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Brno studies in English. 2005, vol. 31, iss. 1, pp. [129]-137

ISBN 80-210-3928-0

ISSN 1211-1791

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/104210>

Access Date: 04. 12. 2024

Version: 20220831

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JANE ROGERS'S NOVEL EXPLORATIONS

By the 1980s, when Jane Rogers's novels began to appear, the British novel had come a long way along the path towards a new self-awareness of its potential as an art form. In the last two decades of the twentieth century straightforward traditional realism was forgotten once again and no matter how realistic a novelist chose to remain, s/he would apply at least some of the wide range of experimental tools that have been linked with postmodern writing. Jane Rogers has availed herself of a variety of both formal and thematic aspects of postmodern playfulness while she tells a recognizably realistic story. Her historical interest, coupled with the positioning of the narrative voice(s) opens for her a plethora of possibilities. Her exploration of the genre in terms of thematics is usually centred around rather intense or disturbed characters and predominantly female narrative voices. This article proposes to examine how in four of Jane Rogers's recent novels the historical perspective and the narrative voices within it co-exist and contribute towards creating a specific novel category or subgenre. In this light *Mr. Wroe's Virgins* (1991) could be described as historical fiction or fictional biography, the award-winning *Promised Lands* (1995) and *The Voyage Home* (2004) at least in part fit the postcolonial novel pattern, while the opening of *Island* (1999) could suggest a postmodern variety of the non-fiction novel.

In the "Historical Note" at the end of *Mr. Wroe's Virgins* (Rogers 1991: 274–6), Rogers acknowledges the historical sources of her novel, but at the same time tells us where to look for facts and where for fiction. While John Wroe was a historical person, accepted as Prophet of the Christian Israelite Church in Ashton in 1822, all the other characters in the novel are fictional, notably the seven virgins of the title who were really given to the Prophet in 1830 "for comfort and succour" (Rogers 1991: 3), but of whose identity nothing is known. Rogers has created a piece of historical fiction – a genre which has been moulded into a variety of shapes in recent decades. Apart from the traditional historical novel, usually about the great events of history and famous historical figures, the range includes inverted historical fictions with wholly fictional heroes in historical settings, such as Merivel as a friend and clown of Charles II in Rose Tremain's *Restoration*

(1989), or fictional biographies based on biographical facts interwoven with fiction, such as Margaret Forster's *Lady's Maid* (1990), a fictional reconstruction of the relationship of Elizabeth Barrett Browning with her maid Elizabeth Wilson, or the more biographical but also more experimental *Virginia* (1981), a play by Edna O'Brien about Virginia Woolf. A long list of writers and works could be cited, proving Steven Connor's point that novels and history overlap, because both are narratives closely associated with time, with the process of translating the private into the public and with a representation of the past (Connor 1996: 130). Connor sees the recent approach to history as enlargement: a growing interest in historical evidence from diaries, familial documents and similar private records, that is, what he calls "history from below" (129). This seems to coincide with the spate of "ordinary" novel characters as mentioned above, whether historical, semi-historical or pure fictions in historical settings or portrayed against historical backgrounds. In Connor's view, with "the authority of history exploded", there is "an explosion of histories and authorities" (136).

Mr. Wroe's Virgins is set in Ashton, a small northern English town, at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Ashton has a strong congregation of Christian Israelites dominated by John Wroe and his prophetic revelation that Ashton was to be the New Jerusalem. Mr Wroe, the novel character, as the novel character is constructed true to the biographical facts known about him. Nevertheless, and despite Wroe being the eponymous hero of the novel, his biography, no matter how fictionalized, is not central to Rogers's story. In the microcosm of Ashton, the events of 1830, when Mr Wroe claimed and was given the services of seven young women, and later faced accusations and trial for indecency, were events of historical, macrocosmic proportions. In contrast, Rogers's focus on the microcosm of Wroe's household, on the individual experience of the "virgins" parallels the "history from below" pattern. Against the backdrop of a fictionalized account of historical events and biography, Rogers reinforces a sense of particular experience through the alternating perspectives of the first person voices of four of the seven virgins in the Prophet's household.

