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THE GREEN KNIGHT AND THE MYTH OF THE GREEN MAN

The frequent return to old themes in recent years, the reworkings or continuations of famous plays or novels, are seen as a characteristic feature of postmodernism. Now termed pastiche and because of the playfulness of style hailed as innovatory, the resort to already existing writing is basically not a new phenomenon. Medieval literature and Renaissance drama did nothing else; disturbing or popular themes have repeatedly found their way into literature of all times. Can the present recycling mean that we have somehow lost our sense of direction and that there is a need to tell old stories from a new perspective or rather a need for continuous syntheses? Iris Murdoch's new novel *The Green Knight* (1993) seems to suggest the latter. The source of the title and partly of the story of her novel, the fourteenth-century anonymous poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, is already a fusion of Celtic myths and Norman French stories, a process which Murdoch carries further. She has neither produced a fashionable, playful pastiche, nor amplified medieval romance. She does not pattern her novel on the poem, but uses some of its story, characters and first and foremost the underlying ideas for new syntheses.

This search for unity is by no means new to Murdoch's work. In her recurrent variations of certain themes and concerns her quest and her message could be represented by an image from her previous novel *The Message to the Planet* (1989), namely that of the Jewish Midrash — the telling and retelling of human stories and the need to listen to them with attention.

The connection between the Green Knight and the Green Man — the age-old image of a leafy head in European churches and public buildings — has been made and rejected and always attempted again. Although Murdoch does not mention the Green Man, much of where he overlaps with the Green Knight is implicitly present in the novel in another fascinating unity.

Zdeněk Stříbrný points out that in her work Murdoch draws on 'the cultural heritage of the whole of Europe, including antique myths, biblical parables and

the principle works of classical art and writing.'[1] There cannot be a better example of his characterisation of Murdoch's novels than *The Green Knight*. Murdoch's treatment of the heritage, which she employs through allusions, images and symbols, her characters' discussions and their attachment to various works of art, may be juxtaposed to her philosophical conception of unity. 'The idea of a self-contained unity or limited whole is a fundamental instinctive concept. We see parts of things, we intuit whole things. We seem to know a great deal on the basis of very little ...The urge to prove that where we intuit unity there really is unity is a deep emotional motive to philosophy, to art, to thinking itself.'[2] Murdoch argues in favour of this kind of tendency towards unity against the present-day fragmentation and demythologisation of deconstructive analysis which leaves us with the 'cults of the ephemeral or deliberately incomplete.'[3]

The medieval poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is an Arthurian romance which combines elements of French and Anglo-Norman romances with older Celtic sources. Though already incorporated into several Arthurian romances, the Beheading Game, which forms here the framework of the story, can be traced back to *Bricriu's Feast,* an eighth-century Irish saga. Other elements find their source in the Welsh *Pwyll*[4]. The extent of the combination of pagan myth and Christianity remains a bone of contention among literary scholars.

The Green Knight, huge and frightening, appears at King Arthur's Court one New Year and challenges any one of the knights to strike him a blow with his axe provided the blow can be returned in a year's time. Gawain takes up the challenge and cuts the man's head off. The Green Knight picks his head up and reminding Gawain to meet him in the Green Chapel next New Year, disappears.

Looking for the Green Chapel, Gawain comes to Sir Bertilak's castle and is entertained by his beautiful wife while his gracious host goes hunting. The Exchange of Gains Game, which is part of the hospitality, involves Gawain being tempted by the lady, which he resists, and he can only exchange her kisses for Bertilak's trophies of the hunt. He however conceals the gift of a green girdle which the lady persuades him to accept to protect his life.

