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Brno studies in English. 2002, vol. 28, iss. 1, pp. [137]-146

ISBN 80-210-2968-4

ISSN 1211-1791

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/104066>

Access Date: 28. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

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RUTH RENDELL/BARBARA VINE: SOCIAL THRILLER ON *THE CROCODILE BIRD* AND *ASTA'S BOOK*

Rendell's writing, stemming from traditional British detective fiction of the 20th century, has been divided into three categories: Rendell falling within the re-invented genre of the detective story with her humanised Chief Inspector Wexford, Rendell with criminals and limited investigation in psychological suspense, and the third series as Barbara Vine with almost no police but crime against the background of social issues and 'the latent pathology of the mind' (Munt 1994:22). Recently, it has been harder to clearly distinguish between her work of the latter categories written under the two different names, as numerous texts from the 1990s testify. Rendell may be seen as having developed a kind of social thriller, in which various representations around region, class, race, gender, or age form an important part of the plot. The examined novels, *The Crocodile Bird* (Ruth Rendell 1993) and *Asta's Book* (Barbara Vine 1993), then prevalently explore individual female characters who embody their social determinations in contemporary British culture.

The physical setting, which is either a huge estate in beautiful countryside or a city house, seems crucial. *Asta's Book* is set in London, and a considerable space is devoted to Padanaram, a big house in Highgate, and to a Victorian house, where the murder case takes place. The quarters and suburbs of London with their real names contribute to the overall image of Englishness, which despite its essentially rural quality, is somehow unthinkable and inadequate without London. In *The Crocodile Bird* the countryside with a focus on a remote country mansion, Shrove, alternates with the city and the difference is clearly demonstrated. The old-time and modern domestic detail, inseparable from Rendell/Vine's descriptions, gives a real English flavour to the images, intensified by the ordinariness. Although she does not comment on the writer's work after 1992, Munt uses the term 'claustrophobic intensity' (Munt 1994:53) in connection with Rendell, and it seems appropriate for the female characters discussed. For example, Eve's love for the owner of Shrove House is no priority of hers, it is the house and its grounds, with the gardens, the park, the gate-house, and the little castle, which are her sanctuary and the only place where she can live and

stay: 'Eve didn't want anyone, anyone at all, coming between her and that house and that land, that domain' (CB 312). It means an asylum and the only shelter she can survive in and recover from her disturbing experience. The English former manor house, with all the valuable paintings, period furniture, vases, statues and books, set in breathtaking scenery of the English North, however, with murdered bodies buried in seemingly unspoilt little woods nearby, makes a sharp contrast with Liza's idea of London: 'She would be alone in some grey desolation of concrete and buildings, of empty tunnels and high windowless walls' (CB 5).

Asta's Book may be seen as a deep study of immigrants' feelings, describing the frustration, struggle and success of their life in England. The importance of the mystery is greatly diminished, and through the protagonist's biographical sketches one can discover the whole family's likes and dislikes related to the English life-style, their prejudices, worries, and hopes for the future. We have here the tastes and opinions of various periods, and various generations of immigrants as well. A Danish immigrant to a xenophobic country, Asta, and her daughter Swanny, who keep talking Danish to each other and switch to English only when somebody else is around, are the real heroines and sufferers here. Already the very first paragraph reveals some of the basic ignorance of the English who, at the beginning of the century, may have had some knowledge of the countries in the British Empire, but rarely of Europe:

When I went out this morning a woman asked me if there were polar bears in the streets of Copenhagen. ... She thinks I must be a savage and half-witted too because I'm not English and I don't speak English well and stumble over words.

(AB 3)

The English are weary of foreigners and far from welcoming them, as Asta, a young woman of twenty-five, observes in 1905: '...they [the English] are used to people from all over Europe, but they don't like us... They say we live like animals and take away their jobs' (AB 3). The diaries, written in Danish, help her in her loneliness seen by her as 'one of the worst things I have to bear in this horrible foreign country' (AB 4). The notebooks are not a record, they rather reveal the frustrated young mother's observations and desires, and we gradually learn what makes her homesick, or about her horror when the boys want to change their Danish first names into English ones. Everything is connected with her hardship when there is little money in the house if her husband appears to be slow in sending some. Asta hates London and looks forward to having a daughter who will take her side.

