

Iris Murdoch

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Iris Murdoch

The Retrospective Fiction

Second Edition

Bran Nicol

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palgrave
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For Ron and Norma Nicol

Human beings need fantasies. The novelist is potentially the greatest truth-teller of them all, but he is also an expert fantasymonger.

– Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*

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List of Abbreviations

The following abbreviations of books and articles have been used in the text.

Novels by Iris Murdoch

- B* *The Bell*, 1958 (London: Vintage, 1999)
BB *The Book and the Brotherhood*, 1987 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988)
BP *The Black Prince*, 1973 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975)
GA *The Good Apprentice*, 1985 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986)
GK *The Green Knight*, 1993 (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993)
IG *The Italian Girl*, 1964 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967)
JD *Jackson's Dilemma*, 1995 (London: Chatto and Windus, 1995)
NG *The Nice and the Good*, 1968 (London: Triad/Panther, 1985)
PP *The Philosopher's Pupil*, 1983 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984)
SH *A Severed Head*, 1961 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984)
SPLM *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*, 1974 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974)
SS *The Sea, the Sea*, 1978 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980)
TA *The Time of the Angels*, 1966 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987)
UN *Under the Net*, 1954 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988)
WC *A Word Child*, 1975 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989)

Non-fiction by Iris Murdoch

- A* *Acastos: Two Platonic Dialogues*, 1986 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987)
ad 'Against Dryness', in *The Novel Today* (1961), revised edition, ed. Malcolm Bradbury (London: Fontana, 1990)
em 'Existentialists and Mystics', *Existentialists and Mystics*, 1970 (Birmingham: Delos Press, 1993)
FS *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists*, 1977 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978)
S *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, 1953 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989)

- sag 'The Sublime and the Good', in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter Conradi (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997)
- sbr 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited', *Yale Review*, 49 (1959)
- SG *The Sovereignty of Good*, 1970 (London: Routledge, 1985)
- MGM *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992)

Interviews

Interviews are identified by the name of the interviewer followed by the date, except in the case of the conferences at Caen and Amsterdam, where the place will be used.

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It goes without saying, however, that none of these people bear any responsibility for the faults which remain. Two editions, and I am still haunted by Arnold Baffin's comment in *The Black Prince*: 'Every book is the wreck of a perfect idea.'

I am grateful to Iris Murdoch, Random House UK Ltd and Penguin USA for granting me permission to quote from the works of Iris Murdoch. Some of the material in Chapters 3 and 6 and in Chapter 8 appeared in articles published in *The Journal of Narrative Technique* and *Modern Fiction Studies*. I wish to thank the editors for their permission to reprint.

Preface to the Second Edition

On 8 February 1999, while the first edition of this book was in the final stages of production, Iris Murdoch died from Alzheimer's disease after a much-publicized decline in health. Writing about the relation between retrospection and identity in the work of an author who had been so cruelly deprived of her own past was an awkward irony which was not lost on me as the book was completed. Yet while this parallel was of course entirely coincidental, the fact is that now, four years later, viewing Murdoch's fiction in terms of her life is almost unavoidable, given the number – and the revelatory nature – of a stream of new biographical works about her that have appeared in that time.

The new material in this second edition has, to a large extent, been inspired by the change in how we now perceive of Murdoch. It is not that I attempt to read her work 'biographically', in any crude sense, however – although a new postscript does consider the complex nature of the relation between Murdoch's life and writing. This book is concerned throughout with how her fiction works, and how it works on its readers, rather than with its genesis or potential autobiographical content. But the more we know about Murdoch as a person, the more it seems to me that her work is driven by contradictory impulses. This is not unusual, of course (why should we expect writers to be consistent?), nor is it a criticism, as I think the interplay of different ideas and desires behind her work accounts for much of its energy. But Murdoch was always a rather didactic writer, in so far as she made it clear in interviews and non-fiction what she stood for – and what she disapproved of – in both philosophy and literature. Now we know that there was 'another' Iris Murdoch throughout her life, a figure who contradicts much of the characteristics and values we associate with her previous public persona, we can explore more fully the other sides to her writing, where some of the central tenets of her thought turn out to be more complicated than she made them sound. The new Chapter 8 and the Postscript deal with two of these in particular: her insistence that philosophy and fiction should – and can – remain separate, and her conception of *authorship*, or the position an author should adopt in relation to her fiction.

