

Encontro con Iris Murdoch en Compostela*

Manuel Míguez Ben

- ¿De onde tira as ideas para escribir una novela? ¿Onde atopa as súas, así chamadas, epifanías ou aperçus? ¿Cal é o procedemento que segue despois diso? Henry James adoitaba dicir que nalgunha cea oía algunhas anécdotas e que as súas narracións procedían da elaboración destas. Para vostede, ¿cal é xeralmente o punto no que comeza?

Coido que habería que empezar máis atrás. Meu pai era un home de libros e eu lía novelas arreo. Empecei a ler novelas a unha idade moi temperá, a ler historias. É dicir, adoitaba reler a Kipling ou Robert Louis Stevenson e pensar qué maravilloso poder escribir unha historia. Logo pensei que tamén eu podería escribir unha, así que empecei a escribir historias cando tiña nove anos. Pero no safu nada diso. Dalgún xeito, cría que iso era o fundamental, así que, en certo modo, o comezo da resposta sería que a idea dunha historia e dun argumento e duns personaxes é, en si mesma, emocionante e a un gústalle facelo mirando ás persoas que o fixeron tamén, ás persoas que, non agora, pasaron tanto tempo lendo libros do século XIX. Pero eu lín as grandes novelas do século XIX, as inglesas, e, por suposto, os novelistas rusos influíronme moito –Dostoievski, Tolstoi– e iso sería a contestación. E isto quedou comigo como a parte máis emocionante de toda a operación que é para min facer un argumento realmente bo e poder poñer unha estrutura e uns personaxes que xorden inmediatamente, automaticamente por así dicilo, e viven e ocupan esa estrutura. Así que a novela, o comezo da novela, esa especie de movemento inmediato, é pensar en dúas ou tres persoas que teñen un dilema; e logo o argumento, o que lles pasa, xorde, se un ten sorte case automaticamente. Creo que é prudente, é dicir, eu aconsellaríalles ós novelistas mozos que intentasen ter o argumento antes de se sentar a escribir a primeira palabra, porque co argumento o resto ven automaticamente. É como ver o crecemento dunha pranta ou algo así. O argumento e un ou dous personaxes daranlle a un moi rapidamente outros mundos, é dicir,

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traerán consigo certo tipo de necesidades, certo tipo de xente, e logo o deseño total presentarase pouco a pouco. Pero tamén estou con Henry James e cos demais que din que todo tipo de cousas pequenas e triviais merecen ser apuntadas, e que un pode querer usalas anos máis tarde. Eu levo un diario, non especialmente sobre escribir novelas, é máis ben un diario realmente moi aburrido con frases como «fun nadar» ou «vai un día de sol», e nel teño certas cousas, todo tipo de cousas que coido que algunha novela, vaia, que contribuirán ou axudarán a unha novela anos máis tarde.

- ¿E como escribe a novela? ¿Cal é o procedemento exacto, usual? ¿Escríbea a man, revísaa,scríbea a máquina? ¿Como a crea?

Ben, non escribo a máquina, no uso un ordenador, porque creo que me resultaría imposible, e ademais estropea o estilo facelo cun ordenador. De todas maneiras, escribo cunha pluma estilográfica Montblanc, unha pluma marabillosa da que parece fluír a tinta, e leva tempo abondo, ben pensando todo tipo de notas, moreas e moreas de notas e preguntas que teñen que ver co funcionamento e a aparencia superficial do argumento. E logo non escribo a primeira liña ata que teño absolutamente claro o argumento. E con isto, pois xorden todo tipo de cousas, detalles sobre os personaxes e todo tipo de chistes e todo tipo de outras cousas calquera, de onde veñen, etc... Logo escribo un borrador completo primeiro que está case rematado, quero dicir que é como escribir a novela en blocks de pastas duras coa mesma estilográfica. Eu escribo na páxina da dereita do caderno e deixo a da esquerda en branco. É moi importante porque así se decata un de que se lle pasou algún tipo de conexión que un se esqueceu no momento, é dicir se Gertrude estaba en Oxford ou algo así, todo tipo de pequenos detalles que un pode querer cambiar, e tamén mesmo cousas moi importantes que logo poño na páxina da esquerda. Logo escribo a versión final en follas soltas que poño nun cartapacio no que se suxeitan, e que ademais é moi útil porque sempre podo romper unha páxina e escribir outra. E despois está alí todo e cando chega ese momento xa está practicamente rematado excepto moitos detalles. Pero creo que, non sei, quizais é algo que algúns escritores fan automaticamente e outros non, pero eu si. Quero dicir, de súpeto xorden uns sinais desa selva caótica enorme da experiencia dun, do que pasa tódolos días, e creo que é moi bo que eu teña un caderno sempre comigo, e que algo raro, nada que teña que ver coa novela que estou escribindo, que non saiba que podo facer con el, entón escribo, e que algo que di a xente ou algo divertido ou algo gracioso ou algún tipo de experiencia ou concepto sobre o mundo. Non sei, eu creo que escribo un tipo de novela moi tradicional que trata da xente, da sociedade, do mundo e de todo tipo de cousas e animais. Gústanme especialmente os animais. Hai todo tipo de cousas sobre os animais que se poden escribir. Por exemplo, nunha novela que veño de rematar, teño a un can e coñecino na realidade, na vida real é cadela, pero é can no meu libro. Vino dúas ou tres veces. É un collie galés de ollos azuis, é un dos poucos cans que ten ollos azuis, e en certo xeito a idea dun can de ollos azuis é irresistible, e escribo moitas cousas dese tipo. De súpeto, unha parte da escena que nos rodea pode aparecer iluminada e entón escribo.

- ¿Déixalle a algún editor retocar os manuscritos ou mándallos á editorial e devólvenllos dicíndolle o que debe corrixir?