Multiple voices can fulfil several functions in a postmodern text: they decentre the narrative, break up the authority of the author/historian, relativize the truth of the text, fragment the temporal linearity and contribute to the openendedness of the narrative. With the four very distinct voices of the heroines of *Mr. Wroe's Virgins* Jane Rogers plays freely with all the possibilities that multiple voices offer. Joanna's lofty voice, caring and solemn, often exulted, may be a pastiche modelled on Joanna Southcott, who was the historical founder of the Israelite, then Southcottian, denomination and in the novel Joanna's acknowledged model and ideal. Pastiche also suggests itself in the interrelatedness of the two figures: while Mother Southcott had a fantasy of pregnancy, it might be suspected that Joanna, too, has fantasized the whole story of her impregnation by Mr Wroe as part of her delusion that her "suffering" was a trial of purification meant to bring women in the full light of God's love (266). Her initially serene and composed voice disintegrates into a tone which, though eventually reconciled, is deeply troubled

and fanatically delirious. In the voice of Martha, Rogers attempts to capture the workings of another disturbed mind. In literary terms, Martha is an experiment with a mentally disturbed and severely retarded voice: "Eat. Shove in mouth. Chew, swallow. Is more. And more. Apple sweet-musty. Cooked flesh, red brown. Grained, tough, teeth go go go. Choke when swallow. Eat. More" (104). Hazy at first and incapable of forming coherent images, Martha is gradually emerging into the light of consciousness from the semi-darkness of incomprehension caused by years of neglect and ill-treatment by her father and his subsequent wives. At the trial of Mr Wroe in Sanctuary, Martha's defence of him contrasts with Joanna's confirmation of the accusation of indecency and rings clearly in her mind: "I was stone. He gave me life" (252). The remaining two voices present yet different kinds of experience. Leah, a pretty and resourceful mother of an illegitimate child, believes she can win the Prophet for herself. When her design on him fails, her injured pride seeks revenge. It is she who makes the accusations against him and hopes to manipulate the Elders at the trial: "I shall sit upright but with my white neck drooping slightly, like an injured flower. I know their sympathy cannot fail; and I shall make them envy him. They will judge him the more harshly for their own guilty warmth" (235). The trajectory of Hannah's attitude to Mr Wroe takes the opposite course to Leah's: from rejection to acceptance. Unlike the other virgins, Hannah is not a member of the Christian Israelites congregation. She is even new to Ashton, where she came to live with her only relatives after her father's death. To be rid of her, the relatives gave her to the Prophet. Hannah's is a dry and sober voice of an almost modern English woman: educated, autonomous, not to be deluded by her forced involvement in the Prophet's activities:

Of all the directions, I find this reference to missionary work the most disturbing, for I can imagine little more ludicrous than the sight of such an ill assorted troupe, decked out in white, processing down the street of some Pennine town to the halting sounds of our own voices, behind a long-haired bandy-legged little hunchback. (42)

Hannah's disbelief at the whole set up of Wroe's odd household and herself in it wearing their strange clothes is part of her internal resistance, which comes to be modified and less intense as she acknowledges Mr Wroe's merits. But it is Hannah's voice, unsettled again by the revelations of the trial, that gives us the account of events, debating their contradictions. The other voices, of Martha, Joanna and Leah, also contribute to the multiple perspectives that leave the novel opened in many respects, i.e. the confrontation of their private confessions does not lead to any unanimous truth, but allows some things to remain unresolved.

The novel *Promised Lands* (1995) combines the historical with the present in a pattern of distant parallels. The historical part places the novel firmly within the contemporary postcolonial critical discourse (cf. Ashcroft et al. 1989). It retells the well-known historical event of the landing of the First Fleet in Australia

on 2nd January 1788 and the slow progress of settlement, but from the point of view of its less illustrious participants. Among them Lieutenant William Dawes, a historical character and something of a rebel against his superiors, voices the doubts and views about colonialism now incorporated in postcolonial studies. However, Jane Rogers the author places herself at a double remove from William's story, which is being reconstructed from historical materials by Stephen Beech, a school-teacher in present-day Birmingham. In this novel within a novel, Stephen, a fictional novelist, fills in the gaps in the biographical material of a historical actor in the drama of settlement of Terra Australis in order to re-imagine the time and place. William's first encounter with the Aborigines shows him to be vastly ahead of his time in negotiating their otherness, when he realizes that they are afraid of the English just as he is afraid of them: "We are the same, he thought" (Rogers 1995: 57). Later, with a great deal of effort and humility, he tries to penetrate the complexities of their beliefs:

If the Greeks, William told himself, can describe the sun as a chariot drawn by horses across the sky, then I'm sure the Ab-Origines have every right to describe the sky as a lid held up by props, and for me to think none the worse of their intelligence for that. (352)

While working on the novel, Stephen keeps debating the postcolonial issues outside his text with himself. He is convinced that William Dawes was a good man, that he "*imagined* – against the current of his time – black people to have rights" (445), but ponders what good his philanthropy could do against the system at the time. The Aboriginal girl Booron's accusation and William's reaction reflect Stephen's struggle with arguments:

"You kill the land. No trees, no animals. All kill."
"It's not *me* –" No, that was contemptible. As one of Phillip's party he was still as responsible as the rest of them. Not until he had left the service could he make such a disclaimer. (458)

Stephen's concern with colonialism makes him sound like a historian and a biographer rather than a fiction writer and his novel more of a fictional biography than that of Mr Wroe in Rogers's previous novel. By having Stephen as the author of the passages about Australia, the novel in the novel in *Promised Lands*, Rogers in turn gives herself more freedom as a novelist although she, too, claims little licence with historical facts (464).

William's Australian adventure is retold by an omniscient narrator. It can only be derived from Stephen's thoughts debated in his own voice that he is that narrator. Besides Stephen, his wife Olla enters the text as another first-person voice. The two voices show their contrasting perspectives on their married relationship and their antithetic attitudes to their handicapped baby-son. Olla fits the mould of Rogers's disturbed women. She gives birth to a boy with severe deformities and

a mental deficiency and she fights for his survival against the doctors' advice and her husband's knowledge. She believes that the child Daniel is another Saviour who has come to the world with a special task. Olla has a traumatic personal history, including an abused childhood in rural Poland, the loss of her little brother Tadek, and the flight from home to England. But Olla is a fighter and her battle for her child against all odds produces an unexpected effect on his development. In this respect, Olla clearly participates in Jane Rogers's exploration of idealism, "of people trying to create new and better ways of living" – one of her recurring and central themes of interest ("Jane Rogers": 4).

Stephen, with his professional background in teaching, is pondering the ideal of equality and its application in the British system of education (Rogers 1995: 122–24) and why his experiment in Campfield school failed. Stephen's own idealistic aims are what he has in common with William Dawes, the hero of his historical fiction. Like Rogers herself, Stephen seems to be trying to understand things that obsess him ("Jane Rogers": 4). William's idealism seeks to justify colonialism theologically and philosophically. He believes the Aborigines to be "souls that hungered to know God, or [...] minds that would find joy in intellectual exploration, in reading, in scientific knowledge, in philosophy" (Rogers 1995: 62). He also thinks that "an unpeopled land was a terrible thought: the pointlessness, the waste of it [...] Land without man would be as futile as a stage with no actors; it would have no meaning" (63). Later he is tormented with guilt, blaming himself for the small-pox epidemic that devastated the Aboriginal population. Although William's idealism clashes with the actions of his superiors and makes him return to England, Stephen, from today's point of view, finds him lacking. He holds the modern culturalist view that "the explorer, perhaps even more than anyone else, is locked in his own cage; carries its bars before his eyes, views the country through its grid" (231; cf. Said 1978: 2–3; Byatt 1985: 59). Where William and Stephen seem to be in agreement, are in their attempts to change other people's lives. This tendency, on the contrary, is disputed by Olla, who dismisses Stephen's "insistence that all are equally perfectible" (301) and believes this to be only a palliative for those who, like Stephen, "cannot abide to know the truth" (301) about the various terrors and horrors of the world. In *Promised Lands* just like in *Mr. Wroe's Virgins* such differences in standpoints between the narrative voices remain unresolved, because they never even confront each other. In *Promised Lands*, however, Rogers confronts the ideas and values of then and now through drawing a plethora of parallels from fundamental contrasts to playful similarities.

