

Essays on Paula Rego

Smile When You Think about Hell



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7. Paula and the Madonna: Who's That Girl?

What you can do is see [Mary's story] from the point of view of a woman, which is what I've done. A woman telling the story — in fact, Mary telling the story. [...] It is about Mary, not about Christ. The story celebrates her — her in her own right. That's what I tried to do. [...] The story is a human story. [...] The whole point of that story is that Jesus was a man and Mary was a woman giving birth [...]. They are people! [...] They are flesh and blood. [...] If the story is going to have power it has to have relevance to each of us, today, as we live.

Paula Rego¹

God addressed Jesus and said, This is the Devil, of whom we were speaking earlier. Jesus looked from one to the other, and saw that, apart from God's beard, they were like twins.

José Saramago, *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, capriciously malevolent bully.

Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*

¹ Paula Rego in conversation with Richard Zimler, *Diário de Notícias (Grande Reportagem)*, Lisbon, April 2003, 57–62. English version from Richard Zimler's original transcript.

(Un)Like a Virgin

The opening lines to Madonna's soundtrack song, 'Who's That Girl?', in the film of the same title, are 'Who's that girl? When you see her, say a prayer'. That is clearly good advice. When what you think might follow doesn't, you know you shouldn't be surprised. You always did know it, in fact. The singer may be called Madonna, and that, unlikely though it might seem, is her real name, but if you knew anything about anything you'd have realized from the start that prayer would not have been anywhere on the menu, neither in the song nor the film. Sometimes God can't or won't help, and some would-be virgins are in reality unrepentant whores in holy clothing. So too in Paula Rego's work. And as in the case of Amélia in *The Ambassador of Jesus* (fig. 3.4), for example, prayer is unlikely to help, especially if you never really meant it anyway.

In 2002 Jorge Sampaio, then President of Portugal, commissioned Paula Rego to create eight images based on episodes from the life of the Virgin Mary, to be placed in eight existing flat wall coves in the chapel of the presidential palace in Lisbon, serendipitously named Palácio de Belém, or Bethlehem Palace, after the Lisbon borough of the same name.

As seen in previous chapters, Rego's past work, from its very earliest productions, had often visited religious themes or formats (in the case of the latter, for example, triptychs) in trademark iconoclastic manner: *Annunciation* (e-fig. 10, 1981), *Joseph's Dream* (fig. 3.10), *Deposition* (fig. 7.14), *Up the Tree* (e-fig. 24)² (the latter, whether intentionally or not, a crucified female figure), to name but a few. In the late 1990s she created a series of drawings and pastels inspired by Eça de Queirós's well-known anti-clerical nineteenth-century novel, *The Crime of Father Amaro* (figs. 3.1; 3.2; 3.4; 3.5; 3.7–3.9; 3.12; 3.14; 3.19–3.21; 3.23; 3.27),³ as well as a series on the theme of abortion which, provocatively, included a triptych, a format more habitually associated with religious art and particularly with altar pieces. She might, therefore, appear at first glance

2 e-fig. 24 Paula Rego, *Up the Tree* (2002). Lithograph. Image size: 96.5 x 61.6 cm. Posted by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/492818>

3 Eça de Queirós, *The Crime of Father Amaro*, trans. Margaret Jull Costa (Sawston, 2001).

an odd choice for the presidential commission, but Sampaio, who had known her for many decades, having been her lawyer in a pre-political incarnation, ought to have known what he was getting.

What he got was a series of eight images which together constitute some of the most startling work this artist has produced to date. Rego herself has stated in interviews, with some disingenuity, that she does not consider the Virgin images to be in any way polemical or irreverent: 'these pictures were created with admiration and respect'.⁴ Her approach to religion, which is elusive, at its most unequivocal has acknowledged a dislike of organized religion ('I am anti-Pope; I don't like the Pope'),⁵ but has staunchly refused any attempt to translate unorthodoxy into the vocabulary of atheism.

Be that as it may, and whether or not with the intent of controversy, this iconoclastic maker of images here produced a series of renditions of one of Christianity's chief icons (in Catholic countries such as Portugal *the* primary icon, more so even than Jesus or God himself) whose effect, as we shall see, contravenes or elides a series of the standard tenets of doctrine: *Annunciation*, fig. 7.1; *Nativity*, fig. 7.3; *Adoration*, fig. 7.9; *Purification at the Temple*, fig. 7.10; *Flight into Egypt*, fig. 7.11; *Lamentation*, fig. 7.12; *Pietá*, fig. 7.19; *Assumption*, fig. 7.20.

Just a Girl

Rego's Virgin Mary cycle engages with and interrogates specific aspects of the Marian cult, by implication also questioning basic premises of Christian dogma. These would include Mary's status — secondary to a Trinity from which she is doctrinally relegated — which Rego rescues and establishes as possessing iconic primacy at the exclusion of Christ himself, nowhere to be seen here (*Lamentation*, fig. 7.12) and sometimes a near-demonic aspect (*Assumption* fig. 7.20).

In Rego's images, then, key doctrinal points are contravened by a series of compositional, symbolic and casting devices, which on the one

4 Paula Rego in interview with Kathleen Gomes, *Público*, Saturday, 8 February 2003, 38. Also in interview with Anabela Mota Ribeiro, *Diário de Notícias*, 1 February 2003, 8.

5 Interview by Edward King in *Paula Rego: Celestina's House* (Kendal: Abbot Hall Art Gallery, 2001; New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 2001).



Fig. 7.1 Paula Rego, *Annunciation* (2002). Pastel on paper mounted on aluminium, 54 x 52 cm. Belém Palace, Lisbon, Portugal. Photograph courtesy of Marlborough Fine Art, all rights reserved.



Fig. 7.2 Leonardo da Vinci, *Annunciation* (c. 1472-1475) (detail). Oil on panel. Uffizi Gallery, Florence. Wikimedia, CC-BY-SA, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Leonardo_da_Vinci_Annunciazione_1472_Uffizien_Florenz-03.jpg

hand bring Mary closer to the human/female condition defined as the consequence of original sin (for example childbirth in pain, in *Nativity*, fig. 7.3, from which doctrinally Mary alone was exempt, Warner, 1985); and on the other hand, raise her in importance above her divine son, giving her representation in scenes in which he should figure but in which she alone does (*Deposition*, fig. 7.14; *Lamentation*, fig. 7.12).

Where's God Gone?



Fig. 7.3 Paula Rego, *Nativity* (2002). Pastel on paper mounted on aluminium, 54 x 52 cm. Belém Palace, Lisbon. Photograph courtesy of Marlborough Fine Art, all rights reserved.