- *¿Ten algunhas ideas sobre a razón ou a motivación que a leva a escribir a vostede? É dicir, ¿cal é a razón pola que o fai? ¿Quere dicir algo que hai que dicir ou sobre o que vostede teña ideas moi fortes ou é unha cuestión de ego?*

Vaia, non creo que haxa ningunha desas cousas. Dende logo, hai razóns en calquera novela ou na mente de calquera novelista. Pode que nalgún momento unha cousa en particular, unha cousa social, algunha causa, algo que ocorra, pague a pena anotalo. Pero eu non creo que teña ningunha motivación dese tipo. É dicir, non quero apoiar ningunha causa política, aínda que hai temas políticos nas miñas novelas, nin tampouco exhortar a un tipo particular de persoa a facer algo. É parte dun instinto natural, como o instinto dos animais, que tiveren dende que era cativa e que meu pai me animaba. Pero non publiquei cousa ata que tiveren trinta anos. Estiven moi ocupada coa guerra en primeiro lugar e despois veume a filosofía, que tamén é un factor moi importante. Estaba en Oxford cando comezou a guerra e os homes maiores ca min foron chamados a filas ó exército, e ás mulleres deixáronnos rematar as carreiras. Así que eu rematei a carreira, pero uns dez días despois de tela rematado marchei sen saber a nota que tivera e metinme na administración a esa idade porque moitas mulleres foron chamadas a filas, pero na administración, porque os homes estaban no exército. A meu pai encantoulle porque dicía que el tamén estaba na administración, só que a súa sección, por desgracia, foi trasladada ó norte de Inglaterra, e eu estaba na Facenda, en Whitehall, onde caeron tódalas bombas, así que había moita animación nesa época. Non se facían planos de futuro porque, en primeiro lugar, non se sabía o que lle ía ocorrer a un ou ó mundo. Nesa época non fixen planos sobre o que ía facer ou se ía seguir coa filosofía ou así. Así que inmediatamente ó rematar a guerra quixen ir traballar cos refuxiados e trasladáronme a Austria a traballar coas persoas desprazadas, cos refuxiados que estiveran en fábricas e escravizados nelas. Non podían durmir, había que alimentalos, vestilos e demais, e ó cabo marchaban a outra rexión que normalmente non era a súa patria.

- *¿Foi esa a época dos episodios nos que se di que tiveron actuacións cos refuxiados, criticadas despois, Harold McMillan e Kurt Waldheim? é dicir, cando ós refuxiados que non querían volver a Rusia foron enviados alí.*

Vaia, eu estaba en Klagenfurt pero non souben nada diso.

- *¿Quere dicir iso ata que os demais o soubemos anos máis tarde?*

Si, coido que moita xente podería telo sabido nesa época, pero deuse a casualidade de que eu non. Estaba a traballar nun campo de refuxiados. En realidade, creo que UNRRA¹ fixo un marabilloso traballo cos refuxiados que de non morreren de fame estarían loitando. De tódolos xeitos, ese traballo era tan satisfactorio para min que crin poder facelo toda a miña vida, ou seguir facéndoo. Sen embargo, algo que ten que ver co escribir sucedeume en Bruxelas onde estaba eu traballando nese momento. Como non conseguira nin libros franceses nin de ningún outro tipo

1. Administración para Rehabilitación e Axuda das Nacións Unidas. Ente administrativo creado para a asistencia ás nacións devastadas na Segunda Guerra Mundial. Creado en novembro de 1943 por corenta e catro signatarios, funcionou ata 1947 en que foi substituído por axencias especializadas como UNICEF e maila Organización Mundial da Saúde.

durante esa época porque estiveramos illados nunha illa durante a guerra, caéronme nas mans un par de libros de Sartre², *L'Être et le Néant*, así que coñecín a Sartre. De calquera xeito decidín que volvería a Inglaterra a ensinar filosofía porque fixera unha carreira basicamente de filosofía.

- *¿E iso non resultaba moi extraordinario na Inglaterra da época? Porque se adoita ter a idea de que os ingleses non se interesan pola filosofía. Probablemente é unha idea errónea, pero parece como que resulta especialmente extraño para a mentalidade inglesa a idea da filosofía.*

¿Quere dicir algo como Sartre e *L'Être et le Néant*? Ben, creo que é verdade e que as tradicións filosóficas europeas, especialmente a metafísica de Heidegger e Sartre, e a filosofía máis apegada á terra da tradición anglosaxona de Locke están moi arredadas a unha da outra. É algo que pensara nesa época eu porque quería seguir coa filosofía europea, cos grandes filósofos como Platón, Aristóteles, Kant e Hegel que parecen tratar de unir esas dúas correntes. Unha morea de persoas traballaban neses filósofos entón. De tódolos xeitos, o primeiro libro que escribín foi un libro sobre Sartre (*Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, 1953), o primeiro que publiquei. E logo escribín outros libros aínda que o último que publiquei é o máis amplo dos libros de filosofía que escribín.

- *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals.*

Si, que é un título suxerente.

- *¿E non é extraordinario dentro do mundo literario inglés que teña publicado un libro de filosofía vostede? Foi clasificado en Times Literary Supplement na sección de filosofía. O crítico que se elixiu para facer a recensión é un filósofo e non alguén conectado coa literatura.*

Si, en realidade é bastante natural, ¿certo? Vaia, eu ensinara filosofía anos e anos. Traballaba ensinando filosofía en Oxford e escribía novelas como unha segunda actividade. Pero despois de que tiveran éxito as miñas primeiras dúas novelas, pois, parece que me entrou a adición a escribir. Tiven que seguir escribindo máis e máis novelas, e fíxeno e asemade tamén seguía ensinando filosofía e, como digo, escribín algúns pequenos estudos sobre filosofía. E logo este, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, é o primeiro importante. Pero si, vaia, un pregúntase como se poden unir estas actividades da escritura e da filosofía, non creo que se poidan unir na realidade; creo que en certo sentido é a cabeza da persoa que as une, en certo modo. A filosofía é moi diferente, é absolutamente diferente da literatura. Os seus obxectivos son diferentes e aí é onde o punto de partida e o comezo da división do estilo da filosofía europea e o estilo empirista anglosaxón vaise facendo cada día máis grande, cando nun principio poderían ter chegado a se unir. Este estilo é agora moi diferente, especialmente pola actitude de certas persoas como Jacques Derrida. E eu penso que algo moi bo na filosofía anglosaxona é esta necesidade que se ten dunha transparencia absoluta. Un filósofo ten que ter un estilo literario moi bo e unha

2. Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980) publicara *L'Être et le Néant* en 1943, traducida ó inglés en 1956 co título de *Being and Nothingness*. É o seu tratado filosófico máis importante no que fai unha apaixonada defensa da dignidade humana, particularmente desfeita na época na que apareceu o libro.

capacidade para facer as cousas claras e para escribir con absoluta transparencia, e Heidegger -coido que *Sein und Zeit*³ é a gran novela do século, a gran novela metafísica do século. A xente di que os grandes filósofos do século son Wittgenstein e Heidegger, pero eu creo que Heidegger é mellor que Wittgenstein. Claro que Heidegger nas súas últimas obras, baixo a influencia de Nietzsche, chega a ter unha certa idea de que o ser é unha forza extraña, grande, e que o home é vítima do ser. De todos modos, esa separación entre a tradición anglosaxona, os filósofos empiristas, e os filósofos europeos prodúcese porque os filósofos anglosaxóns séntense realmente confusos. Vaia, non me gustaría poñelo desta maneira, pero cren que todo este tipo de cuestión metafísica que Rousseau e Heidegger e de máis propoñen é simplemente algo que produce confusión, e que a única filosofía clara é a que está conectada coa lóxica: a que eles mesmos seguen. Creo que é ésta a gran crise da filosofía⁴. Hoxe en día, que a filosofía xa non se ensina nos colexios, creo que é unha boa idea porque non se pode ensinar filosofía a ninguén que teña menos de 18 anos. Ademais, aínda que eu sinta que desapareza a filosofía, creo que é natural porque os problemas que a filosofía presentaba hoxe soluciónanos os científicos e os historiadores.

- *Ben sei que non lle gusta que lle fagan preguntas sobre a súa vida, pero volvendo á cuestión da súa estadía en Bruxelas cando traballaba para as Nacións Unidas, ¿cales foron os seus contactos co comunismo, se é que tivo algúns?*

Nesa época ningún. Quero dicir, díxose moito disto. Eu era marxista cando tiña vinte anos e estaba en Oxford, e tiveron un pequeno asunto co marxismo nesa época. Eu era moi de esquerdas e fun a un colexio moi de esquerdas, era de esquerdas e en Oxford era o que se era. Claro que o deixei moi pronto porque varias persoas dixéronme o que estaba a ocorrer en Rusia e entón aquilo era moi difícil de entender. E iso é todo.

- *Volvamos ás diferentes etapas de súa obra. Agora parece considerar que a súa primeira novela publicada, non a primeira que escribiu, Under the Net, é unha novela que non lle gusta.*

Non, non, non. Iso retíroo. O que quero dicir é que as primeiras novelas, con excepción de *The Bell*, non son tan boas como as seguintes. Eu creo que *Under the Net* é un caso especial. É a miña única novela realmente filosófica, na que a filosofía é algo moi serio. Gústame moito, é un libro memorable, pero o título é anterior a Derrida. *Under the Net* é unha discusión filosófica e ó que o título do libro fai referencia é a a rede da linguaxe. Tamén escribín un artigo filosófico sobre isto que se chamaba «The Search for the Particular», e esta imaxe en particular sempre a teño presente: a relación da linguaxe coas entidades, con certas entidades, e *Under the Net* é o retrato da rede da linguaxe e do que está debaixo e como está debaixo da realidade ou o caos. Así que o título resultoulle a moi pouca xente importante. Non se decataron. Cando se traduciu ó francés, a traduciron como *Dans le filet* e non como *Sous le filet*, e iso fixo que parece como un asunto amoroso.

3. Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) publicara *Sein und Zeit* en 1927 e abriña con isto o chamado existencialismo. A súa obra non apareceu en inglés ata 1962 co título de *Being and Time*. Se o ser foi analizado por el nesta obra, a nada sería o tema central dous anos máis tarde de *Was ist Metaphysik?*, aparecida en inglés en 1945 co título *What is Metaphysics?*

4. A entrevista seguiu sobre outros derroteiros das diferentes tradicións, da ensinanza da filosofía en Inglaterra e en España.

- Clasificouse nesa época, posiblemente por cuestións como a forma picaresca dalgunhas das súas primeiras novelas, como pertencente ó grupo de Angry Young Men, e supoño que os críticos máis tarde foron un pouco reacios a cambiar esa primeira impresión, normalmente fano. Suponlles un gran esforzo o cambiar a maneira de vela porque pódeseles acusar de ter sido cegos na súa primeira apreciación do escritor.

Penso que cambian de actitude automaticamente. É dicir, *Under the Net* ten certas notas raras que lles poden levar a facela pertencer ós *Angry Young Men*. Ademais, esta xente era xente que eu coñecía e as nosas primeiras novelas apareceron máis ou menos na mesma época. Así que creo que é unha idea bastante inocua. Aínda que, hoxe, eu desbotaría.

- Logo, ó final dos anos sesenta, as súas novelas parecen converterse nalgo cómico, mentres que dos anos setenta en adiante parece ser que o lado fantástico, a cuestión de mitos e fábulas parece ocupar máis espacio na súa obra. ¿Considera que as súas obras dos últimos quince anos son totalmente distintas das que fixera antes?

Non creo que haxa tal diferenza. Creo que hai un progreso continuado e comicidade –creo que tódalas novelas deben ser cómicas– e dalgunha maneira en *The Bell* esta comicidade é máis evidente. Non sei, creo que escribo máis sobre a vida e tamén teño máis atrevemento. Creo que hai que telo, que os novelistas mozos non o teñen, pero eu si.

