

A HOUSE FOR FREE CHARACTERS :  
THE NOVELS OF IRIS MURDOCH

The reader of Iris Murdoch's novels is at once struck by the originality of her imagination ; he may be puzzled, fascinated or shocked by her eccentricity, but he can never be indifferent. The novels challenge the reader and invite his cooperation, for Iris Murdoch never imposes her own appreciation of a given situation : she inquires into its potentialities and encourages the reader to further meditation. The seriousness of her approach indicates that she does not search for the extraordinary at all costs, but her inventiveness serves her philosophical thought admirably. On the whole, her heroes do not comply with ordinary standards ; they move in a peculiar world, apparently without moral restraint. This does not purport that their attitude to life is non-moral, but their ethics is personal and they chiefly aspire to freedom and truth.

In *Under the Net* <sup>(1)</sup>, the characters roam against a background of seeming strangeness. Yet there is nothing unreal or improbable in the hero's adventures. His experiences are in the picaresque tradition, and their setting is representative of contemporary life in a half Bohemian milieu. But Iris Murdoch has a gift for metamorphosing ordinary incidents and scenery into an unfamiliar substance, whose oddity is emphasized by the personality of the characters. The scenes in the Cold Cure Research Centre, in the Mime Theatre or in the film studio create an atmosphere of extravaganza, not because of what these places are but because of the unusual vision of them the author conveys.

Jake Donaghue, returning from Paris, finds that he has been thrown out by his mistress Madge. As he hates solitude and finds it senseless to spend money on rent, he prefers to live in other people's apartments. His search for a place to live in soon appears as a mere pretext for making him look for people who at different periods played a more or less important part in his existence. He finds Anna, his former mistress, her sister Sadie and Hugo, whom he had met in the Cold Cure Research Centre and whose conversations with himself he had recorded in a book called "The Silencer". From then on, he is involved in a series of adventures with the sole purpose of being of service to Hugo and Anna and of renewing his friendship with them. He escapes from Sadie's apartment where she had locked him in to defend it against the assaults of Hugo, steals the star

(1) *Under the Net*, Chatto and Windus, 1954. I quote from the Penguin edition, 1960.

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dog Mars to blackmail Sadie and Sam, is caught with Mars in a row between Socialists and New Nationalists in Hugo's studios, goes to Paris where Madge summons him and offers him a well-paid but rather undefined job which he refuses, and comes back to London where he starts working as an orderly in a hospital, a white concrete structure which is for him a symbol of reality. This sets him anew on the track of Hugo, with whom he has an ultimate conversation before the latter settles as a watchmaker in the North of England, after having given away his fortune. Anna escapes him also, but Jake who has now learned to accept solitude, gives up translating and settles as a creative writer.

This bare statement of facts can only give a very imperfect idea of the novel, of the humour and the imaginativeness with which the exploits of Jake are told. At some point in the story, Jake says that his acquaintance with Hugo is the central theme of the book (p. 53). It is indeed through his relationship with Hugo and partly because of Hugo's denial of it that Jake comes to terms with life. He lives by literary hack-work, doing as little original writing as possible. It is obvious from the start that he is in some kind of emotional mess. His nerves are shattered, and he loves to be protected. He gives the clue to his own attitude when he says : " I hate solitude, but I am afraid of intimacy. The substance of my life is a private conversation with myself which to turn into a dialogue would be equivalent to self-destruction " (p. 31). He is conscious of his weakness and fears that a relationship based on reciprocity might annihilate his own being. The consequence of this is that, though he is genuinely concerned for his friends, his actions are totally irrelevant to their real needs. He is a dreamer whose attitude towards other people is determined by his own fanciful vision of them. So that his quest for Anna and later for Hugo is in fact a violation of their freedom and of their personality because it is carried out in ignorance of what they really are. And he is quite surprised to discover that he has been mistaken all along and that people do not quite fit his own conception of them. He had not understood that Hugo did not love Anna. He had refused to believe Sadie when she told him that Hugo loved her, simply because it seemed incompatible with his idea of Hugo and Sadie. In the same way, he took Finn for granted as a companion and thought him incapable either of thought or of feeling and he is again surprised when Finn, who has confided in Mrs. Tinckham, skips off to Ireland, as he had often told him he would. When J.-P. Breteuil wins the *Prix Goncourt*, Jake who had judged him once and for all feels that ' he had no right to turn himself surreptitiously into a good writer ' (p. 171). Jean-Pierre's achievement is the first revelation which

comes to him as a shock in Paris and partly accounts for his refusal to take up the job offered by Madge. Later on, he is forced to realize that Hugo is not the Hugo of his imagination and that he must let him go. His experiences have in fact compelled him to recognize his friends as separate beings who have a right to be what they are and to work out their destiny as they like it.

"Anna really existed now as a separate being and not as a part of myself. To experience this was extremely painful... Anna was something which had to be learnt afresh. When does one ever know a human being? Perhaps only after one has realised the impossibility of knowledge and renounced the desire for it and finally ceased to feel even the need of it. But then what one achieves is no longer knowledge, *it is simply a kind of coexistence*; and this too is one of the guises of love" (2).

In the same way, he recognizes that both he and Anna, because they loved Hugo, had attributed to him a magic which he lacked, giving him a power over them of which he was unaware.

"His very otherness was to be sought not in himself but in myself or Anna. Yet herein he recognized nothing of what he had made. He was a man without claims and without reflections. Why had I pursued him? He had nothing to tell me. To have seen him was enough..." (p. 238).

As he is described by Jake, Hugo first appears as an exceptional man, wise and interested in everything, displaying a curious mixture of naïvety and assurance, surrounded by an atmosphere of mystery and vague power. Gradually, however, he is revealed as an ordinary human being who seeks his own way and is, like everyone else, capable of unaccountable actions. His philosophy as expressed by Jake in *The Silencer* dominates the novel and is substantiated by the experiences of the characters. For Hugo who approaches everything in life with an absolute freshness of mind, only actions are important because they don't lie, whereas all theorizing is flight and "the movement away from theory and generality is the movement towards truth" (p. 80).

"We must be ruled by the situation itself and this is unutterably particular. Indeed it is something which we can never get close enough, however hard we try as it were to crawl under the net" (pp. 80-81).

Life is neither continuity nor progression; it is made of a succession of particular situations to which our response must be each time reconsidered anew. "One must just blunder on.

(2) *Under the Net*, Penguin Edition, p. 238. My Italics.

Truth lies in blundering on" (p. 228). Thus truth is not an Absolute that can be defined and that one tries to reach. It is relative, different for each human being, and impermanent; one discovers it in separate experiences. That is why, truth cannot be put into words (3) :

"For most of us, for almost all of us, truth can be attained, if at all, only in silence. It is in silence that the human spirit touches the divine" (p. 81).

We now understand why Jake's book about Hugo is called *The Silencer*. But it seems paradoxical that he should have recorded the conversations of one who precisely mistrusted words and was convinced that they could only but distort feelings and actions.

