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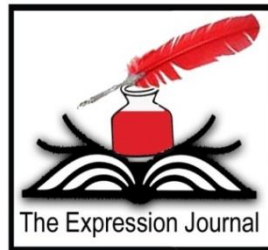
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A Decentred Soul Clutching the Past That Slips Out of Memory: Reading Irish Murdoch's *The Green Knight* (1993) and *Jackson's Dilemma* (1995)

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Abstract

Iris Murdoch, the novelist and philosopher, brought forth the synthesis of opposing philosophical views existent during the second half of the 20th century across the shores of Atlantic through her writings. The western philosophy in the second half of 20th century was faced with the dichotomy of existentialism and linguistic empiricism. Murdoch stood right in the lap of this dichotomy and came out with her concept of the "moral being" or the "good" characterized as a single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention. Struggling with Alzheimer's disease during the 1990s, Iris Murdoch entered a new phase in her writing career as she countered her progressive amnesia by adopting new techniques of unnecessary repetitions of events in the minds of her characters. Her last two novels, *The Green Knight* (1993) and *Jackson's Dilemma* (1995) grapple with most of the issues dealt with in her arguably most complete philosophical compilation *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992). The Christian Buddhist incarnation of Murdoch sans the belief in a personal saviour manifests itself in both these novels. Add to it Murdoch's Heideggerian proclivity in *Jackson's Dilemma* and we have a complete canvas of her philosophical oeuvre in these texts.

Keywords

Iris Murdoch, Philosophy, Existentialism, Empiricism, Alzheimer's Disease.

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A Decentred Soul Clutching the Past That Slips Out of Memory: Reading Irish Murdoch's *The Green Knight* (1993) and *Jackson's Dilemma* (1995)

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Iris Murdoch, the novelist and philosopher, brought forth the synthesis of opposing philosophical views existent during the second half of the 20th century across the shores of Atlantic through her writings. Educated at Oxford University at a time (mid twentieth century) when analytical philosophy was growing in stature in England (owing largely to philosophers like Ayer, Ryle, Austin, Strawson and others), Iris Murdoch showed an une inclination towards Existentialism. One possible reason for her departure from the contemporary dominant philosophical stream (in England) may be her impulse to break the mold, to carve a niche for herself in literature and philosophy at a time when the three post-Hegelian movements of thought – the Marxist, the Existentialist and the Phenomenological – were criss-crossing the British and Continental shores. Another reason behind Murdoch's obsession with Sartre in her early years might have been her deep dissatisfaction with Anglo-Saxon philosophy which had invariably sidelined the consciousness and moral dimension in philosophical discourse. However, Murdoch became equally critical of Existentialism soon as she shifted more towards the Platonic mysticism which also, like the existentialists, emphasizes a full inhabiting of the present moment. Peter Conradi brings out this existential-mysticism debate in the "Preface" to Murdoch's *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (1997):

Existentialism comes more and more to play the role of principal ideological opponent, and precisely because the existentialist is not immersed in the real world at all. It is the mystic which is so immersed, while the existentialist moment of choice is described in terms of *discontinuity* between the moral agent and his/her world. (xxxiii)

Therefore, Murdoch evolved a philosophical idealism that grows out of contrasting schools of thought prevalent in her times. She came out with her concept of the "moral

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being” or the “good” characterized as a single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention.

Struggling with Alzheimer’s disease during the 1990s, Iris Murdoch entered a new phase in her writing career as she countered her progressive amnesia by adopting new techniques of unnecessary repetitions of events in the minds of her characters. Her last two novels, *The Green Knight* (1993) and *Jackson’s Dilemma* (1995) grapple with most of the issues dealt with in her arguably most complete philosophical compilation *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992). The Christian-Buddhist incarnation of Murdoch sans the belief in a personal saviour manifests itself in both these novels. Add to it Murdoch’s Heideggerian proclivity in *Jackson’s Dilemma* and we have a complete canvas of her philosophical oeuvre in these texts.

The Green Knight, a highly symbolic novel, is replete with myths, legends and fairytales and continues to concern itself with the problems of morality, of Good and Evil, of the place of god and religion in a godless world. For Murdoch, Buddhism was aligned with the philosophical views that she discussed in her non-fiction, as well as with the philosophical themes on moral development that she illustrated in her fiction. In fact, the writers of the post-war generation had an affinity with Buddhism and the representation of Buddhist themes in their novels seemed to be aligned with societal attitudes during the post-war period. A decline in organized religion and a rise in secularism were hallmarks of this epoch. Patricia Waugh has pointed out that the decreasing respect and deference towards authority after the war was accompanied by an increase in intellectual relativism and the privatization of values and for these reasons, many people began to believe that organized religion was “no longer viable as a source of absolute value and spiritual sustenance” (61).

