

LITERATURE

CONSTRUCTING THE MIDDLE AGES IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE AND CULTURE: THE READING OF IRIS MURDOCH'S *THE GREEN KNIGHT*

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When Umberto Eco wrote that "books always speak of other books and every story tells a story that has already been told" (1994: 511, 512) he instigated an intertextual game which gave the writer the power to draw on the literary/textual tradition while the reader was assumed to have a certain presupposed knowledge enabling him/her to pick up the glove and respond to the challenge. In more recent works like Iris Murdoch's *The Green Knight*, one can find "hidden" texts (intertexts) that are identified and furthermore interpreted; this, as such, can be seen in the long quotation at the end of her novel. The author herself asks questions about the parallels between the medieval and contemporary text.

"Why does all this suddenly come upon me, thought Clement, why is it suddenly so significant? Had Aleph had some sort of intuition, a kind of mystical insight, when she gave Peter that name? Pieces of the story are there, but aren't they somehow jumbled up and all the wrong way round? Lucas cut off Peter's head, and Peter might have cut off his, but because he was noble and forgiving he only drew a little of Lucas's blood. It isn't really like the poem, yet, it is too, and it is something much more terrible. Lucas was brave and Peter was merciful. Or would Peter have killed Lucas if I hadn't been there? So am I also in the story? And Aleph, wasn't she the temptress, wasn't she what they both wanted? But that isn't quite right, the Lady was the wife of the Green Knight, and the Green Knight was good, though he was also a magician. Now Lucas is a magician too, and Lucas is not good, but Aleph is Lucas's wife. Yes, it is all mixed up. Lucas cut off Peter's head twice. He killed him first instead of me and second because he wanted the Lady. But how could Aleph have mysteriously conjured up this tale and this ending? What had Aleph meant when she called him the Green Knight? She may

have intuitively seen further, seen him as a sort of instrument of justice, a kind of errant ambiguous moral face, like some unofficial wandering angel. He could have claimed a just retribution by killing Lucas, or better still perhaps maiming him. That was his first apparition. But then later he forgave him and punished him only by that small symbolic shedding of blood. Will Lucas cherish that scar ... There the first blow was struck by a provocation to a mysterious adventure, here, the first blow was struck by an evil magician whose victim reappeared as another, ultimately good, magician. And what about the temptress who in the story was the good magician's wife? Now the good one has gone, receding into his mystery, and the beautiful maiden has been awarded to the evil one" (Murdoch 1993: 432).

In a way, by providing the explanation of the medieval and contemporary parallels Murdoch flouts the rules of postmodern intertextual game at the same time giving the original *Green Knight* a very serious reading. In this paper I would like to explore the twilight zone in which the two texts clash and illuminate the symmetry as well as the non-equivalence following from this interrelation. In short, I hope to uncover the gaps between the medieval and the contemporary.

In a great bulk of contemporary literature intertextual allusions are of, as Linda Hutcheon (1999: 40)¹ claims, the "parodic/ironic" kind (Fowles' collection *The Ebony Tower*) but the transformation of the intertext can also be complementary to the earlier text expanding the scope of its meaning (Margaret Elphinstone's "The Green Man"). Both subscribe to the Barthesian principle of *deja lu* (already read) adding new dimensions to contemporary works. Nevertheless, in such cases the Middle Ages functions not so much as a cultural (this is more noticeable in films) but primarily as a discernible literary intertext establishing the analogy, the continuity between the medieval and contemporary traditions.² Although romance as a genre presents one of the possible areas of re-

¹ Parody here does not mean ridicule, but rather assumes "that only unique styles can be parodied and that such novelty and individuality are impossible today." (Hutcheon 1993: 94).

² Dreaming of the Middle Ages through the postmodern temptation brings to mind the kind of medievalist nostalgia which is found in John Fowles's translation of Marie de France's *lai* "Eliduc" and its location among other contemporary short stories of his in the collection *The Ebony Tower*. By doing this he gives Marie a new contemporary voice. Fowles introduces Marie's text with a personal explanatory note on the fascination with this particular tale and its main motifs, setting it apart from the rest of the collection but also, strikingly, blending the medieval with the contemporary. Another "hit" of the last decade, Booker prize winner "Possession" by A. S. Byatt (1990) although focusing on the Victorian era is not deprived of medieval allusions. The book features a lonely "knight" (who is actually an academic) Roland and heir to Chanson de Roland and Browning's *Childe Roland*, in the hunt for the manuscript mystery. The letters of Heloise and Abelard are mentioned at the beginning of the novel and correlate with the illicit correspondence of Christabelle La Motte with Randolph Henry Ash.

search into intertexts, generic transactions and postmodern reinterpretations are of less importance here as they have been thoroughly researched by others, e.g., Heidi Hansson (1998).

