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JOYCE'S FEMININE OUTLOOK - BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH

(A VISÃO FEMININA EM JOYCE - ENTRE O CÉU E A TERRA)

(DIE FRAU IN DEN WERKEN VON JOYCE - ZWISCHEN HIMMEL UND ERDE)

SUMMARY

This article endeavours to show how Joyce's outlook on women hovers between heaven and earth; that is, he either portrays woman as a reflection of the Virgin Mary and, as such, near to heaven; or as Eve/seductress, sensual and down to earth.

The last part of this study, still dwelling on the feminine outlook, shows how Leopold Bloom, as Ulysses, gets reinstated into his rightful place - in his home and by his wife's side.

RESUMO

Este artigo tenta mostrar que a visão feminina em Joyce oscila entre o céu e a terra, isto é: ele ora retrata a mulher como reflexo da Virgem Maria, e como tal esta fica perto do céu, ora como Eva/sedutora, sensual e terra-a-terra.

A última parte deste estudo, ainda focalizando a visão feminina no autor, mostra como Leopold Bloom, como Ulisses, se reintegra em seu lugar de direito - em sua casa, ao lado de sua mulher.

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*They talk about a woman's sphere as though it
had a limit;
There's not a place in earth or heaven,
There's not a task to mankind given,
There's not a blessing or a woe,
There's not a whispered 'yes' or 'no',
There's not a life, or death, or birth,
That has a feather's weight of worth
Without a woman in it.*

(Kate Field, Woman's Sphere)

James Joyce's is essentially a man's world, but a woman is everpresent there.

I call it a man's world because most of the short stories in *Dubliners* are slices of men's lives, from boyhood to adulthood; *A portrait of the artist as a young man* is a study of Stephen Dedalus' path to manhood, and *Ulysses* portrays a man in his journey through a long day.

Characters from these books are here to be studied, but Molly Bloom is the one to whom the majority of reflections will refer. For, although our Ulysses, Leopold Bloom, is very much a man, his tale dwells on his wanderings towards home and his reinstatement beside his wife and as master of his house.

Woman's place is, in Joyce, neither defined entirely by her ties with nature and body nor as a feminine spiritual ideal, but partakes, rather ambiguously, in both.

Between heaven and earth

*To men a man is but a mind. Who cares
 What face he carries or what form he wears?
 But woman's body is the woman.*

(Ambrose Bierce, The devil's dictionary)

Joyce's outlook on women can be considered from two viewpoints: the way a woman is looked upon and the way a woman herself feels. His outlook on women hovers between heaven and earth: a woman is either the Virgin Mary figure, the mother archetype; or an earthly figure, a person of sensations and feelings rather than of thought; or both.

Joyce's relation to his wife Nora shows the tone of his treatment of women: she is to him both a saint to be worshipped and the woman-earth to be passionately loved and fertilized. He tells her in a letter that *"she is more important to him than the world and that everything comes from her."* (TRILLING, 1974) But as he sees in her the image of mother-woman, it is mixed with that of mother-earth, and consequently of mother-nation. His letter expresses this feeling towards her: *"O take me into your soul of souls and then I will indeed become the poet of my race"* and among the things he has loved in her: *"the image of the beauty of the world, the mystery and beauty of life itself... the images of spiritual purity and pity which I believed in as a boy"* - there are *"the beauty and doom of the race of whom I am a child."* He calls her *"my love, my life, my star, my little strange-eyed Ireland!"* (TRILLING, 1974).

The figure of the Virgin Mary stands out in Joyce's feminine characters, mostly due to his religious upbringing.

Although he rejected religion from the time of his youth, religious rites, symbols, ideas, characters are ever present in his work.

The feminine character of "clay," in *Dubliners*, is called Maria, after Jesus' mother and, although unmarried, is the mother figure to her two brothers. She acts motherly to everybody in her brother Joe's household, and even lets herself be made fun of by the children. Her unmarried state reinforces her virginal representation, both being virgin mothers. Her brother Joe's feelings towards her are shown through his words "*Mamma is mamma, but Maria is my proper mother.*"¹ The description of the character includes the words "*she has nursed him and Alphy too*" (p. 84). The expression used to welcome her at Joe's house is analogous to the first sentence of the Roman Catholic prayer. In place of "Hail Mary" everybody said: "*O, here's Maria!*" (p. 86). In the end, everybody jokes with her about her entering a convent and becoming a nun, so deep is the strength of the Catholic analogy. Anyway, her life at the laundry was like life in a convent: she even had to obey a matron in everything.