Murdoch explains this phenomenon in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* by pointing out that many great thinkers saw organized religion as “an enemy of morality, an enemy of freedom and free thought and accordingly for some the entire institution of organized religion was rationally considered to be discredited or outmoded” (487). Thus, while Murdoch was interested in eastern philosophy and religion in general, it was the absence of a personal saviour, as well as the lack of emphasis on the supernatural, that drew her to Buddhism.

It is in *The Green Knight* that Murdoch enters into one of her most transparent and extended narrative engagements with Buddhist teachings. There are many parallels between Murdoch’s own personal religious beliefs and her portrayal of those of Bellamy James, the homosexual protagonist in *The Green Knight*. In the very beginning of the novel, one finds that Bellamy, like Murdoch, has had a long-standing “flirtation with the doctrines of the East” (43). It soon becomes clear that by mentioning ‘the doctrines of the east’, Murdoch is referring to Buddhism in particular.

Peter Conradi has briefly noted the influence of Buddhism on Murdoch in his seminal work, *The Saint and the Artist: A Study of the Fiction of Iris Murdoch* (1986), in which he states that Buddhism appealed to her because “it is based on a realistic assessment of the limited capacity of the ego to decentre itself, and because it is nonetheless designed to alter perception and behaviour” (16). Murdoch comments on these limitations of the ego in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, stating that there is the “selfish ego surrounded by dark menacing chaos, and the more enlightened soul perceiving the diversity of creation in the light of truth” (165). Like the Buddhist

teaching of the three bad roots, Murdoch's moral philosophy speaks of the dangers of greed, hatred and delusions, concepts which, for her, had their bases in Platonism.

In *The Green Knight*, Bellamy suffers from illusions that distance him from reality. A close reading of the novel reveals that Bellamy's desire to rid himself of the world completely and join a remote religious order stems from his illusions and therefore creates a pernicious influence in his life. Father Damien warns Bellamy that his asceticism is actually based on greed and delusion. Suguna Ramanathan has argued in her critical work on Murdoch, *Iris Murdoch: Figures of Good* (1990), that the experience of selflessness and loving/kindness in Buddhism can be directly compared to Murdoch's stress on the importance of proper seeing (32). In keeping with Murdoch's moral philosophy, Father Damien encourages Bellamy to direct his attention outward, away from the self. This focus of thought and action away from the self is similar to the Buddhist teachings of benevolence and understanding from the three good roots. Bellamy wishes to embrace an ascetic lifestyle in order to become more moral and spiritual, the solipsism that could result from such a lifestyle would paradoxically restrict his ability to love, and hence impede his moral development, since true moral vision is cultivated in interaction with others.

Peter Conradi opines that Murdoch's moral philosophy can be compared to the Buddhist philosophy of the middle way since it mediates moral extremes, such as egocentrism and self-denial (*The Saint and the Artist* 85-6). While Murdoch's moral philosophy initially resembles the middle way because of its emphasis on moral mediation and balance, it further reflects this element of Buddhist teaching as Murdoch goes on to insist on intellectual transformation as a means of spiritual mediation and growth. And because of her affinity with Platonism, physical passion plays a role in the individual's intellectual and spiritual transformation.

Murdoch bases her philosophical stance on a Platonic notion that is similar to Tibetan Buddhism - physical passion can be virtuously transformed in the pursuit of truth and knowledge, thereby enabling one's spiritual growth. She emphasizes that through intellectual discipline and moral vision, an individual can metamorphose the temporal impulses of sex and selfish desire (or Low Eros) into spiritual energy and selflessness (or High Eros. In *The Green Knight*, Bellamy exemplifies this Platonic concept as he decides to try to become more moral by transforming his sexual energies. In portraying the Platonic relationship between spirituality and sexuality, Murdoch shows how Bellamy's dream of a moral life causes him to shun sexual activity and to adopt a self-imposed vow of chastity in order to purify and transfigure his sexual impulses.

