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THE AESTHETICS OF GIOTTO'S 'PERFECT CIRCLE' IN/AND IRIS MURDOCH'S THE SANDCASTLE

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Abstract: *From Jackson Pollock's gestural abstraction to Pierre-Auguste Renoir's painting with a brush tied to his dysfunctional hand, certain artistic gestures acquire fixed meanings. This paper investigates the role of imitated artistic experience as part of the specific expression of the age in the recontextualisation of the Renaissance discourse in a particular British postmodern narrative: Iris Murdoch's third novel The Sandcastle (1957). Based on the combination of post-structuralist and deconstructionist approaches, the study aims to demonstrate the ambivalence of the authority of the Renaissance narrative of artistic rebirth as Jean-François Lyotard's grand narrative. This paper argues that the ekphrastic revival of Giotto's 'perfect circle' and the set of aesthetic values and ideas underlying the works of Giotto as the father of the Renaissance narrative that are associated with this gesture reveals the postmodern features of Giotto's anecdote and postulates it as a small narrative of subversiveness of the canon. The anecdotal origin of Giotto's gesture, the validity of which is based on Giorgio Vasari's documentation of the Old Master's biography in his Lives, establishes and simultaneously undermines the influential power of ekphrastic knowledge. Its conceptualisation of a paradigm that contributes to the formation of an artist is considered within the framework of Michel Foucault's terminology as the conceptualisation of an 'ideology of the return'. Imitation in representation is approached in this paper as Giotto's key artistic principle that is reassessed in The Sandcastle in its connection to the failure of Murdoch's protagonist to fit contemporary reality into the familiar aesthetic systems.*

Already during his lifetime, the Italian artist Giotto di Bondone (1266-1337) acquired the fame and reputation of an artist who revived painting that had supposedly fallen into decay during the Middle Ages. One of Giotto's contemporaries, the Florentine chronicler Giovanni Villani (1276-1348), envisaged him to be "the most sovereign master of painting in his time" (qtd. in Galdy 54); the Italian writer and poet Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) claimed in his *Decameron* (1353) that Giotto "brought that art again to light, which had lain buried for many ages" (304), whereas the pre-eminent Italian poet Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) immortalised his image of an artistic innovator in his major work *The Divine Comedy* (121). However, it was in the sixteenth century, two centuries after Giotto's life and death, when his name was contextualised by the Italian artist and historian Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) within the discussion of the artistic rebirth that acquired the name of 'Renaissance' in his *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (1550).

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In the preface to his monograph on the art of the period of Renaissance, Alexander Stepanov addresses the concept of ‘Renaissance’ as “the most lyrical and cheerful, yet the most ambiguous term in the History of Art” (6; trans. N.G.). Should it be understood as a period in the historical development of Italy and Northern Europe or as a type of culture that is not limited historically or geographically? Was this cultural movement (if one does consider it a cultural movement) a continuation of the Middle Ages or a break from its aesthetics?¹ The use of a postmodern approach in the study of Renaissance texts constitutes a recent wave in the contemporary reassessment of this phenomenon.² In this sense, Randolph Starn discusses the possibility to talk about ‘a postmodern Renaissance’ as a methodological framework for contemporary Renaissance Studies.³

However, the term, as it was coined by Vasari in the sixteenth century, appeared to be devoid of the ambiguities that it acquired later within the framework of the debates in the academic discourse concerning the essence of this phenomenon. Employed in order to address the condition of rebirth, the revival of arts in their return to the Roman ideals, the term ‘Renaissance’ constitutes a structural and conceptual pivot for Vasari’s biographical account of the pre-eminent Italian artists from fourteenth to sixteenth century that he presents in the first volume of his *Lives*:

For having seen in what way she, from a small beginning, climbed to the greatest height, and how from a state so noble she fell into utter ruin, and that, in consequence, the nature of this art is similar to that of the others, which, like human bodies, have their birth, their growth, their growing old, and their death; they will now be able to recognize more easily the progress of her second birth and of that very perfection whereto she has risen again in our times. (vol. 1: lviii)

