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Abstract

Discusses Murdoch's *The Green Knight*, which uses themes and plot elements from *Gawain*, but interpreted in her own fashion.

Additional Keywords

Murdoch, Iris. *The Green Knight*; Murdoch, Iris. *The Green Knight*—Sources; Sir Gawain and the Green Knight—Influence on Iris Murdoch

So Familiar, Yet So Strange: Mythic Shadows of the Medieval *Gawain* Romance in Iris Murdoch's *Green Knight*

Carla Arnell

THE British novelist Iris Murdoch is, undoubtedly, one of the most prolific mythopoetic writers of the twentieth century. From her philosophical writings, which are deeply imbued with Platonic myths, to her novels, dialogues, and dramas, which borrow heavily from classical Greek and biblical mythology, Murdoch has shown a penchant for raiding the riches of old myths to fund her own writing. Her penultimate novel, *The Green Knight*, published in 1993, is no different in this respect. It draws broadly upon familiar stories such as Leda and the Swan or the story of Cain and Abel, to name just a few of the myths that her novel reconfigures. And, as *The Green Knight's* title suggests, Murdoch turns especially to medieval literature in this novel, using archetypal motifs from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to lay her novel's mythic foundation. This mythopoetic use of medieval literature puts her novel in the great tradition of Lewis, Tolkien, and Williams, all of whom used medieval literature mythopoetically to enrich their modern fictions. And yet, Murdoch is anything but a traditional mythopoetic novelist.

Familiar as Murdoch's mythic materials are, as they surface in her novel, they appear uncommonly strange, too—akin to shipwrecked fragments in a much larger sea of stories. For, unlike Jane Smiley's 1991 novel *A Thousand Acres*, which preserves almost *in toto* the Shakespearean *Lear* plot it is modeled upon, Murdoch leaves neither character nor plot entirely intact in her revision of the novel's primary source, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In Murdoch's hands, the shape of this medieval romance is peculiarly borrowed, bent, and ultimately even "broken." And it is the strange quality of her mythic shape-shifting that I hope to illuminate in the essay to follow.

For Murdoch, we are myth-makers all, using symbols, images, and myths to interpret the world and translate our perceptions into meaningful stories (*Metaphysics* 505). In Murdoch's view, though, the old images and stories we live by need to be re-seen, revised, and sometimes even "broken" in an effort to

discern stories that are pure fantasy or plain lying from stories that are in some way truth-bearing. In everyday life, this challenge is no easy task, as Murdoch's characters repeatedly demonstrate. In fact, if there is a pervasive darkness about *The Green Knight*, it is because the characters are all dreamers of one kind or another, trapped in a sad shadowland of illusion akin to the darkened terrain through which Rembrandt's Polish Rider courageously forges in the painting featured on the novel's front cover.¹ In this respect, Murdoch's novel explores the dreaming and illusion that are a part of the most ordinary lives, for she uses myths and images from medieval romance to illustrate the fantasy that springs up everywhere in her characters' lives—out of their anxiety and hubris, their hatred, and their love. And yet, Murdoch also recognizes that not all dreams are deceptive fantasies. We live by our dreams, too, she thinks, meaning that “mythical pictures should be kept and used” as spiritual guides, so long as they are recognized *as myths* and not as “literal factual information” (*Metaphysics* 403).

In this essay, therefore, I shall explore how Murdoch balances skepticism about and faith in myth as she borrows mythic material from the medieval *Gawain* legend to construct her own novel. On the one hand, Murdoch “breaks” and distorts her mythic material, defamiliarizing the traditional *Gawain* legend in order to distance characters and readers from it and emphasize the ways in which their messy, contingent world overflows the boundaries of neat mythic paradigms. On the other hand, though, she “keeps” and “uses” traditional mythic pictures as “enlivening spiritual images” (403). In particular, she reenacts mythic patterns from the *Gawain* romance in order to resurrect its special constellation of values: patience, cleanness, “trouthe,” and, more mysteriously, the pearl of great price. Ultimately, she uses the *Gawain* poet's symbolic landscape to revise the traditional Grail myth and map a redemptive quest out of the shadowland of illusion and into the light of truth and goodness.

