

## Displacement in Rose Tremain's First Novel: *Sadler's Birthday*

Rose Tremain's first novel, *Sadler's Birthday*, published in 1976 when she was 33, elicited surprised reactions from editors and fellow writers alike. The novel's focus on the reminiscences of a 76-year-old man was deemed highly unusual coming from a young woman writer. Angus Wilson, whose creative writing class Tremain attended at the University of East Anglia, liked the novel and agreed to be quoted on the front cover saying it was 'as far from the stereotype of a young woman's first novel as it can be' (Brown 2012). Her editor, Penelope Hoare, was similarly 'thrilled' by the unexpected perspective Tremain adopted: 'It was so unlike most people's first novels, in the sense that it didn't seem to be in the least bit autobiographical' (Rustin 2003).

From her first novel onwards, Tremain has favoured marginal characters for her protagonists to further unconventional outlooks on life:

It has to do with a feeling that I have that people who are not valued or are marginalized or are experiencing difficulties vis-à-vis mainstream life in some way are likely to have a more unique and original perspective on life. And I believe that's what I'm after, this voice from the wings, 'dans les coulisses,' emphatically not on the main stage but from this kind of ... tangent. (Menegaldo 1998, p. 107)

Her writing motto, which she passed on to students such as Tracy Chevalier when Tremain herself took up teaching the writing class at UEA,<sup>1</sup> is: 'Write about what you *don't* know' (Rustin 2003). *Sadler's*

*Birthday* helped Tremain develop her personal approach to writing as inhabiting an unknown ‘terrain’ (Tremain 1999c, p. 62). Indeed, although it is not apparent, *Sadler’s Birthday* was actually based on Tremain’s own childhood (Tremain 1999c, p. 62), in particular the time spent holidaying at her grandparents’ who were rich landowners and also inspired the title story in *The Colonel’s Daughter and Other Stories*: ‘I think that the house owner, this colonel and his wife, are slightly based on how my grand-parents were...’ (Menegaldo 1998, p. 104). However, at the time when she was writing her first novel, she was also writing a radio play, *The Wisest Fool*, dedicated to James I’s decision to wage war on Spain to save his favourite Georges Villiers who had ruined marriage negotiations with the Infanta Maria. The contrast between the two ‘terrains’ and the dissimilar working conditions led Tremain to realize she was more comfortable dealing with the unknown:

And one fact of this simultaneity is significant: the play was written very fast in a kind of hectic excitement, looting and grabbing from the facts of history, then distorting – or distilling – these facts with inventions. The novel, on the contrary, was measured, difficult work. And when I emerged from the two, I understood how the distant past had set my imagination alight to a far greater extent than the past of my own girlhood. It was from this time onwards that I decided I didn’t want to draw heavily on personal data in my fictions, but rather solicit subjects outside my experience of the world and learn about the world through writing about these. (Tremain 1999c, p. 62)

She later devoted a short story to James I in which she reaffirmed her basic principle of writing about the unknown. ‘My Love Affair with James I’ is the writing exercise of an ageing actor attending a writing class. In it, he narrates the shooting of a film entitled *The Wisest Fool* and intersperses his narrative with comments on the teacher’s instructions. He disagrees with the injunction to ‘Always write about what you know’ (Tremain 1999a, p. 173) underlining instead the complex interconnections woven in writing and the stimulating grasp of things attained through writing about them:

For instance, do I, through my recent experience, actually know more about the following: James I, Georges Villiers, Will Nichols [a fellow actor], the psyche of actors, the price of success, seventeenth-century English civilisation, twentieth-century Greek civilisation [where the film

was shot], love, infatuation, envy, childhood, Welsh miners and so on? I'm not sure. But all these are vital ingredients in the knowing of something I can only fully understand by writing about it. (Tremain 1999a, p. 173)

