

7. SYMBOL AS A BOND

One of the numerous attempts at classifying Iris Murdoch has been with symbolists despite the fact that her symbols are seen as vague and indefinable.

The human mind is full of dreams, illusions and fantasies, some of them wild and unbounded, others more down-to-earth wishes or little superstitions. Murdoch's characters are no different and some of the symbols she employs are the product of her characters' minds and therefore much more realistic than an artist's symbolism with the symbols difficult to understand. In addition to this, they are both the author's and the characters' reaction to the rationalism of our age when everything can be explained by science, where there is no mystery in us or around us.

In an interview with Bryan Magee Iris Murdoch says that 'literature is, very often, mystification ...that one is defeating the formlessness of the world ...one is cheering oneself up and consoling oneself, and also instructing oneself, by giving a form to something which is perhaps alarmingly formless in its original condition – a sort of rubble.'¹ I suggest that some of Murdoch's symbols are precisely of this kind, when formless feelings find expression in a symbol, particularly a symbol of a private nature. Sometimes a symbol like that is shared by two or more people and becomes a bond that is something like a mental shortcut where words can be dispensed with. It may establish instant communication and understanding or even be an obstacle to verbal communication. A shared symbol or symbolic activity as productive of a bond between people can be traced back to the Dark Ages of mankind, to the old beliefs and rituals that preceded religion. The age-old need of connection with others also finds its expression at this more private level.

The symbols are highly emotionally charged because they stem from the emotional life of the characters. Murdoch does not eschew emotions in her novels and some scenes are loaded with feeling. For all that she admits to it in a rather guarded way: 'Literature could be said to be a sort of disciplined technique for arousing certain emotions. That is certainly one of the reasons why one enjoys it, and one of the reasons why it is both good for us when it is good and bad for us when it is bad.'²

The symbolic also often verges on the supernatural, one of the characteristic features of many of Murdoch's novels and one she is frequently criticised for. She does not dispute the fact that this is where she deliberately diverges from the realistic tradition. 'The supernatural – this is partly an obsession of my own. Partly also, I think – [...] – that in an age such as ours, where the world of religion and God and gods has become completely problematic, there are more psychological forces working loose, as it were, as if they were demons or spirits.'³

Donald and Felicity in *The Sandcastle* do not see much of each other as they are now in different boarding schools. But Felicity's fantasy about their dead dog Liffey establishes instant contact between them where otherwise they might find communication difficult at their age.

"My dear girl," said Donald, shooting up like a jack-in-the-box. "Stop! I'm not serious. You know we dropped all that long ago."

"I haven't dropped it," said Felicity. She was near to tears. "Liffey is outside," she said defiantly, "and I nearly saw Angus on the road." Angus had been a frequent ally in the Power Game raids. The translated and immaterial Liffey was Felicity's own private familiar.⁴ The dog has become a symbol for them of their childhood days together when they were close to each other and their parents. The fantasy also helps Felicity to battle with her teenage emotional problems. 'As she ran she whistled softly to Liffey, who soon came bounding up to run beside her, turning to look at her every now and then, and smiling as dogs do. She never came into the house now, or entered any human habitation. Since the dissolution of her material body Liffey had become rather larger, and now had black ears and a black tail, to signalize her infernal origin.'⁵

Sibling relationships are of particular interest to Murdoch for a simple personal reason as she observes in an interview: 'Well, I'm very keen on twins ...I'm not sure why, though doubtless someone will rush in to tell me. I'm an only child, and I think this is connected with my interest in sibling relationships – I haven't any siblings except imaginary ones. There's this element of family, of company, in writing.'⁶ She however does not idealise the companionship or love and shows also the jealousy, mistrust and rivalry or subjection and dominance that those relationships just as often display.

In *The Sandcastle* Liffey has acquired symbolic significance for the parents Nan and Muir as well even though without the fantasy element. The memory of the dog is a point of emotional contact for them, too, where other means are already failing.