- As súas novelas e as de William Golding, e en certo sentido as de Angus Wilson, parecen ter algo en común e, posiblemente, consideraranse no futuro entre as mellores novelas desta época, novelas serias, que debaten ideas, que tratan de cousas profundas. ¿Non considera que esa estrutura de fábula e simbolismo se debe ás súas lecturas, que pode ter sido influída vostede pola novela dos anos vinte e os anos trinta, nas que símbolos e linguaxe metafórica, en xeral, é tan importante, e que a outros escritores de súa xeración non lles influíu?

Non creo que me influíse en particular a idea de utilizar mitos e demais. Creo que isto é natural, que estas cousas son naturais. Quero dicir, a mitoloxía vive na vida da xente e eu non me consideraría nunca un escritor mítico en particular. Creo que as miñas novelas tiñan unha certa sensación de algo xeral, que trataban da vida na súa totalidade, e que todo tipo de imaxes, imaxes alegóricas ou de mitos e demais, se é que están alí, pois xorden da estrutura profunda da novela, das formas profundas de creación das que falabamos ó principio. Por suposto, cando se está escribindo a novela é posible que o feito de que eu tivese unha formación clásica e que coñecese ós gregos me axudase. Pero en certo sentido, todo axuda ¿non? Así que non me consideraría eu, nese sentido, pertencente a unha escola en particular de escritores míticos. Pero si, claro que lera e lera novelas toda a miña vida, lido e relido...

- Cando dixo que comezaba co argumento xa rematado, ¿quería dicir con iso que xa tiña unha especie de deseño completo ou deseños que despois mantén estrictamente no desenvolvemento desa estrutura?

Ben, deseño volve a suxerir unha especie de configuración abstracta e, en realidade, o primeiro esbozo terminado é algo moito máis complexo que ten que ver máis cos

seres humanos e con toda a estrutura do libro, que co que un vai facer cos personaxes. Creo que as novelas teñen un deber cara ós seus personaxes. É dicir, un tipo de novela crúa serían as historias de detectives como as de James Bond, por exemplo, unha historia ou algo onde o heroe é o novelista.

- *As súas novelas hai quen as describe como novelas de detectives filosóficos.*

Si, pero iso é moi equívoco. Quero dicir que non son novelas de detectives. O que o leva a un a escribir son todo tipo de emocións, todo tipo de pensamentos, e un ten que decidir cómo son exactamente en realidade os personaxes, e estar preparado para cambialos e para considerar as súas paixóns. Quero dicir que hai que pensar nas fórmulas profundas da personalidade da xente e demais. É moi importante. E a un inspíranos outros novelistas, e a min inspíranome Tolstoi, Dostoievski e Dickens.

- *Leunos traducidos, ¿supoño?*

¿As novelas rusas? Si, linas traducidas. Os rusos chegaron ás nosas vidas máis tarde, e John Bailey, o meu home, crítico literario, escribiu un libro sobre os rusos e coñecemos, quero dicir, el sabe ruso [e eu manéxome] o bastante como para ler ruso.

- *E cando a influíron a vostede, ¿léraos en ruso?*

Nesa época en inglés.

- *E cando os leu en ruso, ¿encontraba que eran diferentes do que lera en inglés?*

Si, sempre se podía ver a diferenza. Había cousas raras. Un normalmente pode ver as cousas extrañas nas traducións, pero, dunha maneira ou doutra, hai xentes ás que un se sente unido, a min pásame iso coa India, e eu sentínme profundamente unida a Rusia, quero dicir á novela rusa. Creo que a novela rusa é a novela por excelencia, e tamén poñería nese nivel a Dickens...

- *¿A novela segue tendo para vostede interese pola vida dos demais?*

Si, creo que é isto o que o novelista fai cos personaxes. Creo que cando un está metido no pracer de escribir unha novela, cando todo vai ben, se todo vai mal un séntese mal, pero se todo vai ben é cando un coñece a esta xente, é cando un ve como se deitan de entender uns cos outros e outras cousas así que teñen que ver coas relacións humanas.

- *Supoño que a vostede é vista dentro da escena literaria británica como algo tradicional, precisamente por este interese seu polos personaxes e pola creación de personaxes.*

Non, non sei. Creo que isto é o normal na novela, en Inglaterra e en América polo menos⁵. Pero despois de todo, ¿que hai máis interesante en todo o mundo que a personalidade da xente? Esta idea de que os personaxes son pouco importantes

5. O longo da conversa xorde o tema de Jacques Derrida e a súa influencia na crítica norteamericana, coñecida como a *deconstrución*. Xorde o problema de que crítica se converta en algo máis importante que a propia literatura. Sobre este particular Iris Murdoch parece ter opinións moi definidas e expresa,

déixanos un pouco cunha incapacidade de ler a Tolstoi e a Dostoievski ou a Dickens. Ben, eu creo que hai xente que pode escribir como Joyce e como en *Finnegan's Wake*, e creo que non hai nada perigoso niso, pero convertelo na regra de ouro da escritura é algo que produce un grande mal e que ós novelistas mozos que o intentan failles moito dano. Os libros de Derrida están cheos de retórica. Son libros que empregan unha xerga que en último término está tomada de Saussure, é algo que a min me causa pavor, o mesmo que os estudantes e os novelistas novos se metan nesta especie de círculo de xerga, e creo que deberían reconsiderar seriamente o oficio de escribir e que a retórica de Derrida e da crítica é algo confuso e falso. ¿Cal é a verdadeira obra de arte? ¿Que é ou que é importante realmente hoxe en día? Parece ser que non é o texto mesmo senón a *critique* do texto, así que ¿o pobre autor non conta, non existe? Síntome terriblemente preocupada por todo isto. En realidade, creo que todo isto se debe á desaparición da relixión. Quero dicir que unha das grandes crises do século é a desaparición en moitos círculos da crenza relixiosa literal.

- ¿Ve vostede algún tipo de conexión entre esta énfase actual nas sectas e na división da crítica literaria en sectas, por así dicilo, e a perda gradual desta crenza relixiosa da que vostede fala?

