The Concept of Human Reality in the British Philosophical Novels of the Middle of the Twentieth Century

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Abstract: The article considers the concept of human reality as a complex of philosophical, moral and aesthetic ideas formed and developed in the novels by W. Golding, I. Murdoch and C. Wilson of 1950-s and 1960-s. Since the first insights into the subject matter brought out a vast network of its background connections and internal patterns, further research was based on systematic approach, that is, on modelling the consolidated paradigm of the philosophical novels written by the three authors. The analytical study of the concept in question at different levels of the paradigm enables to identify its ontological, ethical and aesthetic components as related to modern preconditions and postmodern condition of contemporary culture.

1. Introduction

The currents of literary thought in the twentieth century conform to the fact that at the turning points of social history, men of letters have to consider particular existential problems in a wide ontological perspective so that to create a holistic picture of human condition. The cross-disciplinary move of aesthetic ideas to broader horizons of humanitarian knowledge entailed the intensive formation of new anthropological concepts in the middle of the twentieth century, when the everlasting query about the destiny of man was recognized as the global problem of survival at the age of unprecedented war catastrophes, the menace of atomic death, degradation of natural environment, and other negative factors of modern civilization. Later on, the two distinguished postmodern thinkers G. Deleuze and F. Guattari stated that "even in philosophy, concepts are only created as a function of problems which are thought to be badly understood or badly posed" [1]. This philosophical axiom is justified, beyond any reasonable doubt, in the works by the no less distinguished English writers – William Golding, Iris Murdoch and Colin Wilson. Their novels and essays first appeared in the 1950-ies, and since then have constituted the important landmarks of the shift in priorities from modernistic preconceptions of personal self-modernity towards the concepts of human being in the world based on the complex research into the actual reality of personal and social experience.

To overcome the egocentric displacements in the novel after modernism, the writers had to build an appropriate form of narrative which would be compatible with the self-motivated decentralization of the literary character and further motion beyond the subjective vision of human reality. A. Lee, a thoughtful postmodern researcher, described this task in the following terms: "One of the most serious humanist

conception of the individual as an autonomous source of meaning has been in the structural and post-structural positioning of the individual as 'subject'" [2]. I. Murdoch attached crucial meaning to the changes in the position and the world outlook of the subject of narration: "We need to return from the self-centered concept of sincerity to the other-centered concept of truth" [3]. This strategic goal was successfully achieved due to attachment of the traditional epic perspective to modernized structure of the novel with its introspective projections of subjective vision onto the picture of reality. The subsequent consolidation of the resultant model was done to the effect that it provided networks of meaningful connections between the eventful narration and the philosophic meta-narrative along the storyline of the whole discourse. Thus, in spite of essential differences in conceptual judgments and writing styles, W. Golding, I. Murdoch and C. Wilson developed a specific genre form of literary prose that might be generally defined as the British philosophical novels of the second half of the twentieth century.

The books of the three authors have been the objects of sustained interest for several decades, which accounts for a significant number of related critical reviews and scholarly researches. The most profound studies devoted to the novels by W. Golding cover all the stages of his way in literature and include the academic writings by V. Tiger (William Golding: The Dark Fields of Discovery, 1974; William Golding: The Unmoved Target, 2008), D. Crompton (A View from the Spire: William Golding's Later Novels, 1985) and J. Cary (William Golding: The Man Who Wrote "Lord of the Flies", 2009). Among the prominent works concerning the creative activity of I. Murdoch there are the monographs by P. J. Conradi (Iris Murdoch: The Saint and the Artist, 1986) and H. D. Spear (Iris Murdoch, 1995) – the books which make up a complete analytical description of the progress of the writer's thought at its successive phases of genesis and transformation. The majority of noticeable opinions on the writings of C. Wilson were distinctly expressed in the books by G. Bergström (An Odyssey to freedom: Four Themes in Colin Wilson's Novels, 1983), S. R. Campion (A Study of the Ideas of Colin Wilson, 2011) and N. Tredell (Novels to some Purpose: The Fiction of Colin Wilson, 2015). The short list might be supplemented with numerous references to other books and articles reflecting the deep insights of the authors into philosophical and artistic works of every writer in question. However, few, if any, attempts have been made to look upon the British philosophical novel as the shared creation by William Golding, Iris Murdoch and Colin Wilson. This article represents the results of such experience within the field of research into the given subject matter.

