

# Iris Murdoch

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Iris Murdoch is a philosopher and a novelist. Her novels are not philosophy in narrative form: we would not expect her philosophical writings to be categorical formulations of her narrative line.

Why should Murdoch, an Irish agnostic, be of interest to the clergy or those with theological preoccupations? Well, perhaps because much modern theology and spiritual writing employs, consciously or otherwise, a neo-Cartesian mentalist individualist epistemology. Or perhaps because we must be attuned to hearing people's stories, or perhaps because when we understand people's mental furniture better, many of our tasks will be clarified.

Is there some more important reason? Yes. Because our way of praying, lamenting, celebrating, and perhaps what ever counts as prayer, will be affected by the kind of narrative we feel at home in.

It may seem odd to speak of us 'feeling at home' in a novel, but if we easily see ourselves as the hero of *Lucky Jim* or *This Sporting Life*, feeling more at home in that role, than in a piece of more chaotic, fabulist metafiction like, say, *The Philosopher's Pupil* it should tell us something about the philosophical anthropology we are employing. Put it this way: there are philosophical reasons for the hero of many modern novels being a rather alienated character, engaged in a more or less fruitless attempt to be *ens causa sui*, but these are not good reasons.

A clue to what Murdoch is getting at may be found in her comment on the existentialist view of evil as found in Sartre's *La Nausée* 'Sartre as Cartesian solipsist seems especially . . . to exhibit a lack of any lively sense of the mystery and variousness of individuals'. Shall we call a narcissist a solipsist in the aesthetic field? Yes. Let's . . .

"So you are a narcissist?"

"Certainly, narcissists can look after others because they are content with themselves. They are creative, imaginative, humorous, sympathetic. Those who lack narcissism are resentful, envious husks. It is they who try to give it a bad name."<sup>1</sup>

The first speaker is J.R. Rozanov, the eponymous philosopher. The second speaker is Fr. Bernard Jacoby, actually an Anglican. If we are going to find that any of Murdoch's characters has been coerced into articulating her religious point of view, and we have no right to, we should find it here. We get this, the parson speaks first:

"Our problem now, the problem of our age, our interregnum, our interim, our time of the angels -"

"Why angels?"

"Spirit without God."

"So you expect a new revelation."

"No, just to hang on."

"Until?"

"Until religion can change itself into something we can believe in."

"Anyway, when it comes to it, what do you want to save?"

"Oh — I don't know — certain images — certain rites — certain spiritual situations — the concept of sacraments — certain words even."

"Why call it religion?" "It certainly isn't morality."<sup>2</sup>

This is almost precisely the conclusion, or at least the finishing point of Murdoch's latest, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*.<sup>3</sup>

The concept of the 'time of the angels' must be important to Murdoch because it is what she called one of her novels. Partially, at least, this work treats of the problems of the religious man handling the theology of the death of God, and its intellectual debts are explicit: Heidegger, and Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. Pattie O'Driscoll, the priest's housekeeper, picks up a copy of *Sein und Zeit* while cleaning her employer's study. It can happen in the best-regulated households. She reflects:

The words sounded senseless and awful, like the distant boom of some big catastrophe. Was this what the world was like when people were intellectual and clever enough to see it in its reality?

Was this, underneath everything that appeared, what it was really like?<sup>4</sup>

With the death of God what kind of redeemer can we expect, what kind of message to the planet, how will it be mediated?

Well, how do we stand for redemption in 'the time of the angels'? Not very well, it seems. The Murdoch novel often has a redeemer figure, but she doesn't allow any of her characters the indulgence of old-fashioned realistic theism, so redemption is effected from within by someone legitimated for the task. The Christian idea of revelation

where God is understood as shepherd and pastor coming in search of us, His lost sheep, to form/re-form a relationship with us does not get a look in. Clearly there is more to Christian revelation than that, but *be patient*. Interestingly enough, amongst her characters who are clergy or consecrated religious there is not much orthodoxy, although there is a certain amount of orthopraxis. There is a hint that this may be a strategy for making the idea of redemption something strange, wonderful and in a sense awful, when it has become something with which we are familiar:

Phenomena can be so familiar that we do not really see them at all, a matter that has been much discussed by literary theorists and philosophers. For example, Viktor Shklovskij in the early 1920's developed the idea that the function of poetic art is that of 'making strange' the object depicted.<sup>5</sup>

Let us get back to *This Sporting Life* and *Lucky Jim*; fine works both, but let us see what philosophical furniture there is in these ideal homes. What is their view of man? Murdoch in *The Sovereignty of Good* uses the philosophy of Stuart Hampshire to stand for a particular view of man, a view which she is undermining as dry and reductionist. This man, she tells us "... is familiar to us for another reason: he is the hero of almost every contemporary novel". Well, let us assume that the reverse is also true, if we look at the contemporary novel, what kind of hero do we find? Well, *voluntarist, solipsist, individualist*, someone who could say, together with the hero of *La Nausée*, and remain at ease with himself, "The word remains on my lips, it refuses to go and rest on the thing."