Vasari’s account of the artists who, in his view, contributed to the “amelioration . . . of the arts” (vol. 2: 78) and specifically his account of the life and accomplishments of Giotto di Bondone, is, however, largely interpretative, which

¹ Problematising Renaissance humanism in Italy as well as Northern Europe, Brian McClinton provides an overview of a change in the interpretation of the phenomenon of the Renaissance in scholarly discussions from the eighteenth century onward. Referring to the scholars who broadened the notion of ‘Renaissance’ (including Voltaire, Georg Voigt, Jules Michelet), McClinton notes a shift from Vasari’s understanding of the Renaissance as an art movement towards Michelet’s theorisation of it as a period in human history. A more recent argument that the Renaissance is “a powerful and seductive myth” (McClinton 10) and, in fact, should not be periodised separately from the Middle Ages is juxtaposed with the argument that insists upon the existence of several Renaissances dating back to the 8th century (McClinton 10-11).

² See, for example, Thomas L. Martin’s *The Renaissance and the Postmodern: A Study in Comparative Critical Values (Routledge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture)*, New York: Routledge, 2016, for a methodologically postmodern rethinking of Renaissance texts.

³ Postmodernism and postmodernity are approached by the author of the paper “Postmodern Renaissance?” in their contentious terminological complexity as phenomena that comprise a range of commonly discussed features (plurality, fragmentation, discontinuity, etc.) “within a system of floating signifiers in the wake of concepts of modernity” (5). Starn discusses the inflections of postmodernism/postmodernity in Renaissance historiography, including the controversial disappearance of a Renaissance character (11-12).

makes art historians question its trustworthiness. Pointing out a recent scholarly tendency to consider Vasari's text "a mine of historical error" (385), Hayden B.J. Maginnis insists upon Vasari's intentional use of such a complex combination of fact and fiction within the framework of Vasari's timely understanding of historical writing as a means "to reveal the larger truths of history and the truths of art" (385). This method is employed by the art historian with the purpose of constructing a particular narrative, a narrative of the rebirth of the arts or, as can be theorised within the framework of Jean-François Lyotard's postmodern terminology, a metanarrative of rebirth.

The tale of Giotto's 'perfect circle' contributes to the construction of such a narrative. According to the anecdote that appears in Vasari's chapter on Giotto, the artist's fame reached Pope Benedict IX of Treviso, who was planning to decorate the church of Saint Peter in Rome with paintings. His Holiness instructed one of his courtiers to visit Giotto among other artists in Siena and to bring him their designs. When the courtier arrived at Giotto's studio in Florence, "Giotto, who was most courteous," Vasari writes. "took a paper, and on that, with a brush dipped in red, holding his arm fast against his side in order to make a compass, with a turn of the hand he made a circle, so true in proportion and circumference that to behold it was a marvel" (vol. 1: 78). To the courtier's inquiry whether he would receive another drawing, Giotto told him to send this with the designs of other artists and to see whether it would be recognised. The courtier recounted this to the Pope, who determined that Giotto had indeed "surpassed in excellence all the other painters of his time" (vol. 1: 78).

In the context of Vasari's construction of his narrative of rebirth, the tale of Giotto's circle appears as a literary device that confirms the authority of the Renaissance discourse. Despite the scholarly critiques concerning the trustworthiness of the *Lives* as a historical document, Vasari continues to be regarded as the godfather of the Renaissance and his systematic selection of the most influential artists – as the canonical foundation of the critical tradition concerning the study of the phenomenon of the Renaissance.

In this sense, such an authoritative model of order provides a fertile field for a postmodern play in the general subversion of the canon and the third novel of the British novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch *The Sandcastle* (1957) offers a curious case of a re-/deconstruction of the Renaissance aesthetics of rebirth by means of a reference to Giotto's artistic gesture. The specific role of Giotto's aesthetics constitutes a lacuna within the academic discourse on the role of art in Murdoch's works, which is intended to be filled by this paper. On the one hand, the evaluation of the recontextualisation of the Renaissance narrative of rebirth as a grand narrative will reveal its (in)compatibility with the postmodern discourse. On the other hand, the assessment of the Renaissance set of aesthetic values and principles within the framework of a postmodern novel will make it possible to reconsider it as an ambivalent and complex phenomenon that contradicts itself.

