

Mona Caird's gendered work: A go-between negotiating Past and Future

Marília Martins Gil

ULICES - University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies

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“**T**he past is a foreign country: they do things differently there” (*TGB*, 7). This opening sentence from L.P. Hartley's book (1953) presents us Leo, a learned old bachelor, who discovers the diary he kept as a boy of 12. Besides not wanting “to touch it (...)” he suddenly “took the combination lock and began to finger it” (*TGB*, 7). His decision awakes in his mind the events of a past time, too long forgotten, now being revived in the present. On doing it, Leo discloses the boy he was in 1900 and knows that what he experienced in that summer contributed to the kind of man he would be in the future/he is in the present. His role as a postman between Marian and Ted, made of him, firstly an innocent go-between, followed by a disillusioned boy, who doesn't want to accept that task from Marian again now that he is a grown-up: “And why should I go on this preposterous errand? I hadn't promised to and I wasn't a child, to be ordered about” (*TGB*, 280).

Actually, the *Past* and the *Future* are quite different or, in other words, they are antipodal. That is the information we can get from Leo and after looking up both words in the dictionary. The noun *Past* refers to something that happened in time before the *Present* or to a period “before and until, but not including, the present time” (*CIDE*, 1033). The *Future*, on the other hand, is ahead because “it has not yet come”, so “it is the time after the present” (*DELC*), 530). It can be “distant” or “near”, as we know. Summing up, the *Past* and the *Future* never meet because their borders do not coexist with each other and they are not even next-door neighbours. Yet, something exists to approach the opposite extremes: the *Present* is standing there between them. According to the grammar rules, that is “the form of a verb that shows what exists or is happening now” (*DELC*, 1038). No doubt! Nevertheless, we should bear in mind

that there is a “historic/historical present”, which is “used in many languages to describe events which happened in the past, when the teller wants to make them sound more real” (*DELC*, 628). So, the *Present* adopts several meanings and it can also transform itself into a go-between that delivers messages from one person to another or from one epoch to another. That is what Leo does when he says, “the past *is*” or “they *do* things differently there”.

That was also the aptitude of Alice Mona Caird’s discourse during her whole life. During the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, she put the *Past* and the *Future* in touch in matters of gender. After unfolding past stereotypes she considered out of age, Caird intended to leave them behind. Hers was an age of transformations and, as Walter E. Houghton says, “it has been said that while the eighteenth century was satisfied with what it was, the nineteenth century was satisfied with what it was becoming” (*TVFM*, 38). Mona Caird would certainly rectify this statement and instead of writing it that way she would probably add that the “Victorian advanced women” are satisfied not with what they had become, but with what they should have become. It means that the present time she is living in is not so distant from the past but it is still distant from “a better and higher view of the state and its responsibilities”, as she said in her interview to the *Women’s Penny Paper* (421) in 1890.

Leo’s expectations for his near future were more optimistic till “the 26th, the eve of the fateful Friday” (*TGB*, 32). Until that day he believed humanity would be better immediately after the turning of the century. How could an innocent child imagine that some years later several countries were pointing towards a world war? How could he think that some days later his vision of the world would transform him into an adult, who would never again obey orders coming from Marian? After the 27th he was able to read “between lines” or, in other words, messages. But till that day his thoughts were quite normal for his age:

The year 1900 had an almost mystical appeal for me; I could hardly wait for it: ‘nineteen hundred, nineteen hundred,’ I would chant to myself in rapture; and as the old century drew to its close, I began to wonder whether I should live to see its successor. I had an excuse for this: I had been ill and was

acquainted with the idea of death; but much more it was the fear of missing something infinitely precious – the dawn of a Golden Age. For that was what I believed the coming century would be: the realization, on the part of the whole world, of the hopes that I was entertaining for myself.
(*TGB*, 9-10)

On the contrary, Mona Caird's maturity makes her less enthusiastic. The main reason for such distance in points of view (childhood-adulthood/past-future) has to do with her longer experience in relation to social communities where masculine and feminine persons are considered to have different roles just because they were born boys or girls. According to her, while those obsolete minds are not eradicated, boys will continue to have great opportunities ahead, not girls. Victorian education still puts girls apart in several matters of public life. Adult boys do not have to submit themselves to the attachment to household chores as women do. This fact emerges from the limitations society imposes on them since time immemorial. Against this state of things, Caird uses her pulpit to denounce *Past* and *Present* social inequalities and reveals herself a New Woman writer trying to change public opinion. Besides being full aware that personal freedom and new social projects for women will not be implemented in a near future, she believes transformation will certainly be possible some day, in a distant future, as she states: "I do not advocate any startling change at present (...) but because my idea may not be practicable at present it does not follow it will always be so" (*WPP*, 421).

