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THE LIMITS OF IRIS MURDOCH'S ARTISTRY

Artistic development in the case of Iris Murdoch should always be discussed in connection with the novelist's philosophical ideas and her views on the theory of literature. Iris Murdoch's own theory of the novel arose from her moral philosophy and her novels reflect all the transformations and modifications of concepts and the reconsiderations of the author in this field<sup>1</sup>. The strictly philosophical interests of Iris Murdoch have gone from existentialism to platonism which is also reflected in the subsequent novels, beginning with the partially existential "Under the Net" (1954) up to the more platonist "The Sea, the Sea" (1978) and finishing with the twenty third novel, the most recent so far, "The Book and the Brotherhood" (1987).

Iris Murdoch believes that clear and meaningful concepts can form the basis for reaching moral excellence<sup>2</sup>. This theoretic-

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<sup>1</sup> A brief survey of the ideas expressed so far by Iris Murdoch can be found in my article "Iris Murdoch: Theory and Practice - Characterization in "The Sea, the Sea", "Wydawnictwo Naukowe WSP w Bydgoszczy" 1981, Studia-Filologiczne, z. 13. Complete bibliography of Iris Murdoch's works and the up to date criticism concerning them can be found in my doctoral dissertation "Konstrukcja postaci i technika narracji w powieściach Iris Murdoch" (Uniwersytet Łódzki, 1985) which is already accepted for publication by the Scientific Society in Toruń and will soon appear under the title "Iris Murdoch - powieściopisarka i moralistka".

<sup>2</sup> This statement appeared in M. O. Bellamy, An Interview with Iris Murdoch, "Contemporary Literature" 1977, vol. 18, p. 136.

cal statement finds its expression in every novel under the shape of carefully observed relations among the characters. The portraits of Michael Meade in "The Bell", Emma Sands in "An Unofficial Rose", John Ducane in "The Nice and the Good", Austin Gibson Grey in "An Accidental Man", Charles Arrowby in "The Sea, the Sea", Anne in "Nuns and Soldiers" and others, manifest the fact that human behaviour is always extremely important and the direct participation in social relations is the final test of everyone's morality. The main interest in the field of ethics is for Iris Murdoch learning about oneself and others as much as it is possible within the frame of human limitations. In the presented contingent<sup>3</sup> world only dynamic, interpersonal relations give the possibility of escaping from the material world and are the only way to reach transcendental values. The road to freedom, wisdom and happiness requires immersing oneself in the opacity of another human being. Different perspectives from which this problem is presented in these novels manifest the richness of Iris Murdoch's literary creativeness and her continuous search towards excellence.

The early novels of Iris Murdoch are explicit in their meaning and in this sense they are more closed, whereas the later novels allow for many various interpretations and hence they are more open. The philosophical outcome of "Under the Net" for instance is clearly presented and the character of Jack explicitly sketched. The more recent novels on the other hand, like "Henry and Cato", "The Sea, the Sea", "Nuns and Soldiers", "The Philosopher's Pupil" leave a lot of scope for the reader's own imagination. It seems that with every following novel Iris Murdoch treats her work with greater consideration. In this way she attempts fulfilling one of the most important assumptions in her own theory of the novel.

In the range of character creation one can also observe

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<sup>3</sup> The term contingency in Iris Murdoch's theory is the key word for understanding human personality from the point of view of morality. Contingency defines the ability to accept fate, to accept the accidental, the unpredictable, the unusual.

certain progress although the novelist herself claims that she is still far from perfection in this respect. In one of the interviews Iris Murdoch stated, "The creation of character is a difficult thing. I'm not yet particularly good at it. My plot and the kind of central magic are so strong that they tend to draw the characters too much towards the centre"<sup>4</sup>. In other words Iris Murdoch has not as yet been able to create characters in their nineteenth century sense<sup>5</sup>. The writer cannot always solve the problem of a character mainly because she is not, contrary to the nineteenth century writers, tolerant enough towards her characters. In another interview Iris Murdoch said, "Some of my characters fail to emerge as independent individuals, and are mere extensions of my emotional and philosophical bias"<sup>6</sup>. Further on in the same interview the novelist gives the example of Hannah from "The Unicorn" as a character that has escaped the author's control. Originally Hannah was meant to be a symbolic character who similarly to Christ, through her suffering was to redeem the people around her. Instead, Hannah herself has the feeling of guilt and deceit. Her personality developed in an unforeseen direction and as a result she has become an unsuitable image of the redeemer. Satisfying results can only be achieved in these circumstances through close control of the character creation and the proper balance between the characters and the plot.

