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Genesis plural

Jenny Diski's reconfiguration of God and his Word in *Only Human*

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This article is devoted to Jenny Diski's polyphonic rewriting of the biblical myth of Abraham and Sarah in *Only Human: A Divine Comedy* (2000). It shows how this subversive novel, through its juxtaposition of two competing narrative voices – an unidentified human narrator and God himself –, challenges the omniscience and transcendence usually attributed to God, but also the power of his creative Word, and launches a reflection on storytelling and truth, presenting thereby an “only human” Bible.

Keywords: reconfiguration of a biblical woman, Sarai (Bible), omniscience, God, *Only Human* (book), Jenny Diski

1. Introduction

Jenny Diski's 2000 novel *Only Human: A Divine Comedy* is a subversive, polyphonic rewriting of the biblical story of Sarah and Abraham. Indiscriminately, and irreverently, drawing on both the Jewish tradition – into which Diski was born – and Christianity¹ to better challenge them, it cleverly intertwines two strong narrative voices – an unidentified narrator and God himself – who keep

1. Jenny Diski is an atheist who was born into a non-practising Jewish family and became familiar with the Bible relatively late in her life. As Philip Tew points out, her rewriting of Genesis in *Only Human* is “informed not only by the Authorized King James Bible, but recent prose translations by Robert Alter and Everett Fox [sic]” (2006: 71). It is also deeply immersed in Jewish culture, and, as such, has sometimes been described as modern midrashic literature – the rabbinic mode of biblical interpretation that questions and fills in the silences of the biblical narratives by retelling them and creatively expanding on them (see, for instance, Terry R. Wright's *The Genesis of Fiction: Modern Novelists as Biblical Interpreters* [2007]).

interrupting each other to give their own version of Genesis. As Ruth Scurr formulates it in her review, *Only Human* “is conceived as a sparse and dissonant battlefield across which different voices vie for dominance” (2000:22). This paper will explore how, through this witty, subversive juxtaposition of competing voices and world-views, *Only Human* questions the omniscience and transcendence usually attributed to God, but also the power of his creative Word, and launches a reflection on storytelling and truth. Diski’s own *Divine Comedy* thereby challenges the traditional interpretations of Genesis and gives to the Bible a very or, rather, “only” human quality.

2. “How could I have known?”: Challenging God’s omniscience

Jenny Diski’s *Only Human* starts on a purely human level and on a mournful note, with an old, weeping Sarai waiting for death. This first chapter is told by an unidentified first-person narrator, who is sitting among a group of visitors surrounding the matriarch. The company is hanging on the old woman’s lips, eager to hear the wisdom she has drawn from her long life: “we are hungry for her conclusions. [...] We do not want her to die without telling what at last she knows, without passing on what she has understood from it all” (Diski 2001:2). But to her audience’s questions, the elderly lady is only able to return bafflement, tears and the puzzling “I wish I were dead. [...] It was all endings. Always. Endings, starting and ending, but no conclusion” (3–4). Faced with this failure, the unidentified narrator proceeds to tell Sarai’s story, in the form of a long flashback.

The mysterious narrative voice at the beginning of *Only Human* is remarkable for two reasons. Firstly, its gender is never explicitly stated which, as Brian Richardson notes in his work on extreme narration in fiction, “causes the most consternation among conventional readers” (2006:4). Some elements, however, seem to indicate that this voice is a woman’s: the narrator’s presence by Sarai in the last moments of her life, the physical gestures of affection they exchange, the vital importance Sarai’s testimony assumes in the eyes of this character, and the ambiguous phrases God uses when referring to the rival story, like for instance “her story” or “the woman’s subversive narrative” (Diski 2001:190–191), without specifying if he implies Sarai or the narrator of her tale.