In these works, Rego has emphasized the human — as opposed to special or approximately divine — condition of Mary and Jesus by reducing divine content to non-signification, an emphasis that had previously, on occasion, extended to an even more radical move whereby even the species status of Jesus might not be taken for granted (as betokened



Fig. 7.4 Juan de Flandes, *Nativity of Jesus Christ* (c.1435–1438). Oil on panel, 48.5×36.9 cm. Royal Chapel, Granada. Wikimedia, public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Juan_de_Flandes_Nativity_Granada_012.jpg

by an earlier image of 1987, *Two Girls and a Dog*, e-fig. 4, representing two girls supporting a recumbent dog, which Rego has referred to as a deposition).

If, as Jasper Griffin would have it, Homer was the first ‘theologian’ to bring the gods down into the realm of the human,⁶ the separation of the divine and the earthly, or of the religious and the secular, became ever more problematic in the long time span that followed those first epics. ‘What is truth?’ (John 18:38). Pontius Pilate’s only partly disingenuous question when faced with the mutually exclusive claims of a would-be-

6 Jasper Griffin, *Homer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

divine Christ and the Jewish religious powers that proclaimed him not to be so, set the agenda for a Judaeo-Christian debate that has shaped much of Western culture, including the visual arts. The problem has not lost any of its urgency, giving rise to explicit or construable, but either way unresolved confrontations with the issue of questionable categories: divinity or temporality, spirituality or carnality, mortality or immortality, the sublime or the mundane, high art or popular culture. Or, to put it another way, and extending the discussion to other cultural parameters, the choice between, and attempted synthesis of, Homer's libidinous, envious, petty, all-too-human deities and a sacrificial Son of God on Golgotha.

In an increasingly polarized age such as ours, inscribed in equal measure by religious indifference (as betokened by drastically declining church attendance)⁷ and martyrdom terrorism, in the West at least, the break between the sign (iconography, symbols) and the referent (God himself) becomes discernible in any number of anecdotes from church websites, the media, urban myth and daily life: the girl in a high street jewellery shop who dithers between a crucifix with or without a miniature Christ, and eventually opts for the former because the cross 'without the little man looks a bit bare';⁸ the media report of a Japanese card manufacturer that got its wires crossed and ended up with an unusable consignment of Christmas cards depicting a crucified Father Christmas;⁹ rules on the nutritional contents and alcohol levels of Eucharistic bread and wine (which may be the actual body and blood of Christ, rather than merely symbolic of it, but are available on Amazon, carry a sell-by date and may be obtained in alcohol-free and gluten-free varieties).¹⁰ Perishable or immortal? Potentially intoxicating

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- 7 Statistics for church attendance in the United Kingdom: <https://www.google.com/search?q=statistics+church+attendance+uk>
 Statistics for church attendance in Portugal: <https://www.google.com/search?q=Statistics+for+church+attendance+in+Portugal>
- 8 William Patrick Casey, 'Jesus: The "Little Man" on the Cross?', *The Fathers of Mercy*, <https://fathersofmercy.com/jesus-man-on-the-cross/>
- 9 Tim Willis, 'Did Japanese Workers Really Get their Symbols Mixed Up and Display Santa on a Crucifix?', *The Independent*, 17 December 2014, <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/christmas/entertainment/did-japanese-workers-really-get-their-symbols-mixed-up-and-display-santa-on-a-crucifix-9931931.html>
- 10 Cavanagh Alter Bread on Amazon, <https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B07CXZRV6H>; gluten-free altar bread on Church Buying Group, http://www.churchbuyinggroup.co.uk/index.php?route=product/product&product_id=412; Society of St Vincent de Paul altar bread, <https://www.vinnies-wellington.org.nz/altar-breads/>; Dave

or otherwise? Tolerant or intolerant of dietary restrictions? Echoing Pontius Pilate, we may well ask with some perplexity, what is truth?

Whether due to fear, divine interdiction or the limitations of the visual imagination, the difficulties and challenges of painting, sculpting, performing, installing or videoing the divine may be one of the central challenges that drives such recent and contemporary artists as Max Ernst, Salvador Dali, Barnett Newman, Brice Marden, Francis Bacon, Antony Gormley (e-fig. 18),¹¹ Bill Viola, Damien Hirst (e-fig. 19),¹² Anna Chromy, Ana Maria Pacheco, Kiki Smith and Marion Coutts (e-fig. 20).¹³

But if so, I would argue that these artists, rather than insurgents against tradition, might be the inheritors of it, which is to say the heirs — in a continuous, unbroken line — to a longstanding heritage of artists (Caravaggio, Donatello, El Greco, Goya, Sargeant, Mantegna, Grünewald, Raphael, Piero de la Francesca and almost any artist of any significance in the art canon) who experienced the same difficulties in their confrontation with an impalpable, undepictable, possibly unbelievable divinity. Almost always, with the exception of Michaelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, what is available is the iconography not of God but of his all-too-dead Son (fig. 4.18).

Is He Dead or Just Resting?

The counterpoint to an escalating lack of religious commitment in Western societies, however, is not necessarily, or not exclusively, a

Lieberman, 'The Nutritional Content of Holy Communion', *OC Weekly*, 26 December 2014, <https://ocweekly.com/the-nutritional-content-of-holy-communion-6618675/>; 'Transubstantiation', Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transubstantiation>; Nutritional values of the Eucharist, myfitnesspal, <https://www.myfitnesspal.com/food/calories/eucharist-161038831>; Emily Bell, 'What Is Sacramental Wine and Where Does It Come From?', [vinepair.com](https://vinepair.com/wine-blog/the-popes-coming-to-town-drink-some-sacramental-wine/), 18 September 2015, <https://vinepair.com/wine-blog/the-popes-coming-to-town-drink-some-sacramental-wine/>

- 11 e-fig. 18 Antony Gormley, *Still Being* (2012). Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, São Paulo, Brazil. antonygormley.com, © Antony Gormley, all rights reserved, <http://www.antonygormley.com/uploads/images/5088fd0b55c70.jpg>
- 12 e-fig. 19 Damien Hirst, *God Alone Knows* (2007). Glass, painted stainless steel, silicone, mirror, stainless steel, plastic cable ties, sheep and formaldehyde solution with steel and Carrara marble plinths, 323.6 x 171 x 61.1 cm. (Left) | 380.5 x 201.4 x 61.1 cm. (Centre) | 323.6 x 171 x 61.1 cm. (Right). Photo by Prudence Cuming Associates © Damien Hirst and Science Ltd., all rights reserved, http://damienhirst.com/images/hirstimage/DHS6003_771_0.jpg
- 13 e-fig. 20 Marion Coutts, *Decalogue* (2001). Skittles, enamel, vinyl lettering, dimensions variable, 35 cm. marioncoutts.com, © Marion Coutts, all rights reserved, <http://www.marioncoutts.com/img//th/13.jpg>

polarized North-American Bible-Belt Christian or Middle-Eastern Islamic fundamentalism, but rather an aesthetic, cutting-edge cultivation of deviant formats, as manifested in art and literature. Bill Viola's video installation of *The Passions* of 2003, for example (first exhibited, coincidentally one year after Rego's *Virgin Mary* series) was arguably, in many ways, the most straight-forwardly reverential instance of religious art available at that point in the whole of London's National Gallery collection, old or new: surpassing, in hushed, irony-free homage, any Leonardo, Bellini or Raphael housed within those walls. But even so, the resurrection — underwritten in one of Viola's pieces by its title, *Emergence* — remains a promise that does not materialize.¹⁴ Instead, in this piece, and in a reversal of the established order, resurrection quickly (slowly: a video film shown in extremely slow motion of a man's body in a loin cloth rising from a water tank) becomes a lamentation by two women, and then an embrace that might be either the kiss of life or of death. The theme of Madonnas turned black widows/bunny boilers will become of the essence presently, in this consideration of Paula Rego's religious imagery.