One way or another, the Middle Ages has always been present in our culture, from the elaboration of the courtly love theme in the Renaissance, the religious zeal of the metaphysical poets, to the eighteenth century development of the Gothic novel and then the nineteenth century medievalism (of Tennyson and the pre-Raphaelites). Gothic novels re-created the Middle Ages, Gothic authors gathered the worst aspects of medieval secular and religious life and transformed them into a picture of a non-historical but, nevertheless, sinister past. Bearing in mind the medieval cult of heroes, the gothic novel created the "Gothic hero" – the villainous character with a strong almost diabolic personality, the reversal of the powerful and virtuous knight of medieval romances. In the contemporary world, however, (especially in some Hollywood productions)³ the high culture of the Middle Ages have become mass culture of today, the heroes are trivialized.

Nevertheless, in contemporary world, as Eco clarifies, we live in the new Middle Ages – assuming, of course, that the long period referred to as the Middle Ages can be synthesized in a kind of abstract model. The kind of accumulation of certain selected features abstracted from the cultural (textual) amalgam referred to as the Middle Ages enables one to isolate certain symmetries⁴ between the past and the present. By doing this, in a way, we are ushered into the medieval nostalgia and create the new Middle Ages. Eco himself, however, ad-

Eco's own novel *The Name of the Rose* confers a vision of the Middle Ages by a contemporary writer. The principle is the same as in the historical novel. Time, place, characters, historical and fictional, give us the literary version of history (which is, by the way, what all historical novelists were doing, even Scott tempered with its features). Eco writes a truly postmodern novel. He mixes the low (laughter, popular motifs) and the sublime culture (religious writing), medieval manuscript culture. He introduces the textual labyrinth, which has its physical counterpart within the novel (the library), bearing in mind labyrinthine qualities of medieval text. The novel also (ab)uses the formula of the detective story. Although William of Baskerville (name significance is here obvious) appears to be modeled on Sherlock Holmes, the mystery is unraveled not through deduction but accidentally. In Bakhtinian terms, both generically and textually disruptive laughter and a sustained interrogation of existing codes form the spectrum of postmodernism in the book.

³ A good example here would be the story of Lancelot presented in *First Knight* directed by Jerry Zucker.

⁴ Another "catchy" theme is that of symmetry between common notions about the Middle Ages and contemporary civilization. Insecurity, for example, is one of the key words: In the Middle Ages people went armed because of the danger of robbery. "This condition is close to that of the white middle class inhabitant of New York, who doesn't set foot in Central park after five in the afternoon or who makes sure not to get off the subway in Harlem by mistake, nor does he take subway alone after midnight ..." (Eco 1986: 79).

mits that medieval authors translated and used classical authors to reread and "invent" a new culture (1986: 75). Still, one should realize that in contemporary scholarship and literature as well there is a curious oscillation between fabled neomedievalism and responsible philological examination (1986: 63).⁵ "Our return to the Middle Ages is a quest for roots and, since we want to come back to the real roots, we are looking for the 'reliable Middle Ages', not for romance and fantasy, though frequently this wish is misunderstood and, moved by a vague impulse, we indulge in a sort of escapism a la Tolkien" (1986: 65). First of all medieval culture is only available to us through textual culture and archeological culture which are, in turn, interpreted and translated into texts. Defending the "pseudo-medieval pulp" may be carried out by reproducing both a relatively truthful as well as a relatively imagined, constructed picture of the Middle Ages. My claim here is, however, that indeed in the age of neomedievalism we can abstract medieval patterns, like the knightly/chivalric code, while, by transgressing borders of historicity, we enter the sphere of literariness. This, in a way, parallels the forms of medieval reading which always assumed that "reading is literal, but one which can attend to allegory understood in its classical sense as the trope that says one thing and means another" (Reynolds 1996: 139). This is what Carolyn Dinshaw (1997: 116-164) is doing in reading *Green Knight*, through the works of Michel Foucault and Quentin Tarrantino's *Pulp Fiction*. In other words, the intertextual transactions of the Hutcheonian "parodic/ironic" kind serve both as a commentary on medieval as well as a critique of contemporary texts.