The postscript also allows me to deal with a text which is discussed at only brief points in the first edition of this book, *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*. Elsewhere I have taken the opportunity to

explore two other novels largely absent from the original. Chapter 3 is devoted to *The Bell*, one of Murdoch's most retrospective novels, and one which exemplifies the central argument of this book about the 'retrospective dominant' of Murdoch's fiction. Chapter 8 includes an analysis of *The Philosopher's Pupil*, a novel which is something of a curiosity in Murdoch's work as it is the only one to combine her two favoured modes of narration, first- and third-person. Although its first-person dimension is radically different from her other six first-person 'retrospective' novels, because the narrator represses the concern with his *own* past (this is why it was not considered in the first edition of this book), *The Philosopher's Pupil* is very much 'about' narration all the same. In a sense, then, my analysis of Murdoch's first-person fiction, which formed a major part of the first edition, can now be completed by examining this novel.

Adding readings of *The Philosopher's Pupil* and *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* to this book highlights another, more implicit, argument that runs through the book. The novels to which I devote most attention throughout are, not uncoincidentally, Murdoch's most experimental, metafictional, works. I am interested in the moments in her fiction when she breaks away from her realist paradigm to create something more akin to postmodernism. Much of the energy of these more experimental fictions, I think (and will argue in Chapter 8), comes from the fact that they expose Murdoch's fictional technique and contradict many of the assumptions about literature and philosophy that underlie it. They work precisely because the author is attempting to remain faithful to her 'ethics' of fiction while also 'surrendering' to the logic of the writing itself.

My treatment of the more contradictory elements of her writing is underscored by an interest in what I think is one of the most overlooked aspects of her work, her literary theory. Though increasingly important in the fields of philosophy and theology, and still a presence in literary criticism, Murdoch's work has been neglected most of all perhaps by literary theorists. References to her thought are practically nowhere to be seen in contemporary literary-theoretical discourse. This is rather surprising, as her non-fiction develops a sustained theory of literary production. Murdoch's unwillingness to portray herself as a literary theorist due to her misgivings about the theoretical impulse in general is no doubt one reason for the neglect. Another is her perceived 'unfashionableness'. Contemporary literary theory is dominated (still) by insights from French thinkers like Barthes, Foucault, Derrida and Lacan, all of whom, in their different ways, articulate the problems with

a kind of universalist or essentialist thinking about categories like the human being, reality and truth. Murdoch's discussions of literature exhibit some of the hallmarks of this way of thinking, especially its implication that 'good' literature is distinguishable from 'bad' literature, is of timeless importance no matter its socio-historical context, and exists to propagate 'human' values.

Nevertheless there are obvious areas of overlap between Murdoch's work and contemporary theory. She was always concerned with questions of otherness, difference and ethics, just as many literary theorists are now. In particular one of the things that fascinates me about Murdoch's work is its continual attempt to grapple with impossibility. Murdoch was determined to represent contingency in writing, when of course the very act of representation instantly transforms the contingent into something special and significant. Similarly she attempted to represent the accidental and even incorporate it in her fiction. Murdoch's philosophy and her ethics of fiction stress the value of respecting and representing otherness. But as a number of theorists – Blanchot, Baudrillard, Derrida – have said, otherness is impossible to represent because the very act of representation renders it the same.