This incapacity of men to commune with each other by means of words is illustrated in Hugo's failure to recognize in *The Silencer* anything he may have thought or even said, and in his vain efforts to understand Anna's theory about the Mime Theatre, though she is influenced by him when she contends that it is pure art because it is silent. When Anna tells Jake "Love is action, it is silence" (p. 41), she is echoing Hugo though Jake is not aware of it at the moment she says it. In the end, however, he understands that Hugo's words are not important; what matters is what he is.

To the philosophy of silence, Dave, the philosopher, opposes the view that nothing is true or important which can't be maintained in an oral discussion (p. 63), but he is unable to communicate anything to Jake when they talk about philosophy. A compromise is proposed by Lefty, the socialist leader. Like Hugo, he believes in the impermanence of things and says that 'the future is anyone's guess. All one can do is first reflect and then act' (p. 101). He is not very convincing, perhaps because the episode in which he tries to persuade Jake of his social responsibility and to compel him to action seems deliberately contrived and has little relevance to Jake's preoccupations at the moment. Yet, in the course of the novel, Lefty gradually gains power over Hugo. The Mime Theatre is replaced in Hugo's house by the Independent Socialist Party and its silence is violated. In the rather fantastic scenery of a Roman city put up to recreate the setting of Catiline's conspiracy, Jake discovers Hugo under the spell of Lefty haranguing the staff of the studio. The meeting is interrupted by the New Nationalists and turns into a fight reminiscent of the 30's. Eventually, Hugo

(3) I. Murdoch shares Queneau's opinion : « Je ne pense pas que la vérité soit dans le langage, c'est-à-dire qu'en décortiquant le langage on trouve la vérité » (*L'Express*, 22-11-1962, p. 30). She herself has acknowledged an affinity between the hero of *Under the Net* and Queneau's *Pierrot, mon ami*. And *Under the Net* is dedicated to Queneau.

gives the Party his apartment and his fortune because he wants to travel light. Yet, his decision seems to be a matter of personal concern and not motivated by a political or social ideology. He also finds it necessary to start anew and he chooses to do so through an activity which is in keeping with his philosophy of silence and action.

The exploration of Jake's personality and his coming to terms with himself, are the points at issue in the novel. His refusal of the job in Paris for no very clear reason is important. It is purely spontaneous. He feels it intuitively to be right but the vision he has of his destiny is mere apprehension of an undefinable purpose. Yet, it eventually imposes a new pattern on his life. This is an example of the existentialist view that we act freely when we act instinctively, and in doing so, create motives of action which rule us afterwards. In Iris Murdoch's first novel there is little talk as yet of the importance of freedom. It is only implicit in the unconstrained behaviour of the characters. The emphasis here is on the necessity to coexist with people without impinging upon their life and without thwarting the normal course of events. It brings out the futility of committing oneself to a fixed course of action and to theories to regulate one's life, though obviously Lefty's insistence on theory and practice is suggested as a means to enjoy the safety of a more definitive course of life through political commitment. Above all, Iris Murdoch insists on the temporariness of all actions and their consequences, of all experiences and all situations. Jake perceives this clearly as his life takes on a new turn :

" Events stream past us like these crowds and the face of each is seen only for a minute. What is urgent is not urgent for ever but only ephemerally. All work and all love, the search for wealth and fame, the search for truth, like itself, are made up of moments which pass and become nothing. Yet through this shaft of nothings we drive onward with that miraculous vitality that creates our precarious habitations in the past and the future. So we live ; a spirit that broods and hovers over the continual death of time, the lost meaning, the unrecaptured moment, the unremembered face, until the final chop that ends all our moments and plunges that spirit back into the void from which it came" (p. 244).

The mutability of life itself equals the instability of characters like Jake who form as real a part of society as the ordinary conventional person. His eccentricity is but one of the many faces of reality.

Of the two aspects of the novel, the picaresque and the philosophical, the former is the more successful. Iris Murdoch has

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a genius for the preposterous incident. Her ability to put a rare complexion on the most ordinary things and her keen aliveness to the movement of life give her novels brilliance and vivacity. But the philosophy is expounded by the characters. It is not sufficiently actualized. It seems deliberately introduced at some points in the novel and sometimes has the effect of breaking its rhythm. This is also true of the spiritual transformation of Jake, which is described by himself just as his moral problems are being argued in his mind instead of being conveyed to us through the story (4). The consequence is that the novel develops on two different planes and that the philosophy, imperfectly assimilated by the characters, does not blend with the narrative.

In this respect *The Flight from the Enchanter* (5) is more successfully worked out, for whatever concern there is for the significance of life, is implied in the attitude of the characters. Here again, Iris Murdoch gathers an uncommon medley of outstanding individuals and one can hardly call attention to the intricacy and the movement of the plot, without doing injustice to its structure and its rhythm. The main character is Rosa Keepe, who lives with her brother Hunter, editor of the *Artemis*, a monthly magazine founded by their suffragette mother. Rosa works in a factory because she thinks that a simple, unpretentious and dull activity makes her life impersonal and mechanical, and at least gives her peace. Rosa and Hunter are responsible for Annette Cockayne, who leaves the fashionable school she attends in order to enter the 'school of life'. At the factory Rosa has met the Lusiewicz brothers, Polish refugees whose orgiastic dances in front of their old mother endows them with a fantastic unreality and disquieting fascination. Rosa becomes the lover of both, and they gradually gain power over her and try to trespass on the other side of her life. Peter Saward, a scholar who tries unsuccessfully to decipher hieroglyphs, is in love with Rosa. John Rainborough, the head of *Selib*, an organisation meant to deal with refugees, is an irresolute man, easily outwitted by his most efficient secretary Miss Casement. There are other well drawn characters such as unobtrusive Nina, the dress-maker, also a refugee and a very submissive friend of Misha's, Mrs. Wingfield, a rich, eccentric old woman, one of the main shareholders of the *Artemis*, and her servant Miss Foy. These people all know each other and are entangled in a network of relationships, brought together or separated by the man who fascinates them all, Mischa Fox. Mischa is the enchanter, the magician. Like Hugo, he is a figure

(4) Cf. Jacques SOUVAGE: 'The Unresolved Tension', in the 'Revue des Langues Vivantes', Vol. XXVI, 1960, 6, pp. 420-29.