Whether revisionist, iconoclastic, polemical or reverential, one of the theological difficulties that confronts the sceptical mind is the problem of sorrow surrounding the death of Christ.

For agnostic or atheist thought, Christian bereavement appears out of place, both regarding Jesus himself (since he will resuscitate) and those he left behind (since thanks to *his* transitory death *they* will be saved). The enduring shadow of sorrow, then, must imply, at some level, a failure of faith, the weakening of belief in the divinity of Christ (he may not rise again, he may turn out not to be the promised Saviour). A doubt, indeed, planted within the Christian faith by the Gospel text itself, in the narration of the moment of death: 'when Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost'.¹⁵ Giving up the ghost (the Holy Spirit) is the most cryptic of all Biblical ambiguities, construable, arguably, as the abdication of any claimed association with the Trinity that might confirm Jesus's status as divine.

14 Bill Viola, 'Emergence' from *The Passions* (2003), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTPf6mHKYD0>

15 John 19:30.



Fig. 7.5 Bronzino, *Deposition of Christ* (1543–1545). Oil on panel, 268 x 173 cm. Musée de Beaux Arts et d'Archéologie, Besançon, France. Wikimedia, public domain, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:D%C3%A9ploration_sur_le_Christ_mort_\(Bronzino\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:D%C3%A9ploration_sur_le_Christ_mort_(Bronzino).jpg)

In his analysis of tragedy and of Jesus as tragic hero Terry Eagleton addresses these matters from the point of view of the sacrificed Christ, when he argues that on the cross, the latter believes he has lost his divinity ('it is finished'). Hence the despair at the last, and the accusing cry to a forsaking Father. For Jesus, according to Eagleton (2003, 23–40), the tragic moment, the moment when he could justifiably say 'this is the worst' comes when belief (in himself as Son of God) is lost, and instead he finds himself 'a little lower than the angels'.¹⁶ Finds, in short, that now it is, indeed, 'a time to die'.¹⁷ World without end¹⁸ no longer.

16 Psalms 8.

17 Ecclesiastes 3:2.

18 *Book of Common Prayer*, Morning Prayer, 'Gloria'.

For Saint Augustine, evil was definable as the place where God was not (Rotman, 1993; Evans, 1982). When the possibility of divinity disappears, whether it be for Jesus on the cross, or for the agonizing believer undergoing a dark night of the soul, or for the merrily atheistic denier, that is where, for Augustine, the Devil, understandable not as a force for malevolence but merely as an absence, can be located.¹⁹ Other possibilities, however, offer themselves, with an exactly antithetical effect, namely the broadly Humanist one of a species that, stripped of faith, comes into its own on a trajectory of earthly fulfilment that includes the acceptance of human duty and moral responsibility *here and now*, without the inducement of a blank cheque for atonement, forgiveness or reward in the hereafter.

Primo Levi, confronting the need to articulate the historic unutterable that was the Holocaust (an event in the context of which, even supposing he was anywhere else at all, God indeed was not) wrote *If This is a Man*.²⁰ The title may be a quotation from Rabbi Hillel, who some believe to have been Jesus' teacher: 'in a place of no men, strive to be a man'.²¹ In our understanding, paradoxically, the place of no men may also be the place of no God, which, Augustinianly, is the place of evil. Confronted with that danger, however, the Rabbi may be urging not the pursuit of God but the pursuit of the self in its humanity (striving to be a man), as the antidote to evil down the ages, from ancient Palestine to the Nazis and back again (grimly, albeit arguably with a numerical difference, back full-circle to modern conflict-torn Palestine). 'When everyone acts inhuman, what should a man do? He should act more human'.²² Long before Christianity came into being, ancient theologies and philosophies had already wrestled with the problem of God, good and evil and had come up with no firm answers. The Epicurean Paradox sums it up: if God can prevent evil but does not, he is malevolent; if he would but cannot, he is not omnipotent; if he is both able and willing, where does evil come from? And if he is neither, why call him God? Faced with these difficulties, it is no wonder that artists have been unable to

19 St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961).

20 Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man*, trans. Stuart Woolf (London: The Orion Press, 1959).

21 Rabbi Hillel, *Pirke Avot* 1:12–14, 2:5–6. Or, 'In a place where there are no leaders, try to be a leader'.

22 Janusz Korczak, quoted in Bettelheim, Bruno, 'Janusz Korczak: A Tale for Our Time', in *Recollections and Reflections* (London: Penguin, 1992), 191–206, <https://archive.org/details/JanuszKorczak-ATaleForOurTime>

envisage God and had to resort instead to depicting his son made flesh at its most vulnerable. If, as the song would have it, ‘they ain’t makin’ Jews like Jesus anymore’,²³ this applies most fittingly to the absolutely human Jesus in confrontation with his own mortality and embarked upon a two-pronged rebellion: on the one hand against the old, corrupt, organized Jewish religion; and on the other hand against his ruthless abandoning father (and, as we know, beginning with Abraham, there are plenty such fathers both in the Old and New Testaments, and in our historical and daily quotidian).

The trajectory to godlessness as the only available option in the attempt to be morally human may have been what consciously or unconsciously drove artists and writers in various modes of religiosity, scepticism or out-and-out anticlericalism/atheism, throughout the centuries of Western creativity. Rebellion, and in a religious context its twin sentiment, iconoclasm, as Baudrillard understood, are not the same as atheism. As every teenager unrequited in love knows, indifference, not hate, is the antithesis of love.

