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THE SECRET GARDEN OF MARY AND COLIN IN *THE COMFORT OF STRANGERS* BY IAN MCEWAN

The Comfort of Strangers (1981) belongs, together with the collection of short stories *First Love, Last Rites* (1975) and the novel *The Cement Garden* (1978) to Ian McEwan's earlier prose which has established his reputation as a controversial writer on the one hand admired for his ability "to point a sentence with enviable exactness" as well as his "evocation of atmosphere" and, on the other hand, regarded to be "a writer of a macabre and disturbing imagination" as Allan Massie describes him.¹

The Comfort of Strangers is by no means an easily digestible pleasant novel and its author does often make use of drastic matter, but it would be wrong, in my opinion, to decree, as is done sometimes, that its chief purpose is to shock the reader. I shall argue in the present paper that it has definite functions to perform which contribute to the general effect and meaning of the book.

Its two main characters, Mary and Colin, whose long though not legalized relationship has lost some of its attractiveness, have come to a foreign country to spend together their holidays in an old seaside city and revitalize their feelings for each other. In the course of their wanderings through the city, Mary and Colin get to know Robert who invites them to visit him and his wife Caroline at their villa.

Mary and Colin find the married couple slightly odd, mysterious, and intriguing; Robert and Caroline seem to exert a strange influence on them which manifests itself in stimulating their erotic imagination and, indeed, revitalizing their relationship. Neither the discovery that Robert has earlier watched them and even taken pictures of Colin from hiding nor the gradual revealing of the sado-masochistic nature of Robert and Caroline's marriage

¹ Allan Massie, *The Novel Today. A Critical Guide to the British Novel 1970-1989* (London, New York: Longman in association with The British Council, 1990), p. 49.

deters Mary and Colin from visiting their new acquaintances again just before their scheduled return to England. As if hypnotized, ignoring signals of danger, Mary and Colin are drawn to the villa where the culminating scene of the novel takes place. Robert and Caroline, who seek in Colin a safe means of satisfying their sexual fantasies which would not endanger Caroline's life or health, murder him and, having found their thrill in death and blood, abandon the body lying in front of Mary who has witnessed the scene unable to move or speak after having drunk drugged tea.

The criminal perverts disappear from the villa and the city and Mary has to stay on in the foreign place because of the police investigation; she is in a state of shock and it is very difficult to imagine her return to the everyday routine of her life in England.

The remoteness of the normalcy of everyday life has increased in the book step by step, almost imperceptibly and parallelly to the escalation of the tension from an indeterminate unease and anxiety to horror, all in strict connection with the suggested (one is tempted to say: insinuated) meanings of the book.

The very first pages of *The Comfort of Strangers* abound in ambiguities, indeterminacies, and obscurities. When, for instance, Colin and Mary wake up in their hotel room, they hear street noises and voices which they cannot understand or identify, footsteps of an unknown person in the corridor, the sound of a key unlocking a door, and a male voice singing the *Mann und Weib* duet from *The Magic Flute*. Also later, during their wandering through the city, they perceive its reality as a series of disconnected, fragmentary images which they cannot control by placing in the context of a fully meaningful whole. A typical example of the situation is provided by the following description:

Inside the kiosk sat the vendor, barely visible through the tiny hatch, and in virtual darkness. It was possible to buy cigarettes here and not know whether it was a man or a woman who sold them. The customer saw only the native deep brown eyes, a pale hand, and heard muttered thanks.²

Chiaroscuro, forcefully present in the novel, the contrast between dazzling light and deep shade, limits the characters' perception so that they cannot see people and places clearly as when they have problems with determining where exactly they are because "With such strong light directly into their eyes, it was difficult to discern the pattern of streets below and gauge their position to the hotel" (56). On the level of implied meanings, the contrast between light and darkness helps to reduce the situation of Mary and Colin

² Ian McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers* (London: Pan Books in association with Jonathan Cape, 1982), p. 20. All quotations from the novel are from this edition.

to "the essential things" of human life pointed to by the motto borrowed from Cesare Pavese.

The frequent use of indefinite articles in the text, suggesting incomplete knowledge of the surroundings, reinforces the effect of the dramatic *chiaroscuro* which creates a "patchwork of light and shade" (47) juxtaposing various elements of what is seen but not fully recognized. Mary and Colin's observations and impressions evoked by street scenes, city architecture, and glimpses of the sea and the sky resemble the fragmentary snapshots taken by the crowds of tourists doing their sightseeing as well as Robert's photos taken by Robert.