(5) *The Flight from the Enchanter*, Chatto and Windus, 1956.

of mystery and power. But whereas Hugo was unaware of his power, Mischa is perfectly conscious of his and uses it to interfere in people's lives, helped by his handy-man, the uncongenial Calvin Blick. Moreover, whereas Hugo's power seemed to emanate from the force of his character, Mischa's lies in the undefinable fascination his strange personality exerts on people, the aura of mystery which he deliberately creates around himself and his huge wealth, which is obviously part of his charm and which he uses freely for whatever purpose he has in view. He appears at the same time more perturbing and weird. Rosa has loved Mischa for a very long time, but she gave him up ten years ago, fleeing the demon of his power. Now Mischa wants to buy the *Artemis* and Hunter refuses to sell. He is blackmailed by Calvin Blick, who has taken a compromising picture of Rosa with the Lusiewicz brothers and threatens to show it to Mischa. The *Artemis* is eventually rescued by Mrs. Wingfield, but Rosa needs now Mischa's help to get rid of Stephan Lusiewicz. After his intervention, she yields again to her attraction for him and joins him in Italy. There, she is immediately blackmailed into leaving by Calvin Blick, who shows her the picture of her with the Lusiewicz brothers and informs her that Nina, an innocent and imaginary victim of Mischa's intervention has committed suicide. The main plot is interspersed with subordinate plots and there is also a very funny scene when the annual shareholders' meeting of the *Artemis* takes place, and at a party given by Mischa, which is the starting point of all consequent follies <sup>(6)</sup> and which brings out conspicuously Mischa's apparent power to influence men's destinies.

This rare combination of intrigue and characters is not without flaw. One does not quite feel the need of a chapter devoted to *Selb* if it is simply meant to point out to Rainborough's inefficiency or his relations with his secretary, or even to make Mischa's intervention in the life of the Polish brothers plausible. Even Nina's suicide is contrived. One does not object to the mixture of comic and tragical elements, but the suicide seems to serve merely as a blackmail device. It does not grow out of a tragic exigency as it should if Iris Murdoch had meant it to be an instance of the drama of life. Most characters are elusive. None of them stands out clearly, and we may wonder to what extent that elusiveness is deliberate, as if the author had wished to intimate the evanescence of human relations in a society where people come and go out of our life without our ever getting to know them well. But the method has its drawbacks, for if the characters are not explored, we cannot feel that their actions answer an inner compulsion and they appear to us

(6) Rainborough calls it 'a carefully constructed machine for the forcing of various plots and dramas', *The Flight from the Enchanter*, p. 193.

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as pawns in the author's game — like Rosa in the presence of Mischa. Iris Murdoch can at times impress us with her understanding of the particular situation, such as Nina's feelings before she commits suicide, or the expression of Rosa's sensitiveness. We are struck by the authenticity of her tone but she does not move us. However, the particular situation is precisely the object of her enquiry. The novel solves momentary problems only and at the end Rosa finds herself facing the unknown, which makes good her belief that her life will never consist of anything but a series of interludes. The plot moves on when the characters decide to act because of an impulsive need to do so when they perceive that a change is about to happen or ought to happen in their life and they want to take the initiative. But action is also a means to get power over human beings. That is how Mischa — though he usually acts by proxy —, the Lusiewicz brothers and even Miss Casement dominate other people, while Rosa's inertia puts her at the mercy of whoever wants to subdue her. Mischa's power, however, does not merely derive from his ability or his readiness to act. A sort of magic flows from his personality and when he is there, people behave madly as if they were under the spell of an enchanter. Rosa is driven to him as if she had drunk a love philtre and Nina submits to him like a slave. Yet both want to escape from him. They flee from what Rosa calls the demon in him, the reverse of his enchantement. Showing Annette a pair of Japanese ivory figures, Mischa tells her that they are magic only in the way in which magic can be part of ordinary life. It is as if his own magic sometimes materialized in the more vulgar form of power of one who acts on his knowledge of people. He combines cruelty with an extreme sensitivity and even sentimentalism, a mixture of the angel and the demon. He has been considered as a symbol in an allegory, though he can be taken merely as a fascinating and fantastic character<sup>(7)</sup>. But then Iris Murdoch's writing allows for different planes of interpretation and this adds to the enigmatic nature of her work.

As to Calvin Blick, his power is merely the despicable power of blackmail. Yet it is as if the author wanted to mitigate its effect, for Calvin has no illusion about it. "Do you imagine", he tells Rosa, "that any real power lies in these mechanical devices? I have done nothing for you and your brother but provide you with rather grotesque pretexts for doing what you really want to do. The truth lies deeper, deeper. It is always so!" (p. 305). Iris Murdoch insists here even more than in *Under the Net* on the relativity of truth and its inaccessibility.

(7) William Van O'Connor writes that Mischa stands for the absolute state, that he organizes other people's lives, and that many of them are all too willing to give themselves into his power, *Critique*, p. 40, Vol. III, N. 2.



"You will never know the truth and you will read the signs in accordance with your deepest wishes. That is what we humans always have to do. Reality is a cipher with many solutions, all of them right ones" (pp. 304-5). Ultimately then, all is illusion and we interpret life to our liking. For Rosa, in the end, even Mischa's magic is delusion: "It's odd, in the past I always felt that whether I went towards him or away from him I was always doing his will. But it was all an illusion". "Who knows", said Calvin, "perhaps it is now that it would be an illusion" (p. 308). There is apparently no way of getting at truth, though as P. Saward says of his useless deciphering: "one reads the signs as best one can and one may be totally misled. But it's never certain that the evidence will turn up that makes everything plain" (p. 315).

This feeling of insecurity pervades *The Flight from the Enchanter*. It implies that we are condemned to live in a world of illusions with our moments of action and perchance of truth. The delusiveness and transiency of all state allied with the mystery of some characters invests the novel with an insubstantiality emphasized by a sort of fatality to which the characters yield. But it is not a pessimistic novel. There is always a hint in Iris Murdoch's novels that the future is full of promises.

*The Sandcastle* <sup>(8)</sup> seems to be a more realistic work in that its subject-matter is more commonplace and the pattern of the novel more familiar. But it would be erroneous to suppose that Iris Murdoch's fundamental preoccupations are modified or that her work is more conventional because it is less sensational. No more than in her other novels is the issue influenced by an ordinary conception of right and wrong, for what determines the attitude of the characters is their own temperament, not their appreciation of morality. Certainly morality and conventions play a part but as justification rather than as real motives for action. This is perhaps what most differentiates Iris Murdoch from other novelists who, even when they revolt against morality, recognize it implicitly by rebelling against it, whereas she simply ignores it. She demonstrates that the attitude of men answers an inner necessity and is not determined by the observance or the rejection of moral standards. This may seem questionable in this particular novel because the hero, Mor, is something of a conformist, slightly puritanical, and suspicious of eccentricity. He is submissive and usually apologetic towards his wife Nan, though he resents, or rather suffers from, the fact that she is the stronger of the two. He is a teacher in a

(8) *The Sandcastle*, Chatto and Windus, 1957.

