

ISSN 0104-1886

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO RIO GRANDE DO SUL
INSTITUTO DE LETRAS
CADERNOS DO I. L.
Nº 11
JUNHO DE 1994

UFRGS
Biblioteca Setorial de Ciências Sociais e Humanidades

INTERSUBJECTIVITY AND RELIGIOUS MORALITY IN IRIS MURDOCH'S THE UNICORN

Neusa da Silva Matte¹

We learn with Husserl that consciousness is intersubjectivity and that there is a mutual implication of subject and object, or, in other words, that the observed object offers itself to an observed eye, as if this observing eye is controlled by the observed eye.

This idea, added to the fact that in the novel *The Unicorn* by Iris Murdoch the word 'gaze' appears numerous times, both in the form of a proper name (Gaze, the place), as a verb (Effingham Cooper gazed out of his window') and as a noun ('She gazed at him for a moment with the old hungry persecuting gaze'.) related to all the characters with different tones and inserted in different clusters of imagery forces us into a phenomenological study of this word in this text that can prove consistent and relevant in the comprehension not only of the plot, but of the author's intentionality as well.

Also, since the name of the house where the story happens is Gaze Castle, a relation to Bachelard's ideas from his chapter entitled The house, from cellar to garret, the significance of the hut, in *Poetics of Space* can be made in order to show one more strong element that reveals the author's literary discourse at the service of her own moralistic intentions that can be understood through her skillful manipulating of irony.

'Gaze at', according to *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* means to look "steadily for a long or short period of time" or, as a noun, a "steady, fixed look". In Murdoch's novel, everything and everybody gazes at each other, every observing eye is closely controlled by another observed object.

When Marian, the governess arrives at Gaze, she feels curious; she wants to observe the unusual landscape. She takes her field glasses to

¹ Neusa da Silva Matte é professora no Depto. de Línguas Modernas do Instituto de Letras da UFRGS.

go bird-watching. By the end of the very first chapter, however, she approaches the window of her bedroom, takes her field glasses to have the first glance at the surroundings and, together with the reader, freezes with panic when trying to focus on the neighbour's dwelling, she gets her own eyes struck by another magnified eye gazing at her, right inside her lenses.

The observing subject is then dissolved and transformed into the observed object; it is the moment when the main pattern of the book is settled, by establishing the sense of fear and imprisonment in both the protagonist and the reader.

No one can feel alone, private in that place; the mirrors (they are all around) on the walls, on the waters of the fish pool, on the lake, on the sea, and on the cliffs force each one to a constant self-observation; The photographs of dead and distant people:

Peter's photographs gazed across the room" and the lake, the bog are also images of big eyes that nature keeps open on the characters. None one feels free. Whenever there is one individual attempt to do something that might disturb the local balance, the controlling presence of someone else is concomitantly perceived, so much, that even when there is no one around, either the objects (photographs, windows) or the house itself exert the magnetic force of controlling the space of the individual. Such a strong feeling is imposed on the individual's conscience that when it doesn't exist concretely, when no other character is present or no object is visible, the conscience of it is imposed on the same subject that brings it into existence suffers its influence as if it were a real being.

In fact, what guarantees consistency to the plot is its entangled net of mutual observation among all characters that is incited by the arrival of Marian. With her, each one has his previous identity re-analyzed and re-conceived under the light of a new conscience. Gerald is the strong authority, the one that has full power, that controls all. Even he, himself is not free, however, from the curious and courtly gaze of Marian, of the ever watching eye of Violet and Denis. He is the first one to be killed by the one that apparently was kept imprisoned by him, the captive that seemed to be actionless, hypnotized by his domination. Hannah, whose eyes also seemed hypnotized, whose individuality seemed to have been annihilated is the one that sees clearly that the beginning of her freedom could only be set out by the end of Gerald. In similar ways, Violet, as the

villain, Jamesie's and Gerald's accomplice, the ghostly maids, the helpful Alice, Denis Nolan, Effie, the outsider, keep watching each one's new prospective individuality; all of them simultaneously underwent a process of re-definition, expecting their new fate. What happens to each affects them all. And if nothing of these happens, the photographs' eyes seem alive, Max's wisdom floats unconsciously in their minds; still, apart from all these, the house itself, with its golden windows keeps observing, and the people, emerging silently from behind the dusty curtains cannot be clearly envisaged neither as individual entities nor as one piece of breathing furniture.

In the few occasions when Marian felt free from the magnetic field of influence of the house, watching the cliffs with Jamesie, or when trying to swim alone in the beach, the massive, concrete, unsurpassable black cliffs, against the silver sea, reflect nothing other than the blackness of the wild waters. There is no way of seeing beyond that. The marshes, the bog, the ocean, all reflect back the imprisoned subject. Nature, then, which is usually the greatest object of contemplation, of the painted, described or remembered landscapes, is felt in this text as a living presence, as an observing subject, a multi-eyed cyclops defending its bewitched land.

The reason why this place can be called "bewitched" drives us back to the word "gaze", to Bachelard and to the irony of the text.

When speaking about the houses, in *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard refers to them in a very positive way, as the place where one finds shelter, as the womb to where we can return, the peaceful resort that not only provides comfort but enriches our imaginary world and our fantasies as well.

He says:

' The house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind. The binding principle in this integration is the daydream. Past, present and future give the house different dynamisms, which often interfere at times opposing, at others, stimulating one another.