Let us go to Sartre to find some illumination about this kind of hero in the novel. If we look at *L'Être et le Néant* we can see that 'Consciousness' is the central point of Sartre's philosophy and he is, in that sense at least, a traditional Cartesian philosopher. Also Sartre insists on the supremacy of the *cogito* and the heroes of novels in the existentialist line can all say, even if they leave themselves and the world in a worse state than they found them, *si fallor sum*.

What must this hero avoid at all costs? *Mauvaise foi*. That is the more or less conscious refusal to reflect, the persistence in an emotional judgement or the willingness to inhabit cosily some other person's estimate of oneself. The 'free man' has to break out of this trap but it seems that he himself is in thrall to one of the great metaphysical myths, as the imperious mitred Abbess remarks in Muriel Spark's *The Abbess of Crewe* "... a lady may be free, but a bourgeoisie is never free from her desire for freedom." Our existentialist or Cartesian hero is

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trying to reflect, to withdraw from absorption in the world, to set things at a distance. At the back of his mind is the supposition that we can achieve some perfect freedom, outside history, our culture and the accumulated customs which surround us:

The self is a social product and to remove all hardship and opposition, all need of fellowship and custom is to bring about not self freedom, but self dissipation.<sup>6</sup>

So in the centre of such a novel we have the rather romantic figure of the lonely, gratuitous chooser, the voluntarist at play. Here we have someone whose whole existence is lived against the world rather than in the world, a whole biography is punctuated by the *acte gratuit*. For this man, the more something is individually chosen and the less it is mediated by revelation, history, custom and authority, the better.

There is one very illuminating parallel in Murdoch's novels and her philosophical writing. On one plane, Murdoch is most anxious to maintain the transcendental properties, goodness, truth, and let us say beauty, without their having their origin in God, and on the other plane, in her novels, she very explicitly treats of religious forms of life: worship, prayer, sacrifice, lamentation, without their having any object.

Reading the Murdoch corpus we are struck by how often we find religion at work. We find meditation, redemption, the priest, the nun, the convent, the anchorite. *The Bell*, *The Unicorn*, *The Time of the Angels*, *Henry and Cato*, *The Philosopher's Pupil* and *The Message to the Planet* all have these explicit narrative features. Even where this is not the case, the fall, redemption, the saviour and the saint are all present. There is a fascination with what we might call the symptoms of religion but in these God is not revealing himself because, according to Murdoch, he does not exist. She herself reflects upon this contradiction:

Even if it should prove to be the case that nothing we would now call religion is destined to survive, philosophical arguments may still properly be offered to the effect that morality must be philosophically defined in terms of an unconditional demand. The religious life often employs ritual, which is not an essential item in the moral life. One may be attracted by various kinds of religious ritual, see and feel them as vehicles of enlightenment, as exercises likely to strengthen good desires and in wanting religion to survive, want ritual to survive too.<sup>7</sup>

We seem to be treading water in a bit of a Kantian whirlpool here.

It is painful to say when Murdoch is a writer who gives such pleasure, fun and occasion for thought, but this, her latest work, is rather dated. The faith has weathered the storm of de-mythologisation. Murdoch is always brought to a halt because she will not countenance 'old-fashioned realistic theism':

I think somehow or other, what Christianity has been doing for us must now be done in a more general way by people, by thinking and by realizing that human life is fundamentally a matter of continuously making moral choices.<sup>8</sup>

We are in a bit of a cul-de-sac when we have philosophy as an activity defined in terms of an unconditional demand, and religion, truth, beauty and goodness all making their demands without God. What is the route out of this philosophy which may lead us to living solely in a world where these things are asserted? Well, Murdoch underlines the importance of anamnesis, but her *unde et memores* is not his life, death and resurrection but that spiritual reflection of the most vividly perceived of the Platonic ideas, beauty. She makes explicit reference to *Phaedrus* (250 E). For Murdoch, this spiritual reflection leads to a sense of *certainty* about the reality of *goodness* which we are destined to *love*.