2. Modelling of the Unified Aesthetic System of the British Philosophical Novel

The approach to the complex study of the subject is grounded in the system principle which implies the application of concrete instruments depends on particular aspects or phenomena to be examined. Since the architectonics of the British philosophical novel was conditioned by the immanent pattern of the literary genre and the premise of external influence, the set of selected instruments contains heuristic of the relevant social and cultural factors; the methods of comparative, structural and functional analysis of the genre forms; hermeneutics of philosophic ideas and artistic images. The core element of the systematic research is modeling of the object under study. This actual case study deals with modelling of the unified aesthetic system of the British philosophical novel, with the view to trace the formation and development of the concept of human reality at the levels substantive and form-shaping components of the resultant paradigm.

W. Golding, I. Murdoch and C. Wilson moved on to writing fiction after concentrated philosophical reflection about human being under the current circumstances of the modern society at mid-century. That train of thought took the writers to postmodern positions in literature, which meant skeptical retreat from progressivism policy aimed at changing the world for the good of man. The alternative was to change man for his own sake and the sake of the world, or, as C. Wilson put it, "to discover a new scientific discipline capable at once of true objectivity and of recognizing that human beings and human life are themselves a part of the 'riddle'" [4].

2.1 W. Golding' novels

W. Golding started his writing practice with publishing the novel *Lord of the Flies* (1954) and with the firm decision "to take the literary convention of boys on an island" so that "to show how the shape of the society they evolved would be conditioned by their deceased, their fallen nature" [5]. This didactic assumption was conducted through the parable about the ill-fated children in so far as the chain of dramatic events on the island led one of heroes to the discovery of innate destructive forces in their unhappy community. The tragic resolution of the conflict between the imperfect nature and self-assured reason is supported by parallel substructures of symbolic images that form the framework for the visionary picture of reality in the perception of the characters. The semantic properties and semiotic codes of these images are the key to the innate mythological archetypes containing the idea of the immanent origins of evil in the human world. The darkness of ignorance was penetrated with the mind's eye of the little hero when he deciphered the riddle of Lord of the Flies in the face of his hypostatic image that was the dead pig's head: "You knew, didn't you? I'm part of you? Close, close, close! I'm the reason why it's not so?" [6]. In his second novel *The Inheritors* (1955), W. Golding used hypostatic imagery to represent the two contrasting pictures of the world created by prehistoric people and their historic inheritors, the ancestors of the contemporary man. In both cases, hypostatization is interpreted by the author as a misguiding way of thought because it begins with ascribing substantial meaning to visible phenomena and goes back to archetypal schemes which impede understanding of the substance of things and their objective order in the world. The distortions and discrepancies in the views of human reality lead to the collision between the two generations of mankind to the cruel defeat of the innocent old people and the dubious victory of the newcomers who set on their path for the future with the burden of guilt and sorrow and "could not see if the line of darkness had an ending" [7]. In fact, the first William Golding's studies of human nature were made in formidable pen and dark colors. Still, according to the author, these darkened pieces presented just the unfinished sketches of a complete picture, saving free spaces for the light of hope: "When we fall off, we fall off into our dark side", but "the straight rode through the ordered universe enables people more easily to show their original virtue" [8].

