THE CONCEPT OF FREEDOM IN THE FICTION OF IRIS MURDOCH

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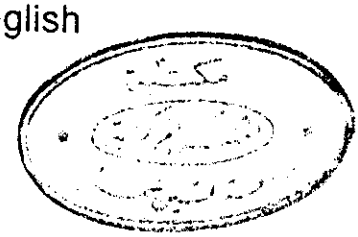

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Introduction

Iris Murdoch is a major contemporary British novelist, who emerged through her prolific output as a writer of considerable stature. She wrote some twenty-four novels, a few plays and poems, a large number of articles embodying closely argued aesthetic and philosophical views. She started her writing career in 1953 with a thoughtful study of the French existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre, then her first published novel, Under the Net, appeared in 1954, after which she continued writing complex and intelligent fiction at a regular pace. This was intervened by two other philosophical books, The Sovereignty of Good[1](1970), on her own moral philosophy, and a monograph on Plato's theory of art, The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists[2] (1977).

Since the publication of her first novel, Under the Net, Iris Murdoch has gained critical recognition as an important novelist. However, in spite of this recognition, she was considered a problematic writer by many critics. When Under the Net was published, Murdoch was mistakenly thought to be associated with the "Angry Young Men" movement, and Under the Net was compared to Kingsley Amis's Lucky Jim (1954) and John Wain's Hurry On Down (1953).

This association was decidedly mistaken. Although Under the Net, like the angry novels, has a picaresque structure and its action takes place in a variety of social and intellectual settings in London and Paris; and is concerned with generational self-definition, which was a characteristic period quality of post-war Britain, yet Under the Net is not interested in social revolt. It is a speculative rather than an angry novel, concerned with complex philosophical issues. Jake Donaghue, the protagonist of Under the Net, like other protagonists of angry novels, seeks to come to terms with life, but the standards by which he attempts to do so are different from theirs. Unlike them, he does not seek a home and a comfortable life; he seeks solutions to philosophical and emotional problems. His is a moral quest for self-fulfillment and existential self-definition.[3]

Later, some critics attempted to interpret Iris Murdoch's novels by relating them to myths. For example, German traces allusions in Under the Net to Virgil's Aeneid, and sees a parallel between Jake Donaghue and Aeneas in that they both share an idea of fate or destiny. He also traces some allusions in The Flight from the Enchanter (1956) to Germanic and Slavic mythology.[4] Moreover, Hall, in his analysis of Bruno's Dream (1969) maintains that Indian legend permeates the novel. He cites as an example, Nigel's mystic vision which he argues is described in terms

of a version of the Hindu creation-myth.[5] Kenney explains connections between A Severed Head (1961) and celtic mythology, including Honor Klein's identification with the severed head which, for the Celts, was the centre of the life force, capable of continuing to live independently after the death of the body.[6] Thomson points out that the structure of Bruno's Dream is associated with the Eros/Thanatos myth, which is enacted and confirmed by the novel's characters.[7]

There is some justification for this approach to Murdoch's work, because an Iris Murdoch novel abounds in allusions to literary classics, myths and different works of art in general. However, to place too much emphasis on those details, and to interpret them as the central concerns of the novels, is to miss their real meaning. Murdoch uses these allusions only as a background to give substance and richness to her fiction, which is in keeping with her belief in the importance of details in a novel.[8] Those details certainly have a powerful hold on the reader's imagination and also, indirectly, reflect the contingent aspect of life with all of its disorderly and random particulars.

Apart from the complexity of Murdoch's novels as a result of her extensive use of allusions, she seems to some critics a "difficult" novelist for other

reasons. Iris Murdoch who is both a writer of fiction and philosophy, fuses in her work philosophy and art, producing intellectual interest on one hand, and the enjoyment derived from a well-told story on the other. However, to read Iris Murdoch's novels at their surface level, simply for the exciting narrative and the lucid prose, is to be left with an uneasy feeling of having missed something. At this level, her novels seem, as Cantu precisely puts it, "cold, artificial, abstract, formular, like a line drawing that needs to have the colours filled in".[9] Readers of her novels cannot help being aware of allusion, symbol and ulterior meaning which has to be searched for. So, the "philosophy" has to be drawn out of the texture of the novel and the reader has to make an effort to understand and appreciate fully Murdoch's work. Hence, some readers find Iris Murdoch a difficult novelist because her novels require a thoughtful response on the reader's part.

Since Iris Murdoch was a tutor in philosophy at Oxford University for some years, and herself has a philosopher's training and temperement, critics readily categorized her as a "philosophical novelist" or "novelist of ideas". However, Iris Murdoch does not subordinate her novels into presentations of philosophical views. She is a "philosophical novelist" only in the sense that she takes a serious interest in coming to terms, in her fiction, with the

experimental and practical aspects of ethical behaviour, with ideas like power, love, freedom and man's pursuit of the Platonic Good.

