

VALUES IN ROSE TREMAIN'S WORKS WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON SACRED COUNTRY

EDIT SPICZÉNÉ-BUKOVSZKI

From Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf the literature of England has been graced with first-rate fiction written by women. Nevertheless no English generation has contained as many talented women novelists as contemporary England now enjoys. The growth of writing by and about women has been a conspicuous feature of British culture in the most recent decades. The establishment of publishing houses that specialize in women's writing e.g. *Virago* has made a significant contribution to this phenomenon. There are anthologies of contemporary women poets and writers as if being a female writer meant to be a member of a special caste. Since 1929, when Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* appeared we are aware of the fact that, undoubtedly, there are things in the history of creative writing that women should be made up for. On the other hand there are women novelists whose consciousness of gender has not become part of their material. Rose Tremain, the writer of *Sacred Country* and several other authors belong to this group. She herself comments on this issue: „I have strenuously resisted categorisation as a 'woman's writer' and the notion that women should address themselves only to women's problems, as this strikes me as limiting and inhibiting, a kind of literary sexism in itself.”¹ So she is not the writer to be chosen as the flagship of the feminist movement, but her works explore vast territories of human experiences with such talent, originality and sensitivity that are worth serving as material for this essay. Her novel *Sacred Country* chronicles the events of the twenty two years between 1958 and 1980, but the values that are put in the centre are as old as Plato's ideas. Duality of things, the paradox of appearance and reality have always been of central importance in art. Our traditional stereotypes of thinking are challenged to the utmost as we are to face the above mentioned philosophical and epistemological issues through the story of a transsexual. Reading the novel one can become horrified, curious, sympathetic but not indifferent. We are shown a mirror but are not told whether the reflections are real or not. As one of the characters formulates it in the novel: „Sometimes stalactites and stalagmites met. Then, it seemed to anyone entering the cave, that pillars had been built there to hold the roof up. 'And this' said Miss McRae grandly, 'is a quite extraordinary thing! Nature playing a marvellous wee game, children.’”²

¹ Leslie Henderson (ed.): *Contemporary Novelists*, St James Press, Chicago–London 1991, p.815.

² Rose Tremain: *Sacred Country*, Sinclair–Stevenson, London 1992, p.29.

The game of nature or life is played on the grounds of strict rules. These are self-discovery, acceptance of others and yourself, emotional bravery, openness. To follow the rules does not mean automatically to be the winner, it only promises the chance of not being a loser.

Rose Tremain handles the complexity of theme with expertise and competence, and writes about it in a very convincing way. What makes her novel a remarkable success is the method of characterisation and the entrepreneurial spirit with which she combines traditional and modernist ways of writing. This novel is a winner of the James Tait Black Memorial Prize (for fiction) and the prestigious Prix Fémina Etranger (France). Her earlier works also prove that she is deeply involved in the issues of crisis of self, gender and identity. Before examining the values of her novel *Sacred Country*, it seems inevitable to outline her literary career up to now trying to establish a system of values she stands up for.

Her life and works

Rose Tremain belongs to the group of writers whose literary career started in the early Eighties together with Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie, Peter Ackroyd and Kazuo Ishiguro. In Great Britain the Seventies and the Eighties mainly were the period when rules of individualism and entrepreneurialism prevail. It was the age of yuppies on the one hand and that of decay and neglect on the other. „We were in the post-post war world, which was the pre-twenty-first century world, shapeless, unprophesized, profoundly insecure, and plainly a new challenge to all its writers.”³ The ideas and themes of art seem to be unfixed and transitory and found their way of expression in two styles of fiction „the self conscious and the realistic, the novel of inter-textual pastiche and the novel of social concern and morality. These styles met often in Eighties fiction, post-modern experiment frequently mixing and merging with traditional narrative.”⁴ From this point of view we can call Rose Tremain a very characteristic representative of this literary period. Women writers also contributed significantly to the ‘postmodern’ experiment of the decade, eg. Angela Carter often depicted the mirrored and the refracted. Jeanette Winterson explores the border of gender, and deals with androgyny and lesbian sexuality. In general, the sexual and gender representation in the novel has got a special importance. Lorna Sage in her book on post-war women novelists finds it important to claim that „women writes are agents of alterneity, and interested in reinscribing the boundaries of fiction.”⁵ Despite all the mobility, change and variety that exist these days in literature she points out a feature women writers have in common: „they pour back into the novel conviction, mockery and

³ Malcolm Bradbury: *The Modern British Novel*, Secker–Warburg, London 1993, p. 400.