In *Sadler's Birthday*, Tremain decided to focus on an elderly butler figure whose marginality is twofold, fostered by his social background and his age. Anticipating the 1980s development of post-colonial studies and their emphasis on marginality and displacement while mirroring the poststructuralist, and later postmodern, challenge to hegemonic discourses and the dislocation of identity, *Sadler's Birthday* problematizes social, spatial, historical and intertextual displacement. Because Tremain writes from the metropolis, her novels do not fit the seminal definition of the post-colonial formalized by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin in 1989 as 'writing by those peoples formerly colonized by Britain' or 'countries colonized by other European powers' (Ashcroft et al. 2002, p. 1). Although her authorial identity does not match the regional and historical specificity of the post-colonial, she has, throughout her career, contextualized her characters' struggles against the backdrop of a waning imperial power which parallels the dismantlement of patriarchy. *Sadler's Birthday* is a third-person narrative telling the story of a 76-year-old butler who lives alone in the house he has inherited from his former masters, the Colonel and his wife, Madge, who die in a car accident on the day of the coronation of Elizabeth II, which marked the instauration of the Commonwealth. The demise of the masters on that particular day suggests a parallel between the collapse of the empire and the end of the paternalist British social order emblemized by the butler figure. In *Letter to Sister Benedicta*, she correlates her female protagonist's struggle for empowerment with the emancipation of post-Independence India. In *The Swimming Pool Season* and *Trespass*, she uses the Nazi occupation of France as a historical background. In *The Road Home*, she tackles the end of the Soviet dominion over Eastern Europe. There are similarities between *Sadler's Birthday* and *The Road Home*, in particular the third-person narrative which allows Tremain to portray her characters through both their self-perceptions with free indirect speech and the perception of others. The parallel procedure in the two novels elicits a comparison between old age and foreignness. Being old and being an immigrant both entail forms of exclusion. The two novels thus read like inquiries into the influence of society's prejudice on the characters' self-perception. Interestingly enough, as Chap. 8 will further demonstrate,

the critical reception of *The Road Home* which detected a neo-colonial ambivalence in Tremain's treatment of the East exemplifies the difficulty of broaching post-colonial issues in the novels of a metropolitan writer.

This may explain why Tremain's first novel failed to have the same impact that Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* achieved 12 years later. Ishiguro was then hailed, most famously by Pico Iyer, as a new addition to the post-colonial Booker-prize winners and a representative of world fiction. There are strong similarities between the two novels in the depiction of a changing world order emblemized by the anachronistic figure of the butler and foregrounded by the protagonist's WWII memories. In both novels, a background failed love story parallels the tangential historical narrative. In Tremain's novel however, the romance concerns the inappropriate relationship between adult Sadler and the boy evacuee Tom whom the masters have agreed to take in. The romance echoes the predominant theme of childhood in the novel which is related to the rewriting of Dickensian motifs. While Ishiguro's novel's overall problematic lies with colonial paternalism and filial devotion, Tremain's deals with self-abjection and perversion as a way to broach the issue of sexual difference. The portrait of the repellent misogynistic Sadler fixated on the maternal bond highlights the connection between the post-colonial focus on the margin and the feminist contestation of patriarchal oppression, an alliance which Tremain's later novels emphasize more blatantly as Chap. 3 will demonstrate. It is Sarah Sceats' contention that Tremain's first novel:

establishes three factors that continue to resonate through Tremain's fiction. It focuses on marginal or outsider figures, which is partly what manifests her particular feminism. All the significant relationships in Sadler's life – apart from his fixation on Tom – are with neglected, abused or abandoned women, equally marginal figures with whom he is able to empathise. The suggestion is of a psychological rather than political feminism: what might be considered 'female' characteristics (empathy, intuition, nurturing) are what define the focus of interest in a character who happens to be male. It raises the possibility of obsession, of being driven by desire, whether for food, sex, a person, a landscape, a thing. This drive in turn is related, directly, obliquely or even inversely, to feelings of belonging, the desire to locate oneself in relation to whatever it is that confers a fulfilling self-identity, that allows the feeling of being 'right in one's skin'. (Sceats 2005, p. 167)