This unidentified narrator, however, does not stand out as much through her gender, as through her omniscience, a capacity that has often been defined as god-like. Genette, for instance, writes that an omniscient narrator is “capable like God himself of seeing beyond actions and of sounding body and soul” (1980:209). Certainly Diski’s anonymous narrative instance knows all the characters’ deepest

sensations, feelings and thoughts better than the characters themselves, even if she chooses to mostly focus her attention on the matriarch Sarai. Her tale, for instance, starts with the rendering, in Eden-like terms, of Sarai's first physical sensations in the womb: it is "an endless day in a garden filled with comfortable warm air riffling across bare skin. The scent of honeysuckle hangs for a second and then drifts past. Bees laden with pollen [...] hum [...] around her head" (Diski 2001:7). Even the child's birth is depicted by the narrator through the eyes of the newborn, whose parents are but mysterious silhouettes that come "booming into her existence" (7), taking her up and putting her down. Throughout the novel, this omniscient narrator makes ample use of her knowledge of the past, present and future, and of the main characters' most intimate thoughts and feelings, alluding here and there to later developments to arouse the readers' curiosity and provoke God, or depicting the matriarch's darkest fears and doubts until the fateful day of Isaac's sacrifice.

The term "omniscient" has recently been much decried in literary studies for its theological connection. Jonathan Culler, for instance, argues that "since we do not know whether there is a God and what she might know, divine omniscience is not a model that helps us think about authors or about literary narration" (2004:23). In Diski's *Only Human*, however, it is more appropriate than ever and acquires some subversiveness. Indeed, in this novel juxtaposing two clashing voices, not only is godlike omniscience ascribed to the female human narrator, but the divine narrator himself is also largely deprived of it.

The God depicted in *Only Human* is a hasty, blundering creator who is trying to persuade himself and the reader that he is a masterful, authoritative deity in total control of his creation. As Whedbee has shown in *The Bible and the Comic Vision*, even if the tradition – especially Christian – has "obscure[d] and largely exclude[d] a vital role for comedy [...] in biblical literature" (2002:2), both facets of God are already present in the Bible: "the calm, methodical, self-congratulatory creator of Genesis 1" and the "haphazard potter-planter god in the garden, who [...] seems to operate by trial and error" (32). The novel, however, undoubtedly stresses and expands on the second facet.

For instance, God's very solemn comments about how all-powerful, omniscient or self-sufficient he is are repeatedly challenged, more often than not by himself. If after the creation, the divine narrator is extremely proud of himself – "I created. I made a world [...] dependent on a creator for its original existence. A marvel. Now I was a maker" (Diski 2001:10) – when it is Eve who proudly exclaims that she has "created a life", he suddenly does not value this creative ability that much anymore: "as if the lowest [...] thing, crawling the face of the earth did not do the same" (25). In the same vein, when he condemns women to give birth in pain and hardship, God reflects: "What need had I for reproduction [...]?"

What use have I for a line, for verification of belonging, needing, loving and being loved?" (25). But his narrative will prove him wrong, for it is precisely out of his need to reproduce himself that he shapes humankind, and out of his subsequent need to be loved by Abram that a child becomes necessary to ensure the man's attachment.

In Diski's novel not only does God misjudge himself, but also in part appears "blind" while undertaking creation. The situation gets out of hand as soon as God, who proudly calls himself "I am", realises that he actually does not know "what I [am]" and shapes humankind to find answers to his existential questions: "Whatever anyone might say, I did not know what the consequences would be. [...] How could I have known?" (10–11). This confession is a direct reference to the Judeo-Christian tradition and the debate about God's omniscience and human free will. If one can argue, like Paul Fiddes and other process theologians, that "God cannot envisage *all* the possibilities that will emerge from partnership with the creation", the deity must, however, still be "able to offer *particular* aims and possibilities" without which "God can offer no guidance [...] and consolation in the midst of the actual experiences of life" (2000: 171). It is precisely such an unhelpful God that the rightly named *Only Human* represents.

Omniscient as he likes to proclaim himself, God is always, to borrow his own words, "one step behind these humans" (Diski 2001: 43). Thus Adam and Eve invent disobedience while God is still busy congratulating himself on creating prohibition, and Cain comes up with death before it even occurs to God's mind. By the tenth generation, humankind has "taken [his] exhortation to be fruitful and multiply to their hearts[,] [r]ather, to their loins" (56), turning what he has conceived as the poor necessity of nature into the pleasure of the flesh, and giving up God altogether. In an attempt to take control of his creation again and eradicate human imagination, God then chooses Noah, the dumbest and most unimaginative of men, to start again from scratch, but even he manages to catch God unawares by inventing drunkenness. After a period of sulking, during which God practices self-deceit, trying to persuade himself that he is just perfect and happy in his solitary eternity, the divinity chooses Abram, whom he deems to be perfectly dull and malleable, to make sure that, just for once, he will be "ahead of the game" (111). God, however, had reckoned without Abram's wife Sarai.