The visible machinery of icons being substituted for the pure and intelligible Idea of God [...] is precisely what was feared by the Iconoclasts, whose millennial quarrel is still with us today. Their rage to destroy images rose precisely because they sensed this omnipotence of the simulacra, this facility they have of erasing God from the consciousnesses of people, and the overwhelming, destructive truth which they suggest: that ultimately there has never been any God; that only simulacra exist; indeed that God himself has only ever been his own simulacrum. Had they been able to believe that images only occulted or masked the Platonic idea of God, there would have been no reason to destroy them. One can live with the idea of a distorted truth. But their metaphysical despair came from the idea that the images concealed nothing at all, and that in fact they were not images, such as the original model would have made them, but actual perfect simulacra forever radiant with their own fascination. But this death of the divine referential has to be exorcised at all cost. [...] All of Western faith and good faith was engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could *exchange* for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange — God, of course. But what if God himself can be simulated,

23 Kinky Friedman and the Texas Jew Boys, ‘They Ain’t Makin’ Jews Like Jesus Anymore’, 1973, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5FSWm67IhDU>

that is to say, reduced to the signs which attest his existence? Then the whole system becomes weightless; it is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum [...] never again exchanging for what is real. (Baudrillard in Poster, 1988, 169–70)

Whatever the case may be, the trajectory towards immanence (God-everywhere, God-down-here, God-in-us), can also be seen as the trajectory of usurpation of divinity by the human or the humanization of the Divine, which is what concerns us in the art works under contemplation here. That trajectory, artist-specific and different in each case, may or may not be also the trajectory to atheism, or to iconoclasm, which as already argued are not necessarily the same. Immanence requires a specific vocabulary and iconography through which to be articulated and understood. When God is made flesh and arguably stays flesh — the despairing Christ on the cross, a doubting Thomas *avant la letter*, unable to envisage his own resurrection ('it is finished') — the trajectory towards immanence, synthesizing as it does the divine and the human, becomes translatable as a voyage towards (sometimes atheist) innocence or non-faith. Or, put a different way, towards scepticism, towards inexperience (including inexperience of evil), towards the purity of lack of experience or lack of knowledge, as found in the Edenic state. Built in to the Epicurean paradox outlined above is the unavoidable conclusion that without evil there is no need for God. In *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* José Saramago, Paula Rego's fellow-countryman and Nobel Prize winner ponders this notion:

Jesus had heard some old men travelling through Nazareth say that inside the bowels of the world there existed enormous caverns where there were cities, fields, rivers, forests and deserts, just like on the surface, and that that underground world, an exact copy of ours, had been created by the Devil after God had flung him from the heavenly heights as punishment for his rebellion [...] And, said the old men, as the Devil had been present on the occasion of the creation of Adam and Eve, and had learned how it was done, he copied the creation of a man and a woman in his subterranean kingdom, the only difference being that, unlike God, he had forbidden them nothing, that being the reason why, in the Devil's world there is no original sin. One of the old men went as far as saying, And if there was no original sin, there was no other kind either. (Saramago, 1991, italics added)

And elsewhere God addresses Satan as follows:

[I do not forgive you, I want you just as you are, or even worse if possible, Why, Because the Goodness that I am would not exist without the Evil that you are, a Goodness that existed without you would be inconceivable [...] if you go, I go, in order for me to be Goodness you have to continue being Evil, if the Devil isn't the Devil, God is not God, the death of one would be the death of the other.]

Saramago makes God the worst kind of narcissist, and many would no doubt agree, but even that does not necessarily make him easier to portray in images. Spirituality, bullied by artists caught up in the lure of representation but outwitted by the difficulties of depicting the metaphysical, may have resulted in the paradox of divinity beguiled visually into immanence. Looking up at God on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, too many viewers, however sincere their faith, may have murmured in their hearts 'that wasn't how I imagined Him'. Unable to find a convincing format for depicting God, the easy way out is the way we know, the shapes we recognize, the emotions we ourselves experience. The Word made flesh, wounded flesh, which, like Thomas, we need to touch in order to credit it. Seeing is believing, touching is believing.²⁴ The price to be paid, in terms of faith, is the risk of either immanence or scepticism, in both cases the risk of imagining that there is no heaven.

Ecce Homo ('Behold the man!' John 19:5), Pontius Pilate's delivery of Christ to the mob in Gospel passages of remarkable complexity, presents the latter as someone with whom Pilate can engage only as *a man*, and whom, as such, he wishes and fights to rescue. Christ himself, cryptically, points a vague finger of blame ('he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin', John 19:11), leaving ambiguous whether by that he means God (which would make himself, as Saramago would have it, a reluctant sacrificial Son²⁵), or merely the earthly authorities (which would disrupt his claim to divinity as lamb — of God — to the

24 John 20: 25–29.

25 The idea as Christ as a reluctant pawn of Jehovah is masterfully presented in José Saramago's *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (1991). For a discussion of this see also Maria Manuel Lisboa, *A Heaven of Their Own: Heresy and Heterodoxy in Portuguese Literature from the Eighteenth Century to the Present* and several of the essays in the bibliography to that volume, in particular Harold Bloom's essay, 'The One with the Beard is God, the Other One is the Devil', listed in the bibliography to this current volume.

slaughter). Whatever the case may be, the Pilate passages arguably transfigure Christ into a figure who, more than anyone else, is in need of a saviour: a saviour whom Pilate repeatedly struggles to be ('I find in him no fault at all'; 'Behold, I bring him forth to you, that ye may know that I find no fault in him', John 18:38, 19:3).

Baudrillard's reading of iconoclasm, as discussed above, located it as the home of true religious fervour — with the iconoclast cast as the destroyer of icons that threaten to upstage the unique (inimitable) reality of God.²⁶ In a different interpretation we would argue here that the cult of immanence may be iconoclasm by a different name (the Divine made human rather than transcendental). Be that as it may, trouble with faith seems to be what motivates a variety of contemporary creations (in literature, film, painting, sculpture, installation and video) whose take on the metaphysical and the sacred reflects it back at us and possibly at itself, with disquieting but beguiling modifications. And occasionally with no hope. Sometimes the light at the end of the tunnel really is that of an oncoming train.

It may have been this silent possibility that drove a long and populous tradition of artists who, consciously or not, more readily painted the decay than the resurrection of holy flesh. Of all the Biblical tableaux relating to the person of Jesus, numerically speaking by far the scenes that have more often attracted either artists' attention or their patrons' commissioning desires have been those that emphasize his humanity, his mortality, his perishability (man of sorrows, crucifixions, lamentations, *pietás*). From early medieval iconography onwards, painters and sculptors, in surprisingly counter-hieratic mode, have insistently emphasized the chains that bind Jesus to his earth-bound, destructible, inconsolable condition.

The Jewish tradition of Midrash invites elaboration upon the questions left unanswered in Scripture. What was the name of Lot's wife? Why did she look back and risk the fate that befell her?²⁷ What did the snake look like before the condemnation, in Genesis, that thenceforth it should crawl on its belly? Did God hesitate before wiping out his *chef d'oeuvre* in the annihilations of the Flood and the Cities of the Plain? When is it a time to die?

²⁶ Baudrillard, *op. cit.*

²⁷ For an interesting discussion of this see Celina Spiegel and Christina Buchmann, *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995).