Caird's feminine characters that do not follow their mothers' footsteps or their "nature" are accused of neglecting the conventional rules for their sex. The lady of Ballochcoill (Mr Duncan's second wife), one of the characters of *The Stones of Sacrifice* (1915) is described as "a handsome, rather mysterious-looking woman, with observant eyes, black hair drawn high above her brow, and a way of looking amused when there seemed nothing particular to be amused at" (*TSS*, 4). Mona Caird's irony here reflects how apart this woman is from the common views, how her smile is a step ahead in time. And the narrator explains the reason why: "At that date, about ten years before the end of the nineteenth century, a woman of ability and independent views was looked upon with suspicion and more or less resentment in country districts; and Mrs Duncan had not

escaped. There were rumours that her religious opinions were very “peculiar”, and that she had proved a harsh step-mother to young Drummond, her husband’s only son by his former marriage” (*TSS*, 4). But even this woman, “who was not afraid of ideas” (*TSS*, 40), condemns radical behaviour in girls such as Miss Kirkpatrick, whose masculine attitude in relation to dressing is described by the narrator, as follows: “In appearance, miss Kirkpatrick was precisely what, at that date, the New Woman was supposed to be: large and angular and masculine looking. A black skimpy coat and skirt, and a manly shirt and tie constituted her attire; and she had wrung her hair, by dint of virile force, into a tight button and pulled down on the top of the button a black bowler hat” (*TSS*, 39-40). This description reflects Caird’s criticism to the ardent public opinion towards those women who deviated themselves from the Victorian standard of behaviour: the submissive woman/wife whose “whole excuse for being was to love, honor, obey – and amuse – her lord and master, and to manage his household and bring up his children. In that role her character and her life were completely distinct from his” (*TVFM*, 348).

Another character of the novel, Alpin McAlpin Dalrymple, is a boy whose emotions place him far from the common masculine ones, and because of that fact, he is easily criticised. His deviance from the conventional rules for men also attracts the others’ attention: he is “rather a handful” (*TSS*, 3), someone who “has a queer way with the beasties” (*TSS*, 49). He was not interested in being “a future banker” because his imagination was “naturally vivid and inclined to melancholy” (*TSS*, 5). That was a characteristic of contemplative persons, not quite proper for masculine minds. To act as a woman/man means at first to gather information from the experts in such matters and to obey social construction or rules. Myra Jehlen in her article “Gender” (in *CTLS*, 268) refers to it and names those social imposed manners as “conventional femininity”/ [masculinity], which has standard parts”(268). But Alpin is more prone to observe nature and to “admire the beastly country” where he can feed animals out of his hand (*TSS*, 32; 4). When he was acquainted to the Welsh Professor Owen, who showed him the Standing Stones, he felt uncomfortable and disappointed with the past and with the world around. He will remember that place all along his life. It was a site of sacrifice and victims, whose blood flowing from them on the altar-stone would

propitiate the gods of the druids. As Professor Owen explains, “the idea appeared (...) in all religions: the belief that one could ward off from oneself the anger of the God by offering victims in one’s place. So long there was a supply of victims, the Gods didn’t seem to be particular as to who they were, provided they were of good quality. The best and fairest of the people were chosen for these Druid rites, as in Greece the fairest maiden was chained to the rock for the Minotaur to devour” (*TSS*, 6). This approach to the Darwinian theory also reveals the epoch in which Caird was living in. Science and medical experiments were being developed quickly. The theme of Vivisection and the suffering of animals for the sake of humanity is a recurrent theme in Alice Mona Caird’s work: compulsive obedience of victims to the most powerful ones. Her “advanced ideas” became too polemical but as she said, “as a child I rebelled against current ideas” (*TWPP*, 421).

The above arguments of inequality and injustice all over the world at any time, are strongly reinforced by Professor Owen when he explains Alpin that they are timeless and have no limits: “sacrifice goes on age after age, though the Standing Stones are without their priests an flowing blood...” So, he adds: “whenever you hear anyone talk of sacrifice, no matter in what refined disguise, you will know that you are back at the very beginning of things” (*TSS*, 7).

The act of speaking offers people the opportunity to communicate points of view, as Professor Owen did. The act of writing is quite useful too because it can present the other something said, done or thought not only in the past but also in the present. It can also spread its function to the future time making it possible for others to know or comment something that happened back in time, sometimes with wide implications in the future, as it happened in Leo’s life. Barbara Johnson in her article “Writing” (*CTLS*) tells us that “writing can always pass into the hands of the “other” and it has a structure of authority” because “the possibility of reading materiality, silence, space, and conflict within texts has opened up extremely productive ways of studying the politics of language (...). [So], “reading” in its extended sense is deeply involved in questions of authority and power (...) [and] in this sense is the field of sexual politics” (48; 46). Mona Caird knows it and uses that same strategy that “goes beyond apparent intention or surface meanings” (“Writing”, 47). To encode it, that

is the task of the reader. She is also acquainted with the idea that novels and their characters are timeless and because of that they can be read every time with a different aim in mind: analyse landscapes, characters, points of view, etc. It depends on the purpose of each reader.

