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Power relationships

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6. POWER RELATIONSHIPS

The theme of power is perennial to literature of all times and while power is glorified by some its evil potential is shown by others. Most Marlowe's plays are concerned with power, whether power gained through knowledge, money or the crown, evil forces are always at play. Shakespeare's plays, too, link power with evil, evil craving for power or power productive of evil. Milton questions the unlimited power of God and Satan's evil.

In Iris Murdoch's novels her handling of the theme starts from her philosophical argument that today's philosophers explain will as an isolated principle ending up with 'on the one hand a Luciferian philosophy of adventures of the will, and on the other natural science. Moral philosophy, and indeed morals, are thus undefended against an irresponsible and undirected self-assertion which goes easily hand in hand with some brand of pseudo-scientific determinism.'¹ She disputes the accepted post-Kantian, existentialist concepts where 'the sovereign moral concept is freedom, or possibly courage in a sense which identifies it with freedom, will, power.'¹

Murdoch's studies of power in her novels usually employ her evil enchanter-figures, which have been discussed abundantly in a number of critical works and compared with Muriel Spark's, Anthony Burgess' and William Golding's studies of evil. However, Murdoch does not stop at power and evil. She creates also well-intentioned good characters who already find themselves in a position of power and has them tread the precarious borderline where good may turn into evil.

King Lear asks where evil comes from: 'Let them anatomize Regan, see what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature, that makes these hard hearts?'² Murdoch asks what gives the evil enchanters and the good godfathers power over others to become manipulated and subjected. What are the relationships that allow these situations to develop? When set in our sober, rational times the notion of dark forces at work and modern, free people succumbing to them may seem ludicrous. Murdoch overcomes this by making the relationships plausible. The enchanter after all cannot use magic and his power never lasts for ever. His victims find themselves temporarily under the spell of his charisma or sexual attraction. A similar mechanism works for the good power relationships only they are less violent and consequently may last longer. Not all the enchanters are males but it is interesting to note that the enchantresses have far less than a fair share of either power or frequency of appearance while the relationships have a more pronounced mythological air. Whether we want to observe Murdoch's power relationships as individualised mythologies or appropriate them to our times as timeless and unchanging concerns makes little difference to Murdoch's pregnant

statement. As there are power-figures in most of Murdoch's novels, I am going to consider only those interesting from the point of view of the relationships involved.

The Flight from the Enchanter and *The Time of the Angels* share the motif of the demonic enchanter who subjects the women around him into complete dependence little short of spiritual slavery. Both Mischa Fox and Carel are despots but much of their power over the women is a product of fantasy and illusion projected in both directions. Although Mischa is enveloped in an aura of mystery, the real material world of money is present, lending the relationships anchorage in reality. The lack of complexity of Mischa's character is balanced by another power figure, Rosa Keepe, who at the same time is in Mischa's subjection and later also her power over the Lusiewicz brothers becomes reversed. Mischa's other two victims are an easy prey. Nina, the dressmaker, loves him unquestioningly, her love unrequited. Her weakness and thus susceptibility to Mischa's domination comes from her insecure position as a refugee. Annette Cockayne is a fantasy maker. Hers is a private drama of her own making in which Mischa happens to fit.

Carel is a much more complex figure than Mischa. Apart from being cast in the role of an enchanter he is also an (anti-)saint-figure. His intense demonic thought, his barely sane struggle with it and the enclosed Gothic setting constantly fog-bound and impenetrable make the link with reality more difficult. Each of the three women over whom he wields boundless power is enslaved in a different way. Pattie, probably the most dejected of all Murdoch's victims of male dominance, is virtually a slave to Carel's sexual and spiritual exploitation. Her orphanage background of emotional deprivation and loneliness and her love of God conspired against her better judgement and laid her defenceless to Carel's claim. Black, Irish, poor and lonely, her situation is similar to that of Nina although she is not a refugee. This must be the reason why she is drawn to Eugene Peshkov, a Russian refugee in the Rectory. But soon Pattie knows she has no chance of escape into happy normalcy. The magic bond to Carel seems unbreakable. Emotionally chained to Carel is also his daughter Muriel, the route of escape being blocked by the myth of Elizabeth's illness. The mysterious Elizabeth is too independent for emotional blackmail and eventually has to be bound to Carel sexually. This incestuous relationship is where Carel exceeds his power and oversteps the limit of endurance. When Pattie and Muriel know, the spell is broken and the fantasy is suddenly over. 'She [Pattie] felt as if she were holding Carel and that he had shrunk into a little thing the size of a nut.'³