At the encounter in the Green Chapel the Green Knight gives Gawain three feigned blows, slightly injuring Gawain's neck with the third. He then allows Gawain to recognise him as his host and explains that the injury was for his failure to tell the truth about the girdle. He pardons Gawain, because the reason for his deception, his love of life, was an honourable one. Nevertheless, Gawain,

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1 Zdeněk Stříbrný, *Dějiny anglické literatury,* Academia, Praha 1987, 728

2 Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals,* Chatto and Windus, London 1992; Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1993, 1

3 Ibid., 6

4 Roger Sherman Loomis (ed.) *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages,* Oxford University Press, Oxford 1959, 536. Laura Hibbard Loomis in her essay "Gawain and the Green Knight" traces the figure of Bertilak and the theme of the temptation to the Welsh half-mythic Arawn in *Pwyll*, attributed to the eleventh century.

back at the Round Table and duly absolved from his sin, promises to wear the girdle as a reminder of his shame.

This is a composite poem, not only by virtue of its diverse origins, but also by its linking together of the themes of chivalric virtues, temptation and chastity, goodness and truth. It is an entertaining romance but also a didactic poem with a moral and it can also be read as a religious poem.[5] The mysterious double figure of the pagan/Christian Green Knight/Bertilak lends the poem an enigmatic quality.

Murdoch retains the outer framework of the Beheading Game of retribution and mercy, the themes of virtue and truth and certainly the enigmatic mood. The rest is jumbled, reversed or hinted at by allusions. The question I want to pose does not concern the extent to which Murdoch patterns her story on her medieval model, but rather what ancient unities are hidden in her source and how she employs them and adds to them.

Murdoch sets the Beheading Game in today's London, where Lucas Graffe lures his stepbrother Clement to a deserted place late one night and attempts to frighten him or kill him with a baseball bat. The blow is intercepted by a chance witness to the scene and appears to be fatal. After a time the man reemerges, apparently restored to life by modern medical science, and demands retribution. Lucas is required to tell the truth about the 'accident' to Clement and their circle of friends and introduce Peter Mir, his victim, to them. Peter wears green, there is mystery about his rising from the dead, like the Green Knight of the poem he wants equity and truth. But Murdoch makes an even more complex fusion of character: her Green Knight has also something of Gawain in him as he, as we will see later, aspires to goodness. Lucas, on the other hand, is not much of Gawain figure unless a parallel can be made between Gawain the ideal knight of his time and Lucas the man of science of our time. Lucas is a professor of history, a rigorous scholar, a man of reason. He rejects the concepts of sin and forgiveness, innocence and revenge, and offers Peter the path of reason instead. He is the more sinister and awe-inspiring of the two, he hates other people and himself, but he is also regarded as honest and brave and held in esteem by his friends. Brian Stone emphasises the truth-bringing role of the medieval Green Knight and explains the symbolism of green as the colour of truth and the significance of his weapon, the axe, as truth.[6] Murdoch encompases a wider range of the issue. While Peter Mir never succeeds in making Lucas confess, Lucas himself is a passionate defender of truth in history. 'What brings down dictators, what has liberated eastern Europe? Most of all a passionate *hunger* for truth, for the truth about their past, and for the justice which truth begets.'[7]

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5 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, translated and introduced by Brian Stone, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1959, Second edition 1974, 129

6 Ibid., 123

7 Iris Murdoch, *The Green Knight*, Chatto and Windus, London 1993, 274

Eventually the men meet the second time at the scene of the crime, not for retribution but in order to help Peter remember something vital that had been lost to him due to the head injury. In a mystical scene where Peter is enveloped in a shaft of light he does remember his Buddhist belief which brings back his tolerance and forgiveness and in a spirit of reconciliation makes him renounce his claim for retribution and punishment, and choose good instead of evil. This 'second event' in a way parallels Gawain's revelation in the Green Chapel about his failure, his lack of faith; however, Murdoch extends the Christian moral of the poem to notions of what unites Buddhism, Judaism (for Peter is also Jewish) and Christianity: And like the humbled Gawain, Murdoch's Green Knight makes no pretentions to being an enlightened person, but is aware of his 'frailties and weakness of his will.'[8]