The storyline of the novel is fairly simple and constitutes one of the reasons why *The Sandcastle* continues to be criticised for its "women's magazine theme" (Dipple 16) and why it is sometimes even regarded as Murdoch's least successful work. In the interview with William Kent Rose in 1968, Murdoch verbalises her

understanding of the corpus of her works as comprising two types of novels. The British novelist explains such a differentiation as “a kind of alternation between a sort of closed novel, where [her] own obsessional feeling about the novel is very strong and draws it closely together, and an open novel, where there are more accidental and separate and free characters” (66). As an ‘open’ novel, *The Sandcastle* appears to pay homage to the Victorian fiction of the nineteenth century.⁴ However, *The Sandcastle*’s conventionally realistic storyline with a hint of Victorian didacticism frames the discussion of problems concerning art and aesthetics as well as the re-/deconstruction of the aesthetics of rebirth.

Giotto’s ‘perfect circle’ is integrated into the novel as a retelling of the anecdote from Vasari’s *Lives*:

‘You know the story about Giotto,’ she said, ‘that when some grand people came to commission a picture, and wanted a specimen of his work, he just drew a perfect circle for them with his brush? He got the job. That impressed me somehow as a child. I used to practise it, as if it were a guarantee of success.’ (Murdoch, *The Sandcastle* 50)

Such a reference to Giotto’s circle, the only instance in the whole novel, appears as a means of characterisation in the construction and simultaneous deconstruction of the portrait of an artist. In her “Art of Fiction” interview with Jeffrey Meyers for *The Paris Review* in 1990, Murdoch discusses the use of painting in her novels. She assigns the function of a literary device to painting and states that a “novel often indicates a painting during the process of creating the characters” (Murdoch, “The Art of Fiction”). The author of *The Sandcastle* elaborates that “somehow the character will lead to the painting” (Murdoch, “The Art of Fiction”) and mentions Titian’s *Flaying of Marsyas*, which she saw in Czechoslovakia and which appears in the novels *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (1970), *The Black Prince* (1973) and *Jackson’s Dilemma* (1995), as an example of purposeful yet oftentimes indirect references to painting that she recurs to in her novels. The functioning of such indirect references can be theorised as the functioning of ekphrasis.⁵

⁴ The features of realist fiction in *The Sandcastle* determine its traditional contextualisation within the academic discussion of such topics as male adultery or gender roles. See, for example, Gillian Dooley’s paper “Iris Murdoch’s Novels of Adultery: *The Sandcastle*, *An Unofficial Rose*, *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*, and *The Message to the Planet*.” *English Studies* 90.4 (2009): 421-434.

⁵ In this context, I take into account the functions of ekphrasis as an (anti-)narrative device. According to Eva Berar, since the nineteenth century ekphrasis mostly refers to painting by means of mentioning of the name of an artist or an object of art rather than describes it like the depiction of the shield of Achilles in Homer’s epic poem *The Iliad* as an example of ekphrasis in its canonical descriptive form (145). In this context, Jerzy Faryno coined the term ‘incorporation’. Incorporation aims “to discredit (or, on the contrary, to postulate) ‘languages’, the systems of the construction of the world” (379; trans. N.G.). The functioning of such incorporations is analogous to other components of the representations of a physical object in a literary text. Possessing certain features and meanings, they can offer a possible interpretation of characters or depicted situations.

In *The Sandcastle*, however, we are dealing with an ekphrastic incorporation of an artistic gesture and the story connected to it. A brief retelling of the anecdote in the context of the artistic maturation of the novel's protagonist raises the question whether the novel can be regarded as a postmodern *Künstlerroman*. As a story from the childhood, the anecdote about Giotto's circle forms the basis for the protagonist's formation – birth – as a painter. Giotto's gesture as an authoritative artistic model establishes a paradigm for an aspiring artist. In order to learn how to write, it is required to practise each letter of the alphabet. Similarly, Giotto's circle plays the role of one of the letters of the alphabet of painting that is to be practised if one wishes to learn how to paint. According to Murdoch, accumulation of knowledge is also connected with the concept of truth: a “study of good literature, or of any good art, enlarges and refines our understanding of truth” (Murdoch, *Metaphysics* 86).