Relationships may seem simple to outsiders and the various do-gooders who feel entitled to give advice. 'It was all perfectly simple after all, there were no nightmares. Elizabeth was a bit lonely ...Carel was tiresomely neurotic ...Muriel must just be firm with Carel. Carel was a selfish, isolated, self-obsessed person. It was a familiar type among men....Muriel was twenty-four and it was time she

stopped being afraid of her father. It was all quite simple and quite ordinary.⁴ Murdoch, however, draws the complicated web of human relationships in all their complexity, their irrationality and unexpected twists and turns. How lack of communication caused misunderstanding and misinterpretation of intentions, jealousy and hatred becomes only clear when the intense drama is suddenly over.

There are few female power figures in Murdoch's novels although by far most of Murdoch's women are not the subjected type. Four of the novels between *The Flight from the Enchanter* and *The Time of the Angels* are studies of strong female characters. Two are enchantresses though admittedly with less power than most of their male counterparts in other novels, and two are strong personalities who can dominate men by sheer energy.

Honor Klein in *A Severed Head* dominates men by her self-imposed role of a priestess of dark gods exploiting men's susceptibility to 'the mysterious woman'. The mystery of Lydia in *The Italian Girl* was her possessive power over her sons which none of them managed to break. Otto was paralysed by it and Edmund, in spite of running away from it, confesses to himself at Lydia's death-bed: 'Of course I had never really escaped from Lydia. Lydia had got inside me, into the depth of my being, there was no abyss and no darkness where she was not ...And now the weird thought that I had survived her did not increase my being; but I felt in her presence mutilated and mortal, as if her strength, exercised from there, could even now destroy me.'⁵

In contrast to the deliberate exercise of power by the above women Hannah in *The Unicorn* may be unaware of her own power. She is an enchantress by being the beautiful 'princesse lointaine', helpless in her mysterious suffering of guilt and punishment. In admiration and awe both men and women at Gaze Castle and Riders become her faithful servants. Effingham comes to 'realise how large a part of the fabric was contributed by his own imagination.'⁶ If Hannah is an enchantress, it is inherent to her situation rather than her character. 'Hannah was a provoker of dreams, her many shadows fell round about her in the fantasies of others.'⁷ But could Hannah also be a wicked enchantress devouring her attendants' affection or is she a saint desiring the true good through her suffering? Hannah is also a victim of power and as Max Lejour expounds, 'the victims of power, and any power has its victims, are themselves infected. They have then to pass it on, to use power on others. This is evil, and the crude image of the all-powerful God is a sacrilege. Good is not exactly powerless. For to be powerless, to be a complete victim, may be another source of power.'⁸

Marian wants to act from the position of good power to save Hannah. But where is the dividing line between good and evil if her action is to be destructive? 'She did feel in her bones a kind of urgency, a sense of being now in a position of power or trust which she must exploit while she could ...even if the result should be some dreadful suffering.'⁹ At the moment of crisis it is only Gerald who is able to move Hannah because he is 'more real to her than the others. Gerald had had

no theory about Hannah. Gerald had not been paralysed by an allegory.¹⁰ But by taking Hannah he breaks the illusion of her chaste suffering. The enchantment is lifted: they all begin to apprehend Hannah differently and are thereby set free. Effingham's attempt to explain his relationship to Hannah scientifically as his Oedipus complex falls flat and unconvincing.

The Red and the Green has its enchantress in Millie though she is more of a temptress than an enigma. There is little mystery in Millie save that she holds for men. She has no power over women who are either jealous of her or at best consider her tiresome. She keeps all the men within the circle of the interrelated families under her spell and evidently enjoys her power. They all respond to her beauty and charm even against their own will or better judgement. She feeds their fantasy.

Morality and money and love are what preoccupy Christopher on the eve of the day when Millie is to say yes or no to his proposal of marriage in exchange for his financial support. 'It seemed to him that after a lifetime of quiet decency this sudden act of selfishness had some elegance about it. For once, and in a wonderful cause, he was going to go straight for what he wanted. Millie was a rich prize, and he would take her in spite of the demon of morality.'¹¹

If Christopher cannot resist Millie and is ready to compromise his concept of morality, Barney is too far gone in his infatuation for Millie and in drink to care. He puts the blame for his failed priesthood and ruined life on his relationships with the two women in his life: his forcibly platonic but passionate love for Millie and his never even consummated marriage with Kathleen. Now Kathleen only means remorse and an inconvenience. 'If only he had not been married he could have been so content to be Millie's fool ...How much he enjoyed making her laugh! He would be an ass and she should drive him in harness.'¹² His relationship with Millie has become a semblance of reality, an illusion that he is unable to dispense with.