Bellamy's spiritual path reaches crisis point when Father Damien, his mentor and role model, decides to leave the priesthood. In his final letter to Bellamy, Father Damien echoes Murdoch's own religious views. He writes, "I can no longer believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob or indeed any personal God or supernatural divinity, or in the divinity of Christ or in eternal life" (265). Illustrating Murdoch's views on the displacement of a personal God, Father Damien concludes his letter to Bellamy with this imperative: 'Remember Eckhart's advice: do not seek for God outside your own soul' (266).

Insistence on the redemption of one's self through spiritual growth is evident in the interactions that Bellamy has with Peter Mir, the 'Green Knight' of the title. Bellamy

feels an instant affinity with Peter Mir, who is maliciously injured by Lucas Graffe, Bellamy's long-time friend.

After spending much of the narrative vacillating between self-indulgent neurosis and extreme self-denial, Bellamy is finally encouraged by his partner Emil to consider what might be called a 'middle way' between asceticism and self-indulgence. Emil's proposal of the two living together can be classified as a middle way because it encourages Bellamy to think of abandoning his ascetic impulses, while respecting his desire not to indulge his sexual appetites. Living with Emil would also mean that Bellamy would have a life in interaction with others, providing an avenue through which his spiritual growth could be accelerated.

After the publication of *The Green Knight*, Iris Murdoch was diagnosed with Alzheimer's syndrome in 1994, roughly the time Murdoch was working on her last novel *Jackson's Dilemma*. The formlessness and frequent repetitions in *Jackson's Dilemma* can be partially attributed to her failing memory as well as to her deliberate disavowal of accurate realism. *Jackson's Dilemma* is a short novel, almost half the length of its preceding seven novel novels. Thematically, the novel concerns itself with fantasy and reality (with a distinctive desire to go back to the past or to remember a past that is gradually slipping from the memory), goodness and Buddhism.

Even in the last stage of Murdoch's writing career, despite her conviction about the invalidity of God, *Jackson's Dilemma* contains a background discussion about religion and mysticism, conducted chiefly through Tuan, who is writing a book on the subject, and Mildred, who wants to be a priest. Speaking no doubt for the author herself, Mildred values the "deep mystical understanding, which had once belonged to Christianity, but had been therein eroded by the great sciences and the hubris of the new Christian world which had kept their Christ and their God as stiff literal persons who cannot now be credited" (*Jackson's* 186). There is an echo here of Murdoch's earlier objections to traditions in modern thought like existentialism and analytic philosophy which fail to pay sufficient attention to the irrational and the contingent.

Murdoch is opposed to the idea of religion as a metanarrative, but values its endorsement of *ascesis*. Christ himself, removed from the specific framework of the Bible, remains an important model for Murdoch's ascetic ideal. Jackson is compared to Christ, his loss of energy after ensuring those around him are more at ease with the past reminiscent of Christ's suffering to enable others to live again. The myth is treated more obviously in *The Green Knight*, where Peter Mir is mysteriously 'resurrected' and comes to confront Lucas Graffe with his past actions.

The impact of Alzheimer's on Murdoch's writing reflects in *Jackson's Dilemma* through her consistent efforts to remember the past as if it would slip out of her memory and would be lost forever. As mentioned earlier, although shorter than any of her novels since the 1970s, and although its compressed form is at times more reminiscent of a fable than its sprawling realist predecessors, *Jackson's Dilemma* nevertheless provides a good example of the extent to which her compulsive characters and plots are motivated by the past. As Bran Nicol rightly points out in his work *Irish Murdoch: The Retrospective Fiction*, "some characters do their best to ensure the past is continually present, though they struggle to make final sense of it. Other characters find that the past returns in spite of their efforts to escape it, and this makes the need to

determine its significance all the more pressing” (38). *Jackson's Dilemma*, contains examples of both kinds of character.

Edward Lannion has never forgiven himself – nor been forgiven by his father – for failing to save his brother from drowning in a childhood accident. Marian Berran is suffering terrible guilt after jilting Edward the day before she was due to marry him – the key event on which the plot turns. Benet Barnell is wistfully and vaguely nostalgic, missing his dead Uncle Tim, lingering at the Peter Pan statue in Kensington Gardens. For Tuan, a Jew, the public guilt of the Holocaust has taken on personal significance, and has prevented him from seeking happiness or entering into any relationship with man or woman.