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private school but his deepest wish is to stand for Parliament, a project which Nan strongly opposes. Pressed by his friend Tim Burke, he finally reaches a decision which Nan merely laughs away, ignoring his argument and sure of her power over him. But Mor is brought to look at his marriage in a different light. He is attracted by Rain Carter, a young woman painter who has come to paint the portrait of Demoyte, the former Headmaster of St. Bride's. Once they set out for a drive and an unhappy manoeuvre of Mor's sends the car into the river. The accident is very cleverly introduced to involve Mor and Rain in an emotional predicament which marks a turning point in Mor's life and makes him conscious of his love for Rain. Though this certainty inevitably brings with it a deep anxiety about the future, it makes him aware of the absurdity of constantly fretting about his life and it frees him from the compulsion, the coercion exerted on him by his wife. Nan coming home unexpectedly from her vacation surprises Mor and Rain embracing early in the morning in Mor's house. Confident that he will do as he is told and give up Rain, she goes back to Dorset, though Mor tells her that he has no intention of renouncing Rain. Yet he hesitates to take the final step, first because he is afraid to shock his son Don who is about to take an entrance examination for Cambridge, then because he is extremely worried when Don, who has climbed the school tower and has just escaped death, disappears, which of course brings Nan and Felicity home. Mor delays and the decision is taken away from him by Nan who declares publicly that her husband is going to stand for Parliament. Mor does not have the courage to contradict her in public and Rain, who didn't even know of his political ambitions, realizes that the course of his life was set, and feels she has no right to intrude.

The supernatural is not completely absent from the novel. It is personified in a gipsy, apparently standing for fate, who appears to Mor, Rain, or Felicity whenever a decisive event is going to take place. However his presence in the novel seems a bit contrived. Neither is Felicity's ritual on the seashore, a symbolic attempt to draw her father away from Miss Carter. But as in her other novels the subsidiary characters are drawn masterfully: Tim Burke, the jeweller, well-intentioned and sometimes awkward in his effort to please all parties, a loser in the bargain because he is in love with Nan; Demoyte, generous and humane but caustic and impatient of weakness and inefficiency, one who is convinced, and tries to persuade Mor, that man must compel fate and act in order to make his own future; Bledyard, the art-teacher, who has ceased to paint and is now lost in theories. Paradoxically, he advocates what he himself seems either to lack or to have lost: an insight and

a reverence for the practice of art which allows the artist to apprehend the real nature of the person or the object he wants to represent, and prevents him from indulging in too great an interest for form as such. Bledyard demands from the artist what everyone ought to have in life : a concern for others. He thinks that when we look upon a human face, we interpret it by what we are ourselves (p. 78). Rain agrees with him in this and tells Demoyte that every portrait is a self-portrait and that we want to see ourselves in the world about us. Bledyard accuses Mor of displaying in life the same limitation of vision and of being concerned with himself, not with others : " There is such a thing as respect for reality. You are living on dreams now, dreams of happiness, dreams of freedom. But in all this, you consider only yourself. You do not truly apprehend the distinct being of either your wife or Miss Carter " (p. 216). Bledyard thinks that Mor wants to be free to do what he likes. For him, real freedom is a total absence of concern about oneself : man is free when he is delivered from his passion and leaves aside personal concerns. For Mor, freedom is the faculty to make one's own life — " this is my situation and my life and I shall decide what to do about it " (p. 217). In his lecture on freedom, he calls it a sort of grace, a grace that he is nonetheless incapable of indulging. For Mor's real quandary results from his incapacity to be free. Freedom and power are indeed the main issues and Mor knows it. He is occasionally stirred by a sense of freedom or of power but he can't make a final decision that will free him and give him power. He is surprised at the tremendous strength of his wife and resentful of her power over him, but when the crucial moment of action comes, he is paralysed by a 'life-time of conformity'. Accused by Demoyte of having willed to lose Rain, he merely answers : " It was inevitable " (p. 312). Is this sheer fatalism or does Mor indeed unconsciously refuse to be free ? This would imply an unconditional surrender to his wife, which isn't quite the case. But it does stress the complexity of human motives, the muddle of emotions, prejudices, ambiguous notions which in moments of crisis determine the course of our life. Only people who like Nan are not afraid of acting and do it wilfully can influence their own life. Nan is victorious, partly because she is willing to take a risk. Her power over her husband is not a matter of personal strength : it derives mainly from her knowledge of his weakness and from the confident certainty that she has a right to exploit it. On the whole, she is unpleasant, except when she suffers, and here again we have an indication that Iris Murdoch does not pass judgement on her characters. They are just what they are. Nan's way of winning back her husband is treacherous by ordinary moral standards, but Mor simply wonders how she could have been so ingenious — or so

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desperate. Mor is not a complete loser. The experience has at least enlightened him on the real nature of his marriage and has conduced to self-knowledge. This allows him to give his professional life a new direction and to enjoy easier and more intimate relations with his children. The happy end seems conventional enough but it leaves room for speculation about Mor's future and testifies that there is always reason for a renewal of faith in the potentialities of life.

The publication of Iris Murdoch's fourth novel gainsaid the opinion that with *The Sandcastle* she had given way to the commonplace. The variety of characters in *The Bell* <sup>(9)</sup> recalls *The Flight from the Enchanter*, but they are more firmly drawn, the most prominent among them embodying different conceptions of life. They are all involved in a plot that tests their ability to live. Imber Court is a lay community for people "who cannot live in the world nor out of it". It is attached to a Benedictine convent whose Abbess is the spiritual counsellor of the community, the superior being they look up to. They form a heterogeneous group of people: a middle-aged couple who hope to patch up their marriage by living in a spiritual atmosphere, a naturalist, a gardener, James Tayper Pace, a man of high moral standards who has done social work in the East End, Catherine Fawley, the 'saint' of the community who is about to enter the convent and her twin brother Nick, rather a degenerate, tolerated for her sake and living separately in a lodge across the lake. Michael Meade to whom the Court belongs is the head of the community. When he was a public school teacher, he fell in love with Nick who requited his love and then denounced him as a homosexual. Michael was sent down and had to renounce the priesthood. Paul Greenfield, an art historian, lives temporarily with the community and studies manuscripts at the convent. He is a violent man, emotionally primitive, obviously unable to reconcile the intellectual and the emotional aspects of his personality. His wife Dora who had left him because she was afraid of him joins him at Imber. Toby arrives at the same time. He is a very young man, anxious to live in a community of holy people — or so he thinks — and to lead a monastic life for a short time before going to Oxford. Dora is the main character in so far as a character can be said to be more important than others, for as in *The Flight from the Enchanter* it is with the whole assortment of individuals that the author is concerned. Dora is a person who has no hold on life. She is spontaneous and generous, partly because she cannot distinguish between right and wrong and is thus incapable of judging others. She lacks the neces-

(9) *The Bell*, Chatto and Windus, 1958.

sary self-confidence to face her situation and her usual motive for whatever move she is capable of, is fear. Paul tells Dora of a legend according to which, in the Middle Ages, the bell of the Abbey flew into the lake when a nun, who had a lover, refused to confess. The guilty nun then ran out of the abbey and drowned herself in the lake. The bell is said to ring sometimes at the bottom of the lake and it portends death. The abbey is now getting a new bell which is due to arrive shortly, it will be called Gabriel and inscribed *Ergo Sum Vox Amoris* like the old one. Life at Imber is not without troubles and Michael has a hard job holding it together and conciliating so many different temperaments. He is himself caught unawares by his weakness; he is attracted to Toby and one evening he kisses him. The trifling incident is big with consequences. Toby, who is at first extremely shocked, reacts afterwards with mixed feelings. In the meantime, he has discovered the old bell at the bottom of the lake and is persuaded by Dora, in whom he has confided, to pull it out. She wants to substitute it for the new bell on the day of its dedication. But the night when she and Toby should be making their last preparation is full of unexpected events. Nick forces Toby to expose Michael, which he does, thus reenacting the scene in which Nick had himself played a part several years before. Dora discovers that Nick has revealed the existence of the old bell to her journalist friend Noel and in order to avoid misinterpretation in the press, she rings the bell in the middle of the night. The next morning, the new bell is taken to the abbey in a procession and falls into the lake. It appears suddenly that Catherine the 'saint' is mad and violently in love with Michael. She is rescued from drowning just in time by Dora and a nun. Her brother, who is also responsible for the disappearance of the new bell in the lake, commits suicide. The community now completely disintegrates.