Rogers returns to the postcolonial theme almost ten years later in *The Voyage Home* (2004). She continues the postcolonial debate here again at two time levels, although with a narrower gap between them than the two hundred years of *Promised Lands*. The setting is African, first in Nigeria in the 1960s following Independence in 1960, then in the year 2000 reflecting upon the aftermath of colonialism in the horrors of illegal immigration. The shift in attitudes from the

colonial to the postcolonial is marked by the generation gap between Karl, who had led the Oji Bend mission for twenty years prior to Independence, and the young couple Miriam and David, fresh from England, full of the new enthusiasm of the hopeful 1960s. As David remarks:

Sad to say my anxieties about him were justified almost immediately; both Miriam and I were embarrassed by the insensitive way he speaks about the Africans. I can't imagine it will be possible to work here without challenging the more rigid of his assumptions and trying to bring a much-needed breath of fresh air to the mission. (17)

Rogers reconstructs their differences to match old arguments for and against colonialism going back well into the past and recalling for instance the criticism of Irish barbarity legitimizing Norman and Tudor colonization of Ireland (cf. Gerald of Wales; Spenser 1934: 72, 78, 109; Campion 1963: 23, 25). Miriam and David are appalled at Karl's descriptions of Nigerian customs and beliefs as barbarous: "His assumptions about the barbarity of indigenous customs date him more strikingly than anything else" (21). A useful reference may be made to Hilary Mantel's novel *A Change of Climate* (1994), whose protagonists battle with many problems of a similar kind.

At Christmas time 2000, both Miriam and David are dead. Their daughter Anne, sailing back to Britain after her father's burial in Nigeria, undergoes a shattering experience with stowaways who ask for her help. Hesitant and frightened at first, she takes a very sick pregnant woman into her cabin, but eventually betrays her existence to Robbie, the first mate, whom she later suspects of having thrown the woman overboard. The enormity of this experience leaves a devastating effect on Anne, who blames herself for the woman's disappearance although her failure is entirely due to her inability to imagine, let alone to believe, that the stowaways were in real danger of their lives – the sailors could kill them to avoid having to pay a heavy fine when the stowaways gave themselves up to the authorities. Far from merely seeking a thrilling plot, Rogers carries on the postcolonial debate here through raising the current uncomfortable questions of immigration, immigrant legislation and contemporary racism – all a painful inheritance of the colonial age.

In terms of the temporal layers of the two story lines, the narrative voices appear in reverse order from *Promised Lands*, where the present story has first-person narrators while the story of the past is told by an omniscient narrator. In *The Voyage Home* the contemporary story features a third-person narrator although one that delves deep into Anne's psyche. The past is recorded in diary form as a first-person narrative. This has a curious effect. Anne, who is actually present in the text seems more distant through the narrator than the first-person journals of her father, who is dead. Although there is no actual interaction between the two voices, the two characters are closely intertwined. Anne is the central character and her family history learned from her father's diaries affects her deeply. Her

father was a dominant presence in her life – the type of man, not dissimilar to Stephen from *Promised Lands*, who wants to change people's lives, a man with a vision, the idealism to improve the world. In contrast, Anne, like Olla in *Promised Lands*, struggles against her private nightmares, the most traumatic of them being the image of a baby. Anne imagines that the Nigerian stowaway Estelle's baby survived in the sea and will return as Anne's own baby, which she has been trying to conceive. The traumas of infertility, child-bearing and parent-child relationships connect Joanna, Leah and the other young women from *Mr. Wroe's Virgins* with Olla from *Promised Lands*, Anne from *The Voyage Home* and, as will follow, Nikki from *Island*. Suicidal thoughts and a lack of neat endings, whether good or bad, suggest yet more connecting lines between the characters and their narrative voices across the four novels.