⁴ Ibid. p. 405.

⁵ Lorna Sage: *Women in the House of Fiction*, Macmillan, London 1992, p. 11.

partisan passion.”⁶

Rose Tremain was born in 1943 in London. She received her degree in literature in 1963 from the Sorbonne and graduated with a BA honours in English Studies at the University of East Anglia in 1967. Since 1980 she has been a full-time writer and besides writing she also gives lectures in creative writing at the University of East Anglia. She was the recipient of the Dylan Thomas Prize for Short Stories in 1984, the year when *The Colonel's Daughter and Other Stories* was published. Rose Tremain was chosen as one of the Best Young British Novelists in 1983. She is also a literary critic, who reviews regularly for radio, and was a Booker Prize Judge in 1988. Her fourth and fifth novel, *The Swimming Pool Season*, (1985) and *Restoration* (1989) were acknowledged with the Angel Literary Award. The latter won the award for the Sunday Express Book of the Year and was runner-up for the Booker Prize. *Sacred Country* (1992) is the winner of the James Tait Black Memorial Prize (for fiction) and the prestigious Prix Fémina Etranger (France). *The Way I Found Her* (1997) is a psychological thriller. Her second historical novel *Music and Silence* (1999) set in the early seventeenth century at the Danish court, won the Whitbread Novel Award. *The Colour*, (2003) her latest novel set in New Zealand at the time of the West Coast Gold Rush in the 1860's was shortlisted for the 2004 Orange Prize for Fiction.

Most of her works have earned both critical and popular acclaim. In this chapter I attempt to introduce the genres, themes, techniques and choices that characterize her craft and outline the values she represents in her novel, *Sacred Country*. Tremain's versatility can be proved by her eagerness to explore different forms of writing: short stories, radio plays, children's stories and novels. This appetite for different modes of expression is coupled with a variety of times, situations and setting. Her first novel *Sadler's Birthday* appeared in 1976. It is first but not the only of her portrayals that depict the bleak desert of old age, masterly emphasizing the state of mind, the general forgetfulness. Personal recollections of an old woman also form the guiding principle in Rose Tremain's third novel, *The Cupboard*, and ageing people appear several times in her short stories as either central or peripheral characters. Love between people of the same sex and the motivating force behind their actions recur in her other works as well; e.g. in *Letters to Sister Benedicta*, *Sacred Country* and various short stories.

The possibility of renewal is a general image in her writings. If there is any message the readers are allowed to decode it is the following: the inhibitions of old age not always real, sometimes only illusory. The characters in *Sacred Country* will also serve as examples to prove that imagination, creative openness and self-appreciation are not dependent on any outer circumstances.

⁶ Ibid. p. 12.

Rose Tremain's third novel, *The Cupboard* was published in 1982 and it became a remarkable success as a memoir-like story that emerges from the peculiar meeting of two seemingly different characters. Erica March, aged 87, a novelist and political activist unfolds her memories to Ralph, a young American journalist. Ralph wants to rescue her from the neglect of years, hoping to find out the secret of Erica, that he could adapt for his own life. The reader is given a vivid and complex kaleidoscope about the century through the life of the old lady. An important aspect of Tremain's art surfaces quite clearly in this novel: her aptitude for using symbols. The cupboard that Erica owned since she was eight, and that accompanied her throughout her life can be interpreted as a symbol of life's greatest mystery. When we are born our life is as empty as a cupboard. We gradually become aware of our limitations, and our experiences fill the emptiness. Some people are gifted with possessing the key to the cupboard, some seek it in vain. The novel ends in Erica's committing suicide in an eccentric but very telling way. She wraps her body in a tablecloth, lays it out neatly in the cupboard, under the few skirts and dresses that still hang on the rail and takes her tablets pill by pill until she dies. The writer expects her readers to decide whether this was the last trick of a rich and intricate life or a possible solution to Ralph's question. I would reveal it as a very constraint and suggestive climax of the novel's symbolism: a lifeline returning into its starting point can mean accepting everything that happened inside the circle irrespective of whether it was right or wrong. But, of course, the truth is not so simple, and Rose Tremain celebrates every small success or fragment of knowledge, which can contribute to the deeper understanding of life. Her collections of short stories seem to be brilliant examples of this. *The Colonel's Daughter and Other Stories* was published in 1984 and was followed three years later by *the Garden of Villa Mollini*. *Evangelista's Fan* is her third collection of short stories. Each of these books gained remarkable critical attention, good reviews and literary awards and even a willing publisher, Sinclair-Stevenson that issued her collected short stories in one volume in 1996. A reviewer from the *Independent* called her „one of the finest short-story writers in the country” and having read her short stories it does not seem to be an exaggeration. Most of her stories engage simply with their subject; love, bereavement, madness, death, that are depicted with clarity, compassion, intelligence, self-irony and wit. Tremain is able to handle even her pessimism lightly, endings often contain ironic twists, or comic effects soothe the poignancy. E.g. the elderly American housewife Leota, in *Bubble and Stars*, who used to insist viewing the world through a purple visor, commits suicide in a plastic bubble in the Niagara Falls. But the absurdities are recalled by the author with too much compassion to laugh.