The chief player in Murdoch's literary reenactment of the *Gawain* romance is Peter Mir, the novel's “generic refugee”² from the world of romance and the Green Knight's modern avatar. Mir intrudes dramatically upon the novel's quiet scene, arriving suddenly like a *deus ex machina*, with just enough of the trappings of romance to raise fear and wonder in the minds of the Anderson family and its friends, a circle much like Arthur's court in its apparent innocence,

idealism, and peaceful seclusion. The Russian stranger Peter Mir arrives at Hammersmith on a quest for revenge: ultimately, he seeks retribution for a mortal blow he received at the hands of Lucas Graffe, a reclusive historian who had been trying to club his brother, Clement, to death in a park when Mir intervened, receiving the fatal blow in Clement's stead.

Both Mir's mission and his physical appearance connect him closely with the mysterious green challenger in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In fact, Mir's physical similarities to this legendary predecessor are so obvious as to be almost comical. Mir appears wearing a "dark green tweed jacket" and carrying a green umbrella, which he wields sometimes like a weapon. An imposing large-boned man with "big powerful hands," a "bulky" head and a mane of curly chestnut brown hair (103), he is akin in his green attire and burly frame to the "half legendary green giant" who rides into Arthur's court (7.136-46).³ Furthermore, Mir's "odd" foreign accent (103) emphasizes his status as an outsider in the novel; like the Green Knight of legend, he clearly comes from afar.

Of course, Mir comes so far and so determinedly in order to exact vengeance on his foe. In this pursuit, he reenacts the old story of the "return blow" (or "exchange of blows"), a traditional narrative element found in many folk tales but perhaps most famously in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.⁴ In that legend, Sir Gawain takes up the Green Knight's challenge to behead him, but upon doing so, he must agree to meet the knight a year later to receive a similar blow from the same knightly challenger. So Mir, who has been nearly clubbed to death by Lucas Graffe, seeks to return Graffe's blow and reenact the original scene of his clubbing. But whereas the Green Knight of legend is enigmatic about the reasons for his challenge to Gawain, Mir explicitly insists that his quest is one for justice.⁵ Graffe has wounded him and destroyed his life; therefore, Mir thinks it only just that he should do the same to Graffe. Moreover, Mir claims to be the instrument of God's will in his search for justice (124). Quoting the Book of Isaiah, Mir warns Lucas, "I am your judge. [. . .] The heavens—shall be rolled together—as a scroll—" (253).⁶ In thus invoking Jewish scripture, Mir's appropriation of the "return blow" motif becomes a mythical expression of his commitment to a religious law of retributive justice. Mir himself explains this form of justice in one of his meetings with Lucas by saying:

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In fact the idea of retribution is fundamental to justice, where it has mitigated punishment just as often as it has amplified it. Recall that men were once hanged for stealing sheep. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth serves as an image for both restitution and revenge. The punishment must fit the crime, being neither more severe, nor less. In some countries, as you know, some crimes, stealing for instance, are punished by the severance of a hand. So in this case, your just punishment would seem to be the reception of a blow upon the head delivered with equal force. (126)

Upon scrutinizing Mir closely, Clement wonders to himself, "Why does he look so like an animal? [. . .] he smiles like a dog. He has proud nervy nostrils like a horse, and his hair is like a close pelt, and he has big prominent dark eyes. He is horrible, yet he is pathetic too" (125). Even Mir's revenge is sometimes described as an almost animal-like necessity, a primal obsession, for Mir tells Lucas mysteriously, "I have pursued you because I *need* you. We are eternally connected" (123; emphasis added). The brutality of his desire only reinforces his wild and animalistic character; in one of his encounters with Lucas, he snarls, "I want to maim and cripple you, I want to damage your mind—" (252). Not only does he seek to destroy Lucas, but he also wishes to glory in the power the opportunity to take revenge offers him. And Mir himself recognizes the natural law at work in his desire to dominate his foe; he confesses to Lucas, "I have also wished, another natural reaction, to display to you the power I have to punish you [. . .]" (128). For Mir, power as well as hatred is a source of natural delight, and they both feed his need for revenge. Thus Murdoch draws upon the negative associations of the wild man to illustrate the extent to which Peter Mir is governed by natural instinct, the amoral forces of desire, in his quest to take vengeance on Lucas.