The beginning of Jane Rogers's *Island* (1999) – a newspaper murder report – is suggestive of what David Lodge refers to as the “non-fiction novel” (Lodge 1977: 90) or possibly what Iris Murdoch describes as the journalistic novel – a “shapeless quasi-documentary object” (Murdoch 1997: 291). The novel pretends to be, or maybe is, based on a real event – a case of brutal murder of an elderly woman on a Scottish island on 8th October 1997. The novel story then goes back several weeks, and also several years, to events in Nikki Black's life leading to her involvement in the murder report. The links to Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966) correspond to David Lodge's characteristic of the novel in terms of genre: “it is written with the novelist's eye for the aesthetic possibilities of his *donnée*, for the evocative and symbolic properties of circumstantial detail” (Lodge 1977: 90–91). In its time, this kind of intertwining of brutal reality with literary fiction provoked moral protest that “there was something callous and inhuman about so ‘literary’ a treatment of experience so painfully actual and immediate” (91). In our time, already less sensitive and more used to such discrepancies, Rogers would hardly be criticized for the weird combination of stark “realism” and aesthetic fancy. On the contrary, the postmodern sensibility seems to welcome inclusiveness of all kinds of incongruities. Unlike *In Cold Blood*, however, or indeed in the historical part of Rogers's own *Promised Lands*, *Island* gives no clue to the reader as to the extent of its fictionality. Rogers may not have talked to the real murderers of her story, as Truman Capote had, but somewhat like Margaret Forster in her “documentary” novels (*Have the Men Had Enough*, 1989; *The Battle for Christabel*, 1991; *Mothers' Boys*, 1994), she is taking an analytical look at a particular social problem. Nikki Black, the heroine of *Island*, came to the world with a severe social and emotional handicap: she was a foundling, growing up in a series of children's and foster homes, unloved, rebellious and full of hate. When she discovers that her natural mother lives on the remote Scottish island Ruanish, she devises a plan to kill her.

Of all the first-person voices discussed above, Nikki's narrative comes closest to the definition of the confessional novel or confessional literature: “works which are a very personal and subjective account of experiences, beliefs, feelings,

ideas, and states of mind, body and soul” (Cuddon 1991: 187). While the personal and subjective was of course not lacking in the previous cases, the confessional effect feels much stronger here, because instead of fragments of experiences, we are treated to a full account of the heroine’s feelings, reasoning and actions. This also bears relation to various aspects of what Sara Mills understands by confessional discourse, whether with reference to psychology or feminist discourse theory (Mills 1997: 80–86).

Like Rogers’s other heroines, Nikki is emotionally unbalanced, vulnerable and prone to irrational behaviour. She suffers from bouts of uncontrollable fear that ruins her in spite of her intelligence and rational self-possession. But she also appears sly, deceitful and generally subversive – all of that on account of being rejected at birth by her mother, for whom she is now consumed with hatred. The novel probes the mother-child relationship again, but from the perspective of an abandoned child, the reverse of Olla’s fierce protection of her deformed baby (*Promised Lands*). As elsewhere, the situation is always extreme: whether the child is wanted or unwanted, it is always too much so. Nikki endows her mother with witch’s powers, convinced that it is her evil mother herself who brought her to the island to carry out the murderous plan (“She has planted in my head every move I make”, 183). It has been suggested that *Island* could be read as a gender inversion of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (Smith 2004: 2–4). This on the whole seems rather far-fetched although there is mentally handicapped Calum, Nikki’s newly discovered half-brother, to provide some possible resonances with Shakespeare’s Caliban. Nikki as Prospero would require much more twisting than a mere gender inversion though. Clearer parallels can be found with the several fairy tales and stories told by other voices, through Calum, who must have heard them many times to “remember them word for word” (169). They are harsh stories of harsh and rough lives, and their reconciliation, like in Rogers’s plots, is not achieved lightly.

All four of Jane Rogers’s novels of the turn of the century show a surprising variety in terms of contemporary novel subgenres and their narrative voices. The shifts and nuances are underscored by broad similarities which characterize the style and matter of Rogers’s writing. The story of *Mr. Wroe’s Virgins* fills up some lacunae in the historical Mr Wroe’s biography. The perspective on this strange episode from the career of this nineteenth-century prophet is female and multiple, and the four voices out of the seven eponymous virgins are convincingly as varied as the characters that they speak for. Another piece of fictional biography, *Promised Lands*, goes deeper into history with insights of postcolonial theory applied to the early colonization of Australia. The first-person voices of the semi-historical novel’s creator and his wife supply the late twentieth-century dimension. In *The Voyage Home* scenes from early postcolonial Nigeria as recorded in a diary are juxtaposed with traumatic events of present-day immigration and asylum seeking. Both the first-person diary voice as well as the omniscient narrator of the greater part of the novel achieve psychological depth. While *Island*, too,

attempts a psychological view, the first-person narrative is combined with what is potentially the non-fiction novel genre.

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