The link that can be discovered by the short stories and *Sacred Country* is twofold. In the centre of most stories there is a revelatory moment which entails inevitable consequences. On the other hand most of the characters have their

chance to make change or improvement in their lives, but they usually fail. „The individual is tormented not only by the inability to break free of fate but also by the inescapable knowledge of what such action could bring.”⁷ The fourth of her novels, *The Swimming Pool Season*, published in 1985, the winner of the Angel Literary Award, also provides some admirable symbolism. The swimming pool can stand for dignity and craftsmanship and on a more abstract level it can be a symbol of life. It has its limitations, in the beginning it's devoid of history, but it is always ready to be filled with significance.

To make the picture of Rose Tremain's art convincing and comprehensive we have to mention her venture into writing a historical novel. *Restoration*, published in 1989 is one of her most highly acclaimed novels. At one level the novel is an imaginative reconstruction of a historical era, the period of Restoration after the revolution of 1640. It depicts the atmosphere of the age extremely well, although is not meant to be a historical account. It is rather a kind of myth, in reference to which the title takes on a different colour. Restoration refers to the spiritual condition of the central character in the novel, Robert Merivel. He is a physician and anatomist by education, but also interested in painting, music and astronomy like someone from the era of great Renaissance polymaths. „He is restless, profoundly shallow. Brilliantly diverse, a man so various that he seems to be not one but all mankind's epitome.”⁸ Merivel manages to work his way into the patronage of King Charles II and becomes the recipient of gifts, honours, even a knighthood and an estate. Being the king's loving confidant and clown, he is obliged to marry one of the royal mistresses without being a real husband to her. Under no circumstances must Merivel fall in love with his wife, but he does. As a result he is deprived of his land and exiled. He takes refuge with an old friend and fellow-student, John Pearce, who works as a doctor in an asylum. He represents that imaginary wholeness and peace that Merivel longs for but could only find after tragic losses. He is put through a series of challenges and disasters, he must endure his friend's and lover's death, the plague of 1665 and the Great Fire of London. According to some critics the events of the story line point too obviously to the direction of his spiritual redemption. Merivel is restored to the benevolence of his sovereign, to his medical profession. He is restored to mental health and also as father to his only child. *Restoration* won the award for the Sunday Express Book of the Year, the Angel Literary Award and was runner-up for the Booker Prize, and it has been made into a film.

For the flavour and texture of the novel Tremain's literary competence and gift should be praised, but I would rather underline the significance of strange sufferings and redemption that are key themes in the novel. Something similar can

⁷ Lavinia Greenlaw: „Fables of the fateful”, *TLS* 1994, July 8, p. 19.

⁸ Walter Nash: „Turbulence”, *London Review of Books* 1989, Nov. 9, p. 22.

enter every life as it happens in her novel, *Sacred Country*, which is an even more profound and complex masterpiece of hers.

„Sacred Country”

It is difficult to give any real notion of the story without making it sound comic or vulgar. It is primarily about the life of a girl, called Mary Ward, who had a revelation at the age of six, that she is not a girl at all. She is a boy. For a long time she hopes that the mistake made by nature will be remedied. Then she starts her lonely, painful struggle in order to become male, or at least as male as biological circumstances allow. There are plenty of other characters whose lives are loosely connected. Each of them is a direct hit of characterization in itself. Tremain has always been concerned with the interrelationship of lives, even „when they only throw a distant shadow across each other”⁹