In "The dead" Joyce pours out all his sensibility towards Nora, and we detect a mixture of feelings: man's jealousy (Joyce's/Gabriel's), his sympathy, his passionate desire turning into unwonted pity, woman's passion and capacity for remembering and reliving emotions long past, her acceptance of life as it flows. It is a melancholy tale of loss and, at the same time, of clinging. The loss of a young lover, of the illusion of being the only man in a woman's heart, of youth, beauty and passion. And the clinging to the memory of the dead and to the touch of the living.

Joyce expresses through this short story the feeling of sadness of man at not having been the only one to have interested his chosen woman. This feeling permeates all his work, and is present in Leopold Bloom's thoughts from his first waking moment to his last wakeful hour of the day in *Ulysses*.

Bloom's sensations towards Gerty Mac Dowell in the "Nausikaa" episode are again a demonstration of Joyce's outlook on woman as hovering between heaven and earth, saint and seductress. We can detect clear references to the Virgin Mary:

*They were protestants in his (a suitor's) family and of course Gerty knew who came first and after Him the blessed Virgin and then saint Joseph.*²

And still the voices sang in supplication to the Virgin most powerful, Virgin most merciful. (p. 348)

Also in the next paragraph, when the words of a litany of the Virgin are repeated:

Through the open window of the church the fragrant incense was wafted and with it the fragrant names of her who was conceived without stain of original sin, spiritual vessel, pray for us, honourable vessel, pray for us, vessel of singular devotion, pray for us, mystical rose. ... what the great saint Bernard said in his famous prayer of Mary, the most pious Virgin's intercessory power... (p. 350)

The mother and woman/earth inferences are also clear, though the use of clichés seems to infer that Gerty's virginity is counterfeit:

A sterling good daughter was Gerty just like a second mother in the house, a ministering angel too with a little heart worth its weight in gold... Everyone thought the world of her for her gentle ways. (p. 349)

The use of colours in Gerty's garments shows a distinct blending of images. Blue and white stand out in her clothes as they do in the virgin's. Another reference to colours is in the picture in the almanac Gerty admires so much – the woman in white and the man in chocolate (p. 349).

Although the image is the Virgin's, Gerty Mac Dowell is very much a woman and full of sensuality in her romanticized adolescence. Her thoughts are of a distant lover and of hopes of marriage. But even if her heart is somewhere else, she acts the seductress as she notices Bloom nearby. She is woman now, attractive, charming, willing to be observed and wanted. Her cheeks become warm with the blush of surging emotion. Her heart goes romantically out to him. He is MAN to her, disrespectful of who he is. Gerty is earth-woman here, desiring and wishing to be desired, with all natural, sexual, primitive feelings surging from inside:

Her woman's instinct told her that she had raised the devil in him and at the thought a burning scarlet swept from throat to brow till the lovely colour of her face became a glorious rose. (p. 354)

Guilt follows, to be immediately replaced by rejoicing and acceptance in the remembrance of Father Conroy telling her

not to be troubled because that was only the voice of nature and we were all subject to nature's laws in

this life and that was no sin because that came from the nature of woman instituted by God, and that our Blessed Lady herself said to the archangel Gabriel be it done unto me according to Thy Word. (p. 352)

With these words Joyce, through Father Conroy, blends the two images he has of woman: the saintly and the earthly.

This is the twofold image Gerty presents to Bloom, and that is how he sees her: as the Virgin and mother looking after children, and as the woman, so lovely, so enticing, so desirable that his sexual yearning is roused. His reaction is typical of his ambiguous attitude: as a woman she disturbs his very bodily sensations and he masturbates; as a heavenly image he contemplates her from a distance, and never touches her.

In his recollections, Gerty's image is blended with that of Molly. Her charm and sensuality are Molly's, through her he resumes his so long forgotten intimacy with Molly. The figures of Molly and Gerty are so entwined, both as representatives of womanhood and in Bloom's mind, that they menstruate on the same day. Gerty, in her inflamed romanticism, recognizes Bloom's integrity as a man and his distinction from other common, vulgar men:

At last they were left alone without the others to pry and pass remarks and she knew he could be trusted to the death, steadfast, a sterling man, a man of inflexible honour to his fingertips. (p. 359)

Like Gerty, Molly admires Bloom and considers him superior to other men she knows and has known. Nora Joyce was reported to have remarked to a friend that her husband was like nobody else,

and Joyce's knowledge of this remark may have induced his building of Molly's character as that of a woman with one man uppermost in her mind, in spite of all her other male interests. Molly is no saint, but rather the seductress who dwells very much on earth.

