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POLISH THEME IN IRIS MURDOCH'S "NUNS AND SOLDIERS"

Polish readers are familiar so far with eight out of the twenty novels by Iris Murdoch, one of the most outstanding and prolific writers in contemporary Britain¹. The first translations of her novels began to appear in Poland in the seventies starting with a gothic novel "The Time of the Angels" /"Czas aniołów", 1970/. Then came the translations of "The Bell" /"Dzwon", 1972/, "The Unicorn" /"Jednorożec", 1973/, "An Unofficial Rose" /"Skromna róża", 1974/, "Under the Net" /"W sieci", 1975/, "The Black Prince" /"Czarny Książę", 1977/, "An Accidental Man" /"Przypadkowy człowiek", 1978/ up to the most recent translation of "The Sacred and Profane Love Machine" /"Machina miłości czystej i wszetecznej", 1980/.

Reading Iris Murdoch's novels is a great pleasure and goes by in a flash mainly because of the quickly progressing story and fascinating plot. At the same time the reader is deeply engaged in the main ideas and moral aspects of the book. The same applies to Iris Murdoch's most recent novel entitled "Nuns and Soldiers" /Chatto and Windus, London 1980/, a very interesting book especially for the Polish reader and well worth translating into Polish. One of the four main characters in "Nuns and Soldiers" is Wojciech Szczepański, an Englishman of Polish origin. The novel itself contains many descriptions of different aspects of Polish life and history. What is most interesting here, all this is seen through the eyes of a typically English writer who has been to Poland only once on a

short visit.

In the year 1980, the year of extraordinary events in Poland that surprised the whole world, Iris Murdoch's book having white and red flag and an eagle on the cover, became immediately popular both among the British readers and the critics. The story of the novel spans a period of nearly a year leading up to the moment of the election of the Polish Pope in 1978. The plot revolves around four central characters and their love tangle: the Pole, Wojciech Szczepański, called by everyone Peter or the Count, a truly displaced person living on the margin of life; Anne Cavidge, an ex-nun of a closed catholic order; her friend, Gertrude Openshaw, a rich, young widow and Tim Reede, a very young Irishman. Anne quietly and patiently loves the Count but unfortunately he is very much in love with Gertrude and Gertrude, much to everyone's surprise, marries Tim.

The plot of "Nuns and Soldiers" is fairly simple compared to many earlier novels by Iris Murdoch and the number of characters that appear in the course of the novel is also limited. Hence, the important role of the "chorus" which consists of secondary characters whose main function is to comment and reflect on the behaviour of the four main figures. These secondary characters are relations and friends of Guy and Gertrude Openshaw and after Guy's death they are the regular guests in Gertrude's elegant house in Ebury Street. Most of the story's events have their beginning in the death of Guy, an extremely intelligent and virtuous English Jew. Anne Cavidge has just come back from the enclosed order to the outside world where she will try to fulfill her christian mission. After Guy's death Anne consoles Gertrude in her mourning. The Count, on the other hand, is a protegee of Guy and after his death decided to wait for a year and then propose to Gertrude who has always been the object of his admiration. Peter is an odd, isolated and frequently misunderstood person. Because he is a Pole, the Count cannot find place for himself in the surrounding world, he feels alienated and lonely. In the very beginning he rejected and then accepted only too late his

parents' affection for their native country, Poland, which is no longer the same, to their language that Peter did not want to learn and to the history that the English do not know or do not understand.

Onto the scene of the novel the writer also introduces Tim, a mediocre painter and his girl-friend, Daisy Barrett, an unsuccessful novelist and painter. Under Daisy's influence Tim tries to swindle some money out of Gertrude. Gertrude however, offers him a job instead. Tim agrees and goes off to southern France in order to take care of the Openshams villa in Provence. Soon Gertrude herself joins him there and quite unexpectedly the two fall in love and very quickly decide to get married. This sudden infatuation undergoes a series of moral and social judgements when the existence of Daisy is no longer only Tim's secret.

Not telling the whole story, it is probably worth mentioning the most characteristic aspects of the plot. It is typical of Iris Murdoch's novels that her characters always look for symbols and meanings and the most significant factor in their lives is always love. In "Nuns and Soldiers" symbolic landscapes, visions and omens are interwoven together with the main love plot of the novel. Love is described against the background of the contemporary world governed by material values, with diminishing sense of responsibility, morality and religiosity. All these themes are well presented through the cast of characters that appears on the pages of the book. The character of Peter is probably the most outstanding in this context. Peter, the title soldier in the army of duty and honour, is an obvious contrast to Tim, the parody of a soldier of happiness. Both the Count and Anne are totally devoted to serving other people whereas Gertrude and Tim are only preoccupied with their own lives and their own happiness. The final solution to the conflict of values that lies at the core of the novel comes in the form of an eternal triangle, with the values being supplied by the Pole and his platonic love for Gertrude. Anne, on the other hand, does not win the man who is ideally meant for her.

Gertrude very egoistically captures Peter for herself. Anne's sadness is never fully expressed and becomes her most guarded secret so much so that even Peter does not realize that he is loved deeply. Anne is rewarded though, when Christ comes to her in a dream vision /how beautiful and very modern this description is!/. Yet in the final effect the cosmic power of Eros brutally destroys promised happiness and joins the unconnectable, as they seem, values. It is Tim and Gertrude who win the battle and achieve happiness that should have been meant for the Count and Anne as they genuinely deserve it but it was not given to them. Will Gertrude be really happy, though? Quite unjustly, yes, because she will always be able to rely on Peter's honest devotion and affection. The Count is an example of a man devoted to his duties and spiritual values. This aspect could also explain the introduction of the Polish Pope into the conversations towards the end of the book. The catholic church, the caretaker of the highest moral values and principles also chooses a Pole as a representative of these precious virtues. Nevertheless, the Count in spite of having many virtues is a nervous, insecure, introvert person. All the time, though without any success, he was trying to be a true Englishman and he understood much too late the meaning of his Polish origin.