At the same time, the function of Giotto's circle as the core of an artistically acquired aesthetic viewpoint can be conceptualised within the framework of Foucault's understanding of the ‘ideology of the return’.⁶ The rootedness of the postmodern Subject in her ekphrastic experience as an adherence to the Renaissance grand narrative of artistic rebirth correlates with the fact that art is treated as a sort of a safe harbour, the rules of which are well-established and can, therefore, offer a ready-made pattern of explanation of reality. In its turn, the difference in aesthetic experience as familiarity with a corporeal component of artistry, i.e. as the applicable knowledge of history or theory of art, is largely determined by the social background and primarily his/her education. Therefore, when Rain Carter asks her companion, a History and Latin teacher Bill Mor, to try to paint a circle as well, he, who has never held a brush in his hands, manages to produce only a “very shaky oval shape” (Murdoch, *The Sandcastle* 50). However, Rain herself paints only an “almost perfect circle” (Murdoch, *The Sandcastle* 50) – a significant nuance that supports her own claim of still being in search of herself as a painter.

In this sense, the incorporation of an ekphrastic gesture refers to a whole set of fixed meanings. Its aim, making use of the terminology of Mariya Tsimborska-Leboda, is to “activate the cultural memory of the reader” (55), the so-called semantic memory concerning the aesthetic ideas of the Italian Renaissance with the focus on the question of representation. It was Giotto's art of imitation, regarded as the essence of his aesthetics of rebirth in the representation of reality, that gained him the status of the father of the artistic Renaissance. Imitation as an artistic technique connected to the reliability and truthfulness of representation and aimed at the creation of earthliness serves as a criterion of artistic mastery. According to Vasari, Giotto

became so good an imitator of nature that he banished completely that rude Greek manner and revived the modern and good art of painting, introducing the portraying well from nature of living people, which had not been used for more than two hundred years. (vol. 1: 72)

⁶ The ‘ideology of the return’ constitutes, according to Foucault, one of the dangers of a postmodern mode of thinking. Foucault argues that such an ideology is based on the false belief in the existence of imaginary happiness and freedom in the past (250).

The Sandcastle problematises the question of representation as a conflict between stylisation and imitation in portraiture. The reassessment of the representation of a human being, whom the German art historian Max Friedländer considers “the most significant item among those with which formative art concerns itself” (84), is rooted in the British tradition of ekphrastic portraiture (the most famous examples there would be Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and James Joyce’s *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916)). In Iris Murdoch’s novel, the artist announces her intention “to paint a really good likeness” (Murdoch, *The Sandcastle* 46) – likeness not only of the sitter’s appearance but primarily of his inner self. However, it is the imitation of likeness to a particular version of the sitter:

‘I am a professional portrait painter,’ said Miss Carter rather primly, ‘and I am employed to paint your Mr Demoyte, not my Mr Demoyte.’ (Murdoch, *The Sandcastle* 46)

As the former headmaster’s portrait is intended for the school, the painter’s target spectator consists of the former and future generations of teachers and pupils. Therefore, Rain Carter’s intention to “sum [the Headmaster] up” (Murdoch, *The Sandcastle* 47) correlates with the idea of the imitation of reality in such a way that its trustworthiness and truthfulness will convince this particular spectator that Mr Demoyte on the portrait is their Mr Demoyte.

Giotto’s skill to convince the spectator of the truthfulness of his paintings as the Renaissance conceptualisation of postmodern deception and specifically intentional deception, trickery of the spectator/reader is addressed by Boccaccio in his *Decameron* (1353):

[Giotto] had such a prodigious fancy, that there was nothing in Nature, the parent of all things, but he could imitate it with his pencil so well, and draw it so like, as to deceive our very senses, making them imagine that to be the very thing itself which was only his painting. (304)

However, the Renaissance idea of imitation of Nature as the source of truth is reassessed within a postmodern context with due account for the ambivalence of its credibility. Murdoch’s protagonist as an authoritative agent of the artistic discourse encounters the deceptive character of reality that she is supposed to represent. The artist’s sitter attempts to deceive the portraitist inventing a completely different image of himself: he intentionally wears clothes he does not normally wear and claims to have written a volume of poems, which are, in fact, written by the new headmaster who he despises.