To try to resolve such complex issues leads, not unsurprisingly, to contradictions, and I should add that my emphasis on these comes as much from the contradictory *responses* her presentation of these issues provokes in me. Murdoch's willingness to tackle such complex issues in her theory – and in her fiction (the backdrop of which is a concern with determining value in a post-religious world) – remains one of her most enduringly distinctive qualities amongst post-war English writers. Angela Carter, part of a different generation, but whose rich imagination and formidable mind suggests that she was in some ways a successor to Murdoch, once told of the occasion when her mother noticed her books on display alongside Murdoch's and said to her, 'I suppose you think that makes you an intellectual?' (Sage 1977: 40) This book, as much as it is a study of Murdoch's work, is intended as a tribute to her great intellect.

Preface to the First Edition

The aim of this book is to trace the preoccupation in Iris Murdoch's fiction with the way the past makes its mark upon us, haunting us and eluding our attempts to grasp it. Murdoch is one of the most important writers in post-war British fiction, partly because of the inventive ways in which she tackles the questions of our time, partly because she seems to stand outside the main currents of late twentieth-century thought. This is clear from her approach to retrospection. Interrogating the relationship between past and present has been a major concern in post-war fiction, one that has shown no sign of diminishing in postmodernity. Though she clearly shares some of the convictions which underlie this aspect of her contemporaries' work, what sets Murdoch apart from them is her comparative disinterest in history. Instead her fiction concerns itself with *personal* history. My focus is on the different ways in which the past is continually made present in her fiction: through guilt, nostalgia, the uncanny and the attempt to understand the past through rational investigation.

The book is an adaptation of a doctoral thesis on Murdoch's first-person novels, but its genesis came a few years earlier, when I first read *A Severed Head*. Like many readers new to Murdoch, I was drawn in by the cast of obsessive characters and the bizarre yet somehow entirely logical leaps of the plot. Most of all, though, I was struck by the narrator. His was a voice I had not come across before, direct, seemingly honest, but at the same time disingenuous in a way it was quite difficult to pin down. Turning to her other first-person novels I found similar protagonists, just as compulsive, deeply self-conscious almost to the point of paranoia – whose ancestors, I now realize, were the heroes in Dostoevsky or Nabokov. What made the plots particularly powerful, I thought (and still do), was the sense of being up close to these characters, looking over their shoulders as they stumbled, to use Murdoch's own words, 'from one awful blow to another' (Rose 1968). Later I realized something odd about my response to them, after I had become familiar with what had been written about Murdoch's fiction. These novels were commonly seen as ironic comedies, whereas I had not found them particularly funny – at least not on the first reading.

Now it may not be wise to admit to identifying with deluded over-sensitive anti-heroes or to missing the funny side of comic novels, but

I think what temporarily obscured their ironic effect was their retrospective dimension. The strange power of these novels comes from the way they address the question of the past. This explains why I have chosen to devote a large part of this book to Murdoch's 'first-person retrospective novels': *Under the Net*, *A Severed Head*, *The Italian Girl*, *The Black Prince*, *A Word Child* and *The Sea, the Sea*. Individually, most of these novels have been credited with being among the most challenging and successful in Murdoch's body of work. Yet their success has never been put down to the one major factor they have in common which her other fiction does not share: the first-person form. This is quite understandable, for on one level there is nothing particularly unusual about them. They can be regarded simply as especially entertaining and thought-provoking versions of the fiction Murdoch has always set out to write, dealing with issues and presenting situations common to the Murdochian 'world'. But these novels are not just about the experiences undergone by their hero. They are about how he is affected by re-living these experiences, how he tries to make sense of them.

This book, then, does not pretend to be a comprehensive account of Murdoch's work. For one thing, there are plenty of other studies already in print which perform this function admirably: Elizabeth Dipple's *Work for the Spirit* (1984), Richard Todd's *Iris Murdoch* (1984), and Peter J. Conradi's excellent *Iris Murdoch: The Saint and the Artist* (1989). There has, it seems to me, been a relatively clear consensus of opinion among Murdoch's critics about what are the important issues in her work. Most studies, whether they deal in particular with one or two novels, or her fiction in general, stress the author's concern with what Peter Kemp has called 'the fight against fantasy', the need to overcome the temptation to 'aestheticize' our experience by attending properly to those contingent aspects of life which elude our attempts to make sense of them (Kemp 1969). This book is no different, though because of the critical consensus I have not felt the need to go over this ground again in any great depth. In one important sense, however, this study is very unlike some of the other works on Murdoch, which stress – like the author herself – the moral and critical value of difference over similarity. My overall intention is to concentrate on what Murdoch's novels have in common rather than what distinguishes them. One of my central aims is to emphasize the affinities, not the dissimilarities, between Murdoch's work and the late twentieth-century literary and philosophical context in which she writes.