Yet both Mir and the Green Knight are deeply ambiguous characters, associated with the world of death as well as the world of nature. In fact, many years ago A. H. Krappe argued that the "true" identity of the Green Knight was God of the Dead rather than vegetation demon or natural spirit (208-09). Though many contemporary medievalists now agree that the Green Knight is not meant to have a single identification, Krappe's essay establishes one important aspect of the Green Knight's terrifying character.⁸ For, the Green Knight comes from the deathly realm beyond the barrow downs and, through his challenge, brings Gawain to an absolute confrontation with the young knight's own death.

Mir, too, has apparently returned from the realm of the dead. Since his fateful clubbing, he was considered dead by all, and his mysterious return to life surprises nearly everyone. Yet even in his “resurrection,” he seems to retain an aura of death, which he half-acknowledges and a few other characters notice. When the other characters ask Moy, the youngest and most intuitive of the Anderson daughters, what she thinks of the strange man they have just met, Moy remarks, “I don’t know—he seems to me to be—dead” (168). Mir himself explains to Lucas, “You thought I was dead, perhaps I was dead, perhaps I am dead. But this *desire for equity* has lifted me up and will not let me rest” (123). According to Mir, the impetus to revenge has given him new life. And indeed, he seems to feed upon images and fantasies of Lucas’s death for sustenance; he tells Lucas, “Since I regained my mind I have thought, and dreamt too, of nothing but killing you” (252). Mir’s mind, we gradually realize, is possessed, even obsessed, by death.

Therefore, from the time Peter Mir first appears outside the Anderson family’s house, clad in green from head to foot, he is in fact an image of death in life. Though his friend Bellamy’s christological interpretation of him and other people’s prating of medical miracles suggest that he has been miraculously returned to life, he is actually no more than “a zombie, a ghostly awful dummy, a puppet,” as Lucas puts it (254). As is common in Murdoch’s metaphysical schema, what appears to be true is merely illusory. Mir may appear to be a living human being, but he is a dead soul. Ironically, the thoughts, images, and fantasies that “raise him from the dead” also leave him a ghostly shadow from that realm rather than a living being. For in his revenge quest, it is his spiritually dead self that lives.

Despite Mir’s relentless desire for revenge, another desire possesses him which disrupts his revenge plot and makes Murdoch’s Mir story less than a neat reprise of the “return blow” plot as it is found in the *Gawain* romance. Apparently the initial blow to Mir’s head has caused him to forget something extremely important which he desperately wishes to recall. And so, after several hostile interviews between Lucas and Mir, Mir proposes a ritual reenactment of the original crime involving Lucas, Clement, and Mir, hoping that the reenactment will restore his lost memory. Although Lucas at first distances himself from the scheme, explaining that he is not a “romantic” like Mir (251), he ultimately agrees to participate in Mir’s drama, regarding the whole affair as an amusing “charade.” Curiously enough, when all the “actors” arrive at the

destined park clearing, it is Clement not Mir who begins to direct things, delivering an elaborate homily about reconciliation and trying to direct the scene to a peaceful conclusion. Mir simply waits quietly for the dramatic catastrophe—Lucas's enacted reprise of the original blow. Yet in submitting himself both to Clement's direction and Lucas's mercy, Mir significantly shifts roles in his own drama—from impatient author of a plot to avenge himself to patient actor. And it is perhaps his patient vulnerability that precipitates the crucial action to follow.

What actually happens next, however, is entirely opaque to the reader, since we experience it through the consciousness of a religious character named Bellamy who has accompanied Mir. To help Mir concentrate, Bellamy shuts his eyes and enters into a kind of ecstatic prayer, and when he finally re-opens his eyes, he sees Peter Mir fall to the ground in a flash of light. Perhaps Mir is struck by lightning, as Clement immediately suggests. Perhaps he is struck by an angel, as the Christian Bellamy avers. Or perhaps Lucas hits him a second time with the baseball bat, as Clement later suspects and Mir half intimates. Yet whatever the source of the second blow, its force stuns and then awakens him, enabling him to remember what he had lost—his consciousness of God, the “pearl of great price” that Lucas's first blow had bereft from him. The memory of God immediately prompts him to “die to” all the plots, designs and fantasies that had preoccupied his mind and driven him to revenge (300). And in a conciliatory letter written to Lucas a few days later, he explains, “My desire for revenge, an eye for an eye, the humiliation and destruction of my enemy, is now understood by me as an impulse of unenlightened egoism, a submission to determinism, an evil fantasy, which I now hereby repudiate and make to vanish” (307). Thus the “return blow” story strangely becomes the “repeat blow” story in Murdoch's novel, disrupting Mir's mechanical drive for revenge and, as the critic David Gordon has said, “homeopathically” healing his soul (180).