Mary and Colin are all the more disoriented since they have forgotten to take their maps with them and this significant circumstance causes that, provided with no instructions, they soon get lost, literally and metaphorically, in the labyrinth of winding streets of the city. They are also hungry, thirsty and tired.

If one takes into consideration the fact that they are foreigners among people speaking a language different from theirs and that they experience sights, sounds and smells that constitute signs they find difficult to read, one may consider their situation quite realistic. However, their uncertainty, the sense of being lost gradually introduces an atmosphere of menace, mystery and the unreality of a nightmare, which makes some critics of McEwan read the book in terms of magical realism. The effect of defamiliarisation is augmented by the deliberate withholding of certain information. For example, only Christian names of the main characters, Mary and Colin, are given and the city they are in, its streets, squares and ancient monuments remain unnamed throughout the novel even though its internal evidence makes it obvious that the *locus* in question is Venice.

It is common knowledge that, as Ryszard Matuszewski reminds us, a literary convention which gives up literalism, consciously aims at generalizations.³ This certainly applies to *The Comfort of Strangers*. The very choice of Venice for the setting of the book almost automatically associates it with certain meanings and atmosphere since, as is noted by scholars researching the subject, the city has become, especially in English literature, a sign of deception, conspiracy, plotting, mystery, eeriness and horror. According to Beata Piątek, the author of an essay in the book on the contemporary British novel, *Współczesna powieść brytyjska. Szkice*, those who have read Henry James, Edgar Allan Poe or E. M. Forster are well aware of the fact that the English tend to have most uncanny adventures when in Venice.⁴ One could add to the names mentioned by her also those

³ See: Ryszard Matuszewski, *Doświadczenia i mity* (Warszawa: PIW, 1964), p. 85.

⁴ See: Beata Piątek, "Ian McEwan", in: *Współczesna powieść brytyjska. Szkice*, ed. Krystyna Stamirowska (Kraków: Universitas, 1997), p. 208.

of e.g. Jeanette Winterson whose Venice in *The Passion* resembles an "invisible city" of Italo Calvino and of Daphne du Maurier who has chosen the place for the strange and thrilling events described in the story "Don't Look Now."

The image of Venice as a dangerous and corrupt, albeit fascinating place linked with "pestilent art," owes a great deal to the influence of John Ruskin who glorified the Middle Ages and denigrated the Renaissance with Venice as its stronghold. His vision expressed, first of all, in *The Stones of Venice* (1851–1853) but also in e.g. *Modern Painters* (1856) is interpreted by Charles T. Dougherty in the following way:

The greatness of Venice was built upon a religion which was false. Venice made a garden of the sea, and she called upon the Angel of the sea to protect her. (...) But the religion of the Venetians was false, the Angel of the Sea was really the Serpent of the Sea, and when the sea and the worm devoured their work the Venetians vanished as a rainbow.⁵

Venice is, then, a false *hortus deliciarum* – a false garden of Eden and the Serpent of the Sea – Leviathan identified with evil and, as Northrop Frye stresses, with the fallen world.⁶ Human beings wander in the dark winding labyrinth of the monster's belly – the underworld and the maze of mankind's history of misery.

The motif of the false garden (visually present in *The Comfort of Strangers* in the description of the thick greenery of suffocating smell grown by Caroline in pots on the balcony of her villa) which is also a labyrinth merges the idea of journey with the quest of false happiness consisting in satisfying hidden needs and desires. The strange married couple attracts and fascinates Mary and Colin so much exactly because it stirs their instinctive drives and longings which are not clear to themselves. They wander through the labyrinthine complexities of their own sub-conscious existence, find the key to their own secret garden – a perverse *hortus deliciarum* and get an inkling of the truth about themselves as well as the human condition in general. They are like their namesakes in *The Secret Garden* (1909) by Frances Eliza Hodgson Burnett, who, when the girl heroine finds the way and the key, get to know what is hidden and inaccessible to others. However, the insight into true human nature gained by McEwan's characters brings about, as was the case with Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, disaster.

⁵ Charles T. Dougherty, "Of Ruskin's Gardens" in: *Myth and Symbol*, ed. Bernie Slotte, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973), p. 146.

⁶ See: Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism. Four Essays* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 190–191.

The connection between *The Comfort of Strangers* and the biblical motif of loss of innocence as well as stories of children perceived as innocent, who find a secret place as in the novel by Hodgson Burnett, wander in dark woods like Hansel and Gretel, or, like Alice, get lost in the nightmarish Wonderland, does not appear altogether accidental since the story of McEwan's Mary and Colin is about wandering, being lost, experiencing horrors and about loss of innocence. Besides, Colin and Mary resemble some of McEwan's children characters in his other works, who appear to have the paradoxical innocence of those following natural drives without being aware of their moral implications; since McEwan, unlike Rousseau and more in keeping with de Sade's views, envisions human nature as controlled by dark forces, their "innocence" is tainted.

