

# Iris Murdoch's *Under the Net*

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It must by now appear to us rather curious that, when Miss Iris Murdoch's first novel, *Under the Net*, appeared in 1954, it was hailed as part of the 'angry' movement of the period and closely associated with such books as *Lucky Jim*, *Hurry On Down*, and even *Room at the Top*. Certainly the novel has its period qualities. There is an impressive and *real* account of London, necessary and contingent, and of its life, its pubs, its river; there is a sharp, accurate sense of the feel of contemporary life; there is—as in several of the other 'angry' novels—a picaresque structure set in predominantly Bohemian milieux and concerned with a raffish, classless, intellectual 'outsider' hero; there is an active, adventurous plot that takes that hero through a broad range of social situations and classes. Yet the book in fact stakes very little on its accuracy or its power to depict the world of the Welfare State and the Butler Education Act; it is dominated by an imagination of a strikingly different order from that of the other 'angries'; and even the dimensions of Jake Donaghue's 'outsiderness' are pursued in quite another way—a way that makes the book seem substantial in the comparison, and Donaghue's situation complex. Now, with the benefit of four more novels by this fascinating author to guide us, the veins that we are likely to find strongest in re-reading *Under the Net* are the curious ornateness of mind which Miss Murdoch repeatedly manifests—this strange Murdoch baroque that loves objects rare and strange, characters involved and mysterious, inventions of a glowing, imagistic quality—and a plot that is as clearly a philosophical one as a plot can be. *Under the Net* is indeed a dialectical novel in comic form, a novel about the relations of words to actions and about what makes for good and bad human intercourse.

The shape of the book is a shape with relation to the mind and emotions of Jake Donaghue, its hero. The picaresque form is a quest—here a quest for a home and money; a quest for people, particularly for Hugo Belfounder, who is, says Jake, "my destiny" and for Anna Quentin; and a quest for the solution of certain intellectual and emotional problems which Jake has at the beginning of the book. The book is dominated by chases, usually of grand comic proportions, by lockings in and lockings out, by cages and masks and concealments. At the beginning of the book we find Jake homeless and jobless, his only centre the accommodation address provided by Mrs. Tinckham. At the end of the novel Jake is in much the same state. Few things have changed for him; after talk of love he is no nearer to being in it; after much exchange of money—large quickly compounded sums of money are constantly offered and lost in the

book—he has much the same bank balance as he had in the beginning. But a process of renewal has taken place within him: “It was the first day of the world”, he comments. In particular, two things have altered for the better; he has developed from being a translator, a literary hack, a man who sees words and ideas as separate things, to being creative in his own right; and he has developed from having “shattered nerves” to being able to encounter life and loneliness.

At the beginning of the novel, Jake’s uncommitted situation is much stressed; he confesses to a traditional bohemian failing—“There’s nothing that irritates me so much as paying rent”—and, though he is generous, he makes it a matter of policy to appear penniless. He observes: “It is not in my nature to make myself responsible for other people. I find it hard enough to pick my own way along”. Although he has strong literary interests, he lives by hack-work, and prefers this to original writing, which he does “as little as possible”. He has

. . . shattered nerves. Never mind how I got them. That’s another story, and I’m not telling you the whole story of my life. I have them; and one effect of this is that I can’t bear being alone for long . . . I love to be protected. I am therefore a parasite, and live usually in my friends’ houses.

But though to some extent Jake is the conventional hero of much of the literature of the fifties—the intelligent rebel, the sleeper on other people’s couches, the honest man of art poor amid the riches of the world—Jake is in a complex philosophical quandary, and it is the terms of this quandary that the book seeks to draw out. Jake’s position is that of the writer or the intellectual who is not sure how much one owes to the aesthetic and the social, with their contesting claims. It is a historic quandary—it is, for instance, treated in the discussions between Ladislav and Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*—for the modern, the classless intellectual. Jake has to find a mode for his detachment that will not leave him dry and barren; the book is about his half-accidental movement toward a *modus vivendi*. At the beginning of the book Jake’s creative urges have gradually been silenced, and his translations are not only hack-work but objects to be exchanged for money—or dogs. “Nothing is more paralysing than a sense of historical perspective, especially in literary matters,” he remarks, in telling us that he is virtually about to decide that he lives in an age in which novels cannot really be written. Certainly he confronts, in his acquaintances, persons who dramatise doubts about the artistic use of language; three of his friends indicate in different ways philosophies of silence that reflect his own situation. One of these friends, Dave Gellman, is a linguistic philosopher dedicated to the spoken word (he is an extra-mural lecturer!) and to a spartan, social philosophy of life. He lives in “contingent” London; his flat is next to, and dominated by, the cold walls of a modern hospital; he represents a spare, utilitarian

view of the world. To him, Jake is “the incorrigible artist” and he believes that Jake should get a job as a hospital *orderly*. By contrast, Anna Quentin offers a softer, more aesthetic world, a world of silks and toys and romantic feelings.