Iris Murdoch's novel is not a historical novel, neither is it a translation of the medieval into the contemporary, a simple rewriting of a medieval story with contemporary characters replacing the medieval ones. Rather the medieval *Green Knight* glosses the contemporary one. The connection between the two texts is as much intertextual as it is philosophical. She writes a contemporary text with clear medieval references. In the course of the book the story of the Green Knight is mentioned several times. The structuring elements of the narrative are also similar in both texts: the challenge, the trial and final re-instating of order. Such intertextuality "necessitates a construction of the entire "enunciative" or discursive situation of fiction ... it re-contextualizes both the production as reception processes and the text itself within an entire communication situation which includes social, ideological, historical and aesthetic contexts in which those processes and that product exist" (Hutcheon 1999: 40). Giving the reader the precise source of her intertext, she spoils the intertextual

⁵ Eco also points to the technological inventions which were seminal for the development of European civilization, e.g., eyeglasses (1986: 64).

game but initiates a textual/philosophical one. Hers is a book which draws parallels to an earlier text by asking similar kinds of questions the medieval work purported. What is, at first sight, a realistic narrative becomes, at a closer reading, a postmodern tale. The text does not ask questions about literary history, although the characters frequently converse about literary figures they relate to in the reality around them. What is more, in the voice of her major character, the historian Lucas Graffe, Murdoch presents the affinity between a historian and a moralist, which indirectly can be read as a connection between literature and morality:

"What is history? A truthful account of what happened in the past. As this necessarily involves evaluation, the historian is also a *moralist*. The term "liberal", mocked at by some, must be retained. Historians are fallible beings who must make up their minds, constantly aware of the particularized demands of truth." (Murdoch 1993: 273) [italics mine, L.S.]

The fourteenth century romance is a story of moral failure. Some would say that it is the story proving that everybody is human. The Green Knight appears at Arthur's court, challenges the most courageous knight to behead him and give his own head in return within a year. The initial scenes point to the aggressive competitiveness (Aers 1988: 159) of the courtly community and in both texts signify a rather discourteous challenge. Violence, therefore, is always latent in relationships of men of honor. After Gawain sets forth to find the Green Chapel, the meeting place with the Green Knight, he becomes a pray to three temptations (from the stereotypical woman-temptress). He gives in to one of them, he wants to save his life. As a result, the Green Knight nicks the skin on the back of his neck as a sign that Gawain has failed in one of the knightly ideals, truthfulness. Both the challenge, violent as it is, and the later development of the story are inscribed into the courtly ideal, in which the young knight has to go through the rites of passage and is dubbed the knight. Although the concept of courtliness underwent various modifications (Burnley 1998: 27), the virtue of prowess and courage in the face of death seems to be resistant to the distinction between chivalric military skills and domestic refinement. The challenge threatens the Arthurian community but addresses both aspects of *cortesia*, fusing the image of knight and courtier. Gawain must literally save his face and the face of Arthur's court, thus responding to the notion of courtliness as a sublime ethical code.

"Of course the Green Knight story was testing his opponent from the start, provoking a violence to which in honour the chivalrous fellow had later to submit himself. Not only that, there was the ordeal of sexual temptation, in which the performance of the chevalier was certainly not perfect" (Murdoch 1993: 432).

This is not the case for Lucas Graffe, the major character in Murdoch's story, like Gawain, a "fallible" being. Murdoch's story is quite simple. Professor Lucas Graffe, defending himself with his umbrella against a nocturnal assailant, unintentionally kills him. After a subsequent court case Graffe disappears. His brother Clement, an actor, Bellamy James, who hopes to become a hermit (another medieval theme), his friend, Louise Anderson with her three daughters, and Joan Blacket and Harvey, her son, as well as other friends, wait anxiously for his return. Meanwhile, a mysterious figure haunts their houses. When Lucas Graffe returns he is confronted by a man returning from the dead, who demands restitution and revenge. In the ensuing struggle the characters undergo various metamorphoses and finally find mercy and forgiveness. The conception of their "society" is also based on the shattering and ensuing re-instatement of order.

Just like the Arthurian knights, the principal characters form, which is also recognized by them, an "enchanted circle", an impenetrable structure. Their life is mostly enclosed in a:

"Four-storey terrace house in a modest street in Hammersmith, near Brook Green. A fanlight over the door ... said 'Clifton'. ... However Clifton though never used in the postal address (which would have been too unassuming a dwelling) was what the house was called among its friends" (Murdoch 1993: 14).

The enclosure parodies the Arthurian impenetrable structure from which any stranger is immediately expelled (compare the story of Lanval in Marie de France's *Lais* and its