Fig. 7.6 Rembrandt (workshop of), *Descent from the Cross* (1634). Oil on canvas, 158 x 117 cm. Hermitage Museum. Wikimedia, public domain, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Descent_from_the_Cross_\(Rembrandt\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Descent_from_the_Cross_(Rembrandt).jpg)



Fig. 7.7 Anonymous (Wroclaw), *Christ as Man of Sorrows* (1443). Tempera on larch wood, 180 x 136 cm. National Museum, Warsaw. Wikimedia, public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wroc%C5%82aw_Christ_as_Man_of_Sorrows.jpg

His Mother's Little Boy

For the Son of God as seen through art, just as for the rest of us, the time to die, all too commonly, seems to have been there and then, here and now, in artists from unattributed medieval art (fig. 7.8) to Damien Hirst (e-fig. 19), all of whom emphasized the chains that bind Jesus, and with him Mary and associated figures (such as Mary Magdalene) to their earth-bound, human condition, rather than to any credible hope of eternity.



Fig. 7.8 Anonymous (Germany), *Altarpiece with the Passion of Christ: Entombment* (c. 1480–1495). Oil on panel, 129.5 x 119.7 cm. Walters Arts Museum, Baltimore. Wikimedia, CC-BY-SA, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:German_-_Altarpiece_with_the_Passion_of_Christ_-_Entombment_-_Walters_37664.jpg

In a recent image by Paula Rego (*Our Lady of Sorrows*, e-fig. 21),²⁸ Jesus is modelled by a doll or mannequin: in other words, a truly lifeless being,

28 e-fig. 21 Paula Rego, *Our Lady of Sorrows* (2013). Acrylic, graphite and pastel on paper mounted on aluminium. Marlborough Fine Art, London. Posted by *The New Statesman*, [https://www.newstatesman.com/sites/default/files/images/2014%2B41%20Our%20Lady%20of%20Sorrows22\(1\).jpg](https://www.newstatesman.com/sites/default/files/images/2014%2B41%20Our%20Lady%20of%20Sorrows22(1).jpg)

whilst the picture's title, like those of the *Cycle of the Life of the Virgin Mary*, draws attention instead to Mary's anguish.

In its totality, then, the overall effect of Biblical themes, contested redemptory assumptions, empty *locus divinum*, tragedy, betrayal and pathos all add up to the recuperation of key narratives of heretic, antagonistic, love-turned-hatred, hell-hath-no-wrath, scorned, betrayed, animalistic but also absolutely human (in the sense of temporal as opposed to spiritual) effect. A prime demonstration, in short, of the appropriation of the vocabulary of spirituality for the purpose of in-your-face unorthodoxy. This urge to profanity leads me now to what is arguably some of Paula Rego's most complex work to date, the *Life of the Virgin Mary* series.

The head-hunting of Mary — like that of Jesus — by a Humanist contingent hungry for its own icons, gives rise to revisionist images such as those of Rego's Virgin. It takes very little tampering, after all, and only a moderate degree of irreverence, to re-cast Mary as a modern icon, offered as a role model to contemporary women: single mother; mother of a child with an absent (busy) career father (since creating and monitoring the world, after all, gives exaggerated meaning to the life of a busy CEO submerged in boardroom battles); or mother in a modern-day relationship of serial monogamy, with a child raised by his stepfather.

In the past, Rego had expressed a predilection for profanity, when she claimed Max Ernst's *The Virgin Spanking the Infant Jesus in Front of Three Witnesses* (1926, e-fig. 22)²⁹ as one of her favourite paintings. In her *Virgin* cycle of 2002, the humanity of Mary permeates the paradigmatic iconographic tenets of endlessly repeated imagistic convention: unexpected and unavoidable pregnancy (*Annunciation*, fig. 7.1); the attendant difficulties of painful childbirth (*Nativity*, fig. 7.3); thoughtfulness to the needs of others (dutifully receiving visitors when body — leaving aside soul — cries out for rest after childbirth: *Adoration*, fig. 7.9); attention to the prescriptions of religious ritual

29 e-fig. 22 Max Ernst, *The Virgin Spanking the Infant Jesus in Front of Three Witnesses* (1926). Oil on canvas, 196 x 130 cm. Museum Ludwig, Cologne. Wikiart, <https://uploads6.wikiart.org/images/max-ernst/the-virgin-spanking-the-christ-child-before-three-witnesses-andre-breton-paul-eluard-and-the-1926.jpg!Large.jpg>

(*Purification at the Temple*, fig. 7.10); harassment by an unhelpful outside world (*Flight into Egypt*, fig. 7.11); the sorrow of a death in the family (*Lamentation*, fig. 7.12); the pain of losing a son (*Pietá*, fig. 7.19); letting go of an ambivalently valued life (*Assumption*, fig. 7.20).



Fig. 7.9 Paula Rego, *Adoration* (2002). Pastel on paper mounted on aluminium 54 x 52 cm. Belém Palace, Lisbon, Portugal. Photograph courtesy of Marlborough Fine Art, all rights reserved.

In Genesis, in addition to all the punishments levelled at Adam, Eve accrued one all of her own, namely childbirth in pain, as befitted her superior guilt. It is possible that Eve's may have been the *felix culpa* that necessitated the advent of Mary, the über-gimmick that redeemed her sex:



Fig. 7.10 Paula Rego, *Purification at the Temple* (2002). Pastel on paper mounted on aluminium, 54 x 52 cm. Belém Palace, Lisbon, Portugal. Photograph courtesy of Marlborough Fine Art, all rights reserved.



Fig. 7.11 Paula Rego, *Flight into Egypt* (2002). Pastel on paper mounted on aluminium, 54 x 52 cm. Belém Palace, Lisbon, Portugal. Photograph courtesy of Marlborough Fine Art, all rights reserved.

Ne had the apple taken been,
 The apple taken been,
 Ne had never our lady
 A-been heavenè queen.

Blessèd be the time
 That apple taken was.
 Therefore we moun singen
*Deo gracias!*³⁰

Or not, since Mary, whilst being a woman, was unique, and in effect left the rest of womankind still unshriven, as well as unreleased from the painful punishment mentioned above. For Mary alone, then, was reserved the divine epidural still withheld from other women in perpetuity. Traditional nativities make clear that for Mary there was no pain, but the iconography of human parturition was not always so coyly airbrushed out, nor were the ancients mealy-mouthed about depicting back-to-basics labour as betokened by, for example, extant ancient statuary (e-fig. 23).³¹

And in the Old Testament, too, reproduction and matters akin are handled with sometimes less than minimum delicacy. Try telling this story to your child, or even the more prudish churchgoers:

And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, [she...] said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die. And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel: and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her. And she gave him Bilhah her handmaid to wife: and Jacob went in unto her. And Bilhah conceived, and bare Jacob a son. (Genesis 30: 1–7)

In no sense, then, is Margaret Atwood's revision of the Rachel/Bilhah episode as the starter gun to her nightmare futuristic world in *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood, 1987) any cruder or more brutal than its

30 'Adam lay ybounden' in David Willcocks and John Rutter (eds.), *Carols for Choirs 2* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 86.