The journey motif has a fundamental importance in *The Comfort of Strangers* and this is signaled at the very start both by the motto and the title of the novel. The motto draws readers' attention to the brutality of traveling, loss of "all that familiar comfort of home and friends," while the title suggests perfidiously that the comfort can be given by strangers. And, indeed, it is given to Mary and Colin, but it turns out to be very different from that of home and friends.

If home and England mean routine behavior and conventional interpersonal relations, Colin and Mary's going to another country denotes a change towards a different state of their minds which enables them to see themselves and the world in a new light. The journey they undertake is, like many other literary journeys charged with symbolical implications, an exploration of the self.

The truth discovered by the two characters, and especially Mary, in the course of the exploration is realized on several levels of meaning. In terms of surface literal ascertainments, it is the truth concerning the criminally perverse passions of Robert and Caroline. On a more general level, the book deals with differences between the natures of men and women and the complex relations between them. McEwan's critics dealing with this problem sometimes emphasize the feminist aspect present in the portrayal of Robert; it must be stressed, however, that this feminism has nothing to do with straightforward propagandist methods and that, in fact, ambiguity which characterizes McEwan's approach renders the feminist overtones somewhat uncertain.

His upbringing in a family dominated by an authoritarian father, with a sympathetic and protective mother and among sisters whom he admired, feared and hated, must have had an influence on Robert's attitude to men and women. Robert's wife, Caroline, is somewhat older than her husband and as a girl she was taught devotion to male authority; she has certain features of Robert's mother (which is suggested by the concurrence of the

image of the mother as a beautiful woman in white and the clothes of Caroline preparing for the bloody scene when she says: "...with so many things to arrange, I feel more efficient in white." (105), but Robert sees in her also his sisters whom he wished to punish for their wilfulness and rebellion against his godlike father as he wishes to punish all women rejecting their traditional roles and submissive attitudes. At the same time Robert feels contempt for contemporary men whom he regards as effeminate weaklings very different from his own father and grandfather in whose times, he maintains, "There was no confusion" (72) while

'Now men doubt themselves, they hate themselves, even more than they hate each other. Women treat men like children, because they can't take them seriously.' ... 'But they love men. Whatever they might say they believe, women love aggression and strength and power in men. ... Now the women lie to themselves and there is confusion and unhappiness everywhere.' (72-73)

Mary and Colin are to Robert typical representatives of such attitudes. Certain features of Colin's personality and the delicate beauty of his physical appearance betray, in the eyes of Robert, a deficiency of male character. Mary, on the other hand, is not feminine enough: she has a professional career, takes interest in public life, is independent and active. The fact that she, like many other women, has taken over some traditionally male roles is emblematically represented by her work in a theatrical company consisting of women only and playing men's roles in *Hamlet*.

Robert is motivated by complex feelings then. This super-macho worships maleness and is attracted by the feminine in Colin (hence suggestions of the homosexual strain in his attitude), he wants to kill the woman in Colin and the man he despises as well as, vicariously, Caroline. He also wishes to punish himself for breaking his father's rule when a child and for failing to become a father himself and so, he does not try very hard to avoid being arrested after the crime.

Caroline, to whom love means that "...you'd do anything for the other person. ... And you'd let them do anything to you" (63) seems to identify with the victim (she smears her own blood on the lips of Colin, which are then kissed by Robert), but, at the same time, in union with Robert, she revels in her power over the young man. Mary has been allotted the role of a passive witness; she, too, is a victim of violence, but the scene of murder is a kind of fulfillment of her earlier sexual fantasy in which Colin had no legs and arms and was a kind of sexual object, sometimes lent to her friends and this fact will make her doubt her own innocence. Even Colin, who appears to be quite a rational and responsible person, experiences secret semi-conscious temptations and a desire to answer the call of darkness:

A narrow commercial street ... vanished enticingly into shadow. It asked to be explored, but explored alone without consultations with, or obligations towards, a companion. To step down there now as if completely free, to be released from the arduous states of play of psychological condition, to have leisure to be open and attentive to perception, to the world whose breathtaking, incessant cascade against the senses was so easily and habitually ignored, dinned out, in the interests of unexamined ideals of personal responsibility, efficiency, citizenship, to step down there now, just walk away, melt into the shadow, would be so very easy. (104-105)

The temptation to reject obligations towards others may be interpreted as a wish for the death of his social identity and yielding to instinctive desires. Colin appears to be only partially aware of what his hidden needs are, but the words of Caroline addressed to him: "Mary understands. I've explained everything to her. Secretly, I think you understand too" (119) suggest that, even if he does not name it, he knows the nature of the impulse which has brought him to the villa.