Although Murdoch wrote several philosophical essays, she seems more comfortable, not with abstract pronouncements, but with the novel, to which she returns repeatedly, and in which she can act out ideas in particular situations and psychologies. It is hard to trace philosophical ideas as such, in an Iris Murdoch novel because philosophy is smoothly blended in her fiction in a natural unforced way, and goes into the making and meaning of what she narrates and describes, rather than used dryly to fill in parts of the novel. Her novels make their appeal primarily as works of art. This is in keeping with Murdoch's belief that the novel is, in the first place, an art of image rather than of analysis;[10] and that philosophy should be completely fused with the image.

Philosophy and literature are, for Iris Murdoch, two different but complementary worlds. She believes that the aim of philosophy is to clarify and explain, whereas the aim of literature is to mystify and create an illusion. Accordingly, language in philosophy is transparent, that is, the philosopher is saying only one thing and is trying to avoid rhetoric and decoration; but language in literature is opaque, that is, rich in connotation, allusion and ambiguity. Most

philosophy as compared to literature seems rambling and formless, but literature struggles with problems of aesthetic form, and tries to produce a kind of completeness. However, both literature and philosophy are, according to Iris Murdoch, truth-seeking and truth-revealing activities, and the notions of truth are near the centre of both. She believes that both philosophy and literature involve a disciplined control on the writer's part. Philosophy writing is not self-expression, but requirs a removal of the personal voice. In literature too, she is against the obvious personal presence of the author in his work.[11]

The work of both the novelist and the philosopher converge and overlap. According to Iris Murdoch, "the novel is a picture of, and a comment upon the human condition."[12] In this sense, the novelist himself is a kind of philosopher who has a deep and clear understanding of human nature, and is able to describe it accurately and vividly. According to Murdoch, the novelist is "a sort of phenomenologist" who has always "implicitely understood what the philosopher has grasped less clearly."[13] In her view, the novelist describes what we do, not what we ought to do:

> He has always been what the very latest philosophers claim to be, a describer rather than an explainer, and in consequence he has often anticipated the philosopher's discoveries.[14]

One of Iris Murdoch's main concerns, both as a philosopher and a novelist, is freedom. Freedom for Iris Murdoch is not merely the exercise of the will, nor the mere absence of coercion. It is rather a concept remarkably her own, which holds together related ideas. She sees freedom as accurate vision which enables one to have a clear perception of reality, and to accept the being of others. This involves an overcoming of the self, becoming free from fantasies and dream objects, accepting and respecting the otherness of other people and apprehending that they are different, separate individuals. It is when this is attained that freedom can be exercised through the capacity to love and to act rightly. According to Iris Murdoch, the concept of freedom is a synthesis of related constituents: the perception of reality, love and the good.

It is the aim of this study to relate Iris Murdoch's stated philosophical concept of freedom to her fiction and to examine the way it is acted out in dramatic situations which put to the test her character's ethical and moral principles. The three major recurring ideas in Murdoch's thought: reality, love and the good, which constitute her concept of freedom are identified in this study and form its structure. Iris Murdoch has treated in detail in her philosophical essays and books the ideas that have become the major motifs in her fiction. Therefore,

the point of departure in this study will be an examination of Iris Murdoch's non-fictional statements which are mainly concerned with morality and aesthetics. The brief survey of her philosophical statements will be followed by an examination of her literary theory, in an attempt to clarify the relevance of her philosophical and literary views to her own practice as a novelist. This will be followed by three chapters, each devoted to one of the main themes as exemplified in two representative novels.

Although certain novels lend themselves more readily to one theme than to another, yet all three ideas can be detected in all the novels in varying degrees. That is, they constitute major concerns in some, while in others they are worked out only at the background. The novels chosen reveal different aspects of Iris Murdoch's rather complex concept of freedom, but again they are neither unique to these novels nor exclusive in them. In view of Murdoch's continuingly prolific output, it was necessary, for the sake of convenience, to limit the number of novels examined in this study. Therefore, the novels chosen cover only the decade from 1970 through 1980. This period represents a mature stage in Iris Murdoch's progress as a novelist, showing her as having gained mastery over her fictional devices and skills, and having developed her own philosophical position.

Chapter one is devoted to a brief examination of Iris Murdoch's main non-fictional pronouncements and literary views and attempts to show their relevance to her own literary practice, which would serve as a necessary background for the understanding and appreciation of her novels.

Chapter two considers freedom as related to the perception of reality. According to Murdoch, decisions and choices are certainly affected by how a person sees the world, that is, by his moral vision. It is this which dictates the choice when the time comes for one to be made. It is only when a person frees himself from fantasies and gains insight into the real world that he becomes free, and only then is he able to make moral decisions. Freedom, then, is a progressive, ongoing process that is not simply identified with separate choices. Choices are restricted by what can be morally perceived or seen, which depends on the individual's moral discipline and outlook. To a great extent, then, the limits of the individual's moral vision are limits on his freedom.

Two novels are chosen to illustrate two different aspects of the perception of, or rather the failure to perceive, reality. A Fairly Honourable Defeat (1970) uses the pattern of "enchantment", a motif which first appeared in Murdoch's early novel, The Flight from the Enchanter (1956) and is suggested by its title.