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THE TEXT OF THE TRANSEXUAL SELF: ROSE TREMAIN'S SACRED COUNTRY

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Abstract: *Rose Tremain is a contemporary writer whose interest has always shifted from portraying historical figures to depicting contemporary 'nobodies' (in terms of characters), and from first-person narratives to third-person narratives. Nevertheless, a constant element in her novels seems to be the probing of the 'out-of-the-ordinary', 'abnormal' self. The novel under discussion here, Sacred Country, is, probably, Tremain's most daring attempt at understanding (and writing) the split self of a transsexual. My paper will, therefore, try to capture and analyse the text and texture of the transsexual self as it appears in Sacred Country, as well as to advocate the need for writings that transgress the moral opposition good/bad.*

I'm in a life I don't understand. Nothing makes sense to me.
(Tremain *Sacred Country* 195)

Among its many emblems, our society wears that of the talking sex. The sex which one catches unawares and questions, and which, restrained and loquacious at the same time, endlessly replies.
(Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 77)

Contemporary writers seem really keen on revealing the touchiest subject, hitherto kept secret (and labelled as 'taboo' or 'abject'): sex. Moreover, as Foucault remarks, postmodern society has declared its intention to flaunt 'the talking sex', to state uncomfortable truths about sex, and, what is more, to uncover and assume troubled identities, to 'come out of the closet'. While both postmodern writers and theorists have been preoccupied mostly with defining (and defending) homosexual/ lesbian tendencies, feminism and the distinction between the concepts of sex and gender, few of them have dealt with the more interesting and challenging subject of transsexualism. Writers' reluctance to approach such a delicate issue might not come from lack of interest in the subject, but, most likely, from the very careful way this subject needs be dealt with, as well as from the extensive research one has to do in order to appropriately describe a transsexual's drama.

In line with her fellow writers, Rose Tremain has manifested an interest in the postmodern 'abnormal self' more than once. Her very first fiction novel, *Sadler's Birthday* (1976), introduces us to the world of a frustrated and homosexual butler who reviews his past while trying to get on with his life after his employers' death. In the same vein, Tremain's second book of fiction, *Letter to Sister Benedicta* (1979), focuses on the drama of a widow-to-be who, while waiting for her husband to decide whether he lives or dies, remembers the most important facts that have led to her spouse's stroke: their daughter is a lesbian and, on top of that, she is initiated in the 'heterosexual way' by her own brother. Lesbianism and incest in one package.

Sacred Country (1992), Tremain's sixth novel, reveals the British author's boldest effort: that of writing the split self of a transsexual. Here, Tremain does extensive research among transsexuals and combines it with her thorough insight into the human heart, thus providing a troubling protagonist, an interesting plot and an original text. The story centres on Mary Ward, a character who is convinced from the age of six that she is a male trapped in a female body and, consequently, tries her best to find her real

self and identity. A traditional theme with Tremain¹, searching for one's real self has haunted all her characters at one point or another; nevertheless, it is with *Sacred Country* that it approaches its bodily aspect: identity as another sex.

At the story level, the main character's struggle to become who she knows she really is intersects with other characters' quests or longings, in a textual fabric that resembles a painting in perpetual transformation. Almost all characters have dreams that never come true and, in the few cases when they finally do, these dreams have already become corrupted by reality. Although the centre of the story is taken by Mary Ward, the hero(ine) of the novel, I would like to postpone the analysis of her drama for two reasons:

- all important participants in the story act as catalysts in Mary Ward's process of becoming Martin Ward, and their minor stories help us understand the major story;
- since Mary's transformation (and, consequently, the text of this transformation) is the most relevant matter to be discussed, it would seem only fair to devote it more space and attention, and, therefore, to focus on it after a short introduction to the other characters.