31 e-fig. 23 Unattributed (Antinoe, Egypt), *Clay rattle of a woman giving birth* (c. 100–150). Clay, 8.5 x 6 x 6 cm. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, United Kingdom, all rights reserved, <http://data.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/id/object/51735>

precursor narrative. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the few women who are still fertile in the post-cataclysm world of a Republic of Gilead made barren by radiation, are held hostage, forcibly impregnated and compelled to breed under duress for the Commanders, the ruling class of males in the new order. Their fruitful wombs now transformed into the scarce commodity of species continuity; they are compelled into ritualistic ceremonies in the course of which they are impregnated by the Commanders while lying clamped between the legs of their barren wives, and give birth in the same position.

The Commander's Wife hurries in, in her ridiculous white cotton nightgown, her spindly legs sticking out beneath it. Two of the Wives in their blue dresses and veils hold her by the arms, as if she needs it; she has a tight little smile on her face, like a hostess at a party she'd rather not be giving. She must know what we think of her. She scrambles onto the Birthing Stool, sits on the seat behind and above Janine, so that Janine is framed by her: her skinny legs come down on either side, like the arms of an eccentric chair. Oddly enough, she's wearing white cotton socks, and bedroom slippers, blue ones made of fuzzy material, like toilet-seat covers. But we pay no attention to the Wife, we hardly even see her, our eyes are on Janine. In the dim light, in her white gown, she glows like a moon in cloud. She is grunting now, with the effort. 'Push, push, push', we whisper. (Atwood, 1987, 135)

The third text of pertinence to these considerations, of Biblical sourcing like the first, is the forerunner of the observations that follow:

And the angel came unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women. And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. [...] Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? (Luke 1:28–34)

A Mother's Work Is Never Done

Genesis offers no comment at all regarding Bilhah's feelings faced with the bargain struck between the barren Rachel, a frustrated Jacob and an inscrutable God. Margaret Atwood's haunting fiction of a post-apocalypse world, in contrast, offers eloquent first-person comment on

the plight of the Handmaids, known only by the genitive 'Of' attached to their masters' first name (Offred, Ofglen, Ofwarren).

For Mary in Luke, and even more cryptically in Matthew (the event merits no mention in the other two Gospels), it is a different story: a brief show of reluctance on hers (and Joseph's) part — 'Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be [...] Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? (Luke 1:29–34); 'Then Joseph her husband [...] was minded to put her away (Matthew 1:19) — quickly replaced by submissive acquiescence ('and Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord' (Luke 1:38), and a glossed-over pregnancy from which, after centuries of doctrinal patristic pondering, she emerges still a virgin and pain-free, even in parturition: in short, absolutely stripped of all that might link her to the rest of her sex, all the way back to and including Eve ('in sorrow shalt though bring forth children' (Genesis 3:16).

Mother and maiden
Was never none but she;
Well may such a lady
Godès mother be. (Anonymous, *Chester Book of Carols*, s.d.)³²

Rachel and Bilhah in Genesis, Mary in Luke and Matthew, Serena Joy and Offred in Gilead — and not (St.) Paul back then, definitely not *him*, but Paul(a) right now: different women, but a connecting thread, or posture, physical and mental. The posture is that of painful human parturition and also of reluctance: virgins and/or wives press-ganged with greater or lesser unwillingness into reproductive service by the envoys of a higher purpose.

It is left to Paula Rego's image of the *Nativity* (fig. 7.3) — an image with which she declared herself to be 'particularly happy'³³ — to restore Mary to both her humanity (because this is an image of realistic childbirth in pain), and to an admittedly ambivalent yet undeniable sorority with other women who, with all the mixed feelings of sisterhood and hate

32 'I sing of a maiden' (Anon., music by Lennox Berkeley), *Chester Book of Carols* (London: Chester [s.d.]). https://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/i_sing_of_a_maiden.htm

33 Paula Rego in interview with Richard Zimler, op. cit.

that presumably afflicted Rachel, Bilhah and the Gileadian Wives (and, in this picture, possibly, the unlovely female angel — female, in dress or drag), held their more fertile counterparts between their legs.

Paula Rego has often related in interviews an episode from her student days at the Slade School of Art in the 1950s, in which she was advised to paint only what she could see. With reference to the Virgin Mary images, she has stated that that is what she did.³⁴ Tongue in cheek? Don't count on it.

[Richard Zimler — That pastel gives us the Virgin with her legs apart, suffering the pains of childbirth].

Paula Rego — I think every woman feels it, that's why we can identify with her. We all know it's like that — to be pregnant [...] is upsetting and frightening. She's frightened and yet she's accepting.

If there is anything new about these representations of the Virgin, it is the fact that they were done by a woman] which is very rare. [...] It always used to be men who painted the life of the Virgin, and now it is a woman. It offers a different point of view, because we identify more easily with her.³⁵

Jane Caplan, elaborating on the writings of Maria Antonietta Macciocchi, writes as follows:

If you are taken in by the Catholic Church's adulation of the Virgin Mary, you will also be open to address as fascism's fertile Mother; if the Holy Family is an ideal relation in your eyes, you will be readily incorporated in the fascist family. Thus the originality of fascism is not the content of its ideology, but the use it makes of pre-existent ideology which is already deeply inscribed in the unconscious. [...] you can't talk about fascism unless you are also prepared to discuss patriarchy. (Caplan, 1979, 59–66)³⁶

And, needless to say, Catholicism too. In this context, it is worth remembering that the fascist regime in Portugal signed a Concordat

34 Paula Rego in interview with Kathleen Gomes, op. cit.

35 Paula Rego in interview with Richard Zimler, op. cit.

36 Maria Antonietta Macciocchi (1979), 'Female Sexuality in Fascist Ideology', *Feminist Review*, 1 (1979), 67–81.

Jane Caplan, 'Introduction to Female Sexuality in Fascist Ideology', *Feminist Review*, 1 (1979), 59–66.

with the Vatican in 1940 which translated the law and iconography of the church into state law and propagandist culture. For Jorge Sampaio, president of a country restored to democracy in 1974 but which, in a referendum in 1998, rejected the liberalization of what was then one of Europe's harshest abortion laws, these pictures, 'a militant interpretation [of Mary]', are an *aperçu* of 'the saga of woman throughout the centuries [...] the woman as subject [...] a trajectory of female emancipation [which throws light] on the vicissitudes of suffering'. (Sampaio, 2003, 40–41).³⁷ The pose, in any case, is always familiar and always cryptic, to the followers of this artist's work. Have I seen you here before? I think so: whether pain is inflected by a positive aspect — paroxysms of love (*Love*, fig. 4.34, *Bride*, fig. 4.35); childbirth (*Nativity*, fig. 7.3) — or by something more destructive — betrayal, rejection, revenge (*Moth*, fig. 4.32); sex gone wrong (untitled abortion pastels, figs. 4.3–4.5; 4.14; 4.15; 4.24–4.26; 4.30; 4.31; 4.37; 4.38; 4.41; 4.49) — the pose that links these concerns lends itself to interpretation as extending an agenda of challenge, whether intentional or unintentional. In the dark, all pain is grey.