In *The Bell* the old bell Gabriel of the local legend is vaguely a symbol of both love and death and can therefore unite as well as divide. It is a symbol from outside and it does not have the power of the private symbol shared by relatives or close friends. Like in other instances of Murdoch's use of symbol, it is apprehended differently by different people. Some members of the lay religious community remain unaffected by the legend and the subsequent emergence of the bell from the bottom of the lake while Dora, already when first told the legend by her husband, is instantly attracted by its symbolic power. Paul's professional interest in the ancient bell, his stubborn love for Dora despite her fickleness and Dora's susceptibility for the quaint seem to be able to make the bell a new kind of bond in their broken marriage.

When Dora ends her vigil at the bell by pealing it and thus giving up her secret of its reemergence, she is reassured to know that Paul is taking over. 'They

had divided the night's vigil between them.'⁷ The magic of the bell proves to be but short-lived for Dora. She soon decides not to stay with her husband after all and try a new life of her own. 'From the tower above her the bell began to ring for Nones. She scarcely heard it. Already for her it rang from another world. Tonight she would be telling the whole story to Sally.'⁸ Dora's decision does not have a finality to it though and should she decide to return to Paul one day, the symbol of the bell could resume its power of a bond between them.

The legend had it that when the bell reemerged somebody would die. We know little about the relationship between the twins Nick and Catherine save that they were very close as children. We are not told what, if anything, goes on between them now and so it comes as a surprise that Nick should want to prevent Catherine from entering the Abbey, actually using the legend. By tampering with piers on the bridge he causes the new bell on its ceremonious way to the Abbey to fall into the lake. As Catherine was supposed to follow the bell inside and become a nun, she recognises the accident as a rejection unavailing her secret love for Nick's homosexual friend Michael. The reader never learns what passed on between Catherine and Nick or indeed in Nick's head since the narrator mostly speaks about Nick through Michael's mind, which is far from omniscient. We never learn to what extent Nick's suicide was connected with Catherine or Michael or some dark currents in Nick's soul. But for him at least the symbolism of the bell was final and the severance of the close bond with his twin-sister complete.

An Unofficial Rose is heavy with symbolism where ordinary objects fulfil the role of private symbols as bonds to people or places. Miranda holds on to her dolls although everybody feels she should have outgrown them at her age. Felix senses something of the special significance the 'little princes' may have for the girl and gives her another one as a present when he thinks he can break the barrier between them and establish some kind of communication. Little does he know, of course, that Miranda's dolls already are a bond between them. As Miranda destroys her mother's chances to marry Felix and at the same time violently collapses the myth of her childhood love for him by tearing his photographs and old letters to pieces, she also breaks the bond symbolised by her dolls. 'They were rows of dead semblances, mocking her solitude. She held the doll dangling at arm's length; then she took hold of its head and body and pulled. The china head came off and she threw it on the floor and it broke. She took the next doll and hurled it by its legs against the wall. Gradually the room filled with sawdust and fragments of pink china.'⁹

Toys are also supposed to symbolise the constant bond between Miranda and her father. When leaving home he gives one of his childhood toys, which he still kept in his bedroom, to Miranda as a token of love and an assurance that they will often meet. The symbolic act, though a simple enough cliché, has the heart-rendering quality of unutterable words and suppressed tears.

When away from home, Randall soon comes to perceive roses as symbolic of his bond with Grayhallock and his wife, from whom he has fled. He has been successful at growing roses and creating new colours and so far unsuccessful as a playwright. Ann's and Randall's battle is in a sense the artist's and the saint's battle in marital dimensions where Randall is obsessed with his personal freedom and with the form. He feels smothered by the quiet, unassuming, loving Ann. 'Yes, yes, form, structure, will, something to encounter, something to make me *be*. Form, as this rose has it. That's what Ann hasn't got. She's as messy and flabby and open as a bloody dogrose. That's what gets me down.'¹⁰ Ann is the 'unofficial rose' of Brook's poem in the motto and she is there when he thinks of the futility of creating new, startling metallic colours while 'the true rose, the miracle of nature, owed nothing to the hand of man.'¹¹