Anna is a former singer now likewise committed to a philosophy of silence. The way in which the quality of philosophical notions is conveyed through characters, objects, places and lines of action is nowhere better shown than in the chapter where Jake, in search of Anna, finds her at the miming theatre in Hammersmith, a chapter dominated by notions and images of silence, treated in a dream-like, surrealistic way characteristic of Miss Murdock’s technique. It is perhaps curious that in a book in which the male characters and the male mind are so accurately rendered the female characters should be handled as rich, romantic objects—Anna is described as “mysterious”, “unfathomable” and so on—but this is, in part, because they function as objects of search for the mentally inquisitive male characters. Thus in a later scene in the book, the long dream-like sequence in which Jake chases Anna across Paris, Anna is described, extremely romantically, as an order of life from which Jake feels separated and which he yet feels the necessity to pursue. Anna is an ornate person, defined ornately; we find her at first surrounded by a vast toyshop of rich objects—“I looked at her, and amid the enchanting chaos of silks and animals and improbable objects that seemed to rise almost to her waist she looked like a very wise mermaid rising out of a motley coloured sea”—and she is herself “like a great doll”. Anna exists in relation to the arts; though she has given up singing she is now devoted to mime, an art that is “very simple” and “very pure”. In singing, one exploits one’s charm to seduce people, whereas mime is a more aesthetic and therefore a more honest art. The same philosophy of silence Anna applies to love; she tells Jake that love is not emotional straining and scheming for possession, not a feeling, but is action and silence. Jake, though tempted to shake the thundersheet, a hangover from the old theatre which Anna is going to sell, accepts the silence of the place, and spends the night there, sleeping in a bear’s skin.

But the character who dominates this part of the book, and Jake’s philosophy at this stage, is Hugo Belfounder, whom Jake describes as “my destiny”. His acquaintance with Belfounder is the theme of the book, he remarks, and tells us that he has unfinished business with him. Belfounder’s history is carefully filled out for us; he is of German stock, he inherited an armaments firm which, because of his ardent pacifism, he converted to a rocket factory, he is dedicated to the impermanent and perishable arts and sees firework set-pieces as an art akin to music, calling for “both manual dexterity and creative ingenuity”. If, as seems intended, the mythological story of Vulcan, Mars and Venus is used to provide a loose framework for the novel, Belfounder certainly stands for Vulcan. Indeed,

this association is worked out with a good deal of surrealist ingenuity, even down to the use of such locales as Hammersmith and such arts as fireworks, the film and finally watchmaking to convert the myth into the new mythology of Miss Murdoch's fiction. Unfortunately for Hugo's theories about the value of an impermanent, momentary art, all art is mediated by society. Hugo's fireworks are classified into styles by the newspapers and, later, when he goes into films, his early expressionist endeavours develop into quite ordinary films, if only because Hugo is, accidentally, extremely good at business. But the distinctive influence that Hugo has on Jake is a philosophical one; immured together at a cold cure research centre (Miss Murdoch has a rare gift for finding such milieux!), he exposes in conversation a theoretical attitude which enormously impresses Jake, an attitude which lacks "both the practical interests and the self-conscious moral seriousness of those who are usually dubbed idealists" and manifests an objectivity and detachment that shows "less like a virtue and more like a sheer gift of nature". To Hugo, everything has a theory and yet there was no master theory—"I have never met a man more destitute than Hugo of anything which could be called a metaphysic or general *Weltanschauung*. It was rather perhaps that of each thing he met he wanted to know the *nature*—and he seemed to approach this question in each instance with an absolute freshness of mind". But the conspicuous feature of Hugo's philosophy is that it is opposed to description; he feels that one makes too many concessions to the need to communicate, that language is a machine for making falsehoods, that only actions speak. The consequence is that Jake, impressed, starts to make notes of the conversation and, in a delightful piece of comic paradox, produces a book called *The Silencer* in which a touched-up version of both their arguments appears. A part of this book is reproduced, and Hugo's argument here emerges as the case that theory obtrudes at the moments when one is most warmly involved in life, that it is dispensable:

... the movement away from theory and generality is the movement toward truth. All theorizing is flight. We must be ruled by the situation itself and this is unutterably particular. Indeed it is something to which we can never get close enough, however hard we may try as it were to crawl under the net.