Unfortunately for Mir, although the return to virtue requires only one person, reconciliation must involve two people. Thus Mir realizes that he needs Lucas's further cooperation in achieving full reconciliation. Moreover, Mir believes that he and Lucas need more than mere “words” for a meaningful reconciliation—they need truth, too (317). So when he visits Lucas at home, he initiates a second drama: a ritual wounding reminiscent of the beheading

game at the end of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. This time, Lucas takes his turn (as Mir had done in the clearing) submitting himself to his rival's power; Lucas plays the knightly victim, Mir the executioner as Lucas bares his chest before Mir's gleaming umbrella knife. And even in the face of such peril, Lucas, unlike Gawain, fearlessly hazards his life.

In contrast to the medieval legend, however, where the beheading ordeal serves primarily as a test of the victim Gawain's character, the wounding of Lucas is less about Lucas than it is about Mir: it serves as a test of Mir's truthfulness and the strength of his new being. During the ritual "game," Mir assumes absolute authority over Lucas's fate. Yet given this advantage over his enemy, he renounces his power to kill and instead, as Lucas puts it, "dispatches a symbolic retribution, like an artist and a gentleman" (322). Like the Green Knight who barely nicks Gawain's neck as a sign of the young knight's "untrouthe," Mir marks Lucas's chest with "the merest pinprick" (321). This harmless nicking of Lucas acknowledges the fact of Lucas's crime and the real presence of evil within him. For, despite Mir's many requests that Lucas confess his crime to his friends and family, Lucas has resolutely refused to admit that he tried to kill his brother. Thus the knife mark serves partly as a symbol of Mir's commitment to the truth and Lucas's distance from it. However, although Lucas's crime cannot be erased, what can be changed—purified—is Mir's spiritual state and the quality of his actions towards Lucas. In its most important respect, the second "ritual" allows Mir to enact the contents of his changed imagination, moving his vision of mercy out of the private realm of reflection into the public realm of dramatic spectacle—here performed for Lucas's brother, Clement. The knife-mark may be seen, therefore, as a symbolic measure of Mir's mercy, his purity of soul, and his truthfulness.

Yet even after the curtain falls over Mir's drama, Mir has one more act to perform, a Prospero-like epilogue to the events that have come before. To celebrate his recovery and his good will, Mir hosts a grand party for all his new Hammersmith friends. All is well until the social worker Tessa Millen arrives with Sir Edward Fonsett, a professional psychiatrist; Fonsett claims that Mir is a wealthy meat butcher who has escaped from his psychiatric clinic and needs to return immediately for further treatment. Without protest, Mir agrees to accompany Fonsett. In doing so, Mir seems to acknowledge that he cannot live "above" life, in some kind of supernatural invulnerability. His spiritual enlightenment may free him from the vice of egoistic fantasy, but it does not

free him from the constraints of ordinary living, including sickness and death. Thus Mir once again chooses to be a patient in the fullest sense of that word; he departs not just as a patient in Fonsett's psychiatric clinic, but also as a patient sufferer—one whose strength is to endure courageously and truthfully the fate given him.