While W. Golding was exploring ways of progress at the level of macrocosm, I Murdoch and C. Wilson concentrated their attention on the microcosm of individual being taking the modernist concept of the self-contained personality for the starting point of further research. I. Murdoch, as a professional philosopher, turned to the existential theory of J.-P. Sartre with the intention to highlight the most evident trends towards absolutization of a subject: "Sartre as a Cartesian solipsist seems especially here to exhibit a lack of any lively sense of the mystery and contingent variousness of individuals, even of the individuality of his subject whom he presents with such dramatic simplicity" [9]. C. Wilson shares his colleague's opinion as far as it concerns the existential belief in the reality of abstract freedom achieved at the cost of alienation of an individual from the actual reality of the world: "And belief must belief in the *existence* of something; that is to say, it concerns what is *real*. [...] The Outsider's sense of unreality cuts off his freedom at the root. It is as impossible to exercise freedom in an unreal world as it is to jump while you are falling" [10]. Both critical issues found the factual base in the novels by I. Murdoch and C. Wilson wherein the egocentric concept of human reality was introduced as part of philosophical meta-narrative to be examined in practical situations described in the eventful narration.

2.2 I. Murdoch's novels

In I. Murdoch's first novel *Under the Net* (1954) the story-telling of the protagonist witnessed the inconsistency of his fragile imaginary "universe" in relation to the hard empirical world: "I would be at pains to put my universe in order and send it ticking when suddenly it would burst again into a mess of the same poor pieces" [11]. In the following works of fiction I. Murdoch complicates the experimental conditions so that to contest the modernist claim for the autonomous status of a subject on the ground that the latter is always dependent on intersubjective relations in real life. She deploys the space of intersubjective connections in the novels *The Flight from the Enchanter* (1956), *The Sandcastle* (1957),

The Bell (1958) to give these perspective deeper dimensions in the books to come by representing the inner worlds of the characters as personal embodiments of the universal conflicts of human being. However, the writing experience revealed overwhelming obstacles on the ways of communications between these isolated worlds. One of the heroes in *The Flight from the Enchanter* expressed the authors' conviction that the barriers appear whenever an individual subject reads the signs of reality in accordance with his/her deepest wishes: "That is what the humans always have to do. Reality is cipher with many solutions, all of them right ones" [12]. Another discovery was the inevitable divergence of subjective intentions from the objective order of real things. These discrepancies induced people into wrong solutions and involved into dramatic crashes of illusions, as it happened in *The Sandcastle* when unreal dreams turned into "dry sand running through fingers" [13].

2.3 C. Wilson's novels

In the early fiction by C. Wilson, the concept of human reality is represented as the outcome of the positive knowledge and life experience obtained by the hero on his road from the outsider's position of solitary seclusion to open existence in the world. Since the concept is formed within the boundaries of the character's world outlook, the cognitive and axiological coordinates of its formation are equal to the visible perspective available for the seeker of the truth at various stages of the way. In the novel *Ritual in the Dark* (1960), the protagonist sets his eventual goal as that of entire vision of total being at the angle of philosophical view: "A vision of all knowledge, of human achievement in imagination and courage. Not the mystic's vision, but the philosopher's, freed from triviality and immediacy" [14]. A noticeable step in that direction is made by the main hero from the novel *Adrift in Soho* (1961), when he discovers close interconnections between human abilities for increasing the horizon of inner vision and for the adequate perception of outer objects. Inspired with his will to truth, he hopes to become "a new type of man who will understand that time is the same thing as eternity, that life is millions times more desirable than any man ever realized" [15]. The principle of evolutionary process, which accounted the coherent developments of human mind and the concept of human being, was supported with new logical and factual arguments in another succession of novels including *The World of Violence* (1963), *Necessary Doubt* (1964) and *The Glass Cage* (1966). The heroes of these novels attain the true knowledge of real things getting over the inner barriers in their consciousness by force of reflexive thought. Thus, the main hero of the *Glass Cage* comes to the conclusion that human reality is part and parcel of the universe far beyond any isolated existence: "The universe is a single organism that somehow takes accounts of us" [16].