At the same time as Tremain explores 'A major feature of post-colonial literatures' which 'is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being; the concern with the development of an effective identifying relationship between self and place' (Ashcroft et al. 2002, p. 8), her reactionary male protagonists, like Sadler, display 'that conflictual economy of colonial discourse which Edward Said describes as the tension between the synchronic panoptical vision of domination—the demand for identity, stasis—and the counter-pressure of the diachrony of history—change, difference' (Bhabha 1984, p. 126). *Sadler's Birthday* thus contrasts the present-day situation of the butler turned master ambling around the house on his birthday, looking for the key to his former servant bedroom, which comes to spatially represent his lost sense of self, and the reminiscences of his past which especially focus on childhood and the WWII memories of the evacuee children. Tremain examines the notion of authority from a social angle with the radical change of position of Sadler who fails to emulate the Colonel's inbred sense of his own superiority symbolized by the standards he has set for himself and calls his 'cardinal rules' (*SB*, p. 170). Instead, Sadler dresses himself in the Colonel's clothes and occupies his room, adopting the accoutrements of authority while failing to adapt to its symbolic requirements. The novel connects the displaced figure of the butler turned master with the outcast figure of the useless old man. Sadler, inheriting the house at 53, ages prematurely and lets himself and 'the empty little kingdom he ruled' (*SB*, p. 169) go to ruin. The portrait of the decrepit old man corresponds to the decline of the empire. Sadler's own compliance with decline as the 'authoritative narrative' (Gullette 2004, p. 13) of old age problematizes on a social and cultural level the historical dissolution of the empire. His vilifying self-portrait as a senile old man echoes his dismay at losing his masters.

In that respect the parallel between Sadler and his dog is crucial and structures the whole novel. Sadler continuously draws comparisons between the dog and his own feeble and lonely condition. Both of them are incontinent (*SB*, pp. 2, 66). Both of them stink (*SB*, pp. 56, 182). Both are growing thin and feeble (*SB*, pp. 3, 150). The highly negative lexicon used by Sadler every time he refers to his ageing body, coupled with the dog comparisons, emphasize Sadler's self-loathing as well as physical abjection. The dog also comes to embody Sadler's fear of death. The book draws a parallel between Sadler's senility and the insanity of Madge's father brought about by old age. Madge remembers

she was afraid at the time of her father's growing dementia that someone would shoot him like they shot mad dogs (*SB*, p. 157). Similarly Sadler thinks of shooting his dog. Given their proximity and Sadler's dismay at his own decline, the scene almost reads like attempted suicide. It anticipates the father figure, Sonny, in *Sacred Country*, who ends up killing himself along with his dog. *Sadler's Birthday* closes on yet another parallel between Sadler and the dog when Sadler is finally able to penetrate into his old room and finds a rat's corpse. The rat recalls Sadler calling the dog an 'incontinent little rat' (*SB*, p. 5) and 'the little rat' (*SB*, p. 187) and prefigures Sadler's own death. When Sadler imagines his housekeeper Mrs Moore finding him dead, he imagines her treating his corpse like that of a dog, ordering that it be buried outside as 'it should never have been given house room' (*SB*, p. 189). The phrase strongly echoes Sadler's harsh detestation of himself and the fear he has of being but a usurper as the master of the house. In Sadler's estimation, the dog is happier than he is as 'that's all a dog needs, a good master' (*SB*, p. 22). The subservient animal echoes Sadler's own social position: he calls it 'Boy', a synonym for servant. After inheriting the house, Sadler feels like a dog without a master. Such figures recur in Tremain's work like misogynistic collaborationist Mallélou in *The Swimming Pool Season* who laments the loss of the German master, bigoted fascist Eileen in *The Cupboard*, or loyalist Merivel in *Restoration*.

The conservative characters in her work from the most benign to the more outrageous problematize displacement as a threat to their identity which they anchor in a deference to order and hierarchy. The butler figure emblemizes the filial devotion to the paternalist ruling system. Sadler's social position as a butler, represented by his uniform, allows him to have control over his life (*SB*, p. 93). He takes pride in his job and its codes that require him to withdraw into himself, to make himself available as well as invisible and imply demureness. The strictness of hierarchy within the house protects him from people prying into his intimacy. The rigidity of hierarchical constraints is both Sadler's lifeline and his perversion. As in Ishiguro's novel, 'The coercive terms of [the butler's] myth are exposed ironically through the narration of Stevens, whose failure to find personal fulfilment is directly proportional to his commitment to the ideal of the faithful servant' (O'Brien 1996, p. 788). In Tremain's novel, it is dramatized through the naming issue. As in the very title of the novel, everyone calls Sadler by his last name as befits his higher status among the servants and his butler position with his masters.