All that said, Mir's departure to the clinic and subsequent death leave many questions unanswered. Although Tessa Millen complacently assures the other characters that Dr. Fonsett will "explain everything," in fact, very little is ultimately explained about Peter Mir. Was he a mentally sick lunatic or, simply, a very good man? Was he indeed the Green Knight, as some of the other characters wonder? Clement suspects that Aleph, the eldest Anderson daughter, may have been right after all in calling Mir the Green Knight, seeing him as "a sort of instrument of justice, a kind of errant ambiguous moral force, like some unofficial wandering angel" (432). Yet, as several other characters observe, Mir is like Prospero, the Minotaur, and Mephistopheles, too, for although he clearly reprises the role of Green Knight, he enacts a number of other literary roles as well. And even more puzzling, despite odd echoes of the *Gawain* romance, the novel's other characters fit into the *Gawain* plot only eccentrically. For instance, where is the perfect knight, Gawain? For Lucas Graffe—unrepentant, unvirtuous, and careless of his life—is surely no Gawain (Dipple 163). Critic Milada Franková agrees that Lucas seems little like Gawain, and Franková compares Clement to Gawain in Clement's obligation to "carry the burden of his failure for the rest of his life—the more Gawain-like alter ego of his brother Lucas" (81). Perhaps, however, Harvey Blacket is the character in the novel who seems most like Gawain because of his youthful perfection and questing, but Harvey, the young man with whom Moy is in love, is only tangentially involved in the Peter Mir plot.

Thus, in some ways, Murdoch's use of the *Gawain* romance results in what one might well call a narrative of mythic brokenness. Partly, as I suggested earlier, this brokenness is meant to remind readers and characters that myths are not "literal factual information" (*Metaphysics* 403), interchangeable with the messy details of ordinary human lives. Partly also, this mythic brokenness is a narrative technique meant to allow Murdoch's characters greater freedom. In her early essay "The Sublime and Beautiful Revisited" (1959), Murdoch argued that the novel needs to be "a house fit for free characters," combining "form with a respect for reality with all its odd contingent ways" (286). As

such, its characters need to disrupt and transcend both our limited symbolic ideas about them and the formed patterning that seems to script their lives. So Peter Mir, in stubbornly choosing a “repeat blow” rather than a return blow, frees himself from the constraints of the original romance plot, with its mechanism of revenge, and thereby wins a measure of moral freedom.⁹

So also, Peter Mir, in bearing within himself so many disparate centers of meaning, confounds all attempts to locate his character within a single frame of reference. He is somehow beyond all the images that others have invoked to name him and more than the sum of all the ordinary parts Tessa and Dr. Fonsett unmask. Because of the surplus of reality Murdoch seeks to convey, myths for her are always, as the critic Lorna Sage has said, “provisional” and even “disposable” (66). In this respect, Murdoch’s vision of the nature of human personality is no different from her vision of the nature of nature. We may “intuit whole things,” as she says in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1), but the world as we know it is a confusing “jumble” of parts (Heusel 265).

And yet, I would argue that the lasting impression of Murdoch’s novel is not one of fragmentation and brokenness, but rather of a mysterious wholeness.¹⁰ For the novel ends, not with Peter Mir’s death and the puzzlement over his identity, but with another quest—that of his young friend, Moy Anderson, to return a stone to its home.

The youngest Anderson daughter, Moy, is a girl sympathetically drawn to animals, plants, and stones and gifted with special telekinetic powers. Because of her telekinetic powers and her special ability to commune with “things,” she has become a stone collector, finding precious stones on the seashore to collect on her bedroom shelf. The critic Milada Franková sees in Moy’s connection with stones—inanimate things—a link to both Peter Mir, whose first name means rock, and the myth of the Green Man with which Mir is associated. Franková writes, “The ancient link between the Irish Great Goddess and the Green Man which [William] Anderson believes to be paralleled in Morgan Le Fay and the Green Knight is echoed by Murdoch in the girl Moy, who is endowed with a special sensitivity to the creatures and inanimate objects of nature” (82). Franková’s passing remark about Moy and Morgan Le Fay is an interesting one, given the additional possibilities for linking these two characters.¹¹ Morgan Le Fay, the evil half-sister of King Arthur, is an outsider in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, “marginalized” in the *Gawain* poet’s narrative, as Sheila Fisher points out, even as she is central to its outcome

(135). Moy, like Morgan Le Fay, is endowed with magical powers, and partly because of these powers, she is the “fey” daughter (109) and something of an outsider within her own circle of family and friends. The family’s friend Joan Blacket even sees her “as a witch” (49). To the extent that Moy is vaguely related to Morgan Le Fay, she is of course a much more benign incarnation of the enchantress, suggesting that in Murdoch’s sympathy with outsider characters, she chooses to redeem the much-maligned enchantress through a character who practices only white magic and ultimately abjures her power over the destiny of things.¹²