The construction of at least three versions of the portraitist’s sitter emphasises the plurality of truth. The painter’s and Mr Demoyte’s versions of his image, however, are to be dismissed in favour of the one commissioned by the school that constitutes a seemingly objective version. Unlike Giotto who challenges Pope Benedict IX sending him his circle instead of the traditional examples of his pictures like other painters, Rain Carter appears to choose to be subjected to the demands of her commissioners. Considered within the framework of Giotto’s aesthetics, her first version of the portrait can be regarded as a failure: the school’s art teacher Bledyard

as the speaker of the Renaissance views in the novel announces that she “made [her] picture too beautiful” (Murdoch, *The Sandcastle* 172). In this sense, the discussion of art-related matters as a discussion motivated by a painting can be theorised as a ‘dialogic ekphrasis’ (Braginskaya 275).⁷ Propagating “respect for reality” (Murdoch, *The Sandcastle* 216), Bledyard convinces the portraitist in the lack of mortality in her depiction of the sitter’s head.

As Murdoch points out in her “Art is the Imitation of Nature”, “the painter and the writer confront . . . a reality which is alien and at the same time something which they are bestowing meaning upon” (257). The painter’s collision with reality (finding out about her lover’s political ambitions as well as the realisation of the impossibility of pure love), which, at the same time, constitutes for Murdoch “the object of truthful vision” (Murdoch, *Metaphysics* 39), inspires Rain Carter to repaint the portrait before she disappears:

The head stood out now solidier, uglier, the expression no longer conveyed by the fine details, but seeming to emerge from the deep structure of the face. Mor was not sure whether he liked it better. He turned away. (Murdoch, *The Sandcastle* 314)

The overcoming of the otherworldliness in representation correlates with Giotto’s innovations concerning the communication of the truth of Nature, the collision with which triggers the rebirth of a painter. The school’s art teacher Bledyard suggests the idea that painting is “the only art that comes naturally to all human beings” (Murdoch, *The Sandcastle* 75). However, it is forgotten with the loss of innocence and has to be learnt “all over again after that” (Murdoch, *The Sandcastle* 75).

Such a statement questions the painter’s current mastery and suggests that the artistic rebirth within the postmodern context is the rebirth into the circle of life of mortality, where she would have to learn how to paint all over again. In the second version of the portrait, the protagonist manages to overcome the intrusion of fantasy and her Self as a painter. This confirms the victory of Giotto’s aesthetics as a victory of visually unpleasant truthfulness in the representation of reality that makes the spectator turn away. The whole narrative of an artistic formation is subverted on the level of the trust in the authority of the canon.

Thus, the assessment of the functioning of Giotto’s circle within the postmodern context of Iris Murdoch’s novel *The Sandcastle* reveals the role of a symbol of postmodern subversion of the authority of its own discourse. The Renaissance narrative as a grand narrative that postulates the glory of artistic excellence determined by the revival of Classical ideals within the context of decline is challenged by the small narrative of Giotto’s gesture. However, its recontextualisation accentuates the internal inconsistency of both the Renaissance and postmodern discourses. The Tuscan proverb ‘Rounder than Giotto’s circle’, derived from the ekphrastic anecdote and referring to the Pope fooled by Giotto, as noted by

⁷ According to Nina Braginskaya, a dialogic ekphrasis as a form of organising a narrative constitutes a literary interpretation of a painting in a form of a conversation between a teacher and a pupil, an old man and a young man, or generally an experienced person and a naive person (Braginskaya 275).

Vasari (vol. 1: 78-79), constitutes a perfect expression of the self-refuting character of the subversion of an authoritative paradigm.

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