The cultural-social factors which have shaped the civilized personalities of Colin and Mary, have given them similar ways of thinking, behaving and even similar appearance: they are "Both so finely built, almost like twins"(67). However, the separation from the familiar makes them look at the world from an unaccustomed angle and it reveals deep differences between the "two worlds" of "the daughters and the mothers in the kingdom of the sons" mentioned in the book's other motto (from Adrienne Rich). The relations between men and women function in *The Comfort of Strangers* on two antagonistic planes: of socially controlled behavior and of instincts and so they are subject to contradictory impulses of attraction and hostility, passive submission and aggressive dominance, sacrifice and violence not always ascribed to one sex only, which creates ties between man and woman that resemble a mortal embrace. In this situation, the line from *The Magic Flute* often heard by Mary and Colin: "Mann und Weib, und Weib und Mann, Together make a godly span" (13) sounds like an ironic refrain-comment on McEwan's story about two couples. The discovery of the hidden nature of the ties between man and woman makes Mary doubt the possibility of harmony and full understanding between the two sexes, because "the imagination, the sexual imagination, men's ancient dreams of hurting, and women's of being hurt, embodied and declared a powerful single organizing principle, which distorted all relations, all truth" (124). If this is also McEwan's view of the problem, it does not necessarily single him out as an exceptional pessimist, because similar views, although more cautiously expressed, are to be found among psychologists. For example, in the papers of some of the participants of the conference⁷

⁷ Conference proceedings: *Przemoc dzieci i młodzieży w perspektywie polskiej transformacji ustrojowej*, eds Jan Papież, Andrzej Płukisa (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 1998).

on violence among children and youth, differences between male and female behavior are ascribed to socializing influences (girls are prepared by their upbringing for the dominance and even violence of men) and, at other times, when "the hidden aspects of human nature" are considered, it is suggested that aggression and violence could be viewed as, just like power and fighting, a kind of aphrodisiac for men.⁸

The problem of relations between men and women in the novel by McEwan is part of an even more general question and leads the narrative to a higher level of generalizations concerning creative and destructive human impulses and the bond between life and death.

The dark forces ruling human life in *The Comfort of Strangers* seem to have much in common, in spite of their stronger link with sexuality, with the concept of evil in e.g. William Golding's work or, more obviously, with the "wilderness", darkness and chaos in Joseph Conrad; the journey of Colin and Mary from England to a foreign city and then through its labyrinth of streets to the place of ultimate horror is also a kind of journey to the heart of darkness. However, Ian McEwan, unlike Conrad or Golding, expresses meaning by making use of devices characteristic of literature associated with the Gothic tradition such as extreme cruelty, crime, horror, suspense and mystery. These devices are no doubt meant to strongly impress the reader's imagination, but they also place the novel in the category of the sublime which cannot but affect the meaning of the novel.

The sublime tends to be understood today as lofty feelings.⁹ Harry Shaw, for example, defines "sublimity" in his *Dictionary of Literary Terms* as "Nobility, impressiveness, grandeur. *Sublimity* refers to qualities in a literary work that transport a reader, carry him out of himself, and set his thoughts on a loftier plane."¹⁰ When we speak of the sublime in the Gothic novel, however, we usually link it, as was done in the 18th century, with an awe-inspiring effect which makes ordinary people feel small and insignificant.

A significant influence on this aspect of 18th century English aesthetics came from *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756) by Edmund Burke who argued that the sublime, unlike the beautiful, involves pain, torment, and anguish. Immanuel Kant, who developed these ideas, also linked the sublime with the presence of a might perceived as an object of fear. His concept of the sublime is a dynamic category since it depends on the evoking in the mind the of notions such as e.g. "infinity", which the imagination cannot embrace. It is from Kant that Jean-Francois Lyotard's postmodernist interpretation of the sublime, the key concept in

⁸ See papers by Stanisław Kawula and Kazimierz Pospiszyl in: *Przemoc dzieci i młodzieży...*

⁹ See: Bogdan Baran, *Postmodernizm* (Kraków: inter esse, 1992), p. 177.