3. Concept of Human Reality in the novels by W. Golding, I. Murdoch and C. Wilson

W. Golding gave more recognition to problems of personal existence in his autonomous novels *Pincher Martin* (1956) and *Free Fall* (1959) where the picture of the world was created as a composition of phenomenal images dependent on the individual subject of narration and irrespective of reality outside his vision or consciousness. The common features of these samples of story-telling are determined by the modernistic model of the genre organization which was reproduced by the author with the view to test its consistency in relation to the objective order of things. The first experiment ended with the death of the protagonist in the open sea, because he struggled for life in his unreal world ignoring the real signs of nature showing the way out to safety land: "The lightning came forward. Some of the lines pointed to the centre, waiting for the moment they could pierce it. Others lay against the claws, playing over them, prying for a weakness, wearing them away in a compassion that was timeless and without mercy" [17]. Unlike the voluble narration of the fictional hero, the message of the factual author goes without saying , since it is derived from what has happened to Martin Pincher in reality: "He didn't even have time to kick off his boots" [18]. This message conveys W. Golding's idea that human reality cannot confine to the phenomenal being of consciousness without a fatal flaw for the empirical being in the world. Reviewing W. Golding's novel of the first period, K. McCarron points out the author's allusions to the literary

predecessors as part of his artistic method: "Particularly during this period, Golding's was an art of essences; he strove to depict what lay beneath, or above, the observable surface of life" [19]. This statement is directly applicable to the novel *Free Fall* where the empirical dimensions of human reality are clarified and deepened further to the extent of their ethical values. It was the desperate but successful search for the right moral decision that allowed the guilty hero to escape the death threat in his isolated chamber and unlock the door to the outer world: "Cause and effect. The law of succession. Static probability. The moral order. Sin and remorse. They are all true. Both worlds exist side by side. They meet in me" [20].

Later on, W. Golding confessed that teaching moral lessons is part of the aesthetic activities of the author: "The fabulist is a moralist. He cannot make a story without a human lesson tucked away in it. Arranging his signs as he does, he reaches not profundity on many levels, but what you expect from signs, that is overt significance. By the nature of his craft, then, the fabulist is didactic, desires to inculcate moral lesson" [21]. This statement complies with the life content and philosophical meaning of the novel *The Spire* (1964) which concludes the first period of W. Golding's literary writing. In fact, it is the follow-up book of the previous fable novels where the author combined the genre features of the epic narration with framework of the parable to describe the lessons of life in moral terms. From this point of view, the monumental spire erected above the unsteady foundation of the cathedral exemplifies man's creation kept in balance by good and evil of human reality: "How proud their hope of hell is. There is no innocent work. God knows where God may be" [22].

The didactic trends are also quite evident in the novels by I. Murdoch, especially in those published over the second decade of her literary writing. Putting forward the moral problems of personal existence and interpersonal relations the author involves her characters in search for practical solutions, which often ends in bitter disappointments – as it happens, for example, to the main heroes in the novels *A Severed Head* (1961), or in *Unofficial Rose* (1962), or *The Unicorn* (1963). The common features of these books are defined by the assumptions that the reason for such failures lies in habitual but misguiding schemes of thinking that deceive people into wrong attitudes to human reality. M. Bradbury wrote that in the novels of the 1960s I. Murdoch achieved a new quality of philosophical density and artistic imagery in revealing real things beneath their visionary phenomena in the minds of her characters: "Meanwhile metaphor symbol and quite obscure and pictorial allegory are there to shape her stories into a complete and distinctive vision. Questions of love, ethics, virtue, goodness; of self-deception and the deception of others, evil and moral wickedness; of how to define the real and name the true; all found in their place" [23]. Thus, the mind of the heroin from the novel *The Unicorn* is possessed with the family legend of destiny condemning her to sinful life and death punishment: "There are great patterns in which we are all involved in, and destinies which belong to us and which we love even in the moment when they destroy us" [24]. However, the best heroes of I. Murdoch passed through the distraction of their false beliefs and came to understanding moral truths about human destiny in the novels *The Time of the Angels* (1966), *The Nice and the Good* (1968) and *Bruno's Dream* (1969). The title hero of the latter novel discovers this truth in the end of his dreamy life, when he finds himself on the other side of the solipsistic world of illusions: "I've been through this vale of tears and never seen anything real. The reality. That's the other thing" [25]. The findings of the characters on their ways of hardships lead the author's query into moral issues to the conclusion that human being is subject to the law of the ethical unity of the world. Summing up the intermediate results of her studies in the essay *The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts* (1970), I. Murdoch lays this idea in the foundation of her concept of human reality: "Goodness is connected with the attempt to see oneself, to see and to respond to the real world in the light of a virtuous consciousness. [...] 'Good is a transcendent reality' means that virtue is an attempt to pierce the way of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is" [26].