The novel is language conscious and family based, and one can see the importance of the characters' first language, 'truly learned at their mother's knee' (AB 42). In Hansine's family, there is an entirely different view, as her grandson admits: 'My mother couldn't speak it and my grandmother wasn't allowed to. My mother bullied her rather. She was always telling her that if you lived in

England you should be English' (AB 212). The text is peppered with a number of Danish words and explanations:

Scandinavians have solved that question of what to call one's grandparents. Not for them the decision as to which grandmother shall be called Grandma and which Granny, which grandfather Grandpa and which Grandad, nor the awkward habit of speaking of Grandpa Smith and Grandpa Jones. One's mother's mother is simply that, Mormor, and one's mother's father Morfar. Similarly, the other side would be Farmor and Farfar.

(AB 43)

In similar comments one can frequently find more about English habits and customs than about the Danish ones, as above. Englishness is to be found everywhere, behind everything, in every depicted period, in every contrast made with the explored Danish immigrants, or occasionally with other Europeans, minor or more important characters of Polish or German origin, e.g. Henry Herzog alias Harry Duke, Asta's platonic boyfriend. The language issues mingle with the family ones, and the family saga and the individual members' relationships are discussed, which is always seen from a woman's standpoint: 'I've noticed how women are interested in families and men not at all' (AB 137).

The writer, who is frequently concerned with the multicultural character of Britain, does not introduce any characters of different ethnic origin in *Asta's Book*, with the exception of the missing child's granddaughter, who is 'blackhaired and with enough of a tilt to the eyes to show that one of those ancestors had been an oriental' (AB 376). Rendell/Vine explores prevalently femininity and sexuality, the myth of independence and femininity founded on duty and self-sacrifice, the question of female identity and guilt, or identity as behaviour, education and language. Similar topics are also questioned in *The Crocodile Bird*, titled after the young girl who is safe even though her mother is a murderer, because she is like 'the bird who pecked at the jaws of death' (CB 2). True, her grandfather was of German origin and her grandmother was employed as a head servant at Shrove, where Eve herself ends up as a caretaker. The immigrant or class issues are of minor relevance. Things go wrong, and Liza, the sheltered daughter, is hidden away from the unjust world for a long time. Here, the collision between society and the individual, basic human relationships, conservatism, and family values versus modernity and worldliness are mainly addressed.

The Crocodile Bird is a thriller concerned with the above mentioned issues related to ideologies of sexual autonomy, family life, child care and parental responsibility. There are noticeable romantic and Gothic novel elements, such as a secluded and wonderful place, sinister atmosphere, huge Doberman pinschers, beautiful young women in danger, an old forgotten crime and more recent ones, a secret love affair and an unexpected escape. The murders are closely connected with the two female protagonists, as one is the murderer and the other an

eyewitness. The two women, Eve and Liza Beck, live strangely enclosed lives in their home, the gate-house of a spectacular country mansion, Shrove House, and their everyday experience is far from ordinary. Liza is brought up without the contamination of the world, and her educated mother, a promising Oxford student once, is her tutor in languages and literature, history and philosophy. Liza's father remains unknown, and in the newspaper article on her mother's trial Liza is referred to as 'a grown-up daughter who's left home' (CB 296). Liza feels frustrated that she has not even been given a name; nobody is in search of her, nobody is interested.

The novel opens with Liza, who no longer does everything her mother says. It is a pure sexual desire that she is unable to control:

Her arms were round his neck, she was clutching his hair in her hands, kissing him back with passion ... It was he who restrained them ... and began asking her if she was sure, did she know what she was doing ... When she tried to think, all that happened was that she saw images of Sean and felt his kisses, growing hot and weak, growing wet in an unanticipated way...

(CB 297)

Soon she shows her will though she is still infatuated: 'You wouldn't ever do it to me without me wanting it, would you, Sean?' (CB 18). When Sean suggests that she should start to take some contraceptive pills not to get herself pregnant, she retorts it is he who is getting her pregnant. With her mother in prison Liza has no family and no friends. She has no skills either, she knows 'nothing except for rubbish out of books' (CB 330), and she is helpless and useless without her partner, as Sean believes. But Liza learns quickly, makes plans, and believes she can manage everything. Even before Sean forces her to have sex with him and hurts her, she wonders how much their relationship has changed, in particular when Sean destroys her books, claiming they are a way of hiding herself from reality: 'How could you feel so passionately for a person and then, suddenly, not care any more at all? A few words, a gross gesture, an insensitive assumption, and it was all gone' (CB 331). She feels like being Sean's property, an object of ridicule: 'she didn't count as other people, she was his' (CB 332). This is precisely what her mother Eve experiences when one of her lovers, Bruno, begins to order their lives.