Alpin is a good example of it. His meeting to Professor Owen was crucial to his inner development, as the 27th of a past summer was to Leo. Leo learned about love and sex and Alpin learned about injustice, obedience, authority and power: on the stones he viewed “his mother (...) and all the women of the long, terrible sacrificial past. The docile maiden seemed a symbol of them all” (*TSS*, 29). Caird’s *fin-de-siècle* writing offers the reading public the possibility of hearing her acute voice defending past/present victims of suffering: women and animals. She gives thus her contemporary and future readers new insights into a society in transformation, which, as a consequence, was abounding in paradoxical ideas and attitudes. Conventional rules and “advanced” ideas both reflect the spirit of an epoch that was changing its mind in several areas. Regarding women’s issues, Caird enlarges the row that spreads hostility towards those who do not help to remove the obstacle placed in front of the feminine gender. She is a “new woman” in revolt against the boredom of household chores and in favour of equal rights, including the vote, as she stated in 1890: “Of course I am ardently in favour of the vote for all women, irrespective of condition and circumstances. I am a Liberal in politics, and I would not shut women out from any profession or career in which it were possible for them to succeed. Men and women should have equal rights in every respect, and the same laws should apply equally to both. What is wrong in the woman is wrong in the man; there should be no fear or favour. Until this be recognised there can be no real progress” (*TWPP*, 421).

Because of her ideas, Caird is/was labelled as a feminist. However, because the history of women was long forgotten, some of the first pioneers who defended the reputation of women were absent of “history books” till recently, as Beatrice Gottlieb explains in her article entitled “The Problem of Feminism in the Fifteenth Century” (in *TSWCP*). But because feminism “is not easy to define in spite of its free use by its proponents and attackers” (...) it is dangerous to assume that words carried the same meaning in the sixteenth century as in the twentieth (...). As historians we

are prepared to find modes of thought in the fifteenth century that are no longer with us" (*TSWCP*, 278; 277). With this explanation Gottlieb is consciously aware that women's arguments in favour of themselves "have changed over the years": the nineteenth century radical feminists claimed for "equality of men and women and wanted to end what they regarded as the demeaning restriction of women to the domestic sphere" (*TSWCP*, 275). The visit of Alpin to the standing stones allowed him to understand how society has separated both sexes and how difficult it has been for women to accept their silenced sacrifice. He reveals himself proud of not being a woman, as he states all along the action of *The Stones of Sacrifice*. Expressions such as "By Jove, it must be beastly to be a girl" are reinforced with the connivance of the narrator when she also says "By Jove, it was hard luck to be born a woman" (*TSS*, 37; 89).

In *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894), Caird examines the authority of marriage contract which "controls women's lives, especially the lives of women with heart, talent and consciousness", as it is referred on the back page of The Feminist Press's edition of 1989. Hadria, one of the main characters of the novel, confirms the voices referred above, when she says: "Renuntiation is always preached to girls, you know (...) preached to them when as yet they have nothing more than a rattle and a rag-doll to renounce. And later, when they set about the business of their life, and resign their liberty, their talents, their health, their opportunity, their beauty (if they have it), then people gradually fall away from the despoiled and obedient being, and flock round the still unchastened creature who retains what the gods have given her, and asks for more" (*TDD*, 63).

Activists like Hadria do not all of them have the same objectives and expectations for their future ahead. According to Gottlieb, "less radical activist women spoke not of equality but of women's special qualities, qualities they believed could be recognized and used to benefit all of society. One curious feature of this history is that the demand for suffrage began as an extremely radical issue and gradually became absorbed into the program of the non-radicals" (*TSWCP*, 275-276).

But the defence of women by women did not see its movement start in the nineteenth century. In the fifteenth century Christine de Pizan struggles against misogyny. The subject matter of her book *The City of the Ladies* refutes slander and tries to demonstrate "the worth and talents of

women (...) and [their] capacity for learning as men [do] (*TSWCP*, 278), as it is referred by Gottlieb. After reading *The Lamentations of Maheolus* (1370s), De Pizan tries to answer the general accusations towards women and explains:

(...) the sight of this book, although it was of no authority, made me think along new lines which made me wonder about the reasons why so many different men, learned and non-learned, have been and are so ready to say and write in their treatises so many evil and reproachful things about women and their behavior. And not just one or two, and not just Matheolus, who has no particular reputation and writes in a mocking manner, but more generally it seems that in all treatises philosophers, poets, and orators, whose names it would take too long to enumerate, all speak with the same mouth and all arrive at the same conclusion: that women's ways are inclined to and full of possible vices". (*TCL*, in *SWCP*, 119)

L.P. Hartley, Mona Caird and Christine de Pizan all have something in common: they all launched their own bridge to link *Past* and *Future*, in their *Present* time. All of them wrote about gender issues, however each one stressing what they thought was relevant for their own life or epoch. When L.P. Hartley wrote in the Prologue of the cited book that "Leo knew that the year must return to winter and begin again; but to [his] apprehensions the zodiacal company were subject to no such limitations: they soared in an ascending spiral towards infinity" (*TGB*, 9), he was walking side by side with the title of this paper.

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