Sadler welcomes the protection offered by the convention that isolates him but at times he deplores such aloofness. As opposed to the chauffeur, Wren, who identifies more fully with his army number than with his own name (*SB*, p. 59), Sadler longs for the recognition of his true self outside of his uniform. He himself addresses the people he feels closest to by their first name, either directly or in the privacy of his musings. He addresses the head kitchen maid with whom he has spent a decade in the house as Vera. More importantly, he thinks of his mistress as Madge, a manifestation of his fond remembrance of her. Sadler is thus torn between his chosen captivity in the rules and conventions of social class structure and his longing for intimacy. He falls in love with Tom precisely because the boy calls him by his first name, Jack, creating an intimate bond between them that Sadler has otherwise been denied in his life. Sadler, however, replicates the master/servant relationship in his love story. In Tom he looks for yet another master (*SB*, p. 133). Upon first touching the boy, he sings the nursery rhyme 'Seesaw, Margery Daw', the text reproducing the song's lines catching the reader's attention with the particularly significant: 'Jackie shall have a new master' (*SB*, p. 131).

The parallel with the dog is again significant in that respect. Throughout the novel, Sadler refuses to name the dog. When he considers killing the dog, it is because he fears 'the name would come to him' (*SB*, p. 187) and he would grow attached to it. Sadler willingly submits to servility but shuns love bonds as bondage. Sadler's relationships to both Tom and the dog function as mirror relations highlighting the tension between the civilized decorum of the butler persona and Sadler's self-abjection. Indeed Tom is also called a 'rat' (*SB*, p. 133) like the dog, emphasizing the alter ego relationship. Tom and the dog as rats represent the obverse of the loyal butler figure, Sadler's contemptible intimate self. The book ends with Sadler's ambiguous postponed resolve to finally give a name to the dog, hereby recognizing his need for its companionship and love. His social position allows him to remain passive while his story is being written. He lets his story pass him by just as history, only mentioned incidentally, seems to have no impact on his isolation. He selfishly wishes the war would last so he could keep Tom longer by his side. He is insulated in his own solitary musings. Naming the dog would mean recognizing its value and opening himself up to the grief its death would bring. Thinking he himself is worthless, how could Sadler acknowledge the dog's merit? Denying his own mortality, how could he

name the loss? This is what Sadler is confronted with at the end of the novel: death and the importance of symbolization. Along with the body of a dead rat, he retrieves an old birthday card from his mother in which she calls him by his first name. Sadler's character displays characteristics of a perverse structure as he acts as a passive substitute for his mother. According to Bruce Fink, 'he [the pervert] cannot go off to "make a name for himself" in the world, for it is not symbolic stature that he is able to seek. He remains stuck at the level of his mother's be-all and end-all' (Fink 2003, p. 50). As he has not completed the symbolization process, the pervert disavows castration, which means he is unable to accept it and instead stages it by trying to force the father to fulfil the paternal function. This would account for Sadler's love of conventions and rules as a defence mechanism and his desperate need for a master as well as his self-imposed incarceration. Instead of the symbolic dimension of authority and the law, Sadler only conforms to its imaginary apparatus: the uniform and its etiquette.

Perversion is a common trait in many of Tremain's characters, most strikingly Joseph Blackstone in *The Colour* and Audrun Lunel and Anthony Verey in *Trespass*. All those characters are fixated on their mother, are terrified of sexuality and/or engendering, and are sodomites and highly conservative law breakers. The pervert stance, as explained by Slavoj Žižek, makes clear that Sadler's relationship with Tom as well as his relationship to women are the result of immaturity:

perversion can be seen as a defence against the motif of 'death and sexuality,' against the threat of mortality as well as the contingent imposition of sexual difference: what the pervert enacts is a universe in which, as in cartoons, a human being can survive any catastrophe; in which adult sexuality is reduced to a childish game; in which one is not forced to die or to choose one of the two sexes. (Žižek 1999)

At the time she wrote the book, Tremain claims she did not think of Sadler's relationship with Tom as paedophilia:

If I was writing that book now, I might have thought twice about that happening, but I don't see it as abusive actually. The child doesn't feel abused by it, he feels protected by it, and there is a great kinship between him and Sadler. In a way, as somebody pointed out to me recently, which I think is true, Sadler is also making amends for the child that he didn't have. (Menegaldo 1998, p. 104)



Instead, the 'kinship' between the two is essentially narcissistic. Sarah Sceats contends that through Tom, Sadler relates to his own childhood: 'it is possible to read this kinship [between Sadler and Tom] as paternal—or even maternal—attachment, a re-enactment of Annie's love for the infant Sadler, his love for a substitute son or perhaps even that of the adult Sadler for his immature self' (Sceats 2005, p. 167). Their affinity stems from their common status as orphans: neither of them has a father. Moreover the exceptional situation of the evacuee children made for temporary orphanage. Sadler was raised by a single mother who got pregnant at 16 by a careless sweet-talker. Annie took up a position as a maid and Sadler then followed in her footsteps, sent away at 14 to serve as an under-footman. His attachment to his mother, his sense of loss and exile, and his boyish rescue fantasies are subtly mirrored in the WWII memories of the narrative which focus on the war's evacuee children. Displacement is problematized on a historical as well as on a domestic level with the world cataclysm mirroring the inner turmoil of the character. Sadler is but a wounded child who imagines himself as a knight rescuing his mother. He has embraced the fate his mother could not withstand. After Annie is rebuked by the butler for playing on the masters' piano, she shuts herself away and stops talking to people in order to concentrate on her duties, which accounts for Sadler's painful memory of her burial which he attended alone (*SB*, p. 15). The boy Sadler's greatest fear is for her to 'cease to exist' (*SB*, p. 92). As an adult, his full compliance with his job description is an enactment of his boyish rescue fantasy of his mother, his way of shouldering the burden for her retrospectively. He himself ceases to exist so that she may not cease to exist and his memories serve to keep her alive. Thus the romance—as Sadler conceives it—reads like a childish fantasy escape from parental authority. Hence Sadler's wish for the war to last, as the war is an adult thing that leaves room for the children to have an adventure of their own, unsupervised.

The boy Sadler also used to identify with orphan Pip from *Great Expectations*. Sadler and Tom share further common features. Like Tom, Sadler was sent to a strangers' home away from his mother while still quite young. Like him he met a butler, Keynes, who offered to have an inappropriate relationship with him, which the boy refused. Sadler does not conceive of his relationship with Tom in the same terms as what Keynes proposed. Keynes promised promotion in exchange for sexual favours. Sadler wants Tom to love him. Tremain rewrites the Victorian romanticization of childhood by disclosing the repressed eroticization

of children. The motif of the abused orphan reads like a reparation fantasy that perversely turns into its opposite. Tom is not damaged by it but Sadler is, as the tough East Ender boy does not return his affection, apparently indifferent and even excited to depart from the house and leaving Sadler's subsequent love letter unanswered. Similarly, the unexpected legacy Sadler receives, reminiscent of Dickensian inheritance plots, does not have the regular corrective effect but rather plunges Sadler deeper into his self-abjection. The intertextual reference to *Little Dorrit*—which Annie reads to the boy Sadler—calls forth the motifs of debt and imprisonment which Tremain displaces into a contemporary context. In *Sadler's Birthday*, the broken line of transmission allows the breakdown of social rules: it is because the Colonel and his wife are childless that Sadler inherits the house, that the butler turns master. Instead of the Dickensian fairy-tale happy ending of the heroes' final integration of the social order through inheritance and marriage plots, which means that 'Like true *Bildungsroman* heroes, they have passed through various ordeals and come out triumphantly, deserving at the end the usual rewards of the narrative agencies: competence, status, requited love' (Sadrin 1994, p. 8), the inheritance Sadler receives leads to his ejection from the comfort of his status and the subsequent loss of his identity. Intertextual displacement thus comes to mirror the historical displacement of authority which leaves Sadler at a loss with what to do with his newfound economic independence. While in Ishiguro's novel, 'Ironically the dissolution of that [anachronistic] social order is legitimated in the novel according to what may be seen as the logical extension of the filial metaphor—the law of "natural" succession' (O'Brien 1996, p. 791), Tremain's novel focuses on the 'unnatural', the breakdown of all rules: the rule of succession, the moral regulations of sexual relations as well as the associated narrative standards, the coded romance formula and the *Bildungsroman*' canon. Both novels however identify the same source of unrest: 'the value of knowing one's place loses currency in a new emphasis on social and economic freedom' (O'Brien 1996, p. 792).