Liza is the focus of the narrative, telling the story of her life to Sean. Her present situation, her independent life with a boyfriend, picking pears and apples on a fruit farm, her cleaning job, takeaways, colas, Mars bars, crisps, or love-making in Sean's caravan, all that is a kind of frame. Her upbringing, education provided by Eve, and isolation from the time she was aged four and saw the first murder committed is the real core of the subject matter. It is also the story of beautiful and intelligent Eve, who is raped and injured when a student, spends a long time in hospital and eventually gives birth to Liza. Eve plays an equally dominant part in the text; however, she is always judged from her daughter's

perspective. She probably never recovers from her tragic accident and trauma, and turns into a recluse, taking up a job as a caretaker of the Shrove estate and isolating her daughter from the destructive worldliness, as she understands it. Liza is thus deprived of school, shops, institutions, any children's or teenagers' company, and virtually of other people's society. The daughter's cultural identity is thus shaped by a very limited pattern of behaviour, of course, associated and compared with the traditional cultural and social values found in literature and philosophy, studied under the tutelage of her mother. Through her seemingly banal thriller the writer thus discusses not only alternative lifestyles, but also alternative education, popular entertainment and its possible moral contamination of the youth, the difference between rural and urban communities, macho culture, or attitudes towards sexual assaults and other forms of violence against women.

Asta's Book is based on a fictitious biography, in which a violent crime and a hidden adoption are detected, and can be considered a post-modernist novel revealing the many identities and roles necessary to the heroines' survival as women. Ann Eastbrook, Asta's granddaughter, tells the story, and at the same time she incorporates things, the ones she finds relevant, that happened or are happening to her. However, she rarely figures in it more than as 'the watcher and the recorder, the note-taker, and the privileged insider' (AB 44). Through Ann's eyes and her own diaries Asta then emerges as a person of many faces, a vulnerable young mother full of spite towards others, a pregnant woman with all the ignorance and uncertainties, a middle-aged lady of fashion having a presentable house, or an attractive woman with her husband on trips abroad longing for a different man. The environment is predominantly feminine, and women are generally viewed as more liberal than men, even though they are dependent on their relationships with them.

The protagonist Asta, born in 1880, frequently questions women's rights and position, and the narrative, purposefully designed to suppress the fictional and promote the seemingly factual, formulates various answers and remarks, opinions and views in the form of telescoped episodes. The individual passages from the diaries tend to start with a few sentences or a paragraph in Danish, followed by the English translation and further English continuation. This strengthens the image of authenticity, and so do the given dates and years, many Danish words and explanations, extracts from a transcript of a trial, letters and documents, or the contemporary female and male characters' jobs connected with the pursuit of accuracy: journalists, authors' researchers, genealogists, documentary film makers, editors, and historians. The dedication to the novel, 'In memory of my grandparents, Anna Larsson and Mads Kruse' (AB flyleaf), and Ann's introduction, signed Ann Eastbrook, Hampstead, 1991, both contribute to the credibility as well.

Asta Westerby's old-time diary entries thus alternate with Ann Eastbrook's contemporary activities, reflections and memories connected with her Grandmother or Mormor Asta, Aunt Swanny, Mother Marie, and Hansine, the maid. The immigrant issue gradually melts into an almost feminist one, and there is no

doubt the novel reaches beyond the boundaries of popular crime fiction. *Asta's Book* is clearly opposed to patriarchy and the dominant consensus concerning the proper social and sexual place of women. The writer does not need independent female sleuths whose campaign for liberation in the area of women's sexuality is essentially the struggle for freedom in many more areas in a capitalist and patriarchal society. While she may not be explicit, her aims are visible at every level. She is essentially pursuing a deconstruction of femininity. Her different women are defined socially and psychically through their clothes, entertainment, eating and drinking habits, or through their pain and sickness.'

In *Asta's Book* issues of gender and generation may be regarded as the most emphasised aspects, while those of nation and class, however crucial in the beginning, become gradually secondary. Asta ironically indicates what she was told by everyone that 'a good wife must devote herself to her husband and to making his home' and finishes by saying: 'I even thought there would be some pleasure in it. I was only seventeen and that's my excuse' (AB 4). She is deeply disappointed with her marriage, in which, however, her husband's absence plays an important role, and the family's financial insecurity is also at issue. Asta invents her own attitude to life, her own remedy. Through writing a diary she makes herself independent, free to be herself. It gradually becomes her favourite activity, which she carefully keeps a secret. It is the only way she can enjoy her privacy, protected from her noisy schoolboys, the crying baby, her chattering maid, and her husband Rasmus' apparent desertion. Here she confesses her thoughts and views concerning her married life: she does not believe in friendship between husband and wife; she hates when she is not being consulted about a new house; she is not interested in Rasmus' motors and automobiles, his trade and hobby, but knows she will never be unfaithful to him: 'We women don't have to be brave and strong or good at earning money like men and if we are it doesn't matter, it doesn't count. We have to be chaste' (AB 65). Yet Asta feels 'a little shiver' inside her when she kisses her good-looking husband. She assumes it might be something like hunger rather than love. Ann finds out that her grandparents, Asta and Rasmus, shared one bedroom and one bed till Rasmus' death, even though Asta evidently preferred her friend Harry Duke's company.