Maritain's delvings in scholastic aesthetics and his attempts to apply Thomistic categories to present problems have given rise to such phrases as "Beauty is the splendour of the transcendentals when reunited", so perhaps she is on to something after all. At least it may be conceded that such spiritual reflection may be a way in to beginning to discern revelation, given the right circumstances and moral possibility. However, not all religious people are enamoured of the direction in which arousing the aesthetic sensibility may take us. *In the Fire and the Sun* Murdoch points out the irony that Plato, while banishing the artist from the ideal state, is himself a great artist. The ascetic sensibility has a poignant awareness of what it rejects; take St. Bernard, for instance:

We who have turned aside from society, relinquishing for Christ's sake all the precious and beautiful things in the world, its wondrous light and colour, its sweet sounds and odours, the pleasures of taste and touch, for us, all bodily delights are nothing but dung.<sup>9</sup>

Whatever else we may make of this passage we cannot fail to be impressed by St. Bernard's awareness of the power of the aesthetic trend. St. Augustine himself fears that the man of faith may be seduced

from his prayers by the beauty of sacred music, so the spiritual reflection on beauty recommended by Murdoch is not without its dangers.

Let us look at one of the novels to see one way of working this out. Marcus Vallar, a highly talented mathematician is *The Message to the Planet* is reckoned by the other characters to be a kind of saviour with a secret message of great importance for mankind. He actually seems to have the power of imposing curses and raising the dead. Patrick, the character apparently raised from the dead says:

“You know, I’m to live differently now. I’ve been talking to Father O’Harte and I’m come back. I go to mass and all. I believe in holiness and the Divine Spirit. You know, a poet is a religious man.”<sup>10</sup>

He continues:

“I’ve to follow Marcus”

“To follow him?”

“I owe him my life so I must give him my life. Father O’Harte says he’s a holy person, a sort of saint. You know, the poet is the saviour of the age, *he’s* the thinker now, he makes the language of mankind and preserves the experience of wisdom.”<sup>11</sup>

And where does Marcus, this saviour/magician go in search of the absolute? Gildas, another of the wonky religious that people Murdoch’s novels speaks first:

“Is philosophy still possible?” said Gildas. “I doubt it. It’s all a matter of temperament anyway, like some people love Aristotle and Dante and other people love Plato and Shakespeare.” “I think he (Marcus) got there in the first move.” said Jack. “Pure cognition is what painters have, and the language of the planet is painting, pictures, what everyone understands! Painting is pre-conceptual. Painters just *see* what’s *really there!*”<sup>12</sup>

How do we relate this to our prayer life and our theological reflection? Well, if we buy the Cartesian/existentialist ‘package deal’, so beloved of many modern novelists and even, dare I say it, theologians, then we may well feel that existence = consciousness with all the consequences that it will have in our moral choices, particularly in the field of the right to life. Additionally, we may have found that we have acquired what we might call a reformation spirituality with a dislike of formal prayer, a determination to establish direct contact with

the Divine influence with no image, even of the mind, intervening. Down that road lie Molinos's *Spiritual Guide* and Spenser's *Pia Desideria*. Furthermore we may accept that the only real prayer is private, silent and wordless. So we would have a self praying and receiving grace in a way that is utterly private and unmediated. Remind you of anything?

Fergus Kerr, in *Theology after Wittgenstein* remarks:

... it is amazing how often devout people think that liturgical worship is not really prayer unless they have been injecting special "meaning" to make the words work.<sup>13</sup>

However, it should be clear that the inner life depends for its depth and character on connections with past and present situations, with tradition, community, authority and art. If we naturally feel at home in the existentialist type of novel, we may well fall under the spell of thinking that normally we are masked, "as though hypocrisy in worship were the normal case".

Or, to put it more succinctly, if the voluntarist/existentialist sort of novel is our natural home then we will be tempted to say *Dominus vobiscum* as though it meant *All together now*. Bear this in mind when you are next in the bookshop.

- 1 Iris Murdoch, *The Philosopher's Pupil*, (London, 1989) p.189.
- 2 *ibid.*, p.188 3. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. (London, 1992)
- 4 Iris Murdoch, *The Time of the Angels*, (London, 1966) p.152.
- 5 Noam Chomsky, *Language and Mind*, (New York, 1972) p.24.
- 6 Roger Scruton, 'Buckminster Fuller' in *The Politics of Culture and other essays* (London,1981).
- 7 Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, (London, 1992) p.484.
- 8 Interview with Donna Tart, *Interview*, (New York, Dec. 1992).
- 9 St Bernard., *Apologia ad Gulielmum* cap.12 — PL 182 col 914.
- 10 Iris Murdoch, *The Message to the Planet*, (London 1989), p.174.
- 11 *ibid.* p.173.
- 12 *ibid.* p.18.
- 13 Fergus Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein*, (Oxford 1986), p.172.