Making His Mother Cry

Physical pain, made more ignoble because made invisible — in other words, not even meriting a place in posterity — is also the theme of *Lamentation* (fig. 7.12), as well as *Deposition* (fig. 7.14), an earlier image, not part of this series. In the past Rego had already taken an iconoclastic approach to sacred scenes, such as Christ's deposition, which she had depicted featuring Jesus as a dog in *Two Girls and a Dog* (e-fig. 4). Unlike in the standard iconography associated with this topic (Van Cleeve, *Lamentation of Christ*, fig. 7.13; Bourdon, *Descent from the Cross*, fig. 7.15; Rubens, *Descent from the Cross*, fig. 7.16) in Rego's lamentations and depositions (figs. 7.12 and 7.14), Jesus Christ, supposedly the star of this particular show, either figures as a dog or is not present at all; and in one case (Rego, *Up the Tree*, e-fig. 24) his position on the cross is usurped by a woman who might be Bertha, mad wife of a man intent on bigamy.

37 Jorge Sampaio, *Diário de Notícias*, Lisbon, Saturday 15 February 2003, 40–41.



Fig. 7.12 Paula Rego, *Lamentation* (2002). Pastel on paper mounted on aluminium, 54 x 52 cm. Belém Palace, Lisbon, Portugal. Photograph courtesy of Marlborough Fine Art, all rights reserved.



Fig. 7.13 Joos Van Cleve, *Lamentation of Christ* (first quarter of 16th century). Oil on oak, 71.5 x 55 cm. National Museum of Warsaw. Wikimedia, public domain, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Joos_van_Cleve_\(follower\)_Lamentation_of_Christ.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Joos_van_Cleve_(follower)_Lamentation_of_Christ.jpg)



Fig. 7.14 Paula Rego, *Deposition* (1998). Pastel on paper, 160 x 120 cm. Photograph courtesy of Marlborough Fine Art, all rights reserved.



Fig. 7.15 Sébastien Bourdon, *Descent from the Cross* (third quarter of 17th century). Oil on canvas, 111 x 78 cm. National Museum, Warsaw. Wikimedia, public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bourdon_Descent_from_the_Cross.jpg



Fig. 7.16 Peter Paul Rubens, *Descent from the Cross* (c. 1612–1614). Oil on panel, 420.5 x 320 cm. Our Lady's Cathedral, Antwerp. Wikimedia, public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Peter_Paul_Rubens_-_Descent_from_the_Cross_-_WGA20212.jpg

The lamentation at the foot of the cross is one of the set pieces of religious art. Its supporting cast traditionally are the women: Mary always, Magdalene usually, Martha sometimes. The lead player, however, is Jesus himself, crucified *en route* back to immortality, the Son with whom God, after all, was well pleased. Within religious iconographic tradition, Jesus is present both as chief protagonist of iconic lamentations and *pietás*, and under contract for future roles: depositions, entombments, resurrections, assumptions (figs. 7.17; 7.18).

In Rego's *Lamentation* (fig. 7.12), an example of her unorthodoxy is found in her overruling of the doctrinal supremacy of the Trinitarian Jesus, who is elided from this image, only the supporting cast of the women being present). As in her *Deposition* (fig. 7.14) Jesus is absent, or at least not available to view, excluded from the main spectacle, hung too high to be seen. Is invisibility (non-existence) the price of overdone, literal loftiness? If you are raised so high that you cannot be glimpsed, you might as well not exist. Can the Divine have any real meaning only if it is brought a little lower than the angels? If it is made more like us? In Rego's *Lamentation* the intention and effect of the compositional decision is to remove Christ from the centre stage, replacing him with his mother whom Rego declares to be 'the star'.



Fig. 7.17 Anonymous, *Entombment* (c. 1495 and 1505). Oil on panel. Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago. Wikimedia, public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:German_School_-_Entombment_-_1926.570_-_Art_Institute_of_Chicago.jpg



Fig. 7.18 Tintoretto, *The Resurrection of Christ* (1579–1581). Oil on canvas, 529 x 485 cm. Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Venice. Wikimedia, public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jacopo_Tintoretto_-_The_Resurrection_of_Christ_-_WGA22555.jpg

How can you do a crucifixion? If you do one it upstages everything. You cannot put it in this series. And it's not necessary. The crucifixion is there in *The Lamentation*, but it's out of the picture. So you concentrate on Mary. (Rego quoted in Zimler, 2003)³⁸

Concentrate on her and arguably identify with her. It may be for this reason that the female protagonists of this image, in stark contrast to that ethereal/ephemeral Son of God, so wholly holy that he becomes at once incomprehensible, remote and simply not there, rub in our faces their contrasting flawed humanity. An entirely different species to Raphael's Boden-catalogue-style yummy-mummy Madonnas (fig. 4.22), Paula Rego's protagonists provoke us on many levels: on the one hand a tart's micro-skirt, skimpy top and fuck-me boots (fig. 7.12); and on the other a dowdy figure in deep mourning (*Lamentation*, fig. 7.19), with no apparent faith in a resurrection supposedly to come, and whose sorrow therefore begs the question, not only in this image and the next (*Pietá*, fig. 7.19) but in the entire *Pietá* sub-genre in the canon: why so *dolorosa*, if the Son is only temporarily dead? Or is it after all not temporary?



Fig. 7.19 Paula Rego, *Pietá* (2002). Pastel on paper mounted on aluminium, 54 x 52 cm. Belém Palace, Lisbon, Portugal. Photograph courtesy of Marlborough Fine Art, all rights reserved.

38 Paula Rego in interview with Richard Zimler, op. cit.

Rego's *Pietá* plays age games also deployed elsewhere in her work. In *The Crime of Father Amaro* series she had cast a grown man (albeit in foetal pose) in the role of the child Amaro (*The Company of Women*, fig. 3.1). In *Pietá*, contrarily, both the man Christ and his supposedly middle-aged or elderly mother are depicted as children, and as such restored to an eminently destructible vulnerability. They carry echoes of the youthful Mary in the first image in this series (*Annunciation*, fig. 7.1), a *collégiene précoce*, sitting under the gaze of a butch angel, dressed in girlish frills and a pleated school skirt, and herself shockingly reminiscent of the child-like abortion girls ('the pictures I most enjoyed doing in all my life'³⁹), some of whom also wore school uniform (figs. 4.14 and 4.15). Like the latter (and as Paula Rego is keen to emphasize, very much *unlike* a long line of iconography by the great Renaissance masters), her Madonna, in *Nativity* (fig. 7.3), carries an undertow of violence: the 'profane pain [...] of someone like us';⁴⁰ 'a twelve year old girl [...] in a desperate, difficult situation';⁴¹ 'and why not? She had a child. It is a dramatic moment. [...] Violence begins at birth'.⁴²

Rego's Virgin Mary images invite any number of hard questions with no obvious answers provided either in the Gospels or elsewhere in doctrine. Who is a mother here? Who is blessed or blissful? Where is God? How old is his bride? What happened to the age of consent? When do bridal white or virgin blue become hellish black (*Assumption*, fig. 7.20)? When does religious ecstasy become orgasmic profanity? When does a bride become a slut? When does the sound of epiphany become the beat of punk rock? In the words of another Madonna, author and singer of *Like a Virgin*, 'who's that girl?'