Isto é un pouco perigoso, e xa se sabe que se un non se explica claramente podería crear unha impresión equivocada. Eu non son unha crente literal, pero penso que a relixión e o ensino da moral é moi importante, e que a diferenza entre o ben e o mal hai que ensinalo. Hai cousas que aparecen nas miñas primeiras novelas, nas que hai xentes que son boas e xentes que están equivocadas, que algúns son bos e algúns son malos, todo este tipo de cousas, se un pensa nas vidas tan terribles e complicadas que temos os seres humanos, ben, o que ninguén trate de buscar un modo mellor de facer as cousas o que ninguén sinta remordemento, ben todas estas cousas normais que habería que facelas todo o tempo adoitan afectar ó tecido da vida humana que é, en si mesma, en gran parte moral e en gran parte avaliadora. Fanse continuamente xuízos de valor e isto que fan os críticos con esta idea de seguir a un crítico é perder de vista a totalidade da cuestión de qué é ser humano. Ben, isto non é exactamente filosofar, pero suxire que temos que pensar no que somos realmente e pensar nos nosos motivos e que a xente, loxicamente, fai isto con naturalidade e, claro, a xente nas novelas faino tamén, e mostrar con forza e con claridade e paixón como se portan os seres humanos non é psicoloxía, é arte, é Arte cando se fai ben. O andar con cuestións de nomenclatura ou etiquetado é en realidade a tradición aristotélica que se mantivo na Europa continental pero non noutros lugares, como Inglaterra. Creo que se perde substancia terriblemente nestas cousas, que é monstruoso, en certo modo, impedir á xente ler a Jacques Derrida, pero a súa crítica é en realidade unha parcela pequena, comparativamente pequena aínda cando se faga ben, que normalmente non se fai⁶. Creo que todo isto se debe á completa ignorancia da moralidade

ó respecto, con forza, o seu pensamento sobre Jacques Derrida e James Joyce, o novelista inglés por el preferido. A conversa deriva cara ás actitudes da crítica da deconstrución de Jacques Derrida e a influencia totalizadora sobre ela da obra experimental de James Joyce *Finnegan's Wake*. Iris Murdoch chega a considerar que o feito de que a crítica se faga máis importante que a literatura é unha situación de pesadelo.

6. A conversa leva a Iris Murdoch a preguntar sobre os costumes dos estudantes galegos respecto ós seus hábitos de traballo, os seus críticos favoritos, etc., e se mencionan a Mikhail Bakhtin e os seus conceptos sobre as novelas dialóxicas. Isto fai que se volva á primitiva cuestión filosófica de Hegel e os seus epígonos.

que aparece en Heidegger. En Heidegger e en Derrida, esta noción, este concepto que eles teñen de *écriture* é, en realidade, unha distorsión do que Saussure presentaba. Saussure ofrecía unha especie de diagrama que lle pode axudar a un a entender ou a pensar sobre a linguaxe, e Derrida fai deste diagrama algo real. Pero a linguaxe é un mar enorme que non podemos ver na súa totalidade, non podemos entender qué é o que significa cada peza da linguaxe porque ten unhas conexións infinitas con outras pezas. Ben, eu creo que a linguaxe ten esa característica de que as palabras teñen conexións con outras palabras e demais. Pero isto convértese en parte dese gran dualismo elitista: o que a maioría da xente non usa a linguaxe senón que a linguaxe úsaos a eles e que non saben en realidade o que din. Todo isto o que fai é desaparecer a verdade.

- *Para concluír, creo que vostede pensa que é moi importante a precisión na palabra, o uso preciso da linguaxe. ¿Pensa que o futuro da literatura vai cara a unha maior transparencia?*

Algunhas persoas en América rírianse disto, pero eu creo que os intereses e a realidade da vida mesma é o que é máis importante para meirande parte dos escritores, e penso que isto é así. Hai máis escritores que non oíron falar de Derrida e que escriben estupendas novelas.

- E seguirán a facelo.

Transcripción da conversa orixinal

- *Where do you get ideas to write a novel from? Where do you find your so-called «epiphanies» or aperçus? And what is the process after that?. Henry James used to say that at dinner parties he sometimes heard a certain anecdote and that he elaborated his fictions from that, what is the usual starting point for you?*

- I think perhaps I should start further back. My father was a very bookish man and was reading novels all the time. I started reading novels at a very early age -reading stories that is. I used to read Kipling or Robert Louis Stevenson, and I thought: How wonderful to be able to write a story! And then I felt I too could write a story. So then I started to write stories when I was about nine. But nothing came of that. But I somehow felt this was the fundamental thing. So, in a way, the beginning of the answer would be that the idea of a story and a plot and characters is itself exciting. And one likes to do it by looking at other people who do it. People who, I mean not now, spent so much time reading books of the nineteenth century. But I read the great novels of the nineteenth century: the English ones. And, of course, the Russian novelists affected me very much -Dostoievski and Tolstoi, and this would be it. And it remains with me, I think as the most exciting part of the operation which is to make a really good plot, to see a structure and to have characters who come automatically, immediately, as it were, to inhabit that structure! So that the novel, the beginning of the novel, sort of immediate movement is that of thinking of two or three people in a dilemma and then the whole plot -and what happens to them- would come about, if one's lucky, almost automatically. I think it is wise, I mean, I would advise young novelists to try and get a plot before you start to write the first word, because [with] the plot [the rest] will [be there] already, automatically. It's like seeing very fast the growth of a plant or something. The plot and one or two characters will very quickly

provide you with other worlds. I mean, they will bring certain kind of necessities with them, certain kinds of people, and then the whole pattern will gradually present itself. But I am also with Henry James and others who say that all kinds of very small, trivial things are worth jotting down, and which you may want to use a year later. I keep a diary, not particularly about novel writing, it is a rather dull diary really -with «I went swimming» or «it is a sunny day», but I also have [in it] certain things, all sort of things that I would feel that some novel perhaps years later would be helped by.

- And how do you go about actually writing the novel? What is the usual procedure? Do you write it in long hand, do you revise, do you type it? How do you go about creating it?

