Old Themes and Self-Reflection in Jenkins's Later Novels

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Abstract

Robin Jenkins considers and questions his own achievements and the role of the artist in the novels Poverty Castle (1991), Willie Hogg (1993), Poor Angus (2000) and Childish Things (2001). In Leila (1995) Jenkins reworks old themes and plot elements. This later text can partly be seen as a ‘rewriting’ of the earlier A Figure of Fun (1974). This essay details how Jenkins's writing becomes increasingly self-reflective during the last decade of his writing career. Some texts can be seen as partly autobiographical in the way they present characters' attributes and experiences that are comparable with elements of Jenkins's own life experience and opinions, as well as narrative details which refer directly to Jenkins himself and his circumstances. As a result, all the narratives in question arguably reflect Jenkins's need to re-examine and reflect back on his central fictional concerns, his literary achievement, and the role of the artist in Scotland.

Keywords


In her 1993 essay on the ‘disruptive' element of Robin Jenkins's fiction, Glenda Norquay argues that his ‘recent writing can be seen as both a continuation and a development of his previous work, but in both respects maintaining a disruptive character which is distinctively his own'. Norquay’s estimate is that the challenges in Jenkins's work, which operate as a force for disruption, ‘emerge more sharply in the period since 1979' and that since then Jenkins has ‘both built upon and diverged from his early works'.

2 Ibid., pp. 11–12.
Fergus Lamont (1979), one of Jenkins’s finest novels, continues the ruthless social analysis that characterises much of his earlier fiction, emphasising the essentially fragmented nature of Scottish society and the great divergence between social classes in Scotland. Further, Fergus Lamont continues the novelist’s interrogation of Calvinist morality. It is strongly focused on individual self-deception and self-justification, and on the confrontation of idealism and human self-interest. The novel therefore represents an obvious continuation of Jenkins’s earlier concerns. Yet Fergus Lamont also diverges from the earlier fiction in terms of both narrative technique and narrative approach to these concerns. The first person narrative perspective means that our interpretation of events is entirely dependent upon Fergus’s biased vision, so that we are forced to identify with a character we are often inclined to dislike. At the same time, Jenkins approaches Fergus and the novel’s main issues with an even greater degree of irony and ambivalence than in his earlier work. Likewise Poverty Castle (1991), which, while typically Jenkinesian in its concern with moral binaries and social justice, also presents a significant break from Jenkins’s former narrative methods by its implicitly metafictional nature and double frame of reference, rendered via its juxtaposition of the story of a dying novelist, who wants his last novel to be a ‘celebration of goodness,’ with the actual novel he is writing.3

While this combination of continuation and disruption is apparent in Jenkins’s later Scottish narratives, the novels of this period, in particular from 1990 onwards, are also increasingly self-reflective on Jenkins’s part. Poverty Castle, Willie Hogg (1993), Poor Angus (2000) and Childish Things (2001) can also be seen as partly autobiographical in the way they present characters’ attributes and experiences that are comparable with elements of Jenkins’s own life and opinions, as well as narrative details or descriptions which refer to Jenkins and his circumstances. Often Jenkins seems to be questioning his achievements and the role of the novelist/artist. At the same time, one text from this last period of Jenkins’s writing, Leila (1995), very blatantly revisits and reworks old themes and plot elements, so much so that it becomes a rewriting of Jenkins’s earlier novel A Figure of Fun (1974). These texts arguably reflect Jenkins’s need to reconsider his central fictional concerns, his literary achievement, and the role of the artist in Scotland.

Poverty Castle, Willie Hogg, Poor Angus and Childish Things are in many ways dissimilar, set in different locations (Argyll, Glasgow/Arizona, Islay, Lunderston /California, respectively), and with different types of characters from mixed social backgrounds. Nevertheless, the four narratives continue Jenkins’s exploration of the ambiguous nature of goodness and moral fallibility,