The story begins on 15th February in 1952 when there was a national two-minute silence for the funeral of King George VI, and ends in 1980. Mary, her parents Estelle and Sonny Ward, and her two-year old brother Timmy are out in a potato field to observe the two-minute silence for the funeral of George VI. The series of comic paradoxes begins here, as Sonny does not know the time since the minute hand of his watch has fallen off. We are given an insight into the thoughts of the six-year old Mary. „She is told to pray for the dead King but all she could remember of the King was his head, cut off at the neck on the two penny stamp. So she was looking at her pet guineafowl, Marguerite”: ‘I have a secret to tell you, dear, and this is it: I am not Mary. That is a mistake. I am not a girl. I’m a boy.’ This was how and when it began, the long journey of Mary Ward.”¹⁰

The first hint that the relationship between the members of the Ward family is not ideal is the fact that Mary addresses these words to her pet, and actually her mother is the last to get to know Mary’s secret. Mary says she can remember the time when she was born, his childhood, and even the day when she got lost in a flat field. „When I was three, I was no longer the one. Tim was born. [...] But after Timmy came, everything changed. My mother and father used to put him between them in their sagging bed. I warned them I would kick Timmy to death; So my father began to think me evil.”¹¹ The jealousy she felt when her brother was born was ignored by her parents, which resulted in growing aggressiveness in her. Estelle, Mary’s mother on the surface seems to be a not-quite-right-in-the-head person, who is occasionally sent to an asylum, but in fact she is gifted with extreme sensitivity and the wisdom of the insane that make her a central character in the novel. She realises the tragic failure of her own life and is

⁹ Penelope Fitzgerald: „Time’s wounding arrow”, *TLS* 199, July 6, p. 524.

¹⁰ Rose Tremain: *Sacred Country*, p. 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 12-13.

not able to bear the consequences of this discovery. She married her husband under the illusive effect of sexual desire. She feels as if she were in prison and suffers from being unable to act. Mary seems to inherit the sensitive imagination of her mother and inclination for brutality from her father, by whom she is cruelly beaten several times. One element of her tragedy is that she so fiercely refuses all the ways of hypocrisy and yet, she is forced to be a hypocrite herself to make life bearable.

Mary formulates very clearly people's reaction towards the unusual. „My mother told me she had a friend at Mountview who thought she was a chicken. And this was why this person was locked up there. No one examined her for feathers. No one offered her a worm. I thought of writing to her: ‘This country is afraid of the unusual’ but then I found that I didn't relish the idea of writing a letter to a hen. I was as narrow-minded as everyone else.”¹² Mary's eccentric deeds have their roots somewhere buried deep in her relationship with her mother. In her own childish at the same time painstakingly sorrowful way she wants to express her emotions, desperately seeking love and acceptance. When she is forced to go to dancing classes she makes the performance end in a scandal wearing her wellingtons instead of ballet shoes. Another attempt of hers to bridge the gap between her and the world is her conjuring tricks. She spends much of her time trying to develop her own identity or rather make the others understand her oddity. She feels comfortable neither with herself nor the others. Mary begins to construct her previous life. She thinks she was a magician, known as ‘The Great Camillo’, and he was born again as Mary. There had been a blunder.

Her father reacts to her performances and acts with brutality, they gradually grow bitter hatred towards each other. What makes these events utterly upsetting and tragic is that Estelle, her mother does not protect or comfort her. They have a very special relationship: Mary sees her mother as a helpless victim – actually that is what she was – and wants to save her. When Mary realises that she is unable to do so, she tries to exile Estelle from her thought. She always feels the absence of a real, protective, loving mother who should have taught her the rules of the game called Life. Mary's state of mind can be described in phrases: underlying unease, guilt-ridden uncertainty, denial and longing. This symbolic dissolving and binding characterizes their relationship in a very telling way and underlies the whole story.

The events that push the story line forward are connected with the brutality of Mary's father. He ruins Mary's self-image and self-appreciation and she has no desire to bear life at home any longer. She finds refuge at Miss McRae, her primary school teacher as she did earlier at Irene. These two characters and her grandfather Cord are offered to Mary as healers or saviours throughout her life. They provide her with home and above all caring love. As time passes Mary accumulates enough

¹² Ibid. p. 153.

experience and knowledge to be able to make decisions about her life, she ceases to be drifted with the events. She moves to London, finds a job, makes friends, and steps on the way which leads her to her „sacred country” when she finds her real identity.