A secondary character, ironically called Miss Reader, dramatizes the confrontation of the two dissimilar world orders. The Socialist billeting officer stands for the emancipation of women that the war assisted. She originates from London's upper-middle class, and her parents, who live on Russell Square and are friends with Emmeline Pankhurst, are reminiscent of the Bloomsbury group (*SB*, p. 62). The character's name as well as her social background may be interpreted as a comment on Tremain's

literary scheme: writing (and reading) is meant to disrupt the carefully ordered world of her characters. Miss Reader indeed makes Sadler highly uncomfortable. Such elucidation however is loaded with heavy irony. Miss Reader proves to be awkward in dealing with any social situation, unable to adopt the correct codes either with the Colonel and Madge or with Sadler. She acts as a billeting officer out of guilt over her pedigree (*SB*, p. 62). She is a displaced element from Tremain's own childhood and the need she felt to make amends for her grandparents' lifestyle: 'If you had a kind of background like that, you felt in the 1960s, that you needed to atone for it. So I think what I was doing in that book was reversing the role. The central character is the butler' (Menegaldo 1998, p. 104). Miss Reader's upbringing and political beliefs have led her to conclude that the war 'brings people together, breaks down barriers' (*SB*, p. 128) and she presumes to befriend Sadler and hopes eventually to make him her lover as she is puzzled by what hides 'behind the butler's convention of playing deaf' (*SB*, p. 80). Sadler, however, is 'a stickler for convention' (*SB*, p. 170) like the Colonel, and resents her intrusion as she comes as an interference in his relationship with Tom. Their common endeavour to mimic the language of the class they want to impress is also what reveals the unbridgeable gap between them. Tremain humorously comments on Miss Reader's failed attempts at integrating the community of Hentswell, starting with her learning the correct pronunciation of the location's name (*SB*, p. 62). Mimicry is not enough to grasp the mindset of Hentswell's people who find her 'odd' (*SB*, p. 62). At 76, Sadler remembers his 'pompous' attempts at addressing his masters correctly by 'mincing words' and using 'all that dictionary language' (*SB*, p. 18). When the two meet, Sadler is wrapped up in the decorum of the butler's address while Miss Reader struggles to find the right words, for which Sadler only despises her. Tremain portrays the clash between the anachronistic paternalist system represented by Sadler and the first faltering steps of the feminist revolution. In old age, Sadler finally gives in to the language that suits him best, that of abjection and self-debasement, the obverse and necessary correlate to his highly civilized butler enunciation.

Like the naming issue, Sadler's very enunciation may be paralleled with language as the bone of contention in post-colonial theory in that 'The control over language by the imperial centre—whether achieved by displacing native languages, by installing itself as a "standard" against other variants which are constituted as "impurities", or by planting the

language of empire in a new place—remains the most potent instrument of cultural control’ (Ashcroft et al. 2002, p. 283). The native language of Sadler as that of impure self-abjection is a way to contest the imperial expression of the socializing order. Although in the case of metropolitan writer Tremain, it does not take the form of a cultural or regional subversion, the ‘stance of rejection’ (Ashcroft et al. 2002, p. 283) is similar and again outlines the concurrence of post-colonial studies and post-structuralist and feminist theory. Julia Kristeva has most famously analysed abjection as ‘what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules’ (Kristeva 1982, p. 4). Sadler as an out-cast problematizes the dissolution of the empire as his abject enunciation lays bare the foundation of the symbolic order based on exclusion: the butler turned master is the margin become visible. Because he adheres to the imperial order, his change of status cataclysmically brings to the surface his dejection so that he displays the same ambivalence as Ishiguro’s protagonist: ‘It is perhaps through this enunciatory disjunction, this narrative ambivalence, that Ishiguro’s novel can most clearly be read as a comment on the postcolonial condition’ (O’Brien 1996, p. 801).