Millie is an artist in juggling rejection and seduction both of which produce the desired effect when used on the right person and Millie is a good judge of that. Pat, one of her nephews, responds to blunt persuasion. 'I know you better than you think. I know the twistings and turnings of your heart. I know you because at the bottom you and I are as like as two pins. You want to humiliate yourself ...Come to me then. I will be your slave and your executioner.'¹³ Pat is a strong character, obsessed with will and yet he answers Millie's call. Andrew's seduction is pointless and meaningless for them both but it sets off a chain of events that reveal the destructive nature of Millie's power. Like the other enchanters she is an egoist who manipulates people like pawns in her private game, in her case to gratify her desire to conquer.

Deborah Johnson classes *The Red and the Green* with the novels where 'male and female spheres of action are rather ruefully shown as sharply divided, linked only by the demands and vagaries of erotic love ...where taut and terrible family

relationships are played out in terms of diabolical triangles, all doomed repetitions of the original Oedipal drama.¹⁴ While this generalisation may well apply to *The Time of the Angels* and *The Italian Girl*, there is hardly anything Oedipal in Millie's relationships in spite of the fact that Pat and Andrew are her nephews. Herself childless, but not feeling deprived in this respect, Millie does not have the concept of her nephews as other than just men. Neither do they appear to perceive her as other than a desirable woman.

Though less numerous, the female power-figures are certainly not small-scale compared to males and the relationships on both sides are remarkably similar in the general outlines of cause and effect. In the area of the human psyche where the drive for power and fantasy is lodged there seems to be little difference between the sexes, at least in Murdoch's interpretation.

A Fairly Honourable Defeat and *The Book and the Brotherhood*, in spite of being seventeen years apart, have one basic pattern of relationships in common: an evil enchanter whose gift to inspire reckless love in women extends to power over a wider circle of people. Whereas in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* this means practically all the characters in the novel, in *The Book and the Brotherhood*, one of the later and consequently more populous novels, some characters are left outside the range of the enchanter's influence.

As has been pointed out in the previous chapter, Julius in the role of an artist casts his friends in a drama where they are completely in his power. His actors' fantasy is his main tool. He tells little lies and plays a few tricks that awaken his victims' imagination, their minds then produce predictable fantasies. Julius confesses to Tallis later on that 'the plan might have fallen to bits at the start if those two [Rupert and Morgan] had been a little more down to earth, but it was of the essence of the business that they were away up in the air.'¹⁵ Julius' moves are purely egotistic. Apart from wanting to teach Rupert a lesson, he simply enjoys himself. His relationship with Morgan has shown the same pattern. Incapable of love himself, he used her illusion of his love to bind her to him. He 'willed' her away when he no longer wanted her. His relationship to others is not of involvement but of detachment, which both gives him power over them and limits it at the same time.

Probably the fiercest power-figure, the most openly violent and dangerous, of all Murdoch's novels is Crimond in *The Book and the Brotherhood*. He is a fantasy-inspiring myth to his once friends, now doubting benefactors. The fantasy already began when they were all students at Oxford and thought Crimond brilliant and expected great things of him. Now they are in their fifties, Crimond's great book not yet written, when the myth of Crimond suddenly grows out of proportion with Jean running away to him for the second time. This brands him as an evil enchanter and defines his relationship to them.

It is strange that they should blame Crimond for breaking the marriage as if Jean were a young and innocent girl and not the self-possessed fighter of feminist

causes she was. For Jean as well as for the rest of the circle Crimond's power is realised through their fantasy. They know little about the real Crimond because, like Julius, he remains detached, keeping coolly aloof from the circle, except for the paradoxical fact that he continues to live on their money. Yet, there are ties that have not proved much different for those who have kept in touch with him. As Jenkins sums up: 'This stuff about being needed is part of an illusion we've kept all these years ...of course there is something close, something unique, and perhaps such things are always partly illusion, partly real.'¹⁶