In his interview with Iris Murdoch, Frank Kermode quotes the words of the author about character creation, "One starts off - at least I start off - hoping that every time this successful character creation is going to happen and that a lot of people who are not me are going to come into existence in

<sup>4</sup> Bellamy, op. cit., p. 139.

<sup>5</sup> The nineteenth century English writers and their novels are the models for Iris Murdoch. These are the only good and great novels according to the author because they present real and convincing human beings against a realistic background. At the same time all these novels carry a profound moral meaning.

<sup>6</sup> R. L. Hayd, An Interview with Iris Murdoch, "University of Windsor Review" 1965, No. 1, p. 142.

some wonderful way. Yet often it turns out in the end that something about the structure of the work itself, the myth as it were of the work, has drawn all these people into a kind of form which ultimately is the form of one's own mind"<sup>7</sup>. In this way the aspect that Iris Murdoch most objects to in her theoretical writings becomes also her own flaw in some of the novels.

Just as it is the case with many characters in her novels Iris Murdoch often takes up the role of the Almighty towards them. This seemingly contingent world created by the novelist is partially shaken by the fact that Iris Murdoch herself is the very person who creates it in all these novels. If the readers are to blame these characters in her novels who deliberately use their great power, they could also blame the author for creating this scheme of self destruction in which they are placed. Sometimes the author manifests her god-like power through punishing the innocent as it is for instance the case with Harriet in "The Sacred and Profane Love Machine". Frequent and surprising turns of action also remind of the constant presence of the author, not directly in the language of narration which is relatively free from the author's interferences, but in arranging the plot which is always subordinate to some outer aim and theory. The author even seems to suggest certain connections existing in all her works through allusions to characters or problems that have already appeared in other novels. These problems that have been dealt with marginally in the earlier novels, sometimes become the main ones in the later novels. Characters with the same names appear in several novels causing the impression of certain homogeneity of the presented world. For instance Mildred and Felix in "An Unofficial Rose" drink wine of the Lynch-Gibbon brand, directly imported from the winery of Martin Lynch-Gibbon in "A Severed Head", while Charles Arrowby in "The Sea, the Sea" knows Adelaide and William, the characters from "Bruno's Dream".

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<sup>7</sup> F. K e r m o d e, House of Fiction. Interviews with Seven English Novelists, "Partisan Review" 1963, No. 30, p. 63-64.



This method suggests that all these characters live their own lives also outside the world of the novel in which they originally appeared and it underlies simultaneously the realistic outcome of these books. It is at the same time a good example of the contingency of human life which is so very important in Iris Murdoch's views. Yet, it also reminds us that it is not anybody else that creates this contingency.

Nevertheless, Iris Murdoch also takes up the god-like position in a more positive sense, through bringing out in the readers the feeling of great sympathy for the characters she presents. It seems to be rather significant that the majority of her protagonists and all first person narrators are men. One could probably find many reasons for such presentation but one is certainly most important - it is the attempt of the novelist to present characters entirely different from herself, characters who are concerned with their own problems. In Iris Murdoch's view it is this ability that makes a genuinely good novelist because according to her theory only a person truly concerned with others can understand them and similarly only such an artist can present a convincing vision of the world and another human being<sup>8</sup>.

In her philosophical work "Sartre. Romantic Rationalist" Iris Murdoch criticizes Sartre's novels for the lack of the author's sympathy towards his characters and hence for the creation of unconvincing characters. The world and the people presented by Sartre are arbitrary and solipsistic. The novels of Iris Murdoch on the contrary, describe from many different points of view various layers of experience and are not treated merely as the means for conveying the author's own dilemmas and problems. The characters created by Iris Murdoch, or at least the best of them, always join two worlds - they move around and func-

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<sup>8</sup> In my interview with Iris Murdoch in her London flat in September 1981 the novelist expressed the above mentioned views and also added that she chooses men for her main characters because they seem to be more significant in social life and as such they are more interesting. Besides, Iris Murdoch would not like to be called a woman-novelist as she does not consider herself a feminist writer.