We should, in traditional/ patriarchal manner, focus on Mary's father, Sonny Ward, first; this character, a German-lover, is obsessed with the idea of having a son, and encourages his pregnant wife to 'Pray it's a boy. Pray and pray.' (Tremain 45) Unfortunately for him (and for the baby), his first-born child is a baby girl who will grow up to become his worst nightmare. Nevertheless, his wish for a son is granted when his second child comes into the world – 'Tim, his treasure. Timmy, his boy.' (Tremain 5) Apart from hating and bullying his daughter (mainly for being a female), adoring his son, and putting up with his cowardly wife's whims, Sonny Ward develops two main passions: for his land and, later in life, for his dog, Wolf. However, he will be disappointed in all his hopes: his son shows too little interest in his father's stony land and wants to spend his life either swimming or praying. Consequently, after studying to become a preacher, Timmy gets married and leaves the land and the farm. Having withdrawn from human relationships – later in his life, he would rather talk to the dog, Wolf, than to his wife or neighbours – Sonny has no choice but to shoot himself, after first having killed his devoted companion, Wolf.

Estelle, Mary's mother, recounts some of the events in her life, and, apart from being a character in the novel, she also becomes one of the story's narrators. She has a cowardly nature and, instead of defending her daughter against her tyrannical husband, she keeps withdrawing either to a lunatic asylum or to her television world, which, paradoxically, becomes the most vivid reality in her life:

Estelle had told Irene she was 'retreating'. She wouldn't say more. She was retreating into the shade was all she'd say. And she said it brightly, in a sing-song voice, as if she were announcing a new malted beverage on the wireless (Tremain 25).

It is another character, Irene, Estelle's friend, who provides Mary the warmth of a home whenever she gets beaten by her father. Irene has a daughter herself, Pearl (the result of an affair) and manages to get married to her employer, Harker, to whom she gives a son, Billy. Both Irene and Harker play important roles in Mary's drama, as the ideal parents imagined by the troubled girl, and they support her in her most radical decisions. Pearl, Irene's daughter, is famous for her beauty and is chosen, when a baby, as Mary's 'most precious object' to be shown at a school contest: 'There was something about Pearl that mesmerised her [Mary]. It was as if Pearl were a lantern slide and Mary sitting on a chair in the dark.' (Tremain 10) As we will see, Pearl will become one of the main catalysts in Mary's transformation.

The Wards' neighbours, Ernie, Grace Loomis and their son, Walter, have their stories, too. They own a family butcher shop and their roles are well cast: Ernie does the butchering and selling, Grace is a cashier and Walter is allowed to waste his time trying to yodel and listening to country music in his uncle Pete's caravan. Uncle and nephew are united by their musical affinities, and care for little less in the world. All is well until a stupid accident happens and Ernie cuts off his fingers when distracted by

¹ As it is with most postmodern writers.

happiness, and bleeds to death. At this point, Walter Loomis is forced to take over the family business but fails to do so and, after a homosexual affair with his dentist, he leaves the family butcher shop and flees to Nashville to become a country singer. His encounters with Mary are very few, and his helping hand comes at the end of the story, when Mary/ Martin comes to America.

Apart from Harker, who understands Mary's dilemma, two 'helpers'² do more than all others for Mary: her teacher, Miss McRae, and her grandfather on her mother's side, Cord. Mary will live with both of them and will eventually confide in them, knowing that they have always been her guardian angels. Margaret McRae also gives Mary a gift of £1,000, when she sells her cottage and moves in with her sister.

For 'normal', 'heterosexual' people, Mary's story is a complicated one, and her condition sounds more like a 'disorder' than anything else. However, before embarking upon the troublesome journey of describing her drama at the medical or cultural level, we should start by getting a glimpse at her story. The text that refers to and recounts Mary's adventures belongs either to the narrator, to Mary herself or to her mother, Estelle³, with an emphasis on Mary's version of it. In that case, we have Genette's 'intradiegetic – homodiegetic – paradigm': Mary Ward as 'a narrator in the second degree who tells [her]/ his own story.' (Genette 248) Even intertwined with the 'objective' third-person narrative of Tremain's narrator, or with the very subjective figments of Estelle's tale, it is Mary's text that illuminates the reader as to what has really happened. In Foucault's words, it is by writing (especially letters) that one discovers who one is, while letting the others see that too:

To write is thus to "show oneself," to project oneself into view, to make one's own face appear in the other's presence. And by this it should be understood that the letter is both a gaze that one focuses on the addressee (through the missive he receives, he feels looked at) and a way of offering oneself to his gaze by what one tells him about oneself. In a sense, the letter sets up a face-to-face meeting (Foucault *Ethics* 216).