Well, I don't type, I don't use a word processor, because I think I would find it absolutely impossible, and I think I suspect it damages prose style rather to do it with a word processor. Anyway, I write with a Montblanc fountain pen, a marvellous pen -the ink just flows out of it- and well, it takes quite a long time. I would begin with thinking these kinds of notes, piles and piles of notes, and queries and so on concerning the working, the appearance of the plot. But then I don't write the first line until I've got the plot absolutely clear. Then -and with this would come all kinds of things- details about the characters and all kinds of jokes and all kinds of whatever: where they are getting to and so on. So, I then write an entire first draft which is actually almost complete -I mean it's just like writing the novel in hardbacked notebooks, with the same fountain pen. And I write on the right hand page of the notebook and leave the left hand page empty -and this is very important, because you certainly realize that you've missed some connection that you've forgotten at that time -Gertrude was still at Oxford or something like that- all kinds of little details that you may want to alter and perhaps even very large things which you then put in on the left hand page. Then, I write the final version on loose-leaf paper which I put into a folder where you clip it in -and that, of course, is very handy because I can always destroy a page and write another one. But then the whole thing is there when I get to that stage. I mean, that is pretty rough finished except for many, many details. But I think that -I don't know- perhaps it's something that some writers automatically do and others don't, but I do. I mean sudden signals appear out of the great chaotic wilderness of one's experience, of what is happening everyday. And I think it's very good I can keep a notebook with me all the time, and something quite odd -nothing to do with the novel I'm writing, or I don't see what I might do with- I would write it down -something somebody said, or some fun or something funny or some sort of picture of the world- I don't know -I mean, I think I write a very traditional kind of novel which is about people and about society and about the world, and all kinds of things and animals -I am particularly fond of animals- There are all sorts of things about animals to write down. For instance, in a novel which I've just finished I portrayed a dog, and I met this dog -it's actually her in real life, but he in my book- about two or three times. It is a Welsh Collie with blue eyes. And it's one of the few dogs, kinds of dogs, with blue eyes and somehow the idea of the blue-eyed dog is irresistible, [and I] jot down many things like that. Suddenly, a piece of the scenery around you, as it were appears as if enlightened, and then you write that down.

- And do you allow an editor to touch up your manuscripts? Do you send them to your publishers and do they actually send them back and tell you what to tidy down?

No, nobody is going to touch it.

- Do you have any ideas on the reason or drive for you to write? I mean, what is the reason why do you do it? Is it because you want to say something that needs to be said, that you feel passionately about? Is it a question of ego?

Well, I don't think there is any. Of course there are [reasons]. In any novel or in any mind of any novelist, there may be at a particular time some social thing and some cause, something that it is just happening which is worth noting. But I don't think that I have any general drive

of that sort. That is, I don't want to advance political causes -though there are political themes in my novels- or exhort a particular kind of person of that sort. It's part of a natural instinct -like some animal has some natural instinct- that I have had ever since I was a small child and encouraged by my father, and so on. but I didn't publish anything till I was thirty. I was kept very busy by the war, first of all. And then, you see, philosophy came into my life, too, and that was a very important factor. And I was at Oxford when the war started and the older men were conscripted into the Army, and the women were allowed to finish their degrees. So I finished my degree but then about ten days after I finished my degree I would leave without knowing what degree I had got and so I was in the Civil Service at that age, because a great many women were conscripted into the Civil Service because men were in the Army. My father was delighted because he said he was in the Civil Service too -only his department, unfortunately, was moved right to the North of England and I was in the Treasury, in Whitehall, where all the bombs dropped, so there was a lot of animation, at that time. You don't really know how to make plans for the future because I didn't simply know what was going to happen to oneself and the world. During that time I didn't make any plans for what I would do or whether I'd continue with philosophy or what. But then immediately after the end of the War I wanted to go and work with refugees and I was immediately then transferred to Austria to work with displaced persons, refugees, who would be in factories and enslaved. They couldn't sleep, had to be fed, clothed, and so on, and then eventually they had to go off to some other land, usually not their homeland.

- Was that the time of the episode in which Harold McMillan and Kurt Waldheim were later said to have been involved? I mean refugees were sent back to Russia when they were refusing to.

Well, oddly enough I was in Klagenfurt but I didn't hear anything about it, I didn't know anything about it till after...

- That means till about we all heard about it about a few years ago

Yes. I think many people at the time could have heard it. But it just happened I was just working in a camp. But on the whole, I mean, I think UNRRA¹ did wonderful work for the refugees who otherwise would be starving or fighting. Anyway that work was so satisfying to me that I thought I might do it or continue to do that sort of work all my life. However, something connected with writing happened to me in Brussels, 'cause I worked then in Brussels. I hadn't been able to get hold of any French or any books [during some time] because we were isolated during the war on an island. And some kinds of books were put into my hands -a couple of Sartre's *L'Être et le Néant*², I got to know about Sartre- Anyway, then I decided somehow or other that I would go back to England and teach philosophy as I had done a degree very largely on philosophy.

- And wasn't that very extraordinary in England at that time? We have the idea that the British are not interested in philosophy at all. We are probably wrong, but we seem to believe there is something in it utterly alien to the British mind.

You mean, something like Sartre and *L'Être et le Néant*?. I think this is true. Philosophical traditions [are different] -the continental philosophy -metaphysical philosophy like Heidegger, Sartre- and the English, Anglo-Saxon kind of grocer's philosophy, in the tradition of Locke, these are very much apart. And this is something that I had been thinking about, because I wanted to stay also with the continental philosophy, -with great philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle and Kant and Hegel, who do unify these thoughts. Because a lot of people worked with these philosophers. Anyway, the first book I wrote was a book about Sartre³, which I published, and then I've written other books, although I published this recent one which was much larger than any other philosophy book I had written...

- Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals.

Yes, yes, enticing title.

- Yes, and isn't that fact [your publishing a philosophy book] extraordinary in the British literary world? I've seen it reviewed on the Philosophy -not literature- section in TLS. The reviewer was a philosopher, rather than a literary critic.

Yes, yes. Well, certainly, that's quite natural isn't it?