The problem of coming to terms with the past explains the title of the novel *Jackson's Dilemma*. As a result of being surrounded by people so troubled by the past Jackson becomes aware that “he carried a weight, a burden placed upon him by *them*” (122). He is one of Murdoch's most successful characters, remaining enigmatic and sympathetic, displaying elements of many of her familiar types without conforming neatly to any. In the course of the book he is compared to numerous artistic or mythic forebears: Christ, Othello, Macbeth, the Fisher King and Caliban. In one sense, these references in the novel illustrate the working of Murdoch's ‘anti-modernist’ use of mythic allusion, in that none of them seem to apply absolutely. But the connection with *The Tempest* – as is often the case in Murdoch's fiction – goes further. Like this play the atmosphere of the book is subtly magical; the plot begins expectantly only for a quiet to descend over it as the characters seem to achieve contentment sooner than we thought.

For most of the novel Jackson's inner world remains enigmatic and we are unsure whether he is working for someone, or for some darker purpose. But at the end we recognize that Jackson's dilemma is a moral one. Specifically, it relates to his decision about whether he should return the confused Marian to Cantor, the man she loves, or turn herein to an over-protective network of friends and family. On a wider level, though, Jackson's dilemma is how to help those around him deal effectively with their pasts. By directing them into situations where their guilt can be assuaged, he allows them practical solutions which point to a way out of their own deluded self-mythologizing. The importance of the past in *Jackson's Dilemma* is reinforced by an apparent eccentricity in its organization. Though the chapters are set out in conventional numerical order, one of them (the third) is given the subtitle, ‘The Past’. Rather than marking a new departure in Murdoch's fiction, this simply makes more explicit the device upon which a great number of her stories in fact rest: a significant event occurs in the past with which the characters must somehow come to terms.

As Peter Conradi rightly points out on more than one occasion in his book *Iris Murdoch: The Saint and the Artist*, these instances are suggestive of the Buddhist notion of *karma*, the belief that we inevitably pay for our past actions, an idea which is clearly attractive to Murdoch as part of her continued interest in theology (81, 233).

Peter Brooks observes in *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (1992) that two distinctive movements are central to the working of memory itself: returns *to* and returns *of*, the deliberate interrogation of what has gone before, and the return of the repressed or the inescapable (90). Both movements are at work in Murdoch's retrospective fiction.

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Another interesting aspect of *Jackson's Dilemma* is its connection with Iris Murdoch's pre-occupation with Heidegger towards the late phase of her writings. Murdoch was working on a weighty analysis of Heidegger's philosophy with a working title *Heidegger: The Pursuit of Being* which was never finished and its typescript lies with Conradi Archive, KUAS6, Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies, Kingston University, London. Frances White in an article titled "Jackson's Dilemma and the 'Responsible life of the Imagination,'" published in the book *Iris Murdoch and Morality* edited by Anne Rowe and Avril Horner, has given a detailed insight into Murdoch's work on Heidegger together with its reflection in *Jackson's Dilemma*.

Benet, a central character in *Jackson's Dilemma*, is, like his creator, trying to write a book about Heidegger. Both Murdoch and Benet are haunted by Heidegger, paradoxically fascinated and repelled by his thinking, and Benet's ambivalence reflects Murdoch's own. *Jackson's Dilemma* became the repository for the painful questions that Heidegger's life and work posed for Murdoch. In her novel she is free to ask them in the tones of urgency which she felt she had to relinquish in her philosophical writing. Benet's unhappy self-questioning concerning his sense of identification with Heidegger prompts further thoughts on Murdoch's relationship with her difficult subject; her character's sense of inadequacy and failure may reflect her own dissatisfaction with her uncompleted work.

Heidegger, Hitler and the unresolved relationship between the two preoccupied Murdoch to the end. Benet, speculating on Heidegger's post-war state of mind and on the Holocaust, groans aloud to himself, "The darkness, oh the darkness" (*Jackson's* 14). Murdoch echoes his words in *Metaphysics as Guide to Morals* when she talks about Hitler and his age and thinks of "quite ordinary people who worked as guards in concentration camps: evil as a job to be carried on evil as duty" (120).

Central to both Murdoch's philosophy and fiction is how we are to deal with the endless and ubiquitous deliberate human suffering as manifested by the Holocaust. How can we think about it? How can it be forgiven, if indeed it can be forgiven? How can we learn to change ourselves so as to stand up to evil, and so as not to add to it? These are hard questions. Murdoch's primary material, in her philosophy and her fiction alike, concerns urgent questioning of human consciousness and conscience. She focuses on the conception of good and evil, and on our ability, or refusal, to distinguish between them, and to make efforts to choose and follow the good.

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