The ideas of truthfulness and humbleness reach a climax at a lavish party Peter gives for his newly acquired friends whom he now calls his family and who are Murdoch's customary closely knit circle of middle-class people, the court-like mood of the gathering all the more fitting here to echo the Christmas festivities at Bertilak's castle, complete with snow outside. But it is Peter Mir's, Murdoch's Green Knight's, turn to confess his little lie about his profession — he is not a psychoanalyst but a rich butcher, the latter symbolised by a long knife hidden in his green umbrella, another of Murdoch's many ingenious allusions to the poem. Loomis argues that 'the "fine issue" of his [Gawain's] story is not that he fell into vulgar sin, but that he failed to keep goodness perfect.'[9] Gawain's commitment to truth, symbolised by the pentangle, is also a commitment to goodness. Peter too, wants to be good and all the people around him respond to his spirituality and instinctively and emotionally recognise him as a good man. Significantly though, Murdoch allows him to be taken away by a man of science, a psychiatrist who claims that 'any so-called moral or religious knowledge is of its nature imprecise'[10] and therefore dismisses it as irrelevant.

In the end Peter dies in the psychiatric clinic and Clement later muses about the connections between the events and the poem about the Green Knight. Not unlike Stone, who interprets the Green Knight as a moral critic tempting on behalf of God [11], Clement senses the moral power of the encounter with Peter but can feel its effect already fading away. We do not live in a world of moral lessons. 'We betray him, we explain him away, we do not want to think about him or puzzle about him ...he is an embarrassment, as if something huge and strange has shot up in our midst and we simply cannot conceptualise it and we imagine that it isn't there.'[12] Clement is resigned to not being able to make sense of it

8 Ibid., 314
9 Roger Sherman Loomis (ed.), *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages,* 540
10 Iris Murdoch, *The Green Knight,* 357
11 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* Brian Stone, 117
12 Iris Murdoch, *The Green Knight,* 456

all; nevertheless, he is ready to carry the burden of his failure for the rest of his life — the more Gawain-like alter ego of his brother Lucas.

Both the 'beheading' scenes in Murdoch's novel are linked to revelation. The first 'accident' is preceded by Clement's dream about the Grail and Lucas's insistence on showing him something; the act itself — a blow on the head with a baseball bat which used to be an instrument of torture in their childhood game — might have helped to resolve their uneasy relationship of old jealousies and a painful bond of love and hatred. At the 'second event' Peter recalls the Buddhist notion that a blow on the head may bring a sudden enlightenment. This emphasis on the head as the seat of thought and enlightenment or spiritual renewal may be seen as one of the implicit links with the mysterious leafy head known as the Green Man.

Both Loomis and Stone refer to some conjunction between the Green Knight and the Green Man. While Loomis dismisses the association made by some scholars between the Green Knight and folk vegetation ritual or myth[13], Stone does associate the Green Knight's greenness with the medieval wild man of the woods and the Green Man, a personification of spring and rebirth, still preserved in folk ritual and in the name of many English pubs, whom he however understands as a rural deity opposed to Christianity[14]. A recent fascinating study of the Green Man by William Anderson[15] goes far back into European history and mythology and throws an entirely different light on the origin and meaning of the leafy head called the Green Man. The image first appeared in this form in Gothic churches, later also secularised on public buildings, book covers and furniture, and has periodically recurred to the present day. The age-old mysterious head is a multilayered symbol of many meanings. There is a great variety of faces from crowned kings to impenetrable leafy masks, some calm and radiant, others wild and frightening. Anderson traces the Green Man's origin back to the Roman cult of Dionysos, to Celtic legends, the pagan tree cult and the Christian Tree of Knowledge — he is the archetype of death and renewal, a fusion of art and folk ritual, of Roman, Celtic and Christian art and religions, representation of the unity between people and their life on Earth and the notion of the transcendental. The Green Man developed fully in the context of Christian spirituality and emerges as a synthesis of good and bad, inspiration and creativity, the divine and Nature — or, as the subtitle of Anderson's book puts it, the archetype of our oneness with the Earth.