Her journey was painstaking and long, and at the beginning lonely. She is obsessed with the idea of finding somebody to share her secret with. First she wants to tell it Miss McRae her teacher, then she goes to a specialist but no one can understand her. Mary also tries to find an answer in the church, but Reverend Geddis only shook his head, side to side. These reactions on a more general level illustrate the common way people react to things that differ from the normal, from the expected. No wonder that Mary has always felt her life absurd. „I was too cowardly to risk being hated by the whole world and to hear only silence falling all round me...”¹³ The tragic paradox is that life can't be lived alone, we cannot be ourselves without any form of relationship with other people. Once Mary gives her grandfather a framed brass rubbing of Sir John Elliot.

„Cord hung it in the downstairs lavatory. He said it was capital. He said brass rubbings were ghostly things in two senses and everything important in life was dual, like being and not being, male and female, and that there was no country in between. I sat on the toilet and looked at Sir John and he looked at me with his empty eyes and I thought Cord is wrong, there is a country in between, a country that no one sees, and I am in it.”¹⁴ I would take this invisible country as one of the interpretations of „sacred country” At the end of the novel Mary-Martin seems to find a home in Nashville, in America. But till that moment an exuberant wealth of events and characters are presented.

Characters

Mary experiences love towards her classmate Lindsey Stevens, but it certainly is a one-sided obsession causing her even more torture. Mary gets involved in a lesbian love affair with Georgia Dickins. Quite paradoxically Mary brakes off the relationship with Georgia for the very reason: she despises Georgia for desiring her. She can only love women who love men, not women who love women. Apart from this reference to physical aspects of love the author seems to neglect this dimension of Mary's transformation. When Dr. Stems, the specialist, invites Martin home to have reconstructive surgery in order to have a penis he refuses it. This happens in 1975 in Tennessee, in America where we meet Martin working and living as a man after a hysterectomy operation. His old ego and former life seem to have faded away, but he feels a certain homesickness for the fields, the river and for the countryside. Finally he finds all these things and even more on Judge

¹³ Ibid. p. 129.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 148.

Riveaux's farm. „Age isn't the only thing to creep on us. Sometimes it's happiness.”¹⁵ In the last chapters Tremain uses the pronoun „he”, which indicates that Mary became Martin and managed to escape from the prison of a mistaken identity. In accordance with these lines the author puts the stress not on the explanation of why it is happened like this. Someone with psychological bias can suspect the roots of her transsexuality in her early childhood, in her dreams of saving her mother. The others may tend to accept the idea of immortality of soul. The phenomenon itself can also be treated as an illness. Tremain thinks it more important to show the consequences of Mary's oddity, her struggle to define and accept herself and make others respect and love her. Mary herself gives a simple but quite convincing explanation that she formulates visiting the Natural History Museum in London.

„There are several things on Earth that we do not know, or if we know we cannot explain. For example a centipede can run faster than a cheetah. In Peru there is a snake that milks cows. There are plenty of wonders that we cannot even imagine. The only thing we can do is to remain open to perceive them. The things we learn in a single afternoon remind me that we live on the planet of the unexpected.... It gives me hope, to realise all this.”¹⁶ When she reveals the whole process she undertakes to Pearl, she refers back to this visit. „It's no stranger than millions of other things on earth. Don't despise me for it. You don't despise a tree for living for fifteen centuries or a treefrog for turning up in Kent. These things are just quirks of place and time, and this is what I am and have always been.”¹⁷

At the beginning of the novel we can find three solemn epigraphs. A quotation from St John of the Cross „I live without inhabiting Myself – in such a wise that I/ Am dying that I do not die” Hamlet's words in Act I, Scene 11: „Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems' ” And finally some lines by T. S. Eliot from *The Hollow Men*: „Between the idea/And the reality/Between the motion/And the act Falls the Shadow.”

The point is not that the novel was written to endorse these remarks. The quotation from St John of the Cross tells us that the uncomplaining struggle of Mary-Martin to inhabit herself represents, after the fact, as it were, a kind of sainthood; that her ultimate state, as a man who is not a man, is nonetheless an authentic collocation of being and seeming, which, if you want, may be thought an emblem of the way people in general seem and are. The 'shadow' can represent the life of Mary-Martin, caught in the desert between sexes as people are continually stranded between the opposing forces of desire and reality.

Choosing these epigraphs, Rose Tremain wants to underline that this

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 353.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 246.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 249.

phenomenon of being somebody else other than who you are thought to be is not a unique one, at all. This tragic duality is of the same age as poetic imagination or philosophical abstraction. The epigraphs capture the very point of the novel. The latter can be interpreted as the illustration to these lines.