Even art, he says, works against theory, and for almost all of us truth can be attained only in silence. It is, I think, clear that this poses the problem of the book, and Jake's problem, which is the problem of picking one's way between the opposed camps of theory and silence, the "unutterably particular quality" of human situations and the social presentation of them in art. In a good essay called "Iris Murdoch: The Solidity of the Normal" (*International Literary Annual*, No. 2), G. S. Fraser makes the point that in this book the

private will is seen at odds with the social spirit and the needs of external co-operation; I think this is true—but the cards are not stacked all one way, in favour of the private will. Indeed, when Jake re-reads these words from *The Silencer* he reflects that the opposition can be strengthened, and the novel provides a kind of dialectical opposite to Hugo in the person of “Lefty” Todd.

Todd, the leader of the New Independent Socialist Party, is the man who represents the case for a practical, political unity between theory and practice, and it is significant that throughout the book Hugo is continually shown as yielding to him; all Hugo’s worlds of silence and art are replaced by the insistent weight of the N.I.S.P. Lefty defines the rôle of the intellectual, for Jake, quoting Marx’s observation that social being is the foundation of consciousness, and glossing this to mean that it is the function of political parties first to think and then to act. Lefty observes that Jake needs to become involved—“As soon as you do something and knock into people you’ll begin to hate a few of them. Nothing destroys abstraction so well as hatred”—and advises him to write plays, doing this by analyzing current successes and then filling in ‘the message’. These crude demands are not of course the solution that Jake chooses, but they do pose a positive aspect of his dilemma. It is after the N.I.S.P. take over the mime theatre that Jake finds he can shake the thunder-sheet, and thereafter he reflects that “my previous pattern of life was gone forever”. And it is shortly after this that Jake is pushed into the expedient of stealing Mr. Mars, the film-star dog, and releasing him from his cage.

In the following chapters, Jake explores the terms of his intellectual rôle. It is by its nature isolated, yet Jake, in refusing the offer of the easy scriptwriting job that Madge makes, commits himself to the isolation and poverty he so dislikes. In Paris on the fourteenth of July he experiences to the full his isolation; like Polyphemus on the fontaine des Medicis, all he can do is overlook the lovers, and when he sees Anna and pursues her, all he is left with are her shoes. We feel that in this moment a certain pattern of life and of art has escaped Jake, and when he returns to Dave Gellman and takes a job as a hospital orderly we feel that he has been driven to an alternative solution, one that unites the aesthetic and the social. And indeed the hospital offers an expedient which he espouses at the end of the book: “It occurred to me that to spend half the day doing manual work might be very calming to the nerves of one who was spending the other half doing intellectual work, and I could not imagine why I had not thought before of this way of living, which would ensure that no day could pass without *something* having been done, and so keep that sense of uselessness, which grows in prolonged periods of sterility, away from me forever”. In this way Jake does find a way of mediating between the solitude of the intellectual life, which may itself produce sterility, and the human contact which

he requires but cannot completely immerse himself in. And this in turn provokes the radical revaluation that changes Jake at the end of the book, for Hugo appears in the hospital as a patient—a victim of a head-wound sustained at an N.I.S.P. meeting—and reveals certain facts which show Jake that his account of the world and the relationships between people within it have been quite false. For now Jake's mood is simply to "get the facts: theories could come later". And the conversation that Hugo and Jake have does in fact restructure all Donaghue's universe. "A pattern in my mind was suddenly scattered and the pieces of it went flying about me like birds", he says; and this simile is reinforced by the later image of the starlings that live in their hundreds outside Hugo's flat, a mass of noise, and finally enter through the open window at the end of the book.

Thus Jake has imposed his theories on everyone, and acted throughout as if his often hastily formed deductions were true; he has heard that Hugo was in love with Sadie, but has refused to believe it. With Hugo's revelations all the past events of the book are open to a new interpretation. Anna, it emerges, felt unrequited love for Hugo (not the other way round) and it is Anna who initiated the mime theatre; indeed, we are led to suspect, it could well be that Anna led Hugo to his anti-theoretical theory, and that Anna *in fact got this from Jake*. "I knew everything. I got it all the wrong way round, that's all!" says Jake, and Hugo comments that "it's like life, isn't it? I love Sadie, who's keen on you, and you love Anna, who's keen on me. Perverse, isn't it?" The effect of this "wrench which had dislocated past, present and future" is to give Jake a new response to people, and in particular to Anna:

It seemed as if, for the first time, Anna really existed now as a separate being and not as part of myself. To experience this was extremely painful. Yet as I tried to keep my eyes fixed upon where she was I felt toward her a sense of initiative which was perhaps after all one of the guises of love. Anna was something which had to be learnt afresh. When does one ever know a human being? Perhaps only after one has realized 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 co-existence; and this too is one of the guises of love.