The transsexual's story seems easy to understand, yet not 'logical' enough: at the age of six, on February 15th 1952, at two o'clock in the afternoon, while trying to have the two-minute silence in honour of the dead King George, this girl, Mary Ward, realizes that she is in the wrong sex. Once she places her character's moment of truth at the very serious date and hour of the King's funeral, Tremain considers that too much solemnity comes to the detriment of the story; therefore, she chooses as the unusual girl's confidant her pet, a guinea fowl called Margaret:

And then, hearing the familiar screech of her guinea fowl coming from near the farmhouse, she thought, I have some news for you, 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 (Tremain 6).

Unbelievable as it may seem, the six-year-old somehow begins to understand the difference between gender and sex and, later, she even explains to us, in her own words, what type of effort is required if you want to become who you really are. Even if she has no idea of sex reassignment therapy at that time, she instinctively feels there must be a way for her to become a boy. So, she takes pains trying to become a boy. At first, she thinks that gender will prevail over sex if she suffers enough or if she runs faster and faster; she, consequently, expects some sort of automatic changing into the right sex:

But I had this thought about suffering: I thought, if I suffer a lot, I will grow a man's skin. If I suffer and refuse to cry, a penis will grow out of all that is locked away inside. It needs only time (Tremain 34).

Judith Butler argues that 'Gender does not necessarily follow from sex, and desire, or sexuality generally does not necessarily follow from gender' (148), explaining the dilemma by the complete and

² In Propp's terminology.

³ Although various bits of it might be told by other characters, such as Miss McRae or Grandpa Cord.

utter independence each of the three elements (gender, sex, desire) has from the other two, ‘none of these dimensions of significant corporeality “express” or reflect one another.’ (Butler 148). In good Foucauldian tradition, the feminist theorist believes that sexual identity is the dominant oppressive discourse in Western societies and that, therefore, sexual categories (male and female) serve to conceal the discontinuities existing in all contexts, heterosexual as well as non-heterosexual. Nevertheless, in the case of the *Sacred Country* transsexual, we do not have a feminist discourse; quite the opposite, we will see that gender and desire will lead to sex transformation, which is, in fact, an example of continuity in the heterosexual context: mind dictates the shape of the body, gender determines sex.

In the same line, transsexuals claim that their gender should prevail over their sex, as mind does over matter – and on that, Butler couldn’t agree more: ‘[...] within the sex/gender distinction, sex poses as “the real” and the “factic”, the material or corporeal ground upon which gender operates as an act of cultural inscription’ (Butler 146). The problem posed by Mary is this: she knows she is a boy, and she repeatedly tells herself and the reader so: ‘I was the only boy at Weston Grammar. There were ninety-seven girls and me.’ (Tremain 84).

Since, as Foucault so aptly puts it, ‘Western man has become a confessing animal.’ (Foucault *History* 59), Mary eventually tells others about it, expecting understanding and help from them. Some understand, some don’t. While Harker and Cord show support and understanding, Pearl, whom Mary has loved all her life, seems very confused and all she wants is her friend Mary back. Determined from childhood to be called Martin⁴, the transsexual reveals his true identity with more or less delicacy, and in different moments of his transformation. Mary/ Martin is a heterosexual transsexual, which means that, male by gender, she/ he is bound to fall in love with a woman – Pearl, in this case. Although this reasoning seems valid enough in theory, it is practice that threatens all Martin’s plans. As the main character says, ‘Life as Mary is full of confusion.’ (Tremain 56), and, in real life, Pearl cannot conceive of Mary as Martin for the world. Moreover, she and Mary/ Martin’s brother, Tim, fall in love with each other and plan to get married, and Pearl cannot choose a worse moment to break the news to Mary/ Martin. The critical moment comes after Mary begins sex reassignment therapy and has her womb and breasts removed. Pearl, who volunteers to nurse Mary/ Martin, and who is unaware of the latter’s passion for her, gives the news to her/ him and, in return, gets her share of violence from Mary/ Martin.