The characters are extremely diverse and their view of the world is conveyed with deep understanding. For the scepticism of the irreligious is as real to us as the faith of the believers. Among the actual members of the community two different ethical theories are preached. For James, morality is the observance of rules. One must act according to what is enjoined or forbidden. The rest is vanity, self-deception and flattering of passion. Innocence is the highest value and must be retained at all costs, through avoidance of experience. The bell is a symbol of innocence because of its truthfulness, simplicity and bearing of witness. In a sermon, James associates Catherine with it, because she gives the impression of innocence and like the bell, is going to cross the lake to the abbey. That he is proved wrong later on by the revelation of Catherine's madness and lack of innocence does not change James's attitude. After

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Toby's denunciation, he treats Michael with kindness but with a complete lack of understanding and sensitivity. Sodomy is not disgusting, it is just forbidden ! For Michael, on the other hand, morality is based on self-knowledge. We must be aware of our possibilities and of our limitations in order to know what strength we can rely on and where it lies. He also takes the bell as a symbol, but a symbol of the strength we must learn to gauge. " We must work from inside outwards, through our strength, and by understanding and using exactly that energy which we have, acquire more " (p. 205).

As in the Middle Ages, it seems that the bell is a symbol of revelation to oneself and to others. A climax is reached when the new bell falls into the lake and the main characters are revealed in their true light. It isn't that Michael fails to know the recesses of his own being, but like young Toby he must learn that one is never secure. He is trapped by his frailty, certain as he is that he can control himself. " As Michael contemplated that tiny distance between the thought and the act it was like a most narrow crack which even as he watched it was opening into an abyss " (p. 165). What Michael has left out of his self-analysis is the impulsiveness, the unaccountable in us, the unfathomable mystery of our emotions which should have kept a man like him on the alert. Nothing is spared him, not even the knowledge that he never ceased to love Nick but that his refusal to commit himself with him when Nick most needed him, acted as a negative force on the despair that drove him to suicide. The abbess is right after all : " All failures are ultimately failures in love ".

For Dora, utterly devoid of moral sense, the process of self-discovery lies elsewhere. Her marriage with Paul is based on the power-and-freedom pattern, familiar in the novels of I.M. He takes unfair advantage of her defencelessness. When he tells Dora : " I don't respect you. I'm in love with you, unfortunately, that's all " (p. 140), he is not so much being deliberately cruel as asserting his unwavering belief in his own self-righteousness and wisdom. Whatever he does and thinks is definite, and he is not moved in any way by the upheavals that lead to the disintegration of Imber Court. He is merely inclined to believe that his wife is responsible for whatever trouble there was, but he considers himself as irrevocably married to her. So does Dora ; whether she is with Paul or away from him, she is never free from the overwhelming power of his will upon her. She merely experiences ephemeral moments of freedom and of intuition of her own existence as a separate being. She welcomes the discovery of the old bell by Toby and her own part in its restoration as a 'magical act of shattering significance, a sort of rite of power and liberation'. But her hope to gain

the respect of the members of the community and of Paul in that way is soon disappointed. She *is* liberated, not by a difference in people's attitude towards her but by her own understanding that she is free to leave Paul and to seek 'salvation' in a way that suits her own nature. She will not return to Paul until she is able to treat with him as an equal ; meanwhile she must learn to be an independent grown-up person. Her experience is similar to that of Mor and like him, she comes to realize that her marriage has failed. But her self-discovery is much more conclusive and articulate. 'She has survived' and survival is after all what matters for it implies a capacity in man to deal with crises which he must solve alone. As the novel clearly demonstrates, running away is impossible. "Those who hope, by retiring from the world, to earn a holiday from human frailty, in themselves and others, are usually disappointed" (p. 86). It also shows that a romantic conception of life or of people conduces to disillusion : people are what they are. Michael even goes so far as to say that "God created men and women with these tendencies (e.g. homosexuality) and made these tendencies to run so deep that they were, in many cases, the very core of the personality" (p. 206). This tolerance is simply an encouragement to exploration of one's own nature and to moral questioning. Self-knowledge does not prevent the outcome of our actions from being unforeseeable. But it does at least lead, as in the case of Michael, to understanding and sympathy with one's fellow-men. The author's sympathetic interest in such different moral attitudes is in fact the novel's chief merit.

Iris Murdoch has indeed travelled a long way and with surprising rapidity since *Under the Net*. The skilful construction of the plot, the original assortment of incidents and characters are nowhere so striking as in *A Severed Head* <sup>(10)</sup> which evidences better than any of her novels her inclination to surrealism. Martin Lynch-Gibbon is happy between his young mistress and his beautiful wife, Antonia, until the latter reveals to him that she is having an affair with Palmer Anderson, a psycho-analyst full of assurance and understanding. Antonia and Palmer not merely expect him to take it well ; they want to keep him as a friend, to help him, to establish with him a sort of parents-child relationship. Martin's more 'civilised' side bids him take it well, though inwardly he does react like a very spoiled child. He is an extremely weak and selfish character who wants everything from life but is not ready to pay in return. Even now he does not tell his wife of his liaison with Georgie, though she finds out from another source. He is very soon aware that he does not really want to marry Georgie. He

(10) *A Severed Head*, Chatto and Windus, 1961.

lives through a nightmarish period during which he is successively enlightened on the intricate relations which each character has with every other one. Georgie who understands that Martin will never marry her, becomes engaged to his brother Alexander. But it seems that she cannot forget Martin and after having cut her beautiful hair and sent it to him, she attempts to commit suicide. Martin discovers that Palmer has been having an incestuous relationship with his half-sister Honor Klein with whom he, Martin, has now fallen in love. It turns out that Antonia's real love is Alexander with whom she has had an affair ever since she knew him, that is even before she married Martin. She is now going to marry him, and Palmer, who has nursed Georgie after her attempted suicide, pairs off with her to America. Martin is then accepted by Honor.