Moy’s decision to renounce her magical control over “things” is prompted by a shock to her psyche—the discovery that her love for Harvey Blacket has been no more than a romantic fantasy, and this coming of age issues in a broader spiritual maturation, symbolized by her decision to embark upon a quest to return a particularly beautiful and beloved stone from its place on her bedroom shelf to its original home.¹³ Moy’s eventual quest to return the stone to its home is particularly significant to the meaning of *The Green Knight* because of the way it links Moy’s story to Peter Mir’s and reveals a larger mythic pattern that ultimately structures many of the other characters’ stories as well—a quest to *remember* what is right and fitting. As Murdoch relates Moy’s story, Moy’s ability to dismiss her sentimental feelings for the weird stone enables her to remember its proper place in the world. And so, too, when Peter Mir relents in his introverted quest for revenge, he remembers what he had forgotten: his memory and mindfulness of God. This striking *anamnesis* in turn enables him to reorient himself to the truthfulness and goodness that had once guided his life.

In addition to Mir and Moy, Murdoch also patterns the stories of several other characters in terms of a shift from self-preoccupation to clarified memory, a mental change that helps to precipitate the characters’ moral and spiritual renewal. Bellamy’s own place in the world becomes clear only when he drops his spiritual self-dramatizing and remembers his dog, Anax, his sea cottage, and his friends’ need for his presence in their lives. The hitherto self-centered Harvey is able to remember where solid ground lies when he descends from the bridge’s parapet a second time because his love for Sefton, the middle Anderson daughter, has newly attuned him to the world. And even Clement finally makes good on his earlier failure with Louise, the widowed Anderson-family mother, by remembering his old love for her and gradually collecting the courage to ask

her to marry him.¹⁴ Different as they are, all of these acts of remembrance are comprehended in the twin myths of Mir and Moy—Mir’s quest to remember God and Moy’s quest to return her stone to its place.

In this way, Murdoch ultimately remythologizes her novel in the image of a new quest pattern. For even as Murdoch’s novel parodies and closes down those rigidly literal romantic quests that lead her characters into greater solipsism, her novel also opens a space for a series of mythic journeys out of the shadow-land of selfish fantasy towards the discovery of a greater good beyond the individual self. Murdoch’s implicit attitude towards myth here bears a clear resemblance to that of the philosopher Plato. Like Plato, Iris Murdoch is suspicious of human myth-making and encourages characters to leave behind false fictions (*mythoi*) in turning towards the light of truth. At the same time, though, it is *through* myth that Murdoch, like Plato, illuminates her characters’ quest for the good.

Ultimately, then, Murdoch does not dispense with the mythopoetic potential of medieval quest romance; instead, she imaginatively re-envisioned the traditional quest’s end to fit her own moral philosophy. In particular, as part of *The Green Knight’s* mythic patterning, Murdoch eschews the traditional Grail as an image of the quest’s end. Indeed, her use of the Grail in *The Green Knight* suggests that she found it to be an otherworldly symbol just as alien to her own moral world as she thought it was to Shakespeare’s.¹⁵ When the Grail appears in Murdoch’s novel, it functions as a false image, misleading Clement to trust in his brother Lucas’s goodness. As Lucas is offering Clement a goblet of drugged wine, Clement perceives it to be the seductive Grail. Describing the scene, Clement explains,

[. . .] Lucas is smiling at me—he’s holding out something towards me, a sort of cup or *goblet*—that’s another funny word—and it’s a strange cup, so beautiful and tall, he wants me to drink out of it, perhaps it means peace at last—yes, I will drink, we will both drink, he is reaching it towards me, it is so beautiful, it is glowing, it is made of the purest silver, oh so pure, it is full of light—I think—oh I think it is *the Grail itself*—At that moment in the dream Clement fell down in a dead faint. (84)

Where the Grail appears in Murdoch’s novel, therefore, its mystery is linked to Lucas’s evil deception. As a symbol, it mystifies and obscures, veiling the truth from Clement and encouraging him to live in a dream world of “lies and mystifications” (218). It is, as Murdoch appropriates it, a romantic symbol of false fictions and untruth.