Crimond's power over Jean is complete. She is entirely enslaved by him mentally and sexually as if the dark forces that drive people to incomprehensible actions, the mind shut to all reason, extended help or understanding, were driving her with a singularity of purpose like a death-wish. Similarly as in Morgan's or Pattie's case it took an act of violence for the spell to be lifted, this time the insane suicide pact and Jenkins' death. Here Crimond emerges as an undisputably odious and evil character. Unlike in the previous power relationships, Murdoch juxtaposes here the evil power figure to a good one. Gerald Hershaw, the benign monarch of the circle and very much in the style of Octavian Grey in *The Nice and the Good* or the dying Guy Openshaw in *Nuns and Soldiers*, only a much more prominent figure, is the one who keeps the illusion, as Jenkins puts it, of their friendship alive. He is the upholder of traditional beliefs and values and apprehended as an authority by the rest of the vast cast of the novel who constitute his kingdom.

However, when put to the test during the months of confrontation with Crimond, Gerald's ideals prove to be ineffectual with the consequence of his empire beginning to crumble. After her abortion Tamar looks for solace in religion, Jenkins wants to leave for Brazil to do good there, Jean and Duncan choose to live in France. Even the gentle, forever waiting Rose rebels, at last tired and wanting her due.

Gerald is unable to deal with Crimond, but Crimond does not emerge victorious either. Both have lost their power over others although Murdoch does not leave them as complete losers. Crimond actually sets Lily, one of his victims, free: 'Of course Crimond must remain for her, as she had told him, an absolute, and for his sake she would perhaps carry round her neck a little painful amulet. But she knew even now, that it was a harmless dream object, which would fade with years, and that she had received a freedom which only he could give her. Now it was time to become real and happy.'¹⁷ Gerald, his power lost, trying to find himself again in Jenkins' delapidated house, is allowed the benefit of a glimmering of hope in Crimond's note – the single sentence telling him that Jenkins' death was an accident. Their relationship was not an illusion.

Power relationships are not restricted to Murdoch's great power-figures, whether evil or aspiring to good. Power usurped or given may govern all kinds of relationships and may be enjoyed even by the otherwise powerless.

The visible power-figure in *The Nice and the Good* is Octavian Gray, a top-ranking civil servant who presides over a court of his family and friends. Considerable power, and more important from the point of view of the novel, is however given to the apparently timid and mild John Duncane. This happens partly by chance when, investigating the circumstances of Radeechy's suicide, he discovers Biranne's involvement in the tragedy. He uses his power for a good end – to persuade Biranne to return to his wife – despite compromising his own career. Partly, his power comes from people's perception of him and this is more illusory by its nature. His friends put trust in him by placing themselves at his disposal, like Jessica, or by confiding in him. Duncane, saint-like, fights against all the power thus bestowed on him.

Although a powerless sufferer who has for ever sacrificed his career, Hilary Burde in *A Word Child* has almost boundless power over two women: his mistress Tommy and his sister Crystal. His relationship to Tommy has a precarious existence hanging by the hair of his will or wilfulness. Here Hilary is a person who will terrorise those who let him with a web of rules behind which he is hiding his impenetrable, lonely self. Tommy is particularly vulnerable to this kind of terrorism by her illusion of Hilary's love.

Crystal is a more complicated case – to see where her illusion about Hilary lies. He virtually keeps her imprisoned like in an enchanter's Gothic tower. It is doubtless love but also a fantasy which they have had since childhood about a luminous future together, away from the awful aunt and the orphanage. Hilary's power over Crystal is also based on his illusion of it. 'I had to have her there, like God. And by "there" I mean again, not necessarily in my presence. I needed to see her regularly but not very often. She just had to be always available in a place fixed and controlled by me. I had to know, at any moment, where she was. I needed her sequestered innocence, as a man might want his better self to be stored away separately in a pure deity.'¹⁸ Hilary's decision to spare Crystal the horror of the repeated tragedy of Anna's death allows his sister to escape into a world of her own. Crystal's then already unexpected bid for freedom leaves us to ponder with Hilary the complexity of human relations and the puzzlement of the individual's inability to exercise control over them.