Anderson refers to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as 'the only literary work of the Middle Ages in which a figure with something of the name and with many of the ancient and Christian characteristics of the Gothic Green Man appears.'[16] The two figures overlap in their origin in pagan myths, Celtic stories

13 Roger Sherman Loomis (ed.), *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, 553
14 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Brian Stone, 122
15 William Anderson, *The Green Man*, HarperCollins, London, 1990
16 Ibid., 115

and Christian religion, both are composite figures of many meanings, enigmatic and elusive. They share common contexts of love of life and its restoration, mystery and deep thought. The human quest for the truth, of which the Green Knight of the poem is a judge, is witnessed and judged by the Green Man, who is often portrayed as a mask with its eyes and mouth open, always watchful and giving testimony.

Murdoch makes no direct claim to the association of the Green Knight with the image of the Green Man. Yet, the unifying features of the two figures merge in both the story and the concerns of her novel. This may partly follow from her view of the importance of our 'ability to sustain and *experience* imagined syntheses', how this ability is acquired through attention and how art and nature may thus be similar objects of such attention. 'Children, if they are lucky, are invited to attend to pictures or objects or listen quietly to music or stories or verses, and readily understand in what spirit they are to treat these apparently dissimilar things. They may also be encouraged to contemplate works of nature, which are unlike works of art, yet also like them in being "beautiful". There are many harmoniously unified forms in nature, but our pleasure here is not always a search for "objects", but may be a delight in limitless continuation or accumulation or chaos: mountains, waterfalls, forests, the sea, the sky.'[17]

It has been suggested that both the Green Knight and the Green Man show some early connection to the pagan tree cult, though more obviously so in the foliate head of the Green Man, the disgorger of vegetation [18]. Trees are a recurrent image in Murdoch's *The Green Knight*. They are described in people's gardens and window views and make a strong presence in the characters' awareness of their surroundings and emotions. The first Decapitation Scene and the reconstruction take place beneath trees, the imagery suggestive of the huge old trees as witnesses.

The ancient link between the Irish Great Goddess and the Green Man which Anderson believes to be paralleled in Morgan le Fay and the Green Knight[19] is echoed by Murdoch in the girl Moy, who is endowed with special sensitivity to the creatures and inanimate objects of nature. She is also in love with Rembrandt's *Polish Rider*, which depicts a young man riding through a dramatic countryside of trees and rocks, his head prominent but at the same time merging with the background, his pensive look gazing towards a mysterious future.

The Green Man all but disappeared from art and architecture in the age of reason, intermittently from the late eighteenth century onward, when, Anderson argues, the image of oneness with Nature was probably deemed unsuitable to the scientific mind and exploitative technology[20]. In Murdoch too, Lucas, a prisoner of reason, finds it hard to respond to concepts of a less exact nature.

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17 Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 3
18 William Anderson, *The Green Man*, 51, 115
19 Ibid. 117
20 Ibid., 146

The return of the Green Man now no doubt coincides with the new understanding of the threat that the devastation of Nature signifies for man's survival. The concerns are clearly voiced in Murdoch's novel, darkly in Lucas' pessimistic view of the human race and its prospects on earth, in Luise's fear for the planet, and symbolically, but all the more poignantly, when Moy follows her overpowering feeling to return the stone she had once taken with her to London back to its place in a dell by the sea where it belonged.

A postmodern fountain in central Birmingham features a male head curiously perched on a metal wheel, this in turn mounted on a chunk of a tree trunk. He is the Green Man — sharp-featured, handsome, with long hair flowing — the indomitable spirit growing through its industrial past and present, gazing boldly ahead, but always connected to the Earth through the roots of the tree. The power and permanence of the image make it a perfect symbol of man's unity with his history and with Nature as well as a symbol of eternal searching. The figure of the Green Knight, too, unites the human quest for truth and good with the mystery of life. Murdoch's *The Green Knight* fuses these themes of fundamental human importance and without offering a final synthesis her novel is another message to the planet about age-old concerns which still have currency, indeed new urgency in our troubled world.