NEW CONTINGENCIES IN IRIS MURDOCH'S EXISTENTIALIST WORKS

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Abstract: *In "The Bell" Iris Murdoch finds existentialist England and human relationship better suited to introduce a decayed present compared to cultural treasures of the past. The new contingencies Murdoch creates are to prove the rightness of life metamorphosis, and to determine the nature, or the structure of postmodern fiction. To her, contingency has been defined as "that form of art introducing somehow a false reality" and see the characters' reaction facing it, since it presents the irrelevance and messiness that characterizes life experience. The bell is important though some critics take it for a character. It is acting more than a symbol, its presence causes certain behaviour of morality on behalf of characters in whose presence it operates, like most of the symbols, motifs used in other novels of Murdoch.*
Keywords: *Murdoch; the bell; contingencies.*

Iris Murdoch, the winner of the Booker prize, is perhaps the greatest novelist of the British fiction at the close of the 20th century. Had she written in the modern ellipses of words or distorted syntax of the absurdist (Beckett, Pinter), she might have got the Nobel Prize. But, anyway, at the end of her literary career, as a general recognition for her art, she also got the highest distinction offered by Queen Elisabeth, namely that of DAME of the British Empire.

Within the Platonic – Wittgenstein outlook of the academic studies, further enriched with existentialist works and Freudian perspective, Murdoch struggles against Aristotelism to use analogical thought with a view to ignoring clear causes, fixed referents and essence. In her particular technique and style, Murdoch makes the reader get closer to see the sun / the truth and experience repetitions parallels, similarities in contingencies and themes, characters and incidents.

Iris Murdoch is only one amongst many modern novelists who, as critical inheritors of the Romantic tradition, have turned an analytical, ironic eye upon its emotional extravagances, tempering them with psychological and moral realism. Murdoch's philosophical formation reflects in her work, which attempts to merge philosophy, and art, therefore intellectual interest derived from a well-told story, leads to a serious and difficult novelist. She also published philosophical essays collected in SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD and articles on the techniques of fiction like AGAINST DRYNESS. Her literary articles written during 1950s/60s remain unpublished. They showed a certain similarity with George Elliot and Henry James. They "have commonly underrated the power of realism to defend itself philosophically in critical argument, and gravely underrated too its power to inform the world or to change it, mistaking it for some tame, cosy cat-by-the fire. In fact there is more like a tiger. Realism in fiction can damage easy assumptions about life as it lived, or ought to be lived". (Watson, 1989: 143)

The new contingencies Murdoch creates in THE BELL are to prove the rightness of life metamorphosis, and to determine the nature or the structure of postmodern fiction. To her, *contingency* had been defined as *that form of art introducing somehow a false reality* and see the characters' reaction facing it, since it represents the irrelevance and messiness that characterizes life experience.

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The supreme exemplar of art is no one else but Shakespeare, *the world's greatest novelist* in her opinion, together with Tolstoy's practicing contingency in the field of the novel. They are said to have overcome this falsness, in part at least they have attempted to reconcile the demands of form or plot with the contingent phenomena of reality. In Shakespeare as supremely successful, there is celebrated the power of irrelevance within the art form. Characters apparently outside the plot can be felt to have a life which nevertheless bears on the plot. (Richard, 1979:230)

In THE BELL, the power of the symbol that gives the name, the bell, is accorded symbolic value by the characters in whose presence it operates, like most of the symbols, motifs used in other novels of Murdoch's. Her conception of symbolism is more scrupulous because she does not see it only in terms of an artist's apprehention. Rather, the readers become all artists , or ordinary people are symbol makers because all of symbols operate in her novels in a subordinate and undominating way. It may illuminate character and that is to be thought of as the symbol's central role.

"An enchanting object may be given symbolic status by the other characters, but the way in which each character does this will be different, and the difference is a function of the character's distinct existence as human being. The process is more centrally and complexly evident in THE BELL where the functions of symbol and power centre are strikingly linked; it would be quite wrong to think of the bell as operating in terms of the kind of dominant symbol which acts as a piece of currency with the same significance to all characters and readers". (Richard, 1984:40)

