michelle, or even, really, the loss of his relationship with his son; it wasn't the depression, or the drugs, or the psychosis, or his book, or even his eventual recovery. Those things, and the indescribably complex feedback relationships between them, serve only to suggest something else, something deeper, some malaise that can only be articulated by a description of its symptoms. As with Dave, so with his times.⁵⁰

In contrast to Dave's unraveling and too loose family entanglement, his occupation as cab driver is too tight, and experienced by him as a form of technological imprisonment. Re-reading the concept of masochism through Michel Foucault's analysis of social disciplinary regimes, John K. Noyes asks in what new ways the story of masochism may be told, finding that it is through an understanding of submission to the machine, that one may still find the masochistic narrative a useful one.⁵¹ Dave's symbiotic relationship with his cab, the

⁴⁸ Michel Houellebecq, *The Elementary Particles*, trans. Frank Wynne, New York: Vintage International, 2001, 128.

⁴⁹ Self, *The Book of Dave*, 325.

⁵⁰ M. John Harrison, "The Gospel According to Dave", *The Guardian*, Saturday 27 May 2006, not paginated: <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/may/27/fiction.hayfestival2006>.

⁵¹ See John K. Noyes, *The Mastery of Submission: Inventions of Masochism*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1997, 11-12.

Fairway “he’d spent half his adult life in ... [which is] *not juss a motor – it’s almost fucking human*”,⁵² gradually becomes a “rubbish bin of old sandwich wrappers”⁵³ and his own bodily wastes. As Dave begins to resent the machine with which his body comes to be almost welded (“*Comfortable for who? You try getting your porky trotters down under this dash, it’s like putting your legs in a coffin, mate, a vibrating bloody coffin.*”⁵⁴), his masculine pride, once embodied by this occupation he had so admired in his cab driver grandfather Benny Cohen, eventually morphs into a form of unmaning, and the instrument of his work becomes a monadic, monastic cell through which he experiences the world at a remove.

Drawing from Dave’s rage, in Ing’s Mokni the sky becomes the “screen” and “drivers” (priests) may only look at their interlocutors by means of a mirror, a prosthetic eye attached to their body. Firmly rooted to one spot, Dave experiences London as a blurred sequence of dizzying images which revolves around him, in a scenario that reconfigures Leopold Bloom’s heavy-hearted *flâneurie* through the city of Dublin in *Ulysses* into the contemporary isolationist experience of a human who experiences life largely through a screen of some kind and as one or another form of simulacrum. Like Bloom’s, his speech is an unending muttered monologue,⁵⁵ a broken text that bounces back, to him and us, its fragmented sequence of hiccupped rants and smashed-up speechery mirroring the monadic isolation of the man and the enclosed centrality of his body, broken on the (steering) wheel, and encased within a metallic shell around which chaotic worlds churn. Dave’s final abandonment of the cab is soon followed by his death.

His apotheosis as the divinity in a new neopatriarchal cosmogony will then follow. But dogmas, old or new, do not provide the right answer to gender troubles, argues Self: an ethical politics of gender cannot be based on archaic and decontextualized texts. Robert Bly’s much-critiqued neomedievalist call for masculine separatist identity reboot, *Iron John* (1990), appeals to and fetishizes medieval legends re-articulated by the Brothers Grimm, as narratives that may reconnect

⁵² Self, *The Book of Dave*, 52 (emphasis in the original).

⁵³ Harrison, “The Gospel According to Dave”, not paginated.

⁵⁴ Self, *The Book of Dave*, 37 (emphasis in the original).

⁵⁵ This new archetype, a contemporary version of Plato’s cave-dweller, is present also in Houellebecq’s *The Possibility of an Island* ([2005], trans. Gavin Bowd, New York: Vintage, 2007) in which cloned posthumans live in monadic compounds and communicate with each other exclusively via the computer.

alienated modern man to his “deep male” self.⁵⁶ Its talk of kings and princes partakes of an aristocratic neomedievalism that ignores and disavows class difference, and the specific challenges faced by working class masculinities. For Bly in this respect, all men are the same. The future sections of *The Book of Dave*, by contrast, violently underscore class-based hierarchy and inequality, imagining a new Middle Ages which are both harshly rural and brutally urban, with a frenzied rabble overseen by a cruel and arbitrary aristocratic judicial system and envisioned through a form of Rabelaisian carnivalesque.

Instead of a solemn, solid, metallic, statuesque model of medieval masculinity, or noble bearded wild man to appeal to in times of epistemic male uncertainty, as in Bly's much criticized formulations, Self's neomedieval man is bodily buffeted hither and thither, and subject to the emasculating body modification of torture. This is the case of “heretic” Symun Dévúsh, who travels from the Isle of Ham (Hamstead, where the protagonists live) to New London to preach of Dave's second, recanting book, and finds himself locked up in the tower, broken on the wheel, deprived of his tongue, and recast as the local bogeyman when he is deported back home to Ham: “So it was that the journey to London began, in haste and in sadness: the Beastlyman left lying at Nimar, gulls lunging down to peck at him, his black mouth open, his red nubbin of a tongue struggling to form the most significant words.”⁵⁷ The bearded wild man is not a lord or king, but an outcast of the community, an Agambenian “homo sacer” who has been silenced and has had his tongue cut out.