Besides being an artist-figure, Charles Arrowby in *The Sea, the Sea* is also a formidable power-figure for his admirers both male and female. They are all actors and actresses, and fantasy being the natural ingredient of the theatre world it is also an essential ingredient of their relationship to Charles. Hartley, Charles' eternal childhood love, does not share the fantasy context and Charles' power therefore does not extend to her. The power relationship is reversed and she, or rather Charles' fantasy image of her, has power over him. In his fantasy he has pictured his relationship to Hartley as always existing, somehow nurturing it all the years since their adolescence and used it quite shamelessly to blame his faithlessness and promiscuity on. Hartley's unexplained rejection of him then hurt him

badly, but he felt free to claim that she had destroyed him morally. Wrapped up in his fantasy of love for Hartley and now that he has found her imprisoned in an unhappy marriage, Charles wants to help her and above all redeem their childhood love. It takes him several days to realise that he will not persuade Hartley to leave her husband and that it has all been his own illusion.

He is chastised by Peregrine for misusing power: 'you despise women, you regard them as chattels. You regard this woman [Hartley] as a chattel.'¹⁹ James is aware of the fantasy: 'I won't call it a fiction. Let us call it a dream. Of course we live in dreams and by dreams, and even in a disciplined spiritual life, in some ways especially there, it is hard to distinguish dream from reality. In ordinary human affairs humble common sense comes to one's aid. For most people common sense *is* moral sense. But you seem to have deliberately excluded this modest source of light. Ask yourself, what really happened between whom all those years ago? You've made it into a story, and stories are false.'¹⁹

In *The Good Apprentice* it is only illusion and fantasy that keep the myth of Jesse Baltram's power alive. For Jesse is no longer all there and later, for days before he is found drowned, he has not been there physically. His wife and daughters worship Jesse like a pagan god and live with and by the illusion of Jesse a famous and powerful man. They impart it to Edward, Jesse's illegitimate and only son when he comes to Seegard. While the women chant the ever-present maxims of Jesse's to Edward, the tension of Edward's prolonged waiting for Jesse to appear is changing into incredulity. 'It occurred to Edward for a moment suddenly to think, *perhaps Jesse does not exist at all?* Perhaps he's someone whom they invented, or something they just believe in, like God?'²⁰ Even when Bettina eventually admits that 'he was a god and has cheated us by becoming a child. It is hard to forgive'²¹, the spell is not broken. The fantasy is stronger than reality and Edward still does not know whether it is all a cynical, deceptive game played by the women for his benefit or a love-hate relationship of three now rather helpless women. Through rifts in the veil of fantasy come in glimpses of both good and evil.

The variety of people and places and the different life stories told do not hide certain similarities that the power relationships exhibit. All the power-figures – not dissimilarly to Shakespeare's – are extremely egocentric characters, incapable of ordinary relations with other people. They initiate relationships but are unable to sustain them as they do not really see others as separate beings. The enchanter imposes patterns of relations on those round him, like an artists playing with the form. He does not lack charm and his doings may have the powerful attraction of the forbidden. The relationships are thus curiously one-sided as if the enchanter had the power to paralyse all will. The demonic powers of Murdoch's earlier enchanters, such as Mischa Fox, or the power of sexual enslavement, such as that of the Lusiewicz brothers over Rosa Keepe, seem to grow less in her later novels. In *The Philosopher's Pupil* the enchanter's grip of Professor Rozanov is more in the

memories of his victims than the actual power of the aging man to hold the enchantment. In *The Sea, the Sea* Charles has no power 'to enchant' Hartley and no interest to go on holding his other victims under his spell.

It does not require closer inspection to note that the chapter on power relations finds many female characters in various situations of open subjection to a dominant or exploiting male. Without adopting feminist attitudes Murdoch portrays Jesse Baltram as a paragon of a domineering man of whom his wife and daughters and even casual callers live in awe. Mitzi in *An Accidental Man* has loved Austin blindly for years and let him sponge on her with as little as a few drunken tears to her defence. Even the sophisticated Rose in *The Book and the Brotherhood* cannot muster any defences in her seeming independence against being completely emotionally dependent on Gerald and always hoping for his more official recognition of her devotion.

Perhaps over-optimistically, Murdoch always shows the power as finite, dependent on fantasy or illusion that helped it to develop. The power relationships in her novels are just episodes or at most phases in the lives of the protagonists and they invariably collapse in the end. The illusion is broken and the enchanter's power is gone. Guarded as she is in passing judgement in her novels in most respects, Murdoch's rejection of power as antithetic to love is quite explicit. The explicitness is probably why Richard C. Kane sees Murdoch at her most didactic here. 'The central moral lesson which Murdoch wants to convey involves the idea that we must not impose myths or theories upon other human beings ... Murdoch's didactic work demonstrates that true evil and demonic power really result from a failure of vision.'²²