Until he falls in love with Honor, Martin depends completely on Antonia and Palmer. As Georgie tells him, he is always looking for a master. Yet he likes to think that he controls his own life. Personal relations are here again determined by power but it is more evident that power springs from a reliance on the weakness of the partner. Palmer and Antonia impose their will on Martin so long as he wants to be interfered with because he is afraid to be left alone. But as soon as Martin is made aware of Palmer's weakness, he gets the upper hand and feels Palmer's will surrendering to his. Moreover what is important to Martin is not so much the action itself or its results but that he should have performed it. What he resents in Palmer and Antonia is that they didn't give him the possibility of accepting or rejecting their liaison, that he was made to accept it before he could take any decision. The feeling of having acted and of being responsible for one's life gives the certainty that one really exists. When Antonia presents Martin with an unexpected interpretation of events which influenced his own life, by telling him that she has always loved Alexander and that Georgie tried to kill herself not for Martin but because she was jealous of Alexander's love for Antonia, Martin feels his universe falling to pieces.

The interplay of sexual relationships is extraordinary : almost all the combinations take place and everyone deceives everyone else in a way which defies rational explanation. It is remarkable, however, that in their quest for love and through their amorous wanderings, they are alone, either because they do not give themselves unreservedly or because they are not loved in return. They are imprisoned in a net of personal relations from which they can't escape. It all seems like a game from which it is impossible to withdraw. For Martin, the stake is his own self that he eventually rescues, invigorated by his love for Honor. Honor is another enigmatic and mysterious character



who exerts through incest a dreadful fascination. She is at once matter-of-fact and not entirely human, physically unattractive and insolent, without indulgence and with an air of unquestionable superiority, which for a long time prevents Martin from treating with her as an equal. It is at first not very clear why she opposes Palmer's marriage with Antonia. We realize later that her effort to persuade Martin to act is not entirely disinterested, but it is she who awakens in him a desire to find out clearly where he stands: "In such matters you cannot have both truth and what you call civilization" (p. 81). In an unsent letter to her Martin writes: "I owe it to you here to attempt to understand myself" (p. 142). What he ultimately understands and rejects are the false situations and the self-indulgence of his past. Substantially, he gains little except the conviction that everything has to be paid for and the certainty of his love for Honor. That love is a strange phenomenon. His fight with her in the cellar, her cutting of the napkins with the Samurai sword, an Oriental symbol of control and power, may have aroused in him this love 'devoid of tenderness and humour, a love practically devoid of personality' (p. 156). He may have been fascinated by her incestuousness. But if ever she appeared to him as a goddess, this certainly brought her down to more human proportions. In a way, it made her more accessible; she cannot be merciless because she is herself vulnerable as Palmer's departure with Georgie shows. She makes it clear to Martin that their love has nothing to do with happiness either. What he will make of that love is unpredictable. She told him once:

"I am a severed head such as primitive tribes and old alchemists used to use, anointing it with oil and putting a morsel of gold upon its tongue to make it utter prophecies. And who knows but that long acquaintance with a severed head might not lead to strange knowledge. For such knowledge one would have paid enough" (p. 225).

It may be that from a relationship with her one gains an intuition of the dark forces at work in the individual. Martin's own attempt at self-analysis in his unsent letter to her had led him to Freudian speculations. When earlier in the novel, he had told her "You believe in the dark gods", she had unexpectedly replied "I believe in people" (p. 120). Doesn't this suggest that people can be dark gods? It certainly shows that she responds to the concrete and is aware of the mysterious forces at work in reality. The novel ends with a series of questions asked by Martin about the nature and the future of their relationship. These questions remain unanswered, since life is unforeseeable. Another episode starts in his life and he must take his chance to survive it. So must Honor. She is human after all!

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The change that takes place in Martin is a change in character not in moral attitude. From the fear and subsequent loss of self-command he experienced when he was forced to face truth or a certain truth, he comes to acceptance of reality and even has the will to explore it. The entanglement of partners is not simply a game between people who have nothing better to do in a half-leisured milieu. It is meant to show Martin the ambiguity of people whom he took for granted and believed to be without mystery. When Antonia brings forward another view of their relationship, she forces him unwittingly to acknowledge the reality of other people. By letting the characters act spontaneously and in absolute freedom, Iris Murdoch leads them to an awareness of their real feelings or of their real situation. Not everything is made clear since they must precisely accept the unaccountable ; Palmer the psycho-analyst who so readily explains everyone else's behaviour is incapable of explaining his own indulgence in incest. Moreover it is not he who helps Martin to freedom but Honor, who by making real to him the complexity of human nature, makes him alive to the unknown world of instincts. Martin no longer flees blindly from reality, he explores different aspects of it, which is in fact what Alexander had suggested they should do when they examined together the rough shape of a sculptured head. He observed that the head alone, severed from the body with which it normally forms a continuous homogeneity, takes on a different meaning ; it suggests to them an 'illicit and incomplete relationship'. However the author seldom uses fantastic elements or they are skilfully fused with the familiar. The reader gets a glimpse of a reality other than that which he is accustomed to. For even those who refuse to be taken in by the fantasy of the plot are forced out of their complacency and get at least from Honor Klein a sense of the inscrutability of human nature.

The novels of Iris Murdoch differ from each other because of her awareness of the manifoldness of life and of people, but she deals in all with the same fundamental issues. In *An Unofficial Rose* <sup>(11)</sup> she tackles them with a new depth and a particular concern for the ulterior motives of men. Hugh Peronett attends the burial of his wife Fanny. Each text read by the priest sets Hugh remembering the circumstances of his life that could apply to it : his reminiscences show him as a rather dull man, a civil servant of medium capacity who could pass as a distinguished man just as he could pass as a good husband, though he was never in love with Fanny and his tenderness for her eventually turned into pity and resignation. The great event in his life was his love for Emma Sands, but he never left Fanny

(11) *An Unofficial Rose*, Chatto and Windus, 1962.

for reasons which he can't make clear to himself : " the terror and the glory of life had passed him by " (p. 15). Coming out of the cemetery he has a glimpse of Emma which makes her again real to him and leads him to the thought that he is now free to have her. His son, Randall, is in love with Lindsay Rimmer, Emma's companion, but he can't leave his wife Ann and his daughter Miranda for lack of money. Mildred Finch, whose husband is a homosexual, has been in love with Hugh for years and hopes now to get him to go with her on a trip to India. Her half-brother Felix is in love with Ann. It seems that these people's destiny depends on Randall's moves for if he runs away with Lindsay, Emma will be left alone and perhaps need Hugh, and Felix could then declare his love to Ann. Hugh makes Randall's flight possible by selling the beloved Tintoretto he has inherited from his wife. But things do not turn out as expected. Emma realises the futility of a relationship with Hugh as he wants it. Besides it is obvious that she is now a Lesbian and prefers a woman companion. So he goes to India with Mildred and Felix who will there join a French girl he was loath to abandon for Ann. Ann wanted him but she has been persuaded to wait for Randall by Miranda, herself in love with Felix.