The painfully ambiguous bond between Gerald and his father in *The Book and the Brotherhood* is of long duration. Gerald is now in his fifties and his father is dying. Their relationship thus passes into a phase of new intensity. Gerald feels the need to discuss the childhood incident of the parrot which for him has grown rather than diminished in significance over the years. When, years back, his father gave in to his wife's dislike of the bird and allowed her to get rid of it in Gerald's absence, a rift opened between father and son that widened with their silence over the matter. Gerald never stopped loving his father, but he never stopped remembering Gray and what he thought of as his father's treachery. The boy Gerald attached symbolic powers to the bird already then, Gray 'was a vehicle which connected Gerald with the whole sentient creation, he was an avatar, an incarnation of love.'¹²

When Gerald learns about his father's death amid the drunken revelling of the Oxford Commem Ball, he experiences strong emotions of love, pain and regret. At that moment Gray is forgotten only to come back again looming over Gerald's relationship to his father like a heavy burden of unspoken words, with the power to keep modifying their relationship even after his father's death. The narrator leaves us in no doubt that Gerald's father shared the bitter knowledge of the rift between them. 'He knew how terribly, how unforgivably he had failed his son. [...] He knew it as the years went by, reading that lack of forgiveness sometimes in his son's thoughtful looks ... Even undoubted kindness, even love, retained that indelible icy line.'¹³ Yet, in spite of the barrier, the parrot remained a palpable, if bitter, bond of which nobody else knew and continued to have its symbolic power for Gerald alone.

Gerald's relationship with Rose, although entirely different in quality, is similarly shaped by a symbol. The symbolic link is Rose's brother and Gerald's friend and lover at Oxford now long dead. The brief amorous episode between Gerald and Rose soon after Sinclair's fatal accident has never been mentioned again and their relationship seems to be surviving on the memory of Sinclair

which has become a symbol. It is now a symbol of their youth, love and the values they still want to uphold.

“I know what you’re thinking about,” said Gerald.

“Yes”

“About Sinclair”

“Yes”

Rose had not just then been thinking about Sinclair, but the thought of him was so profoundly associated with the thought of Gerald that she felt no qualm in assenting.¹⁴

Rose’s is a tragedy of a woman eternally in love with the wrong man. ‘Their deep intimate yet somehow passionless even hygienic relation’¹⁵ is a mere reflexion of a real relationship where Rose is in the role of a replacement for her dead brother, or of a priestess in a temple built in his honour. After two decades dedicated to Gerald and Sinclair’s memory Rose suddenly finds her life empty and in need of some kind of assurance which the conventions of their relationship do not allow her to ask for. Yet, in spite of Rose’s disappointment the bond proves to be strong enough to keep them together.

A somewhat similar symbolic bond was already encountered in *The Good Apprentice*, where Jesse Baltram, besides being a formidable power figure even in his physical absence from the scene, is also a mysterious symbolic character. When Edward arrives at Seegard his once glamorous father is reduced to the aura of his former self. The family live with Jesse’s name, which has become a symbol of what he used to be and still could be and even is as long as they manage to keep up the fiction. The name of Jesse is a symbol of their past and the present and at the same time it is a bond that keeps the family together and it binds Edward to them, too.

Edward is an outsider and in his case the bond is a tenuous one. When he meets his two half-sisters and their mother for the first time since his early childhood, he forms a tentative, rather vague relationship with them that does not change very much during his prolonged stay. Undefined and uneasy it remains and could be interpreted as friendly and close at one time as well as sinister and uncanny at other times, just as Seegard itself. It continues to be relative in dependence on the immediate situation or mood in relation to Edward’s state of mind. The ghost-like relationship between Edward and his natural father Jesse is presented from Edward’s point of view. Jesse only comes into his life now, at the time of acute crisis when Edward is tortured by extreme guilt for having caused Mark’s death. Although Jesse is now a mere, though formidable, ghost of his former self, with the help of his myth perpetrated by Edward’s half-sisters and their mother Jesse completely replaces Mark in Edward’s preoccupations. When Jesse disappears, the ghost-like quality of the relationship becomes more real for a time. ‘Sometimes Edward felt ...that Jesse must be, not only alive, but somewhere *very*

near. Jesse was simply teasing him by his absence, perhaps even watching him. He kept seeing ghost Jesses in the street, sometimes pursued them.¹⁶