Asta's relationship with Harry is as complicated as her lawful one with Rasmus. When she resolutely refuses to spend a holiday with him, her youngest daughter Marie innocently asks whether she will marry Uncle Harry one day. Again the issues of duty and chastity are brought up; Asta and Harry, the chauffeur in Rasmus' words, are both married and they 'would not misbehave' (AB 321). They are happy to be together, finding their pleasure in sharing car drives and trips, picnics, restaurants and shows, and the interesting thing is that they are allowed to do this both by their legal partners and society. One is thus made aware of considerable stability and discipline. When we compare Asta's granddaughter's relationships and her attitude to having children, we come across striking differences. In her forties, Ann has never been married, and her best friend Cary is known to have stolen, married and soon divorced Ann's first steady boyfriend. When Ann finds another man, they both prefer to remain

childless, thinking an adoption out of the question. All three of them, Cary, Ann and her partner, satisfied with demanding and well-paid jobs, independent and tolerant companionships, serve as representations of these highly estimated common features of contemporary relationships.

As the years go by, Asta grows much harder and self-sufficient. After one of her children's death she resolves she will never cry again, thus keeping her past and her emotions under an iron control. In fact, Asta remains isolated for the whole of her life; she is even unable to develop a closer relationship with her favourite child Swanny, in spite of her genuine love for her, or after her husband's death, with Harry. When Harry asks Asta to marry him, she does not accept: 'Why risk it again? People change when they get married, let me tell you. I'd rather have a friend than a husband' (AB 129). She does not mind when Marie has a number of lovers, or Ann a live-in boyfriend. Her maid Hansine is very much resented by her, and in the beginning one strongly suspects Asta's contempt is class-based rather than anything else. In the oldest diary young and miserable Asta gives us a very biased picture of her maid, envying perhaps Hansine's boyfriend, the boys' preference for her, or her genuine pleasure and cheerfulness in the children's company. Asta's spiteful judgements concerning Hansine form almost a kind of subtext to the narrative. Ann, who does not grasp the social difference in connection with Hansine, also believes Asta snobbish when she will not hear of inviting Hansine and her husband to a party: 'If I asked her, ...it would be to help out but the caterers are going to see all that' (AB 74). As revealed later, Hansine is the only one who knows about the secret adoption, and this is the reason why Asta feels uncomfortable in Hansine's power.

Swanny, the eldest daughter, can be viewed as one of the flattest characters, more appropriate to a kind of romance or even pulp fiction. In comparison with the other female figures depicted vividly and with a considerable amount of realism, Swanny's tremendously positive qualities must seem strongly far-fetched and out of place. Although Rasmus prefers his dark-haired children and finds Swanny, the dazzling blonde, too much of a Danish or Nordic type, while all his efforts aim at imitating the English, she is everything Asta could hope for and even more. She becomes the most beautiful woman with dark blue eyes and wonderful fair hair, tall and slim, gentle and loving, compassionate and understanding. She has one of the most romantic long-life attachments, starting as love at first sight, followed by a happy and successful marriage ever after. And there is not only the beauty and good marriage, so important for someone of Asta's generation, but also considerable social achievement. This culminates when Swanny and her husband, the diplomat, now older and distinguished, appear in the *Tatler*. In the photograph the King and Queen of Denmark pose with some of the Embassy staff, including Torben and Swanny Kjaer looking as aristocratic and magnificent as the Royals.

The writer, however, needs Swanny for different purposes. Through the character she questions the very roots of human identity. At the age of fifty-eight Swanny gets an anonymous letter that entirely damages the following twenty

years of her life. Asta confirms the adoption but fails to understand the state Swanny finds herself in: 'I don't know why you mind so much. Haven't I been a good mother to you? Haven't I loved you best? Aren't I here with you now? What's wrong with you, digging up what's all past and gone?' (AB 88). Later Asta denies everything and claims she is 'a bad old woman who likes to tease' (AB 129), pretending she may be approaching senility. But Swanny is not to be comforted so easily:

Her mother, for all her vaunted love, was no longer her mother, had never been her mother. Her sister and brother were not her sister and brother but only people she had been brought up with. It struck her forcibly ...that she was most likely not even Danish. Her Danishness had been important to her in ways she hadn't fully appreciated until it had been shown not to exist. ... Danish, her cradle tongue, grew stiff on her lips and when she spoke it she felt like an impostor, uttering a language to which she had no right. She had no language, for she had no nationality.