C. Wilson's concept of human reality takes the similar moral meaning while the heroes of his novels pursue their goals in the world, moving, as M. Yu. Lotman remarked, "over the boarder of a semantic zone" at every subsequent stage of the wa. [27]. The ethical notion of this way is "escape from personal", and its epistemological perspective is defined by the principle of self-knowledge, based on the theory of

phenomenology and aimed to eliminate distortions in a subjective picture of reality: "There is a philosophical method, whose purpose is to uncover these distortions imposed by thought" [28]. These guidelines lead to the novel *The Minds Parasites* (1967), a follow-up book wherein C. Wilson summarizes philosophical and aesthetic ideas of his early works. The title of the novel designates the hypostatic phenomenal image of mythological structures and ideological schemes that stand between human consciousness and the world, thus obstructing the true knowledge of reality: "The parasites had always used these obstructing methods against the human race – deliberately distracting the mind when it began to get grips with its own secrets. We had learned how to prevent this: by penetrating to those depths of the mind from which the parasites normally operated" [29]. The fight against parasites, as described in this book of visionary fiction, begins with reflexive acts of thought concentrated on phenomenal images and aimed at the destruction of obstacles which conceal their true meaning under deceiving illusions in individual minds. However, over the time, the battle reaches the scale of the global community due to the selfless and courageous actions of the heroes striving for the better destiny of man in the world. Outlining the author's prospective plan, N. Tredell observed that it contained "an 'objective correlative' of the metaphysical 'vastation' Wilson was later to undergo and to evoke in both his fiction and non-fiction: the feeling that the apparently secure human world was an illusion, that life was only 'an escape [...] from some ultimate pain on the other side of existence'. Two words: confident and acute pessimism; an intense sense of value and a fundamental pessimism. It is these extremes that both Wilson's novels and non-fiction will explore" [30].

Overall, the concept of human reality in the British philosophical novels was formed as a multilevel system of ideas connected with the state of art and philosophy in the middle of the twentieth century. At the level of its ontological coordinates in contemporary culture, the concept was an important fact and a facilitating factor of the reverse shift of priorities from the existential overview of self-sufficient subject to the basic understanding of individual being as related to the actual circumstances of the current time and social life. In the British philosophical novel this postmodern trend was supported with the immanent principle of personal self-determination which led the individual to the exit from his egocentric seclusion to the absolute infinity of the outer world. According to Ph. Lacoue-Labarth, this process includes auto-overcoming of the centralized position of the self: "The process as such of absolutization or infinitization exceeds in all senses of the word, the theoretical or philosophical power in general of which it is, after all, the fulfillment. The 'auto' movement, if it can be called that, – auto-formation, auto-organization, auto-dissolution, etc. is always in a state of excess in itself" [31].

4. Conclusion

At the level of epistemological parameters, the concept of human reality was well established on the empirical tradition in the British philosophy which imposed the necessity for positive verification of any meta-narrative ideas and their alignment with the factual life experience captured in the narration of the story. Following this tradition, the British novelists highlight moral aspects of human experience to affirm the ethical principal as the universal law of being in the world. W. Golding expressed the shared opinion of his colleagues on that subject: "The only kind of real progress is the progress of the individual towards some kind of – I would describe it as ethical integration" [32].

The aesthetic coordinates of the concept of human reality in the British philosophical novel are conditioned by the principle of historical continuity in literature. This attitude accounts for maintaining the modernistic status of the hero as the subject of all artistic representations in the novel. W. Golding, I Murdoch and C. Wilson adopted this static centralized position of the literary character but only with the view to change it on the way of experience and 'to establish the new evolutionary type, for shadowed by the 'outsiders'" [33]. The ultimate purpose stated by C. Wilson was achieved by all the three writers, but at the later stages of their knowledge and experiences.

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