In the life of a man, the house thrusts aside contingencies, its councils of continuity are unceasing. Without it a man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of heavens and through those of life. Life begins well, it begins enclosed protected, all warm in the bosom of the house.' (p.7)

Considering, first, Bachelard's words, secondly the usual positive connotations of the words 'house' and "home" have and thirdly, the fact that the house in the novel is called Gaze Castle we can visualize Murdoch's irony. We are taken to share with Marian, in the very beginning of the story, the expectations of a nice and comfortable place, a resort where human suffering could be reduced, somewhere far from the hard real world. However what takes form, quite shortly, is a hostile, dark and dusty place inhabited by mysterious and gloomy people, a kind of witch's castle on the top of a steep unapproachable rocky cliff.

The name 'Gaze' /geiz/ sounds exactly like 'gays' /geiz/; the equation proves to be correct when we, further on along the narrative, find out that all the characters are closely involved in homosexual relations. The place is, then, heavy and gloomy due to the strong sense of guilt they all carry; it's not a castle, but simply a large house which offers shelter to the unprotected soul; Gaze is a retired place where sinful people hide their shame from the world. Gerald loves Peter; Peter marries Hannah, who loves Pip. Hannah tries to kill Peter. As punishment she is imprisoned in Gaze Castle and Gerald is made her jailer. Peter flies away with Shapiro; Jamesie stays with Gerald. Violet wants Hannah's inheritance; she helps, but she hates. Alice sinned in her intentions; Pip took Peter's wife; Max omitted himself from helping and Denis kills Peter in the end. Guilt is everywhere.

Before Marian arrives, the balance is kept as if, at one level, each one's conscience of sin supported the other's; they had equal weights. In other words, evil was sustained by the false god that Hannah represented.

It was a self contained microcosm of a barren world, wild and aggressive. The rage of nature was equated perfectly with the image of the powerful punishing God Hannah embodies. She says:

'The false God is a tyrant. Or rather he is a tyrannical dream and that is what I was. I have lived on my audience, on my worshippers. I have lived by their thoughts, (...) just as you have lived by what you thought were mine. And we have deceived each other.' (p.218)

and:

'I lived in your gaze like a false God. But it is the punishment of a false god to become unreal. I have become unreal. You have made me unreal by thinking about me so much. You made me into an object of contemplation. Just like this landscape. I have made it unreal by endlessly looking at it instead of entering it. (...) It was your belief the significance of my suffering' (p.219)

Guilt is imposed upon her by the others. She becomes the scapegoat of the other's evil, the Ate, the blind creature, the power that spreads suffering. But she wakes up and kills Gerald. She breaks the mirror" to go out through the gates' (p.247). By killing him she gets rid of her own guilt, of her jail.

Killing, though, must be punished, and Nature, perhaps another false God, kills her. A disaster was fated to happen at the end of the seven years and the new Flood comes to wash away sin and provide its survivors with a new beginning, This time, though, better invested with a deeper consciousness of the human sinful and suffering dimension when not sheltered in the house of the true God, which must be somewhere, much beyond the bog, where Denis seems to be going to at the end.

The whole plot, then, is built upon the pattern of imprisonment and circularity. Each one's guilty conscience is a prisoner of the conscience that the other projects upon it.

The intersubjectivity here presupposes a kind of existence that has no other source than each other's view. We are what the other sees in us. This is the controlling observing-observed subject-object.

But the novel would be simply a sample of human misery if seen through the point of view of the inhabitants of Gaze Castle. The story could as well finish when the rain starts and the flood comes. Nevertheless is exactly from here on that we can visualize the author's personal interference on the story more clearly, to make herself assured by what she makes Denis, Marian and Effie represent. Denis Nolan's mysterious and enigmatic identity is finally revealed; his determination and purity open the gates of Gaze Castle, the same gates Marian and Effie found very hard to open, and releases not only the spell of the place, but his own person, Marian, the text itself, the reader's expectations and the writer's wish of telling the story. Denis is the savior.

He falls in sin, too. He hates Peter, kills him and makes love with one he doesn't love. He has been faithless, but he repents and turns back to his original search of God. When he says:

'I am faithless (...) I am the most guilty.
The guilt passes to me!
(...) Marian, this is your cure!

and she answers:

'Yes, you're becoming Hannah, now.'

he becomes the redeemer, the beautiful white and pure Unicorn, the Christ that comes to carry away all human sins and save human kind. He is the one that never "gazes" in the story. (the word is only used referring to him when he is confessing his crime). He is known to have 'fairy blood' the one that walks over the marshes (waters). The one that knows about the fishes. Perhaps he is himself the brave salmon that climbs over the waters, up the hills, the only one able to walk across the bog, 'lost in view in the saffron yellow haze near the skyline' (p.264). He is the one that came down to the valley (a valley of tears?), loads himself with human sin, swan against the flood to keep good and redeem mankind.

Marian, the mortal sinful teacher can then, take her train back to life and go back to attend her old friend's wedding ceremony:

'And, with Denis' words, she had an eerie sense of all beginning again, the whole tangled business: the violence, the prison house, the guilt. It all still existed. Yet Denis was taking it away with him. He had wound it all inside himself and was taking it away, Perhaps he was bringing it, for her, for the others to and end.' (p.262)

For some time she and Effie had been redeemed, Perhaps for the same time those fishes that stayed in the pool will be able to resist the hunger of the cranes, they will be able to resist sin. We expect those fishes to live long.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BACHELARD, G. The Poetics of Space. Beacon Press, Boston, 1969
MAGLIOLA, Robert. Phenomenology and Literature. An Introduction.
Purdue University Press. Indiana, 1977
MURDOCH, Iris. The Unicorn. Triad Panther Books. London, 1984.