This is the reason why his enunciatory abjection is coupled with an ambulatory exploration as ‘Instead of sounding himself as to his “being”, he does so concerning his place: “Where am I?” instead of “Who am I?”’. [...] the *deject* is in short a stray’ (Kristeva 1982, p. 8). Sadler as a stray dog without a master endeavours to spatially locate his sense of self by ambling round the house while wandering aimlessly in the past as the present-day narrative is interrupted by the surfacing of reminiscences that obey no chronological or other perceivable order but rather follow the train of thought of the old man who does not remember what day of the week it is and is thus unsure when his birthday is.<sup>2</sup> Consequently the narrative appears fragmented, mimicking the old man’s incapacity to make sense of ‘the debris of a whole life’ (*SB*, p. 181), which conforms to Kristeva’s depiction of abject time between ‘forgetfulness and thunder’: ‘The abject from which he does not cease separating is for him, in short, a *land of oblivion* that is constantly remembered. [...] Then, forgotten time crops up suddenly and condenses into a flash of lightning’ (Kristeva 1982, p. 8). The third-person narrative also allows Tremain to make plain her character’s denials and contradictions, which provides an opportunity to reflect on the pains and joys of memory. Thus the reader is given access to the painful memories that Sadler would rather have kept locked away like the memories of his mother ‘he always chose [...]

with such nervous care, examining those that hardly gave him any pain [...] but once in a while they slipped like intruders in his sleep' (*SB*, pp. 14–15). Similarly, although he denies the purport of his memories and of his very life: 'Now hardly an hour went by without him finding some buried splinter of his existence and picking at it. But, probe as he did, he could find nothing much of any significance' (*SB*, p. 85), he nonetheless finds comfort in the reminiscing process as the parallel with Madge demonstrates: 'It seemed to revive her spirits to talk to him, to remember aloud. It was as if she were reading something she'd written long ago, long ago dismissed as trash, and then found herself surprised by how good it seemed to be' (*SB*, p. 157). Tremain is interested in slips and 'splinters' as she penetrates the 'terrain' of her characters' wounded intimacy. From her first novel on, she has picked characters whose marginality makes their flaws more vivid. Her literary design is indeed to transform the trash, the debris, the leftovers of her characters' lives into a good read. Her writing flirts with the abject as that which society has to repress to impose its order. Hence the recurrence in her work of excremental motifs like the enema pump (*The Cupboard*, *Trespass*, *Merivel: A Man of His Time*), sodomy and faeces.

The recourse to abjection further allows Tremain to problematize gender hierarchy and the exclusion of women as the foundation of the paternalist symbolic order, which distinguishes her novel from Ishiguro's. With the figure of abject Sadler, Tremain problematizes the questions posed by Kristeva in her essay: 'Where then lies the border, the initial phantasmatic limit that establishes the clean and proper self of the speaking and/or social being? Between man and woman? Or between mother and child? Perhaps between woman and mother?' (Kristeva 1982, p. 85). Indeed Sadler's pervert stance, which means he disavows castration and the paternal prohibition, entails both an empathy for the maternal and a detestation of female sexuality. Kristeva highlights the connection between abjection and perversion in their relation to the paternal law: 'The abject is related to perversion. [...] The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them' (Kristeva 1982, p. 15). Thus Miss Reader also emblemizes Sadler's ambivalent relationships to women. Sadler's loyalty is based on his unflinching devotion to his mother. His life is peopled with his omnipresent mother and substitute mother figures. The other women, who hint at possible sexual relations, he hates. The pervert is caught up in the

mother's demand because her lack has not been symbolized, it has not been named, hence he cannot access desire. Annie's silence that threatens to 'engulf' (*SB*, p. 92) Sadler represents that overwhelming demand. His fantasy of a crippled mother in need of rescue (*SB*, p. 88) is a way for him to enact an imaginary lack in her for which he can compensate. When he is sent away at 14, he is surrounded by substitute mother figures: the maids shower him with 'maternal affection' (*SB*, p. 95) and turn him into a pet to whom they feed 'tidbits' and 'little peck[s]' (*SB*, p. 96). In Madge, he also sees a surrogate mother not only because she makes him her heir but also because in Sadler she thinks she has 'found the man' (*SB*, p. 10). He makes himself into her *object a* with the unfailing loyalty of the perfect butler, the epitome of her privileged status, she who is sexually frustrated and finds happiness in money (*SB*, p. 79).