¹⁰ Harry Shaw, *Dictionary of Literary Terms* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1972), p. 361.

his *The Postmodern Condition*, is derived. Both Kant and Lyotard stress the fact that it is impossible to represent sublimity, which causes pain, but while Kant opposes reason's notions to images, Lyotard sets reality against text, which represents it inadequately. Lyotard in our own time and Burke and Kant in the 18th century give much attention to the hiatus between the notion of the sublime and the desire to control it which cannot be fulfilled and so becomes a source of frustration and pain.

In *The Comfort of Strangers*, the sublime functions most directly in two aspects: the psychological motivation of characters, especially Robert, and in the reader's reception of the narrative. Robert's case can be interpreted in terms of the "biological sublime" of which concept Elana Gomel writes in her interesting article "From Dr. Moreau to Dr. Mengele; The Biological Sublime" that, drawing on Darwinism, eugenics, and nazism, it has produced the ideology of the New Man, whose superhuman perfection verges on the terrible. She points out that "The sublime may terrify, but one circumvents terror by becoming its source."¹¹ This was the case with, for instance, the Nazis, who identified with the sublime (the New Man), themselves caused terror and, in order to convince themselves that they were supermen, they needed "the other": submen-victims they could torture, over whom they had absolute power. As Golan explains, "In the ideology of the New Man the sublime of violence functions as a tool reconstructing subjectivity."¹²

Similar factors motivate the behavior of Robert, who worships his father as if he had been a powerful god, tries to imitate him and usurps the right to turn others into inferior subhuman beings whom he may abuse and kill.

Caroline, his passive victim, is terrified and transported and she represents the attitude of the victim's love for the torturer and, from the point of view of the sublime, she exemplifies the aesthetic of witnessing. During the act of murder also Mary is a witness; she is temporarily paralyzed and cannot prevent what she is looking at, but afterwards she feels vaguely guilty as if she had derived a certain pleasure from the scene.

As stated earlier, the implications of *The Comfort of Strangers* are ambiguous and complex: a victim can cause others suffer or, at least, consent to pain. However, this is to be expected in a novel which deals with fusing opposites (represented by sado-masochistic relations) and uniting ecstasy with horror of the sublime. Such a contradiction is to be

¹¹ Elana Gomel, "From Dr. Moreau to Dr. Mengele: The Biological Sublime" in: *Poetics Today. International Journal for Theory and Analysis of Literature and Communication* 21/2 (Summer 2000): 105.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 406.

found in the situation of Robert and Caroline (indirectly, also of Mary), who are greatly impressed by the extraordinary beauty of Colin's body, which, however does not prevent them from murdering him. On the contrary, just because he is beautiful, he has been elected to be their victim. It seems that the murder is for them an attempt to possess themselves of sublime beauty and perfection by destroying it, which is an all too familiar impulse present in, for example, the irresistible desire to leave footprints in a virgin field of snow as if its purity were unbearable. Destruction is then, in a sense, an expression of intense rapture. And in view of this paradox, Robert and Caroline's love can be regarded as absolute love, because it accepts the possibility of one's own as well as the other's death in the attempt to reach the unattainable. This extreme situation delineated by Eros and Thanatos, transgressing limits of humanity terrifies Mary, but it is exactly because she and Colin sense its nature that they are drawn to Robert and Caroline like moths to fire which will burn them. And the reader's fascination with the shocking story is not unlike this attitude of Colin and especially Mary.

The intensity of feelings, the power of inner drives and dark forces hidden in human nature, which render people helpless, shown in *The Comfort of Strangers*, confront the reader with the terror of the sublime that works like a spell. The dark forces are all the more disturbing since they are not analyzed or identified; they remain a mystery. Moreover, the writer gives us to understand that these dark forces can inhabit anyone's inner world.

Unlike the earlier, traditional Gothic novel, *The Comfort of Strangers* does not represent evil as an external factor manifesting itself in the presence of supernatural powers, vampires, ghosts, monsters or degenerate human beings, but makes one view it as an integral part of human nature; human beings do not just wander in the labyrinth of Leviathan's belly – the secret false garden of paradise – but carry it in themselves. Ian McEwan's truths about human nature are much more disturbing than sexual excesses and deviations he often writes about. The fact that it is those truths that matter most in his writing is confirmed by his novel *Black Dogs* published in 1992: in it, the writer no longer resorts to very drastic material, but still makes demons of violence central in his narrative and reminds his readers that they have not disappeared for ever with the wars they caused, but can still bring about disasters.

The Comfort of Strangers is virtually overloaded with meanings and they constitute a construction which actually gives an allegorical character to the novel. It explains the sometimes criticized "theatricality" of McEwan's