Indeed, the divinity's "original sin" has been to haphazardly shape both man and woman: "My mistake. My miscalculation. [...] I gave them, in my naïve fondness for separation, [...] each other. And with that, I had given [...] them powers of creation that I had not dreamed of. [...] I did not know about the idea of *us*" (12–13). It is precisely this "us" that is the crux of God's problem, for it is this particular human ability to recreate unity out of plurality, to join forces, that bewilders the divine narrator so much.

3. “I had fallen – how appropriate the metaphor – in love”: Challenging God’s transcendence

The turning point of the novel, which marks the beginning of a love triangle Abram-God-Sarai and God’s progressive fall towards humanity, takes place when Abram realises that Sarai is no longer physically capable of giving him a child through which he would be remembered. This realisation sparks off a deep existential crisis in the patriarch, who desperately “need[s] [...] more than the world to explain what [goes] wrong” (117). Sarai’s attitude to life, by contrast, can be described as deeply atheist. Already as a child, the protagonist is convinced that men and women are alone responsible for their destinies and that human life is merely accidental: “she knew that it was all a charade, and that underneath the belonging [...] was wasteland and wandering. She tried to think about the gods, and how they had ordered the world. [...] But [...] [d]eeply, she knew that those gods didn’t exist” (104).

God’s timely appearance in Abram’s life, just a few days after the shocking realisation of Sarai’s infertility, cannot escape the reader, all the more so since, for Sarai and the human narrator, the deity is but the invention of Abram’s tormented mind. As the narrator muses, “[o]ne should never underestimate the unimagina-tive, and their stolid power, once trouble has colonised their minds, to wreck [sic] havoc on the world” (96).

While it conveniently answers Abram’s wish for certainty, the divine interven-tion also creates a deep rift between the two human lovers, in which God, play-ing the part of the homewrecker, worms his way and eventually gets trapped. He who had planned to merely use Abram to regain control of the world, and had only expected to get the man’s obedience in return for his blessing, is again caught unawares by his creatures’ own creative powers:

I, the omnipotent, the omniscient, the singular, discovered at last what it was to be the object of love.

It came as a surprise to me. I had not built this into creation. Why would I even have thought of it? [...] I had been the creator, the punisher, but I had never been part of an *us*. [...] And yet now I myself experienced this strange capacity that humanity had developed in spite of me. [...] Abram, given the promise of a dream come true, had turned his human feelings towards me. He loved me. [...]

This love that Abram turned on me, [...] was beyond the power even of *I am* to imagine. It was the greatest surprise I had ever had. (135–137)

Completely absorbed in this new relation to his God, Abram grows away from Sarai, behaving like an unfaithful husband who spends the night away from home: “[Abram] erected a tent for Sarai beside his own. [...] [He] had not lost his passion, his capacity for devotion, but it was focused away from Sarai. [...] He [...] desired the one who promised what she had failed to achieve” (127).

If Sarai is jealous of what she sees as her “ghostly adversary” (169), for God, Sarai becomes the rival to supplant, the obstacle that stands “in the way of [his] complete possession of [his] beloved Abram” (179): “I had made an us of him and me far more compelling than she could imagine with her time-tainted human love, which had produced nothing. Between Abram and me, a future would be created. I could give him what she had failed to provide. She was just flesh and bone. I was almighty” (126). God, however, is wrong to despise and underestimate Sarai’s humanity, for, to oppose God’s will, she will choose to incarnate the “way of the world” (176). The best illustration of this is to be found in the Hagar episode, when Sarai resolves to give Abram a child, whatever the cost:

I am stronger than [your god], Abram. I am life. I am of the world. He is not. I will give you a child, [...] because I love you and I have my own need, and my love and my need are stronger than his. We do not need your god, we need a child-bearing woman, Abram. [...] Let us laugh in the face of this god. [...] We will make our own future. [...] It is the way of the world. (175–176)