I made it through the wilderness
Somehow I made it through
Didn't know how lost I was
Until I found you

I was beat
Incomplete
I'd been had, I was sad and blue
But you made me feel

39 Paula Rego in interview with Ana Marques Gastão, *Diário de Notícias*, 19 July 2002.

40 Interview with Rocha de Sousa, *Jornal de Letras, Artes e Idéias*, 5 March 2003.

41 Interview with Anabela Mota Ribeiro, *op. cit.*, 10.

42 Paula Rego in interview with Kathleen Gomes, *op. cit.*

Yeah, you made me feel
Shiny and new

Hoo, Like a virgin
Touched for the very first time
Like a virgin
When your heart beats
Next to mine

Gonna give you all my love, boy
My fear is fading fast
Been saving it all for you
'Cause only love can last

You're so fine
And you're mine
Make me strong, yeah you make me bold
Oh your love thawed out
Yeah, your love thawed out
What was scared and cold

Like a virgin, hey
Touched for the very first time
Like a virgin
With your heartbeat
Next to mine

Whoa
Whoa, ah
Whoa

You're so fine
And you're mine
I'll be yours
'Till the end of time.

Madonna, 'Like a Virgin'

Where Is She Going Now?

'Till the end of time'. World without end? In Paula Rego's version of Mary the question 'who's that girl?' is not unreasonable. And the disquiet created by the first seven images reaches a climax in the last image in this series, *Assumption* (fig. 7.29), featuring a satanic, runaway Madonna, clad not in traditional virgin blue or red but rather in witch's black.



Fig. 7.20 Paula Rego, *Assumption* (2002). Pastel on paper mounted on aluminium, 54 x 52 cm. Belém Palace, Lisbon, Portugal. Photograph courtesy of Marlborough Fine Art, all rights reserved.



Fig. 7.21 Andrea Mantegna, *Christ's Descent into Limbo* (1470–1475). Tempera on wood, 38.8 x 41.3 cm. Lent to the Frick Museum, NYC from the Barbara Piasecka Johnson Collection. Wikimedia, public domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MantegnaDescentLimbo.jpg>



Fig. 7.22 Titian, *Assumption of Mary* (1516–1518). Oil on panel, 690 x 360 cm. Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, Venice. Wikimedia, public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tizian_041.jpg



Fig. 7.23 Andrea del Sarto, *Assumption of the Virgin* (1530). Oil on panel 309 x 205 cm. Poppi altar piece, Palazzo Pitti, Florence. Wikimedia, public domain, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Andrea_del_Sarto_-_Assumption_of_the_Virgin_\(Poppi_Altarpiece\)_-_WGA0416.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Andrea_del_Sarto_-_Assumption_of_the_Virgin_(Poppi_Altarpiece)_-_WGA0416.jpg)

With reference to her *Assumption* Rego has commented, possibly disingenuously: 'There's a wonderful picture by Mantegna of Christ descending into Limbo [fig. 7.30]. It's the most marvelous picture in the world. [...it] came into my mind when I was doing *The Assumption*. The Virgin Mary is rising to heaven, but underneath her — underneath them — might be a black gap'.⁴³ Is Rego's Mary really Heaven-bound or is she heading in the opposite direction? With Scripture, as with everything else, everything depends on who's interpreting it.

In Rego's *Assumption*, Mary's attire is reminiscent in hue of the anti-clerical context of *The Sin of Father Amaro* series, for example in *Angel* (fig. 3.27), as well as of what is arguably the most violent picture in that series of images (*Amélia's Dream*, fig. 3.21). The hell hag in *Assumption* (fig. 7.20), moreover, whose posture reprises that of some of Rego's dancing ostriches of 1995 (*Dancing Ostriches from Disney's Fantasia*, fig. 3.22),⁴⁴ is dressed entirely in black and stands with her back turned to the viewer, inscrutable and unapproachable, with arms raised in incantatory mode, theoretically born aloft by an angel whose comparative slightness, however, suggests the likelihood that he will be crushed by her.

What is going on, then, in these images in which the destructibility of the child Jesus — whether unborn (*Annunciation*, fig. 7.1; *Nativity*, fig. 7.3), newborn (*Adoration*, fig. 7.9; *Purification at the Temple*, fig. 7.10; *Flight into Egypt*, fig. 7.11), or descended from the cross (*Pietá*, fig. 7.19) — is made even more conspicuous by the scandal of his absence (*Lamentation*, fig. 7.12) and the fragility of his angels (*Assumption*, fig. 7.20)?

In the Scrolls, the face of God may be hidden. More challengingly still, it may not be there at all. At least if you leave it to women to tell the story. In the Book of Esther, in the Old Testament, King Ahasuerus' wife, Vashti, is put away when she refuses to perform the ultimate trophy-wife act of stripping in public in order to impress his mates. Vashti is replaced by Esther, who, unbeknownst to Ahasuerus, is Jewish. As the plot thickens, Esther turns out to be much brighter than the king, and the intrigue builds up to a *dénouement* that sees her saving her people from genocide. The Book of Esther is defined by the theme of a woman who serially outwits violent men. It may be no coincidence that it is

43 Ibid.

44 In an interview with Anabela Mota Ribeiro, however, Paula Rego rejects the link between the two images, op. cit. 13.

also the only book in the Hebrew Bible in which God is not mentioned. Did she not like him very much? Did she forget about him? Was she just not interested? Or did she simply not believe in him? And what about her sister Paula? Rego described the eight images discussed here as the various stations of Mary's cross, but paradoxically, when asked what she would like people to take from them, her reply was not straightforward: 'I hope they will feel in good company here — good and helpful company'.⁴⁵ Good, possibly; helpful, perhaps, depending on who's asking for succour; but cruel and unusual too, definitely. In a scary, lawless status quo in which the only certainty is the suspension of *Habeas Corpus*, and paraphrasing the well-known horror film of 1962, whatever happened to Baby Jesus?

45 Paula Rego in interview with Richard Zimler, *op. cit.*