tion in the very realistically presented world of modern England but at the same time these characters and their actions carry additional, more universal, often symbolic meaning. Thanks to this method of characterization the reader comes across interesting characters who are rich psychologically, fully developed and intriguing. These lively and colourful beings, just as the characters from the nineteenth century novels, stay in the memory of the readers for a long time also because of the visual method of presentation which concerns both the main and the secondary characters such as for example Jack in "Under the Net", Dora in "The Bell", John in "The Nice and the Good", Bruno in "Bruno's Dream", Bradley in "The Black Prince", Charles in "The Sea, the Sea" and secondary ones such as the Quentin sisters in "Under the Net", Annette in "The Flight from the Enchanter", the Anglican bishop from "The Bell", Rachel in "The Black Prince", small Luca in "The Sacred and Profane Love Machine", Rosina in "The Sea, the Sea", etc.

In some novels, however, ideas seem to overshadow the main characters as it is with Mischä.Fox in "The Flight from the Enchanter", Martin and Honor in "A Severed Head" or Hannah in "The Unicorn". In such novels the characters are mainly types who are rather allegorical figures than real living individuals and they are not always originally meant to be such.

The majority of Iris Murdoch's characters usually cannot easily come to terms with the accepted theories about morality and it is only after a series of painful experiences that they find the moral meaning of their existence. It is one of the reasons why the characters invariably move within the frame of an interesting, quickly changing plot. These new situations, in which the characters suddenly find themselves, most often suggest that the world they live in is rich in meaning and contingent. Thus, every single experience is unique, precious and surprising and although all the situations concern similar moral problems, every single one is different and never made boring. The author uses different perspectives and the result is that she avoids schemes and stereotypes in character creation. Characters in the novels of Iris Murdoch demonstrate how unpredictable are the reactions of people. Jack Donaghue, Mi-

chael Meade, Martin Lynch-Gibbon, Bradley Pearson or Charles Arrowby, all of them, every one in a different way, manifest how irrationally human mind can operate under stress. The behaviour of these characters and many others indicates that man can get to know himself only through the contacts with others. It is only through loving others that one can understand himself and see realistically the world around him. The main message all the novels of Iris Murdoch convey is the statement that life is art and the greatest artist is the one who learns about himself through the knowledge of others.

The novels of Iris Murdoch deal mainly with ideas from which the author always starts beginning a novel and the characters spring from the theme not vice versa. Nevertheless, in one of the interviews the novelist stated, "I suppose I have certain philosophical ideas about human life and character, and that these must somehow find expression in my novels; but for the most part I am not conscious of this process and I think it would be destructive if I were"<sup>9</sup>. Iris Murdoch claims that philosophy is not her main concern but she also admits that philosophical ideas are present in her novels because every writer subconsciously writes about what he knows best<sup>10</sup>. It is characteristic of Iris Murdoch's writings that she often presents extremely immoral, disgusting and odd characters whose behaviour is sometimes horrifying. The presence of such characters is the results of Iris Murdoch's interest in the problems of good and evil and their moral outcome.

Evil seems to be presented much more convincingly than good in the novels of Iris Murdoch. It might be the result of the novelist's belief that evil is the best catalyst which in the sharpest way defines human personality. These extremely bad behaviours show acutely the main moral dilemmas of human relations. The most repulsive and atrocious pictures of evil appear in "The Flight from the Enchanter", "A Severed Head", "The

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<sup>9</sup> J. H a f f e n d e n, John Haffenden Talks to Iris Murdoch, "The Literary Review" 1983, No. 58, p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> These opinions were also mentioned by the writer in my interview with her in 1981.

Italian Girl", "The Time of the Angels". The novelist thinks that evil is more fascinating than good. One of the characters, Julius King in "A Fairly Honourable Defeat" expresses best the novelist's assumption when he says, "Grown men show an equal facility for making completely absurd metaphysical assumptions which they feel instinctively to be comforting - for instance the assumption that good is bright and beautiful and evil is shabby, dreary or at least dark. In fact experience entirely contradicts this assumption. Good is dull. What novelist ever succeeded in making a good man interesting? It is characteristic of this planet that the path of virtue is so unutterably depressing that it can be guaranteed to break the spirit and quench the vision of anybody who consistently attempts to tread it. Evil on the contrary, is exciting and fascinating and alive. It is also very much more mysterious than good. Good can be seen through. Evil is opaque"<sup>11</sup>.