Looking beyond patriarchal paradigms

Though *The Book of Dave* appears partly under the guise of a “timeless” story of fathers and sons who fail to connect, cyclically and repeatedly, its preoccupations are also palpably political, its target the representation of a specific chronological moment in which old models of fatherhood and masculinity are being toppled and deconstructed, and new ones have yet to be solidified or even formulated. It is important, Self appears to argue, that within this epistemic fracture the seductive, decontextualized, and often arbitrary narratives of “tradition” be firmly resisted, especially neopatriarchal religious ones. For all his failings, Dave is arguably above all a man without a narrative,

⁵⁶ Robert Bly, *Iron John: A Book About Men*, New York: Vintage, 1990, 6.

⁵⁷ Self, *The Book of Dave*, 238.

without a story to which to adhere to, and through which to make sense of the dizzying confusion of his lifeworld. The book he pens is his gospel, and the one to which he belongs an apocryphal addition to the New Testament which foregrounds an often overlooked biblical character: that uncomplaining non-biological father Joseph.

The family trio of “noble Dave and perfidious Chelle”⁵⁸ is completed by one of Self’s growing collection of posthuman characters, in the wake of the distorted and hideous zoo-bound “humans” of *Great Apes*: the “motos”. These childish posthuman pig-like creatures, who recall the “pigoons”, genetic pig/human splices of Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003), reprise the “emotos” of Self’s own short story “Caring, Sharing” (1998) in which prissy Manhattanites are taken care of by babyish giant nannies, “inner children” who have been enslaved and put to work in the service of the rich and powerful. In *The Book of Dave* the repressed emoto returns as moto, a creature somewhere between animal and child, defined in the glossary as a “large, viviparous, omnivorous, mammalian creature native to Ham and found nowhere else. Used by the Hamsters as a source of meat and oil alone. The moto has the functional intelligence of a two-and-a-half-year-old human child.”⁵⁹ Within the linguistic economy of the novel, the moto offers a further level of communicative breakdown, its lisp making its words even harder to parse than other Mokni speakers, though its supplicant intent is often clear, as is its inability to comprehend the gender struggle of the parents:

Perhaps Self’s most intriguing invention is the moto, a curious creature that is combination enormous baby and pig. The Hamsters (denizens of the island of Ham outside New London) cherish these gentle beasts, constantly cuddling them and stroking their soft neck waddles despite their rather repulsive appearance. But, as beloved as they are, the motos are ritually slaughtered for their blood – the invaluable ‘moto oil’ that keeps Ham running. As their necks are slit and the blood pours out of them, these pitiful beasts call out in childlike voices “Itun hwurting, Cwarl. Mwy nek hwurtin.” Throughout the book the motos are subject to never-ending abuses. In a way, they have become the

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 491.

misshapen remnants of the childlike trust and innocence that Dave tries to connect with when he wrote his first, ill-conceived book.⁶⁰

The motos are arguably also children of a “men are pigs” philosophy and its internalization among men and women (“You’re a pig – not a man”⁶¹). At the novel’s end Carl, Antön and the moto Tyga will take a stand against the moto slaughter that has been ordained by representatives from New London. Both this scene, and Dave’s second book, his “EPISTLE TO THE SON” in which he advocates to “RESPECT MEN AND WOMEN BOTH, to strive always for RESPONSIBILITY, to understand that WE MAKE OUR OWN CHOICES IN LIFE, and that BLAMING OTHERS is not an option. Children NEED BOTH THEIR MOTHERS AND THEIR FATHERS, yet if their union does not last there should be no CONFLICT, no tug of HATE ... there can be no EXCUSE for not TRYING TO DO YOUR BEST and live right”⁶² articulates a first step towards a reconciliatory approach between the sexes which the novel despairs in for the present, but augurs for the future, a step away from gender separatism characterized as a “battle of the sexes”: “a wake-up call to readers about the importance of family and communication. It’s better to communicate your feelings – your secret Mummyself – openly, rather than burying everything where it can be dug up and misconstrued later.”⁶³ *The Book of Dave* ends on a positive note, with an invitation to new narratives, in the form of strong critiques, deconstructions, and mockeries of old ones, posing the question of how to imagine and construct a politics of gender and the family beyond and against the questionable authority of patriarchal sacred texts, essentializing and backlash discourses of gender warfare, and the process of depatriarchalization.

⁶⁰ Dan Murphy, “A Society Based on One British Cabbie’s Delusions”, *Buffalo News*, 15 Apr 2007, G.4.

⁶¹ Self, *The Book of Dave*, 216.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 420-21 (emphases in capitals in the original).

⁶³ Murphy, “A Society Based on One British Cabbie’s Delusions”, G.4.