In fact, as I argue in Chapter 1, her theoretical position is itself essentially retrospective, because it has developed by way of a productive engagement

with two previous literary traditions, classic realism and modernism. A major concern of the next two chapters is to continue this process of contextualization by situating Murdoch's retrospective fiction in the tradition of the post-war novel. More specifically, both chapters set out what I see as the 'double movement' of the past in Murdoch's fiction. Kierkegaard said that life is lived forwards, but can only be understood backwards. This logic illuminates the attempt of many of her characters to somehow make sense of their past. But, as psychoanalysis reminds us, life is also lived 'backwards', that is, we continually and involuntarily return to moments of past trauma (or lost happiness), all the while looking forwards to a point where we might be able to understand what has gone before. Chapter 2 traces this double perspective in Murdoch's fiction as a whole, placing particular emphasis on how her later work – especially *The Good Apprentice*, *The Book and the Brotherhood* and *Jackson's Dilemma* – dramatizes questions of guilt and redemption. This is further explored in a detailed reading of *The Bell* in Chapter 3.

Chapter 4 turns to the first-person novels, and proposes that their demonstration of the power of the past owes much to the author's use of retrospective narrative form, a peculiar combination of *mimesis* and *diegesis* which provides a fascinating counterpoint to her continued interest in aesthetic patterning. This chapter clears the way for the three following chapters, which offer detailed readings of the first-person novels. In these I have chosen to discuss the novels in pairs to bring out common concerns most clearly. Chapter 5 considers the attempt to understand and represent the past in *Under the Net* and *The Black Prince*, the only two novels in Murdoch's body of work where the protagonist is a novelist. Chapter 6 explores uncanny recurrence in *A Severed Head* and *A Word Child*, a phenomenon which motivates the characters and also informs the narrative dynamics of each novel. Chapter 7 deals with two works, *The Italian Girl* and *The Sea, the Sea*, which show the two kinds of retrospective movement working against each other, in the form of nostalgia and the uncanny. Chapters 4 to 7 also continue to examine Murdoch's 'dialogue' with some of the principal schools of twentieth-century thought: respectively, postmodernism and poststructuralism, psychoanalysis and modernism. This is extended by Chapter 8, a reading of the other novel which uses a first-person narrative voice (though it is a very peculiar one), *The Philosopher's Pupil*, in the light of Murdoch's engagement in her later philosophy with the work of Jacques Derrida.

Finally, I should add a note on my critical methodology. I have made use of the insights of a number of different theoretical 'schools', especially Bakhtin, narrative theory and psychoanalysis. One reason for this rather

maverick use of theory is because I have tried to let my arguments determine the theoretical approach rather than the other way around. But it also relates to my desire to consider Murdoch's relationship to recent theoretical trends. This is particularly illuminating, I think, in the case of psychoanalysis, the theory I draw upon most often. Besides some key similarities between Murdoch's thought and Freud's, which I shall explore at length in what follows, I am attracted by the parallels between Freud's (and, to some extent, Lacan's) conception of the psychic mechanism and the patterns which underlie Murdoch's presentation of character and her narrative technique. As the work of critics like Harold Bloom, Peter Brooks and Malcolm Bowie have shown, Freud is most illuminating when regarded less as a scientist or even a psychoanalyst than as a theorist who has much to say on the relationship between desire and the need to construct and believe in fictions – an estimation that could equally apply to Murdoch. This reading of Freud accounts for my debt to the work of Brooks, in particular.