In this mosaic of personal relations, love under its most diverse aspects recurs as almost the single motive of all the characters, from the older generation who are almost seventy down to Miranda and Peny, Hugh's Australian grandson, who are hardly more than fifteen. It seems as if Iris Murdoch will not be satisfied until she has fathomed the whole range of passions which the human heart can experience. The feelings and motives of the characters are carefully analysed, not merely suggested. There is none of the darting brilliance of *A Severed Head* but a slow and thorough investigation of what determines the course of a life. The characters are on the whole unpleasant, except for Peny, the innocent victim of his cousin Miranda, and intermittently Emma who comes out as a more human Honor. There is a definite parallel between Hugh and his son Randall, though Randall is at the same time more irresponsible and more attractive. Both have married 'women without darkness' that is without mystery. Both face the same dilemma at a 25 years interval : each wants to leave his wife and be free. Both admire the moral otherness of their mistress and consider that their falling in love with her was the best thing they ever did in their life. But whereas Randall lives in chaos, Hugh has a set of 'workable principles' which are not referable to morality but derive from a sense of what is the proper thing to do and can be applied in a crisis. In a way this is characteristic of Hugh's lack of imagination. One must indeed be obtuse or as Emma more charitably puts it 'divinely simple' to suppose

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that at 70 one can resume a relationship on the same terms as 25 years before. On the other hand, his sense of the future and his feeling that there remains something to be had from life is a refreshing expression of man's desire to survive. Hugh is sometimes grotesque when he declares his love to Emma but he is more often pathetic. Perhaps of all the Murdoch characters, he evidences at best human frailty and confusion. Experience and age have not taught him wisdom and he is as unsure of the right course of action as any young man. Life still holds surprises for him ; there is no end to human experience. Hugh's motives for selling the Tintoretto are not very clear. He admires Randall for daring a thing that he was too cowardly to do, and as he tells Mildred he never did anything extravagant or foolish himself. On the other hand, he thinks that when Lindsay is away, Emma will be glad to have him. But Emma compels him to admit that he did it for himself because he needed her, not she him. The basic error was to believe that the selling of the Tintoretto would at least set Randall free, for this is an assumption that money can solve all problems. If life is simply a matter of cash, why worry about the rest ? If Randall is not free it is because he lacks the strength to free himself. He is not responsible for the sort of deliverance from Ann he achieves in the end. He wants to have around him people who have *wills*, who take what they want : " Form, structure, will, something to encounter, something to make me *be* " (p. 39). He relies on others for qualities that he obviously lacks. He insists on existing through someone else because he can't exist by himself. He thinks that Ann is formless and structureless because she lives by moral or religious rules which make her abstract. As a matter of fact, she does lack form and structure because she is unable to see in morality anything but fixed rules which are irrelevant to her own predicament. Hence, a conflict arising from an incapacity to unravel her own emotions and to refer them to a reliable moral system. Neither does her openness allow her to understand Randall. Her 'lack of darkness' derives from a sort of moral simplicity, an ignorance of the richness and oddities of human personality. And she *is* a destroyer, the incarnate spirit of the Negative. Randall admires Lindsay's indifference to morality, her complete freedom, her honesty and genuineness. Yet their love is the object of a rather sordid bargaining, she giving it when she thinks he deserves it and of course making money the primary condition to their elopement. Randall who had thought that being alone with Lindsay and being rich would be the height of freedom is soon disappointed. He does not develop a new self and he can't help worrying about the nature of Lindsay and Emma's past relationship, and about the fact that Lindsay rules his life. It is not perfect freedom, but his restlessness is now compensated by the fact that he can

give free play to it. Also he still thinks of Ann but the finality of his abandon has freed him from her influence. Yet, he is reassured that whatever happens to him, Ann will always be waiting. By a sort of mental restriction he leaves a door open to go back to her and he is treacherous not to the conventional morality he so hates but to his new canons of freedom. He is right though: Ann will always be waiting for him because of her and Felix's incapacity to take what they want. Ann is always blaming herself for everything, even for what Randall does to her. Her inertia, her hesitations and meaningless scruples make her destiny. She realises the emptiness and the inadequacy of the moral rules she has been applying but she is inherently incapable of spontaneity or of an impulsive yielding to her desires. She has loved Felix for years and has denied her love; even now when she wants it and is free to enjoy it, she denies it, letting her daughter impose her will upon her. Miranda's perspicacity, her antagonism to her mother whom she considers as a rival, her merciless cunning in forcing her to abandon Felix, are stunning. She is extremely unpleasant, yet by forcing Ann and Felix to a decision, she is merely an instrument of their destiny. Ann overestimated Felix when she thought that he would not take her at her word but impose himself on her. He is even more fatalistic than she is and accepts her decision. As Marie-Laure Auboyer rightly writes to him: "Vous préférez que les choses arrivent sans avoir besoin d'être décidées" (p. 169). It seems that only Emma has enough will to master her own life. She is also the only person who shows some sense of humour, a quality of which the other characters are curiously devoid. It may seem strange that the most mysterious characters have the firmest hold on reality. Perhaps it is because their mystery derives from a deeper insight into the real working of the human soul. But even Emma betrays her weakness when she claims with the same eagerness as Hugh or Randall to be the author of the match between Randall and Lindsay, because she couldn't own even to herself that she has been abandoned. All the characters find it essential to give their life significance, to be actually responsible for what happens to them, and to be convinced that their actions really belongs to them. Randall cannot stand the idea that his actions 'could be stolen from him', that his flight with Lindsay is not really a personal move towards freedom. Equally, Ann is stunned to realise that the break between her and Felix is not the outcome of a personal decision but that she has been overruled by Miranda. "She had had no act at all of her own, she had been part of someone else's scheme, a thought almost in someone else's mind... Had she acted, or had her act been stolen from her? Can our acts be stolen from us?" (p. 339). This is the question that each character puts anxiously to himself. For Hugh the answer

is satisfactory. He feels free because he has really acted by giving Randall the possibility to gain freedom, a feeling which is strengthened by the assurance of his own survival after all the confusion and the misunderstandings. Randall cannot be so sure of his autonomy. He knows that freedom is not so easily conquered, that going away and taking what one wants is not enough. For Ann, no illusion is possible, only forgetfulness. After the realisation that she has acted irrationally, without motives, she is comforted by the thought that at least she has acted, until even that is taken away from her. Then she chooses to forget what she has done and what it means. She chooses not to know, either other people or herself. She accepts her destiny with resignation and settles down to a busy life : " She would never know and that would be her way of surviving". Thus, the continuance of life and the assurance that one has one's own share of it, are the only certainty.