Richard Ellmann (1974) describes Molly's nature as "*earthly, trivial, sexualized and lyrical.*" He says: "*Basically she is earth to Bloom's sun, modifying his light by her own movements.*" She is natural and spontaneous and her thoughts follow a natural course, so natural that they flow like a river, and she does not hide anything from herself. Her feelings also flow through her thoughts - they are sensations rather than reasonings. Her language is flowing and down-to-earth. She calls things by their proper names, she does not use metaphors. She never complicates, but simplifies notions - that of God, for example:

*...as for them saying there's no God wouldn't
give a snap of my two fingers for all their
learning why dont they go and create
something... (p. 767)*

The natural eternal wisdom of woman is shown in her words

*...God help their poor head I knew more about
men and life when I was 15 than they all
know at 50... (p. 747)*

Both Edmund Wilson and Stuart Gilbert see Molly in the same light - that of nature and mother. Wilson (1974) says of her that "*she is like the earth, which gives the same life to*

all: she feels a maternal kinship with all living creatures." Gilbert (1952) says that *"she is the voice of nature herself, and judges as the Great Mother, whose function is fertility, whose evangel 'that exalted of reiterately procreating function even irrevocably enjoined', whose pleasure is creation and the rite precedent."*

Molly's sensations flow and repeat themselves - the same feelings come and go, as in a circle, and from present to past, and back, and towards the future, likewise from man to man and back to Bloom. She is like the queen bee: she needs a male and she is not very particular as to which male she gets. It is, as in the case of the queen bee, more a question of the drone reaching out to her; the one who manages to leave all others behind and get near her gets the prize.

When Molly refers to HE in her interior monologue, very often she is thinking of Bloom, but many times, even if she is thinking of one or another, she is just referring to the male, whoever he is, whom she needs intrinsically, as earth needs water in order to be fertilized. However, from the frequency with which her thoughts turn to her husband, we perceive that she recognizes in him the ablest drone, the one with the greatest number of desirable qualities.

Throughout Molly's chapter, as her thoughts wander and come back to Bloom, we can detect a great many random examples of his superiority in Molly's mind: she finds him superior in knowledge - in his explanations of difficult words like "metempsychosis" - and facts which she does not actually understand, as she expresses in

*... still he knows a lot of mixed up things
especially about the body and the insides
I often wanted to study up that myself
what we have inside us... (p. 728)*

She admires Bloom for his sensibility, a quality her lover Boylan does not possess. The manner in which each of them writes shows how far apart they are as men of letters and in Molly's estimation. Bloom is sensitive in his writing, Boylan is blunt. Molly displays the awareness of her husband's thoughtfulness and decency in various points of her interior monologue:

*...and he made me the present of lord Byrons poems
and the three pairs of gloves... (p. 728)*

*...Poldy anyway whatever he does always wipes his
feet on the mat when he comes in wet or shine
and always blacks his own boots too and he
always takes off his hat when he comes up in
the street like that... (p. 729)*

*...Still I like that in him polite to old women
like that and waiters and beggars too hes not
proud out of nothing... (p. 723)*

She knows she can trust him to oblige her, and leaves with him the task of buying her favourite face lotion:

*...O no there was the face lotion I finished the
last of yesterday that made my skin like new
I told him over and over again get that made
up in the same place and don't forget it...
(p. 735)*

And later in her monologue she admits "I saw he understood or felt what a woman is " (p. 751). At some point in her recollections she remembers when Bloom, though frightened, had gone downstairs

handling a candle and a poker to check whether a noise she had heard came from burglars, a remembrance that helps soften her towards him in his role of her man and protector.

As Molly's thoughts wander away and she remembers feelings of love and sexual excitement towards various men in her life, past and present, they all converge upon Bloom. Sometimes figures of different men blend with that of her husband and, although she despises him a little sometimes, mainly for his acceptance of her lovers, the next minute thoughts of his superiority as a man permeate her flow of words, as we can detect in the examples:

...well has beyond everything I declare somebody ought to put him in the budget if only I could remember the one half of the things and write a book out of it the works of Master Poldy Yes... (p. 739)

...you want to feel your way with a man theyre not all like him...(p. 739)

...I suppose there isn't in all creation another man with the habits he has look at the way hes sleeping at the foot of the bed how can he without a bolster its well he doesnt kick or he might knock out all my teeth breathing with his hand on his nose like that Indian god he took me to show one wet Sunday in the museum in Kildare...(p. 756)

His being superior to the other men she has known explains why she accepted him, and not others, for a husband. His courtship of her, or perhaps her courtship of him, was not without some difficulty. She yielded to Bloom that summer in Howth, among the rhododendrons, but actually she had seduced him with the seedcake from her mouth, the apple of Eden, as Richard Ellmann interprets it. We cannot help but think of an analogy with Eve as an apt

symbol of mother and seductress in this reference to Ellmann's interpretation.