Some reviewers consider that Mary’s misery comes from ‘the legacy of her monstrous English parents’ (Sorensen in *The Literary Encyclopedia*), and has, therefore, too little to do with gender-related issues. Sorensen even explains Mary’s unhappiness by her violent and deceitful nature, and she draws the conclusion that ‘it is hard to offer the compassion she deserves, particularly as we watch her brother Tim become the wretched victim of her childhood fury.’ (*The Literary Encyclopedia*) No compassion for a violent girl pretending to be a boy, but what about a boy being a boy – is that easier to understand and forgive? If we agree that Mary is, in fact, Martin, then all violent incidents, egotistical moments or indelicacy are forgotten and forgiven, as it is in boys’ nature to be all that. Somewhat surprisingly, at one point in the story, Mary reflects upon how unbelievable some things may seem and gets to the uncomfortable conclusion that, eager to be accepted as she is, she shows the same type of narrow-mindedness as everybody else:

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 (Tremain 153).

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault remarks that ‘The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prisoner of the body’ (Foucault *Discipline* 30); consequently, if one wants to free the soul, one has to punish the body. In her own way, and according to her/ his

⁴ After an actress, Mary Martin, that her grandfather had liked.

understanding of the situation, that is exactly what Mary/ Martin does: she does, first of all, leave Suffolk for London, and then become a 'he' by means of sex reassignment therapy. The first process, leaving Miss McRae's house, where Mary took refuge from her angry father for a while, is called by Tremain 'transmigration'. This transmigration is a physical process only, and it does not involve the soul that, apparently, is in no need to transform itself:

And now I saw that I had to leave straight away. [...] I had to transmigrate. Not my soul, which I knew would probably stay behind, hiding in the Suffolk lanes or in a ditch like my old tennis ball, but my body. I had to move it, or it would die right here. Not even Miss McRae would be able to save it (Tremain 173).

The second stage of the transformation, making peace between his gender and his sex, takes place in London, and under the supervision of a psychiatrist specialised in sex counselling. The need for 'mending' one's body refers us to Foucault's concept of 'the body as a machine' (Foucault *History* 139), which allows for repairs whenever need be. The real gender longs for the real sex, and, asked what was wrong with being a woman, Martin answers: 'Nothing is wrong with being a woman. It's only that I'm not one. I never have been.' (Tremain 242). As long as, in our modern society, 'sex was constituted as a problem of truth' (Foucault 56), Martin cannot identify himself with his body unless all elements fit in perfectly. Or so the theory goes. However, our main character does not undergo the final operation: the actual implantation of a penis or what is called in medicine 'reconstructive surgery' (Tremain 352). Rejected by Pearl, the only lover he would have liked to have ever, Martin sees no point in having this final surgery. Once his dream of love destroyed, no other gesture can repair the damage done and, as a result, no effort is to be made for Martin to become a man. A penis is or no use to a heart-broken Martin. He is thirty now, living in America, working the field and dreaming about nothing at all. Foucault states that

Between each of us and our sex, the West has placed a never-ending demand for truth: it is up to us to extract the truth of sex, since this truth is beyond its grasp; it is up to sex to tell us the truth, since sex is what holds us in darkness (Foucault *History* 77).

Apparently, the truth only partly sets Martin free: he is almost in the body he has always wanted, but that seems of very little importance now, that Pearl is married to Tim, his eternal rival (first to his parents' love, now to his woman – as Martin sees it). Away from England, that epitomizes Martin's idea of intolerance and narrow-mindedness, he may start to feel, if not a complete man, at least a free one. It is the image of a clichéd America, where all dreams come true and everyone feels free, that Tremain chooses to render as the 'liberating country', but that only works up to a point. The question that still bothers Martin (as well as many of our contemporaries, who do not attempt to understand the possible battles fought between gender and sex) remains unanswered. It is almost a gender-related aporia:

Why couldn't I have just accepted being Mary Ward?

The answers are: because [I] wasn't. Because I couldn't. Because I am not Mary Ward. And no one – not Harker, not Sterns, not I – can explain it better than that. All we have are theories. It remains one of all the million mysteries left in the world (Tremain 293).

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