Well, I had been teaching philosophy for years and years, you know. My job was teaching philosophy in Oxford and I did novels on the side. But I was by that time -after my first one or two novels had been pretty successful- I was very addicted I had to go on and on writing novels, so I did that and I did philosophy at the same time, and as I say, I wrote some very small works on philosophy. And then this [*Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*] is my first large one. But if one wonders how this novel writing and philosophy connect. Well, I think they do not connect truly, I mean in some sense the mind of the person who writes them will connect them in certain ways perhaps. But philosophy is so different. It is so absolutely different from literature -its aims are different. And this is where the departure and the opening between the continental philosophical style and the empiricist Anglo-Saxon style is becoming greater, when they were likely to come together. [This style] is now being seen as very different, partly through [the attitude of] Jacques Derrida. And I think that a very good aspect of Anglo-Saxon philosophy is the demand of absolute lucidity. A philosopher must have a very good literary style and an ability to clarify and to write lucidly. Heidegger, I think *Sein und Zeit*⁴ is the great novel of the century, the great metaphysical novel of the century. People have said the two great philosophers of the century are Wittgenstein and Heidegger; I think Heidegger is better than Wittgenstein -but Heidegger in his later work descends, under the influence of Nietzsche, to a kind of feeling of the Being as a great alien force, and man is the victim of Being. Anyway, that sort of separateness between the Anglo-Saxon tradition, the empiricist philosophers [and the continental ones] -[the Anglo-Saxon philosophers] felt rather in the dark or rather -I wouldn't put it like that- they would say that all this metaphysical stuff as offered by Rousseau, Heidegger, it's just [a] mystification, and that the only clear philosophy which is also connected to logic is also being pursued by themselves. But I think this is the great crisis of philosophy.

[Nowadays] philosophy is never taught at school, and I think it's right, there's no good use teaching philosophy to anyone under 18 [...]

But I'm sorry about the disappearance of Philosophy. I'm afraid it may tend to disappear and many people would say, of course, it disappears naturally because the problems raised by it are now solved by scientists or by historians.

- I know you really don't like to be asked questions about your biography but just to take in back the question to the time you were in Brussels and working for the U.N. what were your connections with communism, if there were any?

Well, there weren't any at that time. I mean a great deal has been made of this fact. Well, I was a Marxist when I was twenty. When I was twenty-eight or something like that I had a very brief [affair with marxism]. I mean I was very left-wing, I went to a very left-wing school, and I was left-wing, and I thought at Oxford [it] was the thing [to be]. I quite quick [got out of it]. Various persons pointed out to me, you know, what is happening in Russia and then it was absolutely impossible to face. So that is [it].

- Now, let's go back over the so-called periods of your work. You apparently now tend to say that your first novel published -not your first one- Under the Net, is something that you really don't like that much.

No, no. I will take that back. What I really mean is that I think the early novels, with the exception of *The Bell*, are certainly not at all as good as the later novels. But I think that *Under the Net* is a special case. It is also my only positively philosophical novel, a novel in which philosophy comes in a quite serious manner.

I'm very fond of it, it's a memorable book. But the title was really pre-Derrida - a very good title, *Under the Net* - a philosophical discussion [is what] the book [is] and [the title refers to] the net of language. I also wrote a philosophical paper on this called «The Search for the Particular». And this particular sort of imagery has always stayed with me, the relation of language to entities and *Under the Net* is the picture of the net of language and what is underneath it and how it is underneath the reality or chaos. So, the title was very important to hardly anybody. They did not notice, really. When it was translated into French they translated [it] as *Dans le filet* [rather than as] *Sous le filet* that would sound like a love affair.

- You were classified at that time - simply on account of those superficial things like the picaresque form of some of your first novels - under The Angry Young Men school. I suppose that critics were rather reluctant later to change their first view - they usually are. When they start saying that somebody is of this or of that school it takes them a great effort to change their view as though they would have been considered too blind to see in the first place what was the right category [in which to place the writer].

Well, I think they change automatically. I mean, *Under the Net* has got certain bizarre characteristics which might make them connect it with them. And also these [*The Angry Young Men*] were people I knew, I mean, we were [alike ^{to 'The Angry Young Men'} and I] at the time. Our first novels came out, more or less at the same time. So, I think it was quite a harmless idea, though I'd vanish it.

- Then in the late sixties your novels appeared to be full of comic or operatic situations, whereas from the seventies onwards you apparently changed that fantastic side and you became more and more orientated towards myths and fable. Do you actually find that your work of the last fifteen years is or can be considered totally different from what you did before that?

I don't think there's all that much difference. I think there was a continuous movement. And funniness I mean I think all novels have got to be funny, and somehow or other philosophy - [in] *The Bell* this funniness is more evident. But, I don't know I think it was just that I write more about life, also that I have more nerve. I think one's got to have it, a lot of nerve. Young novelists [don't].

- In my mind your novels and William Golding's, and to some extent Angus Wilson's, appear to have something in common. In the future I think they will be classified among the best of novels of those years, novels of a serious kind, that actually debate ideas or care about deep things. Do you see that framework of fable and symbolism - if you prefer - [in your books]? Do you consider that this aspect of your work relates to your readings? You seem to have been influenced by that novel of the twenties and thirties in which symbols figure so much, whereas other writers of your generation didn't.

Well, I don't think I was particularly influenced by the idea of using myths and so on. I mean, those things are natural. I mean that mythology lives in people's lives, and I certainly wouldn't have thought of myself as a mythical writer. I mean that is, I began to feel that my novels had a great sort of generality, but they were about the whole life and that any kind of imagery or allegorical imagery or myths and so on, if it was there it would emerge out of the deep part of the novel, the deep forms of creation which were coming about at the very beginning, and this was of course the time when you're making the novel and, I mean, of course the fact that

I had a classical education, that I knew about the Greeks and so on -this helped. But in a sense everything can be made to help. So I wouldn't feel in that sense that I was in a particular school [of myth writers].

But yes, of course I had been reading, I've been reading novels of my life, I mean I read and reread..