(AB 95)

Swanny remains tortured till her death. She relentlessly tries to find her origin and parents, making mistakes and associating herself with a little girl missing after her mother's murder committed near the street where Asta and Rasmus lived at the time. She is at her wit's end when she realises the wrong dates and conclusions, illustrated by her last word, 'nobody', when dying. All this may sound like a melodrama, in the writer's skilful hands, however, it is not so. Throughout the narrative we are given only bits of information, which may resemble symbolic gestures in places rather than clues to the solution of the mystery. The beautiful doll's house, the imitation of Padanaram, built for Marie and not for Swanny is one of such symbols.

The quest for identity is a fundamental theme with all female characters here, not only with Swanny, whose pilgrimage amounts to a total loss in the end. Ann finds her fulfilment in a new rewarding relationship abandoning the myth of independence, Hansine in her family and her grandson's education, Asta in writing, clothes and entertainment. Asta and Swanny are both beautiful and elegant, but their dispositions are fundamentally different. One is a rebel with the intention to shock people, either with her manners or appearance, 'open about matters most women of her age are anxious to hide' (AB 51), and who remains isolated for the whole life. The other is an obedient and gentle daughter, whose priorities suddenly begin to deteriorate. Through their female life experience the readers can see different women in different situations in a number of areas, such as the sphere of sex and job opportunities. Both feminine and feminist identities are addressed here, and what would perhaps best characterise Rendell/Vine's attitude to these in her narrative, to borrow the phrase used by Elizabeth Wilson, is that she 'returns women's experience to its immediacy' (Radstone 1988:22). The concentration on the family saga also gives the emphasis on human development, with the past integrated both into the present and the future.

In contrast to *Asta's Book* where a young mother is violently killed by her ex-lover, in *The Crocodile Bird* it is the men who get murdered. Eve kills three men in revenge for the three men who have damaged her life. She also kills for fear and safety, and because her freedom of decision making is threatened by all the men who want to take her sanctuary, Shrove, away from her. Essentially the murdered men are all representatives of men's control over women's sexuality, property, mind and intellect, in other words, they are all 'patriarchal villains'. The text disputes 'a female psychology conditioned by an oppressive and patriarchal male culture', as Shoshana Felman puts it in her essay "Women and Madness" (Belsey, Moore 1997:117), and may thus be considered compatible with those feminist narratives which use this inevitable ideology and relate it to the social situation.

Apart from her interest in the individual characters' psyches Rendell/Vine purposefully covers a number of fundamental social phenomena existing in contemporary Britain. In the novels analysed it is predominantly young or ageing touchy, moody women inside houses, confined to their changing roles of wife, mother, lover, or servant who are seen and heard. The novels are markedly different in plot, characters, scope and method, yet they both compare the conservative Englishness of the Victorian past and its cultural modes with contemporary social experience. Rendell/Vine's world is illustrated as a disorderly place, similarly to P. D. James's crime novels, where 'good is rare' (Hubly 1983:513). The writer concentrates on tortured human relationships, and the representations of contemporary social identifications are intensified against a romanticised background. The narratives may therefore be considered social thrillers essentially concerned with women versus the British cultural conditions, where Englishness, national and cultural identities, femininity and sexuality constitute some of the major aspects. Both the novels present the liberal vision of equality and cultural diversity, and focus on prevailing domestic situations. Rendell/Vine appears to fit into the 'movement inwards—towards the family, and even the self, in a growing psychological imperative—evinced feelings of claustrophobia' (Munt 1994:18), which according to Munt, characterises most contemporary English Queens of Crime, i.e. prominent female detective story writers. Masculinity in crisis could be another image the narratives undoubtedly produce, showing predominantly weak males who can never penetrate their female partners' troubled souls, while there is no pro-marriage or pro-family message, and no condemnation of homosexuality. The narratives rank among those making conscious efforts to modernise the crime novel, to update it and liberate it from the classical importance of the puzzle value and mainstream masculine ideology. Rendell/Vine's universal themes of loneliness, personal trauma, division and a quest for identity set against the specific English cultural conditions strengthen the images of contemporary Britain, and display different female characters' expectations and reality, experiences and limitations, chances and failures.

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