In place of the “sexy magical romantic” Grail traditional to medieval quest romance, Murdoch substitutes the image of a small white stone—what one might well call, in the symbolic language of the *Gawain* poet, the pearl of great price.¹⁶ The small stone first appears during Peter Mir’s costume-party encounter with Moy. In following Moy to her room with a present to offer, Mir gives her a beautiful little lapis lazuli jewel box. The box is inscribed with his family motto, “*virtuti paret robur*,” or strength obeys virtue (212). The jewel box is also empty when he presents it to her, perhaps suggesting his own soulless state and the related absence of virtue in his life. Immediately and intuitively, however, Moy takes a small white stone, “a round pure white pebble,” from her shelf and deposits it in the box. In doing so, Moy establishes a crucial link between the white pebble or “pearl” and the virtue the box is meant to contain.

Given that it is also a stone of Moy’s being put in its proper place that brings the novel’s many quests to an end, I would suggest that Murdoch substitutes the pure white pebble for the Grail as the symbolic object of her characters’ mythic quests. As an image the pearl is “clean and clear by contrast” to the often glamorous Grail cup. It is something small and suitable for the smallest child’s hand. It belongs to the ecology and economy of the everyday world. And it is something precious beyond price. This *lapis exilis*, hidden in a forest of novelistic detail, lies at the heart of Murdoch’s quest romance as an image of human virtue. For, Murdoch’s characters recover a precious “pearl of great price” in discovering the truth and goodness that ought to orient their lives. And in this essential way, their individual stories describe the strength of the soul in its obedient turning towards virtue.

Endnotes

¹Rembrandt’s *Polish Rider* is an important image in the novel. It is the character Moy Anderson’s favorite painting, and both Murdoch and Moy link the image to one of the questing heroes in the novel, Harvey Blacket.

²This phrase comes from the Bakhtinian scholar and literary theorist Gary Saul Morson.

³This quotation and all subsequent quotations from the *Gawain* romance are taken from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Tr. James L. Rosenberg. 1959. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964.

⁴Elizabeth Dipple has argued that “Peter Mir self-consciously fashions himself as a contemporary parody” of the medieval Green Knight, pointing to Mir’s frequently green apparel as a sign that he is presenting himself “not as a person but as a self-contrived image” (162). Although I agree that Mir is an actor in the sense that he pretends to be something he is not (a psychoanalyst

rather than a butcher), I am not convinced that Mir is completely (if at all) self-conscious about his role as the Green Knight. He never announces himself as such to Lucas or the Anderson family, though he clearly likes self-dramatizing, nor does anything he says imply that he is aware of his role as the Green Knight. In addition, many of the legendary parallels Dipple mentions—for instance, the fact that Mir stays at The Castle pub—seem to be more a matter of the author’s contriving than of Mir’s, for it was not Mir who arranged to place a pub named The Castle in the vicinity of Lucas and the Anderson family.

⁵At best, the Green Knight explains the challenge of the return blow as a “game” to test the glory of Arthur’s court (13.283-90).

⁶On Mir’s Jewishness, David Gordon explains, “[. . .] the figure of the Jew is crucial in a number of [Murdoch’s novels], closer than other characters to a realm of gods and demons. In her latest two novels, *The Message to the Planet* and *The Green Knight*, the Jew has the central role of exemplary sufferer and foreshadower of a new religious idea” (13).

⁷A second tradition associates the Green Knight with the “literary green man” popular in late medieval poetry, a gay and youthful nature figure with possible connections to folk vegetation spirits. In *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Larry Benson associates the Green Knight’s jovial and merry aspects with this literary figure who is also typically clad in green (63-4). Although the medieval Green Knight shares conventional characteristics of both the “green man” and the “wild man,” the former seems less relevant to Murdoch’s characterization of Peter Mir in the first part of the novel. For reasons I shall explain in the discussion to follow, although Mir is associated with nature, in the role he plays during the first half of the novel, he is emphatically not associated with life, vitality, or regeneration.