- When you said that you start out with a finished plot, does that involve a complete working of a pattern or patterns that you will later on keep very strictly in view?

Well, pattern again suggests some kind of abstract configuration, while the finished first draft in the mind, for me would be much more complex to do with human beings and with the whole structure of the book, with what are you going to do with your characters. I think that novels have a sort of duty to their characters, I mean, a very crude sort of novel might be that of a sort of detective story, a story or something where the hero is a novelist, [such as in] James Bond novels, for instance.

-I see. Your novels have been described as philosophical detective stories.

Yes, but that is a very misleading title. I mean they are not like detective stories. What moves one to write are all sort of emotions and all sort of thoughts, and then you have to decide what your characters are really like, deeply like and be prepared to alter them and to look into their passions. I mean, thinking about the deep formulations of people's character and so on is very important. I think one's being inspired by other novelists, the ones that inspired me are Tolstoy, Dostoevski and Dickens.

- You read them in translation, I suppose.

The Russian novels? Well, I read them in translation. Russian came into our lives later and John [Bayley] has a book about the Russians. And we, I mean, he knows Russian. [And I can manage] quite well enough to read in Russian.

- And when you were influenced by them, I mean had you read them? [in Russian]?

In English at that time.

- Did you find [when you read them in Russian] that you were reading something different from what [you] actually had when you read them in English?

You mean when I was able to read Russian? Yes, when I could make the connection, I mean, there were oddities. I mean, one can spot oddities of translation. But somehow or other, there are people where you feel really that you belong to them. I've got this feeling about India. I certainly did have an absolute sense of connection with Russia, I mean with the Russian novel. I think the Russian novel, I mentioned the greatest novelists, and I would put Dickens at that level, and [is the great novel]

- So, is still the novel for you an interest in the lives of other people?

Yes, I mean this is coming back to what the novelist does with his characters. I think that caught in the pleasure of writing a novel is -if it goes well, if it goes bad one is pretty miserable but if it is going well- then one understands these people, one sees how they misunderstand each other, and other such things, which involve you, human relations

- I suppose you are perceived in the British scene [as old-fashioned] because of your emphasis upon character.

No, I don't know, I think it is not certainly the case in England or in America [to be old-fashioned].

- *You mentioned Jacques Derrida, what is your opinion of his literary criticism?*

I've met him [Derrida] and I rather liked him when I met him. His attempt, I mean, to poetize on the novel and to make it into rhetoric and to think that James Joyce's the greatest novelist. I mean, James Joyce is a very great novelist. But, after all, what is more interesting in the whole world than other people's characters? What is character? This presumably curious attitude taken against character, leaves us with an inability to read Tolstoi, Dostoievski or Dickens.

[As for Derrida's defense of Joyce] I mean of course there are many people who could do this [write novels like *Finnegan's Wake*] and there was no harm in it. But to make it the rule, as it were, I think it is totally damaging and what damages [young novelists' attempts to do this], apart from Derrida's rhetoric, is the books full of jargon taken from Saussure and so on. Text books purported to convey Derrida. But it is rather frightening it means that [students of literature and young novelists] are going into a kind of cage [when reading and writing about their reading like this].

- *Yes, but if students do not use the right jargon they may be considered dull. They have to use the jargon, they have to be smart to be considered serious.*

Well I think they should seriously consider this job and what I think is false and muddled.

I had no idea that this nightmare [reading critical works rather than the texts themselves] really existed in such a way. What is the true work of art? What is really important [these days] is not the text itself but the critique of the text [so that the poor author doesn't count, he's non-existent and the less one reads of the things he wrote, the better.] I feel terribly sorry about that [I think in some way this is due to the disappearance of religion] I mean one of the great crisis of the century is the disappearance in so many quarters of literal religious belief.

- *Do you see any connection between this emphasis upon cults of a certain sort, in this case literary discourse, and the loss or the gradual loss of religion?*

Well, this is tricky and you know if one doesn't explain it pretty clearly one might give the wrong impression. I am not a literal believer, but I think religion and the teaching of morality -the difference between good and evil- is extremely important. These are things which appear in the early novels -or in my novels- that some people are right and some are wrong, some are good and some are bad. All the sort of —if one thinks of dreadful, complicated lives we humans live and nobody feels remorse and we try to find a better way and so on. The usual things that should have been done all the time affect the whole of the texture of human life, that is largely moral and largely evaluative -you are making value judgements all the time. And what this is for human beings to be, I mean, this sort of follow-the-critic idea loses the interesting question of who is the human being. This isn't exactly going into philosophy but it's suggesting that we have to think about who we are and to think about our motives and that people, due to a logic extent quite naturally do. And then people in novels do it too and to show with great clarity and with force and with passion how human beings behave it is not psychology, it is art. It is at its best, very high Art. This [follow-the critic idea] would be the Aristotelian tradition which has been maintained on the continent but not in other parts

I think there's some terrible loss of substance that's going on. It's monstrous to stop people from reading Derrida. But this is such a small, comparatively small area even if it is conducted properly which it isn't.

I think it is [due to] the sort of obliteration of morality in Heidegger. In Heidegger and in Derrida this notion of *écriture*, this concept is a distortion of Saussure. Saussure was offering some kind of picture that might help you to think about language and Derrida makes this picture into something real, as it were. But language is a great sea. We cannot possibly see the whole of it, we can't understand what any particular piece of language means because of its infinite connections with other pieces of language. All right, I mean language has got its characteristics of having words [that] have connections with other words and so on. But this then becomes a part of his [Derrida's] great elitist dualism: that the majority of people don't really use language when language is using them, and they don't know really what they're saying. It obliterates truth.

- This is probably connected with whatever [the deconstructionists] have to hide. I think you feel passionately about the power of being precise, the precise use of language. Do you find that literature is changing towards more lucidity?

Well, some people in America would laugh at this. But I mean the concerns and the reality of life is for most writers [important] and I think they are probably true. There are more writers who have never heard of Derrida and so on and who are writing jolly good novels

-And will go on doing it.