It is this discovery which accounts for the note of celebration upon which the novel ends, for it is a recognition of the individuality of persons and of the need to conceive things as they really are and not as he pleases. Jake has found Hugo and learned what he needs to know from him; he has balanced the demands of the intellectual and the practical life; he has achieved a renewal of his creative energy. He is still as lonely and as poor as he was at the beginning of the book; but he is adjusted to his solitude and he does have Mr. Mars, on whom what money he has gained in the course of the novel has been

spent. Moreover, the revival of his creativity is associated with the renewal of his sense of wonder. He has found a way out of silence and out of abstraction; the aesthetic must answer to the moral, to reality, and he must respond to the individuality of others and at the same time respond to the demands of his own distinctive nature and his own profession and social rôle. So he accepts the need for his intellectual solitude much as he accepts the separate existence of objects and people. If he began the book with Vulcan, he ends it in the company of a freed Mars.

The revelation at the end is, in substance, not unlike that we get at the end of some of Henry James's novels, and in this sense Iris Murdoch is of the tradition of the English novel. Yet in the organization of the book and her means of supporting this ending, she strikes us, I think, as an inventor of a very unusual sort. To begin with, the ending is not so much moral as philosophical; if, in James, we recognise the need to allow each person his own independence, this is because to encroach upon human individuality is a moral fault. In *Under the Net* it is more conspicuously a philosophical fault. Further, although the book is marvellously controlled through the (very masculine) intelligence and curiosity of the figure of Jake Donaghue, it does nonetheless have a very playful aspect. The style is neat, light and flexible—able to comprehend the variousness of Jake's mind, and the overall surrealistic fancies of the novelist. There can surely be no doubt that surrealistic is the right word to use here; the dedication to Raymond Queneau should remind us that, though the treatment can be sensibly compared at times with Henry James's and the matter (as G. S. Fraser points out) with the idealist philosophy of the turn of the century, there is a very modern vein of fantasy at work here too. Indeed, the difference between the weighty, scrupulous Jamesian style, and the very un-Jamesian subject-matter, becomes the basic comic strategy of *A Severed Head*. In this book as in *Under the Net* many of the scenes are contrived for their sheer ornateness, their pure surprise. And surely if the story of Mars, Venus and Vulcan is used as a kind of scaffolding, its use cannot but seem playful and light. It is the philosophical theme that is used at times like stones to weight down the whole structure.

In the fiction of a society with greater moral consensus than we now have, a characteristic shape for the novel was a pattern of the hero's sin, repentance and absolution. In the modern novel it is more frequently a pattern of wrong thinking, reappraisal, and true vision. Certainly Jake learns a fresh truth; but the real difficulty of the book is the unsatisfactory rendering of the crisis, which is dissipated, and its terms left unclear. It is perhaps for this reason that Miss Murdoch's most recent novel, *A Severed Head*, seems so much more successful. It is conducted in a more muted world, in a much more controlled comic vein, but it tackles the same problem not in the philosophic but in the mythological dimension. The theme

of *A Severed Head* is of the thinness of the upper-middle-class drawing-room philosophy of good personal relations and of not withholding anything. It is a world of highly civilized persons and highly rational talkings-over of affairs and passions. But the hero, Martin Lynch-Gibbon, discovers that the gibbon in man is not so easily lynched! The totemistic figure of Honor Klein, an anthropologist and a kind of dark god, speaks out for the secret and violent forces that lie behind civilization. The book bears certain curious similarities with Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*, not only in its totemism but in its curiosity about coming to truth and the means by which truth is known. And whereas in *Under the Net* the mythological background is used half-fancifully, half to remind us of the primitive sources of the imagination, in *A Severed Head* this is its explicit function; the process of the book is a gradual stripping away of all relationships and concealments in order that the hero can reach the godliness and the objective state which is nearer to truth and which enables truth and power to be won. In this sense the book is a ceremonial initiation instead of the haphazard search of *Under the Net*.

Nonetheless *Under the Net* probably attains to greater charm than does *A Severed Head*—if only because the picaresque structure and the freer form gives greater rein to that original imaginative exploration which is Miss Murdoch's great gift. The very excitement of following her invention carries us over those scenes where we feel she is aggrandising things that will bear no more enlargement. In an essay called "Against Dryness", recently published in *Encounter* (January, 1961), Miss Murdoch speaks of the importance of literature; through it, she says, we can re-discover a sense of "the density of our lives" which our liberal theory of personality has tended to conceal. *A Severed Head* is much more explicitly about that density—it is a kind of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in which Lord Chatterley tells how he becomes Mellors—and is therefore a much better managed book; *Under the Net* seeks rather to invoke it, and in this lies its delightful zest.