⁸Comparing the structural patterns and motifs of tales of death with the fourteenth-century legend of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Krappe concludes that several of the Green Knight’s prominent characteristics—the mantle he wears, his role as executioner, and his color—are all typically associated with various gods of the dead. In the latter case, Krappe points out that green is traditionally associated with death as much as with life, possibly because green is the color “assumed by corpses under certain conditions” (212).

⁹Apropos of Murdoch’s use of myth in relation to human freedom, William Slaymaker contends that Murdoch’s use of myth in her earlier fiction reflects her “belief in the severe limitation of human freedom” (166). According to Slaymaker, in using Celtic and classical myths, “Murdoch has adapted the pagan world of irrational forces to modern life, not only as a literary device, but also as an explanatory system which emphasizes the mystery and opacity of human existence. Freedom appears as a suspect mode of existence that, like human life itself, is so complex as to defy a total rational analysis; myths provide fictional frameworks to support her notion of the incomprehensibility and impenetrability of human action and motivations” (166). Though Murdoch does seem to be using myth in *The Green Knight* to illustrate the partial inscrutability of human life, I argue that, in this late novel, Murdoch deliberately breaks traditional mythic frameworks in order to *emphasize* human freedom—both moral and spiritual. Thus, if it is true, as Slaymaker argues, that Murdoch’s earlier fictions reflect an author who is “quite skeptical about the possibility of human freedom, but [. . .] not cynical” (166-7), I would suggest that

this late novel evinces a lessening of skepticism and an increase of faith in the possibility of human freedom.

¹⁰Peter S. Hawkins notices a similar phenomenon—wholeness overcoming fragmentation—in Murdoch's earlier novel, *A Word Child*. About this phenomenon he observes: “[W]hile the arbitrary and accidental nature of things is constantly maintained by one character or another, what we actually find there is something more open to interpretation: a world of magical symmetries, uncanny coincidence, signs and wonders” (125). And it is such strong artistic patterning that, in his view, “allows the reader to remythologize” despite Murdoch’s “fictional attempts at demythologization” (91).

¹¹Moy's short name, incidentally, can be seen as an elision of Morgan Le Fay.

¹²Peter S. Hawkins notes that, in other Murdoch fictions, the “relinquishing of ‘magic’ is for Murdoch one of the signs of spiritual greatness [. . .]” (120). The term “greatness,” however, is a somewhat misleading descriptor for a process so dependent upon humility and a renunciation of the self-aggrandizing potential of magic; perhaps spiritual maturity would be a better way to describe the significance of her characters’ abjuration of magical power.

¹³For a deeper analysis of Moy's character and the mystical dimension of her spiritual transformation, see my article “Romancing the Stone: Mysticism as a Guide to Moral Reflection in Iris Murdoch's *Green Knight*” in *Studia Mystica* 21 (2000): 126-149.

¹⁴Here Clement is a little like the Grail knight Perceval in forgetting to ask the crucial question that could save a kingdom from suffering and waste. As Louise's reflections throughout the novel suggest, her life after her husband's death would have been less “wounded” had Clement thought to propose marriage years earlier.

¹⁵On Shakespeare's attitude towards Arthurian romance and the Grail, Murdoch writes,

It is interesting that Shakespeare did not use Arthurian legends, or refer to them except for a sneer by Hotspur (*I Henry IV* 3.1.48) and a joke by the Fool (*Lear* 3.2.95) directed against Merlin. *Cymbeline* is not Arthurian. He knew that stuff was not for him, its sexy magical romantic world incompatible with the high art to which his instincts belonged. Of course Malory's writings are beautiful, but Shakespeare's own romanticism as seen in the comedies is clean and clear by contrast (it is ‘tougher’). [. . .] Shakespeare created his own symbols. The powerful image of the Grail would have been a nuisance in one of his plays, and I suspect that he found it alien. (*Metaphysics* 141)

¹⁶The “pearl of great price” is an allusion to the *Gawain* poet's visionary poem *Pearl*, though the image originates in Matthew 13.46 and Revelation 2.17. The actual phrase occurs only once in *The Green Knight*, and it is associated with the love of truth that Sefton comes to perceive as the precious object of education (272). But the “pearl” itself, as I shall briefly show, occurs elsewhere within the novel and accretes a broader symbolic value.

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