The rivalry between Sarai and God for the love of Abram might therefore be understood as a fight between Sarai’s own “way of the world” and the will of God, where Sarai stands out through her powers of discernment and her determination, and God through his powerlessness. Indeed, the Matriarch very perceptively identifies God’s psychology, his fears and needs: “Your lord is capricious, [...] enticing and withdrawing like any flirtatious girl who could have her way with the world. [...] He is a separator, a baffled, angry solitary who cannot bear the results of his thoughtless creating. [...] He fears that giving you a child will weaken his hold on you” (171–175). Sarai can be described as an expert psychologist who sees God as a young child going through the Oedipus complex: “He is an infant who gave birth to parents whose interest in each other he cannot tolerate” (175). The contrast is particularly blatant with God, who is completely baffled by the complex psychology of humankind, and even implicitly confirms Sarai’s harsh diagnosis: “If only they had known, they needed no child, they had one already” (199).

Moreover, if Sarai is free to deny God’s existence, Abram’s Lord, on the other hand, seems to be bound hand and foot, as he remarks in one of his few moments of lucidity: “now I loved, as if I had caught it like a virus. [...] I, it seemed, had fallen – oh, how appropriate the metaphor – in love” (146). Theologians like Fides argue that a self-sufficient God, “may still, out of pure free will, [...] [and] for enrichment of the divine life [...] *choose* to be in need and to be completed by those who are created” (2000: 174). In Diski’s *Only Human*, however, God does not even have the choice, but becomes subject to his creatures’ will: “[h]aving chosen, I found myself unable to unchoose, omnipotent Lord though I might be” (178).

Even Isaac’s birth, which should have represented God’s triumph, becomes in Diski’s *Only Human* the symbol of human achievement: “Sarai and Abram had

a boy. [...] It is [...] the way of the world. [...] The lord of Abram's hopes and hopelessness was very nearly forgotten in this affirmation of holding together. The world took on a renewed importance" (205–206). God is forced to recognize that "humanity ha[s] the capacity to go its own way", and that Abram and Sarai "sustain each other against the worst" (203) he can do. God's final move, Isaac's sacrifice, deals a fatal blow to God's relationship with Abram and humankind in general, and marks the ultimate step in the divinity's fall towards humanity. It revolves around a dramatic reversal of roles, where it is Abram who, through his absolute, but loveless obedience to his Lord's will, tests a God that has become "too weak, too fearful, too human to pass the test" and to sacrifice "the future of love" (213).

4. "And the Word was ... what was the word?": Challenging God's creative Word

In Diski's *Only Human*, not only is creation largely beyond God's control and limited knowledge, but the power and authority of his Word are also considerably undermined. The first chapter of the novel already sets the tone with its human narrator celebrating, not the beginning of the earth through God's creative utterances, but a dying Sarai and her words of wisdom: "And at the end she is lachrymose. [...] We are there to sit with her in her final hours, and to honour her for her [...] achievements. [...] [W]e are hungry for her conclusions. We want the wisdom she must have gained" (1–2). This focus on, and celebration of, humankind is then continued in Chapter 2 through a rewriting of Genesis 1. This beautiful passage subverts the language of the first book of the Bible, using it to describe what the human narrator calls "our beginnings" (5), that is, in utero life, and the sudden interruption that our birth constitutes: "In the beginning, and in each of our beginnings, there was the precursor to all else: interruption. [...] But, for a few fleeting moments, life was free simply to be. [...] In the beginning, before the interruption, there was life itself. And it was good ---" (5). Such words establish human life itself at the centre and origin, ruling out any form of verbal creation *ex nihilo*, or even any mention of a divine intervention.