To the Polish reader however, the Count may seem an unusual Pole. Though he is gallant towards the ladies and possesses unusually high sense of duty and honour, he lacks the typical Slavic exuberance and extroversy, he is too "cool" and reserved for a Pole and too English in his behaviour and manner. And this in fact is his life tragedy - since he belongs neither to the Polish community nor to the English. He is living in a psychological vacuum. Iris Murdoch attempts to present him as an alienated character, a social misfit. Although well educated the Count has an inferior job, does not belong to any social group and has not created his private little world in which a man could be satisfied. His little flat becomes a citadel of loneliness and a place of escape from the world. The Count's

Polish traits are rather psychopatic and miserable and for him they are interiorized nightmares. Tormented all the time by certain sense of suffering for the country he does not even know. Peter's life is to some extent an illustration of the impact of evil in the world, the effects of wars, military activities, genocide and death on the innocent young generations. Peter's life is just as tragic as the history of his parents' native country.

Iris Murdoch presents with erudition¹, on few pages only, the main historical events of Poland since its independence in 1918. For an English reader this historical background is necessary for a better understanding of the strange Pole who somehow personifies the ever complicated fate of Poland.

The description of the origin of the Count's parents is a pretext for presenting the main events in Poland between the years 1918 and 1979. There is also a very emphatic presentation of the role of Poland in the Second World War - the names of Sikorski, Mikołajczyk, Anders, Bór-Komorowski are introduced, the Warsaw Ghetto is described, the significant role of the Home Army and the tragedy of Warsaw Rising, decisions of Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt. Further on one can find the elements of contemporary history in the socialistic Poland - the events of June 1956 in Poznań, Gomułka's coming to power and then Gierek succeeding him. The latter period is described on the basis of Iris Murdoch's own impressions from her visit to Poland.

Like Iris Murdoch, the Count visits Poland in the early seventies and soon discovers that he feels no connection whatsoever with this country and the ties are only a burden to him. Peter visits Warsaw, the reconstructed Old Town and witnesses the lifting of the gilded dome into its place upon the rebuilt Royal Palace. The Count feels uneasily, more of a ghost than a real human being. He is considered to be a shy but slightly eccentric Englishman with a funny accent /in spite of his efforts the Count never got rid of his Polish accent/ and a Polish name which he can hardly pronounce. He is a Pole from

non-existent Poland whose Polish origin could be reduced to the complex of the lost war and a strong sense of honour and virtue that the English used to attribute to Poles.

Thus, the Count is definitely not a typical Pole and a representative of the Polish emigrants. There is too little romanticism in him, little sentimentalism and spiritual loftiness, complete lack of pride in his Polish origin, isolation from the Polish emigration community. One could probably reproach Iris Murdoch for not quite understanding the Polish soul though as she herself said Poles as a nation are very close to her heart and in her opinion personify the most ideal and valuable features in the increasingly bad contemporary world².

But then is it at all possible for a foreigner to understand the Polish spirit? And even if so, this certainly was not the aim of the book. Though at the same time after reading this novel Poland must seem closer to an English reader and it may be easier to understand this strange country. It is also very interesting that an English writer should at all become interested and even fascinated by the Polish problems. Yet, it was just this aspect that allowed Iris Murdoch for the presentation of the main aim of the book - showing the struggle of the highly moral and precious values in the contemporary, essentially evil and immoral world. This result has been well achieved by the means of original methods of narration and characterization.

NOTES

¹ If not to count the mistaken date of Warsaw Rising given in the book as the 1st. of September /p.9/ or the basic error in describing our national flag as "red and white" whereas "white and red" are the colours of the Polish flag.

² Information based on the conversation of the author of this review with Iris Murdoch in her London flat in September 1981.

REFERENCE:

Iris Murdoch, Nuns and Soldiers, Chatto and Windus, London
1980

TEMATYKA POLSKA W POWIEŚCI IRIS MURDOCH
"NUNS AND SOLDIERS" /"ZAKONNICE I ŻOŁNIERZE"/

Streszczenie

Artykuł jest recenzją najnowszej powieści Iris Murdoch zatytułowanej "Nuns and Soldiers" /1980/. Jest to szczególnie interesująca książka dla polskiego czytelnika, ponieważ jej główny bohater, Wojciech Szczepański, jest Anglikiem polskiego pochodzenia. Opis pochodzenia Wojciecha i jego rodziców pozwala autorce przedstawić najbardziej istotne momenty historii Polski okresu międzywojennego, a później aspekty najnowszej historii Polski. Szczególnie interesujący jest fakt, że pisarka tak bardzo angielska w ogóle zainteresowała się tematyką polską i z takim zafascynowaniem ją przedstawiła. Wybór takiej tematyki umożliwił Iris Murdoch realizację głównego celu powieści jakim było zapewne ukazanie zmagania szlachetnych wartości i walka o nie we współczesnym, tak bardzo zmateralizowanym świecie, w którym całkowicie brak poczucia moralności i religijności. Filozoficzne idee są wspaniale przeplatane z głównym wątkiem miłosnym powieści, a całość jest przejrzyście ukazana przy pomocy ciekawych metod narracji i charakteryzacji.

1/ At the time of the publication of this review yet another translation appeared in Polish - "Henry and Cato".