Molly had led Leopold on, led him into proposing marriage - and she had said "yes," as she says "yes" now. The following passage, from the last pages of her monologue, shows both her strength as woman-nature and the strength of her attraction for Bloom:

...the sun shines for you he said the day we were lying among the rhododendrons on Howth head in the grey tweed suit and his straw hat the day I got him to propose to me yes first I gave him the bit of seedcake out of my mouth and it was leapyear like now yes 16 years ago my God after that long kiss I near lost my breath yes he said I was a flower of the mountain yes so we are flowers all a womans body yes that was one true thing he said in his life and the sun shines for you today yes that was why I liked him because I saw he understood of felt what a woman is and I knew I could always get round him and I gave him all the pleasure I could leading him on until he asked me to say yes and I wouldnt answer first only looked out over the sea and the sky... (p. 767)

And then she thinks of all circumstances of her life and finally says "yes" to him.

Molly's monologue brings together the specific elements presented separately in the previous episodes, specifically the natural elements of which she is part:

Flowers - from the "Lotuseaters" episode
 the sea and the waves - "Proteus" and "Nausikaa"
 episodes
 fine cattle, symbolizing fertility and emblem of
 Ireland - "Oxen of the sun" episode.

These elements are brought together in one single paragraph, which is also full of smells and colours, showing how

sensations are on the surface as well as deep inside Molly's mind:

*...I love flowers Id love to have the whole place
swimming in roses God of heaven theres nothing
like nature the wild mountains then the sea and
the waves rushing then the beautiful country
with fields of oats and wheat and all kinds of
things and all the fine cattle going about that
would do your heart good to see rivers and lakes
and flowers all sorts of shapos and smells and
colours springing up even out of the ditches
primroses and violets nature it is...(p. 766)*

From the analogy of the whole Bloomsday with the Homeric Odysseus's epic and struggles, Edmund Wilson's interpretation of the last chapter as Ulysses/Bloom's final homecoming seems correct: Penelope/Molly has some difficulty in reckoning what Bloom's attitude means - she spends forty-five pages in an uninterrupted flow of reverie linking past and present, Bloom's attitudes and men's outlook on things, trying to understand what Bloom is going to be like from now on.

Joyce's outlook on women as virgin/mother/earth finds its highest representation in Molly. As all things blend in her monologue, so is the Mary figure present:

- p. 726 - *"and said a Hail Mary"*
- p. 730 - *"... I sang Gounod's AVE MARIA"*
- p. 731 - *"O MARIA SANTISSIMA"*
- p. 744 - *"and her black blessed virgin".*

Conclusion

From the blending of all characteristics mentioned above and Bloom's long journey, which finally ends in a demand for breakfast in bed and deep sleep, the outcome is naturally the reinstatement of Bloom's marital status.

After all, Molly is nature; she is earth; she is the natural forces; she centralizes all action, all things converge on her. Like the queen bee, she receives Bloom as the ablest done. He finds his place beside her as his rightful conquest. As Edmund Wilson (1974) states, "*it is in the mind of his Penelope that this Ulysses has slain the suitors who have been disputing his place.*" Molly's final "yes" is an acceptance of life after all Ulysses's struggles, doubts and sufferings.

The final two pages of the book are a lyrical summing up of her life, her surroundings, her feelings. Her mind's going back to Bloom's wooing and her warm response to it as she is about to fall asleep is her final surrender to her distinguished male. Her final "I will" is both a remembrance of her first "yes" to Bloom and a new promise to this new man who has come home anew, as well as a repetition of her marriage vows:

*...as a girl were I was a Flower of the mountain yes
when I put the rose in my hair like the Andalusian
girls used or shall I wear a red yes and how he
kissed me under the moorish wall and I thought well
as well him as another and then I asked him with
my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would
I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put
my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so
he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his
heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will
Yes. (p. 768)*

Joyce himself stated that the Penelope episode had no "art" - it was built with the artlessness of Nature and of woman. Similarly, it is timeless, as earth itself. As Stuart Gilbert (1952) says:

Thus we find that Molly Bloom acts as the paradigm or Masstab of all the characters (or nearly all) in Ulysses. She sums them up in her monologue and in the light of her natural understanding we see their proportions reduced to a real scale of magnitudes. She takes their measure according to an ancient wisdom, the warmblooded yet un sentimental exigence of the life-force. This episode is limited, it will be observed, to no TIME, and illustrates no ART; Gaea-Tellus is 'timeless' and 'artless'.

So such an artful masculine book ends in artless feminine sensitivity - it flows, in Joyce's outlook on women as the flow of nature and the blender of all elements.

Notes

- ¹ Joyce, JAMES. Dubliners. In: The Essential James Joyce. London: Granada, 1981, p. 84. All subsequent notes are cited from the same edition and only the number of the pages will be mentioned.
- ² Joyce, JAMES. Ulysses. New York: The Modern Library, 1946, p. 343. All subsequent notes are cited from the same edition and only the number of the pages will be mentioned.

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