As opposed to the substitute mother figures in Sadler's life, the female characters whom Sadler cannot bear are the ones who talk too much, that is the ones who would have him recognize the lack their babbling tries to cover, enter the circuit of desire, and acknowledge the enigma of the Other's desire. Thus he cannot abide his mother's best friend, Betsy, whose cousin is his father. He obsesses over her 'red mouth' with its 'waterfall of words' (*SB*, p. 96) and its 'thousands of words' (*SB*, p. 100). Betsy's greatest offence is her betrayal of his mother. Complying with her husband's wish, she tells Annie she can no longer see her given her bad reputation as a single mother. What Betsy thus symbolizes is the paternal prohibition Sadler refuses. Typically, while Betsy utters the betrayal, the boy Sadler is not listening so that the actual words do not appear in the text. The obvious sexual component of the red mouth connects language and sexuality. The pervert disavows symbolic sexual difference, thus Sadler hates it when women talk. Clare Morley, an early flirt of Sadler's, was 'pretty till she spoke' (*SB*, p. 126). Miss Reader's 'seesaw of a voice' (*SB*, p. 128) evokes castration. Sadler's misogyny may be accounted for by his denial of the Other's desire.

He loathes women's hysterical anxiety at the Other's desire: 'So odd, they were, women. So terribly, pathetically afraid' (*SB*, p. 102) and despises churchgoers. God may function as an embodiment of the Other, the third party that regulates intersubjective relations, that is the symbolic order. That Sadler stands outside symbolic relationships appears blatantly in his disparagement of the church fan club: 'what an arrogance there seems to be in people who think God loves them. Like members of a club. [...] Forgetting, though, that Jesus kept company with publicans

and sinners' (*SB*, p. 107). Sadler identifies with the outcast and, adopting the classic perverse stance, doubts the love of God, as he believes not in the Other's desire but rather in his/her *jouissance*, which is obscene and entails punishment, the vengeful God rather than the benevolent one. Thus he condemns women's turning to the church for an answer as an easy way out of the conundrum of the Other's '*che vuoi?*' and, in a typical male chauvinist way, debases the sublimatory aspect of religion as simply looking for the safety of a man's arms: 'each one [of the women] rapt in pursuit of safe havens. And the Church was the most obvious, the most accessible and the only one run exclusively by men' (*SB*, p. 102).

Sadler hates women who take an interest in him as they would confront him with the question of desire: 'Lacan's *Che vuoi?* is not simply an inquiry into "What do you want?" but more an inquiry into "What's bugging you? What is it in you that makes you so unbearable not only for us, but also for yourself, that you yourself obviously do not master?"' (Žižek 2006, p. 43). As his mother's object, he feels no need to answer that question as he fulfils his role as a provider of *jouissance*. But the masterless dog is bugged by his enforced isolation and the onslaught of his childhood memories. Tremain introduces the reader to her character's inner turmoils. By focusing on marginal voices, she often emphasizes self-abhorrence, that which makes the character 'unbearable' to himself, as well as, in the case of Sadler, to the reader. In *Sadler's Birthday*, Sadler's ambivalent relationship to women, hovering between infantile attachment and misogynous scare, helps uncover the complex issue of sexual difference, whose symbolic implications Tremain will later develop at length in the polyphonic novel *The Swimming Pool Season*. It is through her insight into a character's singular conscience that Tremain broaches larger social and historical concerns. The recourse to self-abjection serves to establish an intimate connection between reader and character, arousing either dislike or empathy. *Sadler's Birthday* is indeed an atypical first novel for a woman writer whose singularity points to the unexpected as that which defines Tremain's work.

## NOTES

1. Rose Tremain is a graduate from the University of East Anglia. She then taught creative writing there from 1988 to 1995. In 2013 she was appointed chancellor at UEA.

2. 'There are two time scales in the book: the day in question which may or may not be his birthday, that's the title, and then he does a sort of looking back over key things that have happened in his life.' (Menegaldo 1998, p. 103).

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