Iris Murdoch subjects to a careful study the motives which drive people to action or paralyse them and thus determine their existence. More particularly she wonders about the causes of man's lack of freedom ; they are to be found in man himself : conventions, principles, moral laws or inner chaos. Almost all the characters are inherently weak : they are not free because of an inner incapacity to gain freedom. But what is worse is that their failure leads some of them to believe that freedom is not so important after all and that its absence is compensated for by the circumstances of life. What is the significance then of all this fretting and suffering? What is the use of action if it doesn't make any difference and if our destinies are what they are ? Is that a consolation ? There is a world of difference between Ann's resigned acceptance of her fate and Rosa or Mor's confidence in the future. The only conclusion one can draw here is that it is all absurd and meaningless. Does Iris Murdoch mean this ? Perhaps for certain people. Those who have no share in their own destiny, except the responsibility of their inertia, and whose life seems meaningless because they prefer not to be made aware of the meaning.

It is clear that Iris Murdoch is strongly indebted to existentialism. With different emphases all her novels are penetrated with the same philosophical concern which is actualized in the behaviour of the characters. Her outlook is more philosophical than ethical but this does not mean, as a critic suggested <sup>(12)</sup>, that she treats her characters with moral indifference. Philosophy can't be entirely dissociated from ethics. Besides, she is concerned with morality, not as a system into which man tries to fit his actions, but as an inner necessity.

(12) ENGELBORGH'S : ' John Wain en Iris Murdoch ', *Dietse Warande en Belfort*, Januari 1958, N. 1, p. 55.

It is through action that man exists and is responsible for his own life. The free act is not performed in accordance to, or violation of, a moral code but proceeds directly from instinctive life. Thus right and wrong lose their traditional meaning for each man must find his own rule of conduct. That is how man makes his life what it is and even alters the world in so far as his actions influence his environment. For man, the way to 'salvation' lies in self-knowledge. Complete integration, a coming to terms with their own personality is the kind of redemption achieved by her characters. What is important is not so much the act itself as being the free author of it. Some know exactly what they want and act accordingly but most people act impulsively when they feel an irresistible need to do so. In any case, the consequences of an action are unpredictable: "Our actions are like ships which we may watch set out to sea, and not know when or with what cargo they will return to port" (*The Bell*, p. 166). However, whatever crises or predicament they lead to, is temporary, ephemeral. And this is a comfort, not a cause of anxiety; it is often viewed as an opportunity for man to start anew on the strength of his past experience. It is true that people are alone, in the sense that they are alone responsible for what they are and also because they are mainly concerned with themselves. Also, she brings out the insecurity, the impermanence, the restlessness of contemporary life, its contingencies, which are as much a source of enjoyment as of pain. However, on the whole, her vision of the world is optimistic because of her characters' confidence that, whatever the circumstances, life is always worth living. Relations between human beings are often determined by a will to power which gives rise to conflict and strengthens the desire to be free. Freedom is the highest good but is seldom achieved because of an inner incapacity in man either to do what he really wants or to be free from the external pressure which imposes a pattern on his life. Real freedom, which gives life its meaning, is not simply a lack of constraint from others but an aptitude, arising partly from self-knowledge, to choose and to make one's life. People cannot be free because of their own weakness, not because of others. Unlike Sartre for whom "l'enfer, c'est les autres" (*Huis-Clos*), Iris Murdoch combines a desire to be free from other people with a great tolerance of them. Other people can be our hell, in which case we'd better flee from them, but the greatness of life lies in coexistence. The exercise of freedom involves a respect for the liberty of others and for what they are. It is among other people that we realise ourselves and this also implies a recognition of their separateness, their difference and their inner reality. Her art is humanistic, inspired by her apprehension of the rich variety of life and of individuals. It gives her novels their particular structure; she concentrates

on a few individuals who are not isolated but always seen in relation with the group. She pictures people living together and explores the problems arising from their association. A multiplicity of characters animates the spectacle of life. That spectacle cannot be looked at from one angle only. Reality has many faces and one is not necessarily more valuable than another. Her originality lies in ignoring any preconceived idea of the world and to bring to light its unexpected or usually ignored aspects, its extreme variety. Life cannot be stripped from the haphazard, the fortuitous, the contingent ; its movement is uncontrollable. This is equally true of human behaviour ; there is an abyss between thought and action which can abruptly fill with irrepressible emotions and change our existence. One must reckon on the unaccountable, the complexity of motives, the mystery of instincts.

Iris Murdoch's art is surrealist in that she goes deeper than the surface to bring out the force of instincts and of unconscious or unavowed desires. She makes the reader aware of a 'surreality'. Hence the moral '*dépassement*' which is an essential feature in her novels ; it does not proceed from a desire to shock for the sake of it, nor, I think, from cynicism ; it is an attempt to compel the reader to acknowledge a different field of references. The method has its own logic, its own morality. Some characters are mysterious or extraordinary ; they have a magic which fascinates partly because some aspect of their personality is incomprehensible or unfamiliar, partly because their knowledge of human nature gives them prestige or power in the eyes of the uninitiated. Their mystery reflects the mystery of an inner world. It is enhanced by a mixture of the real with the fantastic, or the presentation of the real in a fantastic light. Thus objects such as a fish bowl, a Japanese sword, a German dagger, a plait of hair, can be made strange and point to the weird idiosyncrasy of a character. In the same way, small incidents can lead to momentous revelation. The author has a sensibility to the outward richness of the world which serves her imagination admirably.

Yet, in spite of the interest aroused by her work, in spite of its technical perfection and the richness of life it conveys, the reader is aware of a disproportion between the quality of the achievement and his own response to it. Certainly, her intelligence and sympathetic understanding are remarkable, particularly in her treatment of male characters. We admire but we are not often moved. This is perhaps because we are seldom absorbed in the characters to the point of forgetting the author. She has been said to play with her characters as with puppets. The accusation is almost inevitable because everything is possible in her novels, and people do not so easily agree that the



exceptional is as normal as the commonplace. But if we feel her presence, it may be due to the impression she gives, of exploring with the reader the situations she has created and of acting as a guide through the labyrinth of her own imagination. On the other hand, as a humorist, she looks at life from the outside, she does not participate in it. Also, the technical skill with which the contingent, which she considers as the essence of personality<sup>13</sup>, is made part of the narrative gives it sometimes an air of contrivance. "Form is the temptation of love and its peril, whether in art or life: to round off a situation, to sum up a character. But the difference is that art has *got* to have form, whereas life need not" (13). But form, if it is too obvious, can deprive art of its look of authenticity, can prevent it from 'being' life. That is perhaps why *Under the Net*, though far less formal and sophisticated than *The Bell* or *A Severed Head*, is more congenial.

However, her technique is also her strength as a novelist, for she can recreate within a limited framework a fragment of life that gives "a sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life and the opacity of persons" (14). She also wrote that "a novel must be a house fit for free characters to live in, and to combine form with a respect for reality with all its odd contingent ways is the highest art of prose" (15). Doubts may arise in the reader suspicious of a freedom which upsets the traditional picture of society, but surely an intelligent sympathy for the diverse forms in which people choose to appear, conduces to an insight into human nature which is the basis of all art.

(Liège)

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(13) IRIS MURDOCH, *The Sublime and the Beautiful*, *The Yale Review*, Vol. XLIX, Dec. 1959, N. 2, p. 271.

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