It is at this precise moment that God the narrator makes his appearance into the story, interrupting the human tale:

--- Damn impertinence! Who dares to speak of the beginning? Before the beginning, when they were nothing, when nothing was, [...] I was, and before I was, I was, when nothing was. [...] And what had been for an eternity, might have remained for an eternity of eternity. [...] Yet I made the beginning, in the very beginning. That beginning. I separated and categorised, I called forth [...] kind after kind. (5–6)

In this attempt to persuade his addressees of his absolute primacy, Abram's Lord ends up stating that he has precedence over none other than himself. This non-sensical declaration, which ironically echoes Jesus' "[v]erily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am"² in John 8:58, is a parodic reference that completely saps the sacred character of the Judeo-Christian God's most mysterious and fascinating self-designation to Moses in Exodus 3:14 as "I am who I am" or "I am that I am", a self-designation that has traditionally been interpreted as situating Yahweh as "the ego-agent par excellence, [as] sheer unrestricted agential power" (Kaufman, quoted in Soskice 2002:64) or, as Soskice formulates it, as "Being Itself" (70). Right from the start, Diski's deity unequivocally shows himself to be a testy, authoritarian, and monological godhead who disparages the dialogic confrontation of views and is wistful about the time before the creation, when his supremacy and his vision of reality could not be challenged, when "nothing had its say. And it was good" (Diski 2001:6).

Furthermore, Diski's God likes to believe that being in the position of the interrupter lends him ascendancy over the contending narrator: "The story's mine, not hers, never was. The interruption is the narrative, the interrupter is the narrator. [...] I am the interruption and the narrative. [...] I am the commencement and the conclusion" (190). In *Only Human*, however, God is no longer the alpha and the omega, the story beginning and ending on a purely human level. Moreover, if God often gets offended, disputes and rises up against the human narrator's tale, the latter, by contrast, makes it a point of honour phlegmatically to ignore her rival, whom she considers a nuisance – she refers to him explicitly once, calling him "this most [...] interrupting lord of the narrative" (204).

The human narrator excels in snubbing God, for only an attentive reader can perceive, through a couple of veiled references or hints, that she actually is aware of the competing tale. In Chapter 2, for instance, after God's first interruption, the anonymous narrator resumes her tale of human beginnings as if nothing had happened, just pointing out, in passing, that the beginning of all times is of absolutely no interest: "The beginning of the world (before the beginning, all our beginnings, is none of our concern. A matter of mere curiosity for later, much much later) – the beginning, I say, of the world [...] [is] an endless day in a garden filled with comfortable warm air riffing across bare skin" (6–7). A second eloquent example that marks the narrator's disregard for God and her refusal to acknowledge his authority is her continuous use of the names "Abram" and "Sarai" after the deity has changed them into Abraham and Sarah.

2. *The Holy Bible*. Authorized King James Version. n.d. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. All quotations from the Bible are from this edition.

To further reinforce God's position of inferiority, the human narrator also purposely keeps using the pronoun "we", which stresses the narrator's belonging to a powerful collective identity, and emphasises, by contrast, God's singularity, that is, his loneliness and exclusion from humankind, to which the divinity craves so much to belong.

Moreover, God's remarkably informal register stands in sharp contrast to the human narrator's dignified, "King James"-like language. While, for instance, the divinity congratulates himself with words like "I was pretty pleased with myself. [...] What a canny *I am I am*" (111), the human narrator, on the other hand, muses poetically on the complexities of human love: "why should a time-corrupted palate, requiring a strong sceptical seasoning, no longer beguiled by a simple story of love, see more accurately than thirteen-year-old Sarai in that moment when everything was perfectly clear in the mutual gaze with her beloved?" (64). In the hands of Diski's God, even solemn moments like blessings only come down to – as he formulates it himself – "stuff and nonsense" or "hocus-pocus" (167), and his revelation to Abram of the title "El Shaddai" – God Almighty –, to the rather pitiful confession that "I [...] offer[ed] him a name so mysterious that even I didn't know what it meant" (191).

From a God who does not know the meaning of his name, to a God whose Word progressively loses the little meaning it had, it is but a small step in *Only Human*. Diski's divinity claims that, as in Genesis 1, he spoke the world into existence. It seems, however, that the power of this creative Word is restricted to the production of matter only. Thus when creating man and woman, God "gave them the Word: live, I told them, and, of course, they rearranged it" (65–66). As God's definition of his creation indicates, this injunction to live only implied basic biological functions:

My universe was a [...] mechanism that ensured decay and renewal at every level. [...] All life [...] had a built-in necessity to reproduce, to make a living and to degrade back into the substance of the earth. [...] I had not [...] conceived of [a special relationship of feeling between one individual and another], because it was simply not necessary for the mechanism to work. (135)

Mankind's rearrangement of God's Word, in such a context, consists in the invention of interactions and logical reasoning, that is, the putting together of beings or ideas: "Out of this and that they made something quite new. Give them one thing and they supposed another, then put the two together to make what never existed before. That was my job. Except that I had done it only once, and very practically" (74–75). In other words, God the potter is surpassed by human creative genius, to rather dramatic proportions, as shown by the following parodic rewriting of Saint John's "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word

was God” (John 1:1), where God, appropriately enough, forgets the words of the gospel:

---- In the beginning was the Word and the Word was ... what was the word? It was, it must have been *I am*, and yet the power of that word weakened, I felt the *I am* reduce as my experience of humanity increased. It began to ring hollow, no more than a name among names, and a forgotten name at that. [...] I had to dig deep into my recollection of the moment of separation from eternity to regain a sense of the enormity of my Word. Even then, it was only a recollection, not the vivid thrill of knowing myself as being, having been, always to be, within the everlasting present of eternity.

A new word took root, not *the* word, [...] but a word embedded in humanity. [...] [I]t wound itself around my immaterial being until I too was held fast. [...] Love.” (169)

The choice of the gospel of John, which, of the four, most forcefully emphasizes God’s loving aspect, to celebrate love as a solely *human* creation that supplants the divine Word, reinforces the subversiveness of this passage.

5. “Your lord is an old story”: A reflection on storytelling and truth

Diski’s *Only Human*, through its juxtaposition of two narrative voices contending to give their version of the story, also launches a reflection on storytelling and truth. For God, his “say [...] [is] the story itself” (Diski 2001:190), whereas for Sarai and the human narrator, Abram’s Lord and, more precisely, the events depicted in Genesis from the creation to Babel are just, as Sarai explains to her baffled husband, “an old story” (171) of a God “who made and [...] destroyed at will, and [of] a humanity entirely at his mercy”; it is a myth passed down among women from generation to generation “to explain why [they] have so little choice in [their] lives” (50). This statement is subversive for two reasons at least. Firstly, it implies that women, the unspoken names in the biblical genealogies, have become in *Only Human* the living memory and keepers of the events we know as the Bible, while men are totally ignorant of it. Secondly, for Diski’s female characters, the story of Abram’s God – that is, the Scriptures – is not, and cannot be, *the* truth. These events are just “as true as *human* stories can get” (50; emphasis mine), which challenges any claim to absolute truth associated with the Bible.

The last chapter of *Only Human*, in particular, is remarkable through its self-reflexive metafictionality. Appropriately entitled “Ending”, it initiates a reflection on the very notion of narrative closure. “You begin a story, a telling, [says the human narrator] and by the end the story tells itself. Finally, motive, [...]

character and meaning are futile. The end is reached, and by the end, none of it matters, because only the ending makes sense of anything that went before" (Diski 2001: 209–210). This statement alludes to the Judeo-Christian *telos*, or, to borrow Fiddes's formulation, the "linear view of time, with the arrow flying from creation to the Last Judgement" (2000: 181), which has had an unequalled impact on Western storytelling. The narrator's assertion can also be understood, more specifically, in the light of Kermode's argument in *Sense of an Ending* that, in narratives, the end bestows meaning upon the whole by transforming mere successiveness into meaningful time (1970: 46). But Diski's narrator seems to challenge this outlook. Her point, in telling Sarai's narrative, being to give a voice to this formerly silenced woman, she cannot accept seeing Sarai relegated to futility, to being just one step in the Judeo-Christian drama, or yet another unspoken name in its genealogies. She wants Sarai's feelings, trials and tribulations on earth to remain significant.

The only alternative to the Judeo-Christian *telos* seems to be, for her, the interruption of her narrative: "Only a story without an end sustains the notion that the dreams and struggles of its protagonists account for more than the workings of chance and necessity. The only story without an end is one in which the narrator arrests the narrative. [...] There is only and always just the one ending" (Diski 2001: 210). This "one ending", on a human level, being death, the narrator deliberately interrupts her narrative before reaching this very last step in Sarai's life, thereby making sure that "[t]he interruption is indeed the narrative" (210). This sentence, which God spoke earlier to justify his so-called authority as interrupter, is here used subversively by the human narrator to imply that her interrupting the narrative indeed makes sure that we still have a narrative, that is, that Sarai's life remains meaningful. Meaningful, at least, in the human narrator's eyes, if not in Sarai's. For, in the last chapter, the narrator brings the reader back to the beginning of the novel, with the old, broken Sarai waiting for death. This time, however, this image leads to the novel's last words and the ultimate refusal of narrative closure: "And here she lies on her bed and waits, while we keep watch. [...] She is waiting. That is all" (214–215).

Waiting is indeed all Sarai can do, for the folly of Abram's binding of Isaac has irreparably shattered the Matriarch's purpose in life and in her story, as the narrator comments: "The fragments remained, [...] but they [...] no longer offered a story that made sense. [...] The present [...] meant nothing, a bleak corridor, too dark to see ahead, too narrow to permit a backward glance" (213–214). This is where the human narrator intervenes, in a godlike way, to shape the raw material of Sarai's life into the tale we have just read: "Stories would be told – and told and told – that were worked like shapeless clay [...] into the semblance of sense, but the final form was always in the wishful eyes of the shaper. [...] The clay needed dreams and wishes breathed into it before it became anything recognisable" (213–214).

6. Conclusion

The human narrator's reflection on the process of storytelling, which foregrounds the role of the human actor in the production and organisation of meaning, neatly sums up what can be seen as the dominant message of Diski's *Only Human*, namely that meaning is not fixed, given or universal but subjective, limited and provisional, and is certainly not to be found in any form of transcendence. If Sarai and the human narrator seem to have always been convinced of this, Abram, by contrast, learns the lesson to his cost, for his search for certainty eventually leads to the implosion of his relationship and to Sarai's physical and psychological disintegration.

Strikingly, God himself seems to gradually relay this conclusion as his involvement with humanity dramatically increases. He acknowledges that meaning is one of humankind's brainwaves to which he has succumbed: "There is no meaning in eternity. [...] Meaning was a wonder [my creatures] had created for themselves [...] to conceal the blankness [...] of their lives. [...] I discovered that if I were to be anything to myself, beyond blank perfection, I needed them to become my meaning" (Diski 2001: 185). Moreover, the subtitle, with its allusion to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, suggests a reading of the novel in which God, like Dante, is guided to deeper understanding. Diski's deity, however, journeys downwards only, from the divine spheres to the human realm, to be instructed by his creatures into the ways of the world, as the anonymous narrator proudly declares: "We taught him a thing or two about being human. *I am that I am* learned the power of *we would be*" (204).³

If there is any meaning in life, according to Diski's masterful biblical rewriting, it resides in the human capacity to frame wishes and dreams into stories. To borrow Sarai's words, "the stories we tell about it make living possible" (105). Diski, in writing *Only Human*, wanted "to take [the Bible] back as an essentially human story" (Diski, quoted in Brown 2004). Her novel indeed celebrates its human characters, but, most importantly, humanizes God and his story, since, as the human narrator points out: "His story, her story, my story: it doesn't matter. The need

3. Decisively defeated by his creatures, God severs all contact with humankind, as the opening lines of *After These Things*, the sequel to *Only Human*, indicate: "So finally [...] humankind beat the Lord at the story game and the Lord sulked mightily. [...] A great long lordly sulk there was after Abraham bound his boy, challenging and defeating God-the-Narrator with the threat of the premature end of His own story" (Diski 2004: 1). God "clam[s] up" (Diski 2004: 1) in this biblical rewriting that focuses on Isaac and his son Jacob, no longer appearing as the intrusive garrulous narrator, but merely as a mysterious voice in the dreams of Abraham's children.

to tell it makes it a human story, whoever authors the narration. Eternity needs nothing, humanity needs a story” (Diski 2001: 204–205). This is a powerful, bitter-sweet celebration of humanity and of the art of storytelling as ultimate *locus* of meaning.

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