Unlike in *The Book and the Brotherhood* here the symbol and the bond do not seem to survive Jesse's mysterious violent death. Edward feels the immediate breach. 'It was not for him to stand by and watch the women crying. He did not belong to that scene. He had been a visitor at Seegard, not a part of its substance.'¹⁷ Later, however, he realises that an experience like that cannot simply be forgotten and that the bond will always be there. 'What had Seegard done for him, was it an irrelevant interval, a corrupt mystery, a good enigma, a journey to the underworld? He felt now that, whatever it was, it was a huge business, so huge that it would take him years and years to think it out; and it occurred to Edward for the first time that there could be experiences which lasted a lifetime through, constantly changing, never disappearing ...'¹⁸

The background to Edward's closer relationship with his younger half-sister Ilona has an undefined symbolic beauty of mythological kind. The secret place in the wood with the prehistoric stone and sacred air where Edward watched Ilona dancing, in his imagination like a nymph hardly touching the grass, becomes a tangible symbol of something they share, at least in Edward's mind. The bond survives Edward's later disappointed realisation that Ilona in fact cannot dance and that she might not even be his sister. The place, too, has preserved for Edward its symbolic significance of the huge mystery that life is. He is drawn to it again on his last visit to Seegard but the key question that he hoped to ask Bettina there to help him make sense of the chaotic dramatic events still eludes him. The place itself is a symbol of the eternal elusiveness of meaning.

A bond of more immediate and temporary kind is formed between Franca and Alison, the wife and the mistress and rivals for Jack's love in *The Message to the Planet*. After an almost mythical experience of a slightly drunken chat they had together, Franca feels dismayed. The things they said eased some of the terrible tension that Jack's *ménage à trois* had created despite all appearances. To Franca 'in retrospect, the curious scene ...had been like a secret liberating ritual of some scandalous sort, a shedding of blood, like a magic rite involving the beheading of a cock.'¹⁹ The image that occurred to her reflects the unifying power of symbolic rites and the chat was therefore not a new understanding but an undeclared bond, quite unlike a simple rebellious complicity of two disappointed women.

In the same novel a simple nickname, too, has the power of a symbolic bond. Ludens was an illegitimate child who grew up in his father's family with a half-brother and his mother none of whom he liked. He rebelled against what he felt to be an injustice of fate by refusing to address his father Dad or Pa or any other accepted version and called him 'Touan'. Ludens loved his father and the nickname was a symbol of the special closeness the boy Ludens wanted them to have, a bond between his father and himself that would exclude the stepmother and her son and obliterate their presence.

A bond thus created by a symbol lasts as long as the people concerned feel or are willing to yield to the power the symbol has over them. They respond to an externalised product of their own emotions and the power they have endowed it with is limited. Murdoch does not use any patterns here and the symbolism is part of the contingent character of the relationships. If or when the symbol loses its meaning for the characters, the relationship moves on to a different plane.

The increasing size of Murdoch's novels affords more space to detail and consequently allows more attention to the inner life of the characters and to brief episodes where symbolism of this kind emerges. It also moves from the comparatively clear symbolic images of the early novels to more elusive, symbolism, rich in emotion that needs to be expressed. As Jacques Lacan explains, 'something of man has to make itself recognized. But what has to be recognized, as Freud says, is not what is expressed, but what is repressed ...the repressed is always there – it insists, and it demands to come into being ...The end of the symbolic process is that non-being comes to be, that he is because he has spoken.'²⁰