This theory can be easily questioned as literature knows many examples of excellent pictures of good yet in the novels of Iris Murdoch it is definitely less fascinating than evil. It seems to be more the result of the author's inability to create convincing images of good than of the conviction that good is really dull. The paradox of Iris Murdoch's writings is that although the novelist praises and values good and condemns evil and amorality it is the latter two concepts that are much more convincingly presented by the author.

Iris Murdoch's literary theory links real men and characters with the contingent world in a way that the novelist herself best described in one of her philosophical works, "We imagine fictitious characters are concrete individuals and although it is true that the information we have about them is limited, this may also be so in the case of real people, and anyway the information is endlessly open to reinterpretation. In fact we may in the course of time, alter our assessment of a fictitious character"<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> I. M u r d o c h, *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, Penguin Books 1980, p. 223.

<sup>12</sup> I. M u r d o c h, *Vision and Choice in Morality*, "Pro-

By moving the reader's sympathy from one character to the other within the same novel and by presenting a given situation from many different points of view, Iris Murdoch tries to show a true vision of reality. It is also characteristic of Iris Murdoch's novels that the characters move in a very real surrounding. It is at the same time a feature that distinguishes Iris Murdoch - the novelist from Iris Murdoch - the philosopher. In her work on Sartre the author notices, "The novelist proper is, in his way, a sort of phenomenologist [...] The novelist has his eyes fixed on what we do, and not on what we ought to do or must be presumed to do [...] He has always been, what the very latest philosophers claim to be, a describer rather than an explainer; and in consequence has often anticipated the philosopher's discoveries"<sup>13</sup>.

Iris Murdoch's talent for conveying the atmosphere of the described places and especially the characteristic aura of life in London is a good example of the author's phenomenology. The novels are full of charming descriptions of many parts of London with precise names of the streets, pubs and shops as it is for example in "Under the Net", "Bruno's Dream", "The Time of the Angels", "A Word Child", etc. Such detailed descriptions of the metropolis may remind the reader of the descriptions of Victorian London that one finds in the novels of Charles Dickens. Similarly to Dickens, Iris Murdoch seems to love and hate this city at the same time but London in the novels of Iris Murdoch is definitely more cheerful. Though both the writers use humour in their descriptions each of them has a different artistic vision and different idea of background in a novel.

In the sphere of narrative techniques one can also observe certain development. Similarly to methods of characterization also here there is a certain widening and deepening of the techniques rather than their radical change. Iris Murdoch is not interested in narrative techniques in themselves but treats

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ceedings of the Aristotelian Society", London 1956, vol. XXX. p. 50.

<sup>13</sup> I. M u r d o c h, Sartre, Romantic Rationalist, Bowes and Bowes Publishers Ltd., Cambridge 1953, p. 47.

them as means of reaching certain aims. The novelist is looking all the time for the best form for her narrative. The first novel, "Under the Net", was written within the frame of the first person narrative and afterwards there were novels written mainly in the third person with a pseudo-omniscient narrator; in "The Black Prince" the novelist joins the narrative of an unreliable narrator with a series of conflicting epilogues; in "The Sea, the Sea" the author uses the form of a memoir.

The novels written in the first person are usually more interesting from the point of view of the narrative techniques. In this context the development of the problem of reliability becomes most significant, beginning with Jack, through Bradley to Charles. Basically similar themes connected with the aspect of getting to know others are presented with different colouring. In "Under the Net" Jack is only a young man who learns how to see and perceive the world around him according to his private theories. Bradley in "The Black Prince" is an artist and a great egoist but he presents a genuinely artistic vision. In "The Sea, the Sea" the reader meets a monster of egoism.

Iris Murdoch seems to be looking all the time for the best form for her novels, using different means and perspectives. Just as the novelist is constantly in search of new solutions to the moral problems she is most concerned with, her novel is in the process of gradual development and modification. Both these factors clearly define the intelligence of the author and her open mind. Iris Murdoch does not close herself in the world of the same ideas and structures but she constantly makes attempts at explaining them by means of her methods. The existing flaws in her novels are the result of the conflict between the ideals and the practice of the modern society, with which the novelist cannot always come to terms, and also of the conflict between her own moral convictions and the ability to give artistic shape to their complexity. The proper balance among all these elements has not yet been achieved by the novelist.

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## GRANICE MISTRZOSTWA IRIS MURDOCH

Artykuł analizuje artystyczne ograniczenia pisarki w zakresie kreowania postaci i operowania fabułą. Główna tematyka przedstawiona jest na tle założeń filozoficznych i teoretyczno-literackich Iris Murdoch, ze szczególnym odwołaniem się do poglądów etycznych pisarki i jej podziwu dla powieści i pisarzy dziewiętnastowiecznej Anglii.

Wczesne powieści Iris Murdoch są jednoznaczne w swojej wymowie i w tym sensie bardziej zamknięte, podczas gdy późniejsze powieści są bardziej złożone, dają czytelnikowi wiele możliwości co do różnych interpretacji, a co za tym idzie są bardziej otwarte. We wszystkich swoich kolejnych powieściach pisarka dąży do coraz to większej doskonałości.

W zakresie kreowania postaci można zaobserwować pewien postęp, choć sama powieściopisarka przyznaje, że jest jeszcze daleka od perfekcji w tej dziedzinie. Fabuła i główna idea są zawsze podporządkowane pewnej nadrzędnej teorii, która stanowi przesłanie powieści. W niektórych przypadkach postaci są przesłonięte prezentowaną teorią i stają się zbyt abstrakcyjne. Owym przypadkowy świat, w którym istnieją poszczególne postaci okazuje się często złudny, ponieważ nie ma pełnej niezależności pomiędzy pisarką a wytworami jej fantazji.

Iris Murdoch stara się jednak zawsze traktować swoje postaci z ogromną sympatią i poczuciem humoru. Te najlepsze z postaci stworzonych przez Iris Murdoch łączą w sobie dwa światy - poruszają się i funkcjonują w realiach współczesnej Anglii, ale jednocześnie mają pewien dodatkowy, bardziej uniwersalny, często symboliczny wymiar.

Iris Murdoch zawsze wychodzi od idei, z której to dopiero wyrastają postaci i fabuła. I chociaż sama pisarka twierdzi, że przedstawianie poglądów filozoficznych nie jest jej głównym zajęciem w powieści, to jednak nie sposób oprzeć się wrażeniu, że filozofia ma ogromny wpływ na tę twórczość. Typowe dla całej twórczości Iris Murdoch jest także to, że autorka często przedstawia skrajnie niemoralne, odrażające postaci, których zachowania przerażają, ale jednocześnie w magiczny sposób fascynują. Zło jest przedstawione o wiele bardziej przekonująco niż dobro. Postaci, które mają dobro uosabiać, są zwykle papierowe, a ich działania nieprzekonujące. Jest więc poniekąd paradoksem twórczości Iris Murdoch, że choć w swoich poglądach niezwykle wysoko stawia dobro, to jednak nie potrafi go w sposób zadowalający przedstawić.

W zakresie techniki narracji można również zaobserwować pewien rozwój. Następuje tutaj jednak bardziej poszerzenie i pogłębienie technik raczej niż ich radykalna zmiana. Technika sama w sobie nie interesuje pisarki, a stanowi jedynie środek do osiągnięcia określonego celu i jest zawsze ściśle dostosowana do tematyki. Iris Murdoch w dalszym ciągu eksperymentuje



i poszukuje możliwie idealnej formy przekazu. Powieści pisane w pierwszej osobie są zwykle ciekawsze z punktu widzenia narracji.

Tak jak pisarka zdaje się poszukiwać najdoskonalszej formy dla swoich powieści, podobnie ciągle na nowo poszukuje rozwiązań tych najbardziej ludzkich dylematów moralnych. Oba te czynniki przejrzysto określają inteligencję autorki i otwartość jej umysłu. Istniejące wady i błędy są prawdopodobnie wynikiem konfliktu pomiędzy ideałami a praktyką współczesnego człowieka, a także pomiędzy moralnymi poglądami Iris Murdoch a jej umiejętnościami nadania artystycznego kształtu ich złożoności.