In the late fifties, the unusual thing about Murdoch's novel would have been its sympathetic treatment of homosexuality, then still illegal in the United Kingdom; not it is the setting in a religious commune. This is a group of people gathered around the enclosed nunnery of Imber Abbey, based at the house in whose grounds the abbey stands; they want to experience something of the monastic life without taking the full step of a lifetime commitment. The novel is set during a time of excitement for the community, as they prepare for the arrival of a new bell for the abbey, to finally replace a medieval original lost with the dissolution of the monasteries. There are, as in any isolated small community, tensions, and these are heightened with the approach of the ceremony they are organising. The most important character in the novel is in fact not a member of the community, but her arrival acts as the catalyst for several events: Dora is returning to her estranged husband, and he is working in the archives of the house. The novel is a third person narrative, but the narrator is made a character as its sympathy moves from one person to another, coloured by their views of and feelings towards the others. It is very clever, and presents a rounded view of the characters in a way that avoids lengthy expsition. In THE BELL Murdoch presents the combination of adventure within a closed environment which she does in many novels, a direct influence of Plato's cave on her imaginative creation that she highly succeeds in having the blend palatable for the contingencies she creates.

Repetition is especially used by Murdoch to assume a new centrality which bestows apprehensible form on the entire narrative. While pleasing for the writer on her aesthetic level, it also gives her some cause for theoretical concern in her essays. The bell as an artefact enables us to comment on the novel in point of the writer's idea of the sublime. First an image of consciousness of the form of our appreprіation of the world, then water and swimming and drowing for Murdoch a counter image. Swimming seems to act both as the unofficial counter image of a healing surrender to the mysterious

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properties of the world, and as its mysterious destructive powers. To be able to swim for Murdoch is almost to posses moral competence and she will assert it in several novels, among which the more complex in meaning will be in THE SEA, THE SEA, because in that novel the point seems a metaphisical more than a social one. There are two poeple who cannot swim and thus drowning is the commonest death to her. For this reason , Conradi says: "They also embody the wisdom in which her books abound that a brave immersion in the detail of the world, and of other lives, is both necessary but can carry with it no indemnity against mischance. Such exposure to the world's particulars is discussed in the philosophy as the sublime in which the box like enclosure of the self is attenued and opened out." (Conradi, 1978:110)

Murdoch comments on the sublime in three of her important philosophical works: *THE SUBLIME AND THE GOOD, THE SUBLIME AND THE BEAUTIFUL REVISITED and THE FIRE AND THE SUN.* In the previous two centuries critics had agreed on the idea of the sublime's being equated to the religion decayed, replacing what escapes from the highest meaning, an exciting and complex idea in fact, used to several ideologies. But, in the Freudian interpretation *the sublime,* stands for a positive resolution of the *Oedipus complex* by which it requires and nourishes a strong *super ego* on which the survival of culture is based. Quite differently, in the *Socratic dialogue* , that Murdoch prefers, the sublime is connected to the presence of the second interlocutor who pretends weakness and humility in conversation, only to finally arrive at defeat turned into victory, with the beatification of weakness in fact.

Unselfed by the sublime, Murdoch's characters are better than us and have less personality. It happens in the great art works which Murdoch attempte starting with THE BELL. Each event takes place first in remote enclosures (the Abbey) and then in the flamboyant and confused house (Imber Court), where iti is disclosed. Two innocent worldlings (Toby and Dora) who may be less culpable than the *murderously high minded meade, become involved in the events* and become involved in the rescue of an agent of the numinous: the bell. Despite its tragic happenings, THE BELL has lots of comic effects and comedy undercuts tragedy offering with triumphant survival of heroes as well as a lot of destruction because that is metamorphic life for Murdoch. Still, *the truth, good , beautiful, light* as platonic principlec are very much related with the help of the Abbess who is a good outsider from the Imber community and insists on the ambiguities of spirit. She sustains that we are all failures in love for which we have to strive more, because we haven't done enough for love.

Murdoch searches for a moral direction in a world vacant of God and for that she follows a way similar to Dostojewsky in writing novels which is, according to the position of Bachtin, the line of Christ's position in our civilization. By patterning good and evil, her works often appear old fashioned to critics, but in her actuality Murdoch finds a graduated range between good spiritual people and those who fail to tap their goodness. So plot and pattern are important in her novels also because the ancient Greek idea of plot is a helpful way to visualize *the cave myth drama* below ground and the cosmology aboveground , which actually make up the fictional world of her novels.

THE BELL is a long combination of sex versus virtue in the religious sense that asigns for Murdoch's own renowned fame of being both an artist and a saint.The ending of the novel presents new contingencies in Murdoch's fictional world for the triumphant survival of the personality, the devious tenacity and resilence of the self. The

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book is made up of all those taken together with its consistent wit and good humour, a comedy, albeit a moving and sometimes a grim one.

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