Mary's whole behaviour proves the understanding of the difference between appearance and reality. Being a six-year old she is able to put into words that she is somebody other than who she seems to be. Later, she trains herself to be quite a good conjuror, as she realised that what people want to see is the appearance. One more remark should be mentioned in connection with the epigraphs. Penelope Fitzgerald, who reviewed Tremain's novel in TLS wrote: „I greatly admire Rose Tremain's brilliant new novel, but I can't make out why she gave it an epigraph from *The Hollow Men*. Eliot's straw men see no visions because they find it safer not to („Let me be no nearer”). Tremain's characters, on the other hand, are will and intention incarnate.”¹⁸

I must contradict this opinion due to my strong conviction that there are 'straw men' in this novel as well. Before citing arguments it seems sensible to make a difference between the characters. The first group is „the firm of dreamers” as Mary referred to herself and her grandfather Cord. But undoubtedly there are other members: E.g. Edward Harker, the local maker of cricket bats, who believes in the transmigration of souls, and he is sure he was a nun in his previous existence. Then Walter Loomis, an ungainly young man of limited intellect but with a gift for country and western music. What they have in common is that they all have their own beliefs and dreams and they dare to undertake them sooner or later, they have the strength to make an attempt to make these dreams come true. The other group of characters represent images of illusory wholeness and peace: Irene Simmons, a cleaning woman, her beautiful daughter Pearl and Miss McRae, Mary's primary school teacher. They are born with an ability to be contented, they have God-given properties of purity, warmth, kindness.

Last, but not least, there are several peripheral characters whom I consider as reminiscent of Eliot's straw men. They do not want to face up to the reality, although quite paradoxically they are depicted as earthly-bound, realistic characters. They can be seen as weak counterpoints to Mary, who after all doesn't escape from her fate, willing to risk losing precious things in a bid to gain the peace of inhabiting herself.

Narration techniques

Tremain often employs the device of deceptive simplicity. In a few sentences, sometimes with only a simple phrase she can describe a character. Nothing much straightforward is said about the characters, nevertheless the depths of their minds

¹⁸ Penelope Fitzgerald: „Time's wounding arrow”, p. 524.

and souls are revealed through their acts and words. We are not given the details of their physical appearance. Partly because it is not of prior significance, partly because the construction of the images are left to the reader. As we can read in an essay about contemporary literary theory: „[...] the addressee is not a passive recipient of an entirely formulated meaning, but an active agent in the making of meaning.”¹⁹

The other factor that makes Tremain's characterization so convincing is that she is able to put herself into other people's mind. Susan Hill formulated it in her book, *The Lighting of the Lamps*: „There is something magical about this ability both to become other people, to enter fully into them and convince the reader of the imaginative truth of the resulting observations and insights and, at the very same time, to be totally detached, from outside of, above and beyond, all those characters.”²⁰

The two main characters whose thoughts the writer reveals in first person singular are Mary and her mother Estelle. Between their thoughts „the story anonymously does the talking” Changing the point of view serves the aim to keep the story-teller and also the reader remarkably distanced from the events and the characters. The latter fight their own struggle, the former happen in their own way without our sympathy or involvement. The common feature of Estelle and Mary is „that they both have an acute consciousness of self. Their vivid imagination conceptualizes not only emotional, but intellectual states”²¹

At Mountview asylum the patients were to play „What's my Line?” a game similar to a quiz show on TV (Frank Kermode remarks in his review that, „What's my line” could be a subtitle of the book.) Estelle has interesting thoughts during the game: „None of the women, including me, had ever been anything. We'd never had a line. Being a mother and a wife is not a line...”²² It rhymes with Mary's ideas about women inventors. „And then I remembered something else, something awful: in the whole of the Dictionary of Inventions, which spanned nine centuries, there was only one woman inventor. Only one! Even the wool-combing machine and the stocking frame had been invented by men. It made me feel terrible, sad as the wind.”²³

Reading these lines one can meditate whether these are some faint marks of a feminist slogan reflecting the author's opinion or not. Rose Tremain has never been a typical woman writer in the sense that she hasn't chosen her characters to illustrate the traditional male-female relationship or to express her disillusionment

¹⁹ Raman Selden – Peter Widdowson: *Contemporary Literary Theory*, London 1993, p. 47.

²⁰ Susan Hill: *The Lighting of the Lamps*, Hamish Hamilton, London, p. 188.

²¹ Penelope Fitzgerald: „Time's wounding arrow”, p. 524.

²² *Ibid.* p. 82.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 167.

about the state of women in the world. She is a typical example of the „androgynous creative mind.” Susan Hill summed it up in a nice way: „I’m certain now that this gift or talent is absolutely sexless. A great creative writer is, for the purposes of his art, neither male nor female.”²⁴ The other works of Rose Tremain show that inquisitive, relentless, modern intelligence that she treats her themes and characters with. I would attribute these above cited ideas to her unabated will to explore the complexity of life, the cross section of human nature rather than to any feminist-like message that she wanted to convey.

David Lodge in his book *The Modes of Modern Writing* formulates those general ideas that underlie a good deal of postmodernist writing. Among others he mentions contradiction, discontinuity, and sexually ambivalent characters as devices deployed by postmodernist artists.²⁵ Rose Tremain seems to contribute to the postmodernist experiment in this respect. She explores the theme of unfixed gender and fragmentary identity, and the structure of her novel emphasizes the contrast between the conventional novelistic approach and the post-modern manner. While the plot suggests the impression that we are told a story in a traditional chronological order, the construction of the novel reflects a more experimental approach. The book is divided into four main parts by the author, with twenty chapters and numerous subchapters. Time is always accurately marked at the beginning of each chapter. The reader is given the delusion that he is reading an exact, detailed chronology of events. There are even references to political issues of that era, for example the Cuban crisis, or the assassination of President Kennedy. This accuracy and conciseness are in sharp contrast with the illusory, wanton, sometimes weird character of the story line. The subtitles of the chapters refer to the event or to the scene, but sometimes seem to be meaningless for example „A Storm”, „One Sunday” Some chapters are marked with the name of the narrator „Mary:”, „Estelle:” These parts consist of soliloquies of characters, recalling memories of the past. The chronological order is often broken. „Two women sat alone in their houses and looked at the future.”²⁶ The author uses time-shifts without any transition, which gives the impression that events and times are interwoven.

The narration techniques also underline the fragmentary and changeable illusion of reality. The inner monologue of Mary and that of her mother, Estelle from time to time give way to the third person singular of an anonymous storyteller. This omniscient narrator always distracts the reader from the identification and sympathy he feels towards the characters. Moments of tragedy or self-pity are counterbalanced with humour and irony. When Mary broke off her

²⁴ Susan Hill: *The Lighting of the Lamps*, p. 132.

²⁵ David Lodge: *The Modes of Modern Writing*, Edward Arnold, London 1977, p. 220-226.

²⁶ Rose Tremain: *Sacred Country*, p. 250.

relationship with Georgia, the furious reactions are described in a very characteristic way: „They were in Georgia's flat. It was still nicely situated but its owner was elsewhere in her mind. She swooped on things like a bat. She took her lime-green suit out of the wardrobe and tore at the seams with her teeth. She came from a family with strong hands and strong teeth.”²⁷

This technique results in a peculiar amalgam of subjective and objective, shows the interplay of events and the emotions they evoke. The alternation of climaxes–anticlimaxes gives the novel an interrupted, rough rhythm. The four parts separated by the author do not coincide with the turning points of the story, with the phases of Mary's inside journey. The first period of her self-discovery and self-analysis ends when she leaves her home and parents. The second one is marked by the scene when she finally reveals her secret to Edward Harker, and he believes it. „There has been a mistake somewhere, Edward, and it won't ever be put right or made more bearable if no one believes what I'm saying. 'I believe you', he said quickly. [...] Neither of us spoke for quite a while and the silence marked the passing of something: it marked the passing of my isolation.”²⁸ The next phase brings her the acceptance of herself-himself divided as she is, for example in a letter she names herself „Divided Devon” The key moment of this process of submitting herself to her fate is the moment when she throws her skirts out of the window. „Long ago the dead skirts had been cleared away but she thought now that the start of her happiness had been there, when her skirts had thrown themselves out into the void.”²⁹

„Postmodernist is suspicious of continuity.”³⁰ In *Sacred Country* there are several examples of disrupting the spatio-temporal and logical continuity. „I thought we were being allowed to step out of the world, being given the knack of it.”³¹ thinks Mary. She admires her grandmother Livia, who was a gliding pilot. Mary herself was excellent at vaulting. Sense of weightlessness recurs several times throughout the novel. Timmy who proves to be talented at swimming always feels weightless when he launches into the water. „When he swam, his body followed an imaginary horizontal line that pulled him on. Singing the Psalms, he sent his voice up an invisible vertical wire. These two lines made a 90° angle in his mind.”³² Mary is not the only character who has to fight a bitter struggle to create a satisfactory, functional identity. There are men and women who enter homosexual relationships for example, Gilbert Blakey or Georgia Dickins. There is Estelle

²⁷ Ibid. p. 225.

²⁸ Ibid. p. 154.

²⁹ Ibid. p. 183.

³⁰ David Lodge: *The Modes of Modern Writing*, p. 231.

³¹ Rose Tremain: *Sacred Country*, p. 56.

³² Ibid. p. 115.

whose mind is divided into normal and mentally insane periods. Then there is Walter, who lets down the Loomises to fulfil his dreams: from a slaughterer he becomes a singer. Resolution and emotional bravery result in happiness in some cases, but Sonny's death proves that only adherence cannot bring satisfaction. The author devotes special attention to illuminate both sides of events and characters. She is far from being deductive, she does not try to convince the reader about the truth of either side and she does not provoke us to agree or disagree with certain moral judgement. Just the other way round; she provides examples that everything might be true or might not.

Combining contrastive modes, fictive and factual, also forces open the boundaries of the traditional structure. Examples of them – dreams and letters – recur with such consistency that the reader cannot fail to recognise their significance. It is very characteristic who is in correspondence with whom. All the letters in the novel can be considered as manifestations of love, care and real friendship. Dreams are also of overriding importance. They reveal the subconscious relationships of the characters to each other, or to themselves. Dreams seem to provide a refuge for the characters when facts are unbearable.

Revealed or discreetly planted contrasts and tensions follow each other throughout the story. „Nothing happens in Swaithey. We continue. We listen out for clues to the world. The east wind blows in from Murmansk... Then one day a tragedy takes place.”³³ Although there is not a well-distinguishable cause and effect line, a kind of balance and complexity are preserved. The traditional expectations of clear judgements and simple explanations remain unfulfilled. The author constantly changes the point of view. However, what makes it a comprehensive unity is the system of underlying leitmotifs.eg. There are sharp blades appear in Mary's conjuring trick, in the butcher's shop of the Loomises, and during Mary's operations.

Summary

Through the desire of the main character to become a man the writer illustrates that true identity is not the innate or early fixed character, but that forged in creative openness. The world depicted in the novel is a fallen world where almost everybody is to some extent imperfect. Everybody has their hidden or outspoken hope to change their lives, but only few succeed. In the cases when it happens such uncompromising values prevail as tantalizing self-discovery, will-power and emotional bravery. Only those can reach salvation who recognise the mutability of the self and dare to live in accordance with their soul. This main idea makes the novel controlled and serious, absorbing and quite original. „One perfectly respectable reason for admiring a novel is the wonder one may feel at the sheer

³³ Ibid. p. 238.

quantity of the world the writer knows and can put down in her story. Of course it is 'only a novel', but so admirably expert, so serious, so compassionately knowing in its slightly modish way, that I should have thought no decently expert reader could withhold some admiration for it."³⁴

Rose Tremain's narrative style is reminiscent of traditional storytelling in its formality and the setting of its scenes. Only a few key details are introduced assuming that the reader has a shared set of cultural reference points. Little is said about the characters directly, however, even the incidental characters are round. The pleasure in reading *Sacred Country* is partly due to this accurate observation of character and to the funny, humorous and at the same time deeply affecting way of narration. „It's a comedy that can break your heart" – writes Philip Oakes in the *Literary Review*. Rose Tremain has the gift of getting within her characters, – of taking on their habits, of speaking in their voices – which makes the novel exceedingly convincing and maintains the reader's curiosity to the end. She has the wisdom to trust the reader and does not preach at us. She is the kind of storyteller who is excellent at arranging pellucid statement at the proper order and then lets the consequences loose.

Intelligence and philosophy glare from all her works. She has developed a characteristic voice of her own, at the same time she has a certain intellectual curiosity to try different games and modernist, postmodernist techniques. The final impression is that Rose Tremain has written a deep, many-layered work, the richness of which made me a devotee of hers.

³⁴ Frank Kermode: „Wannabee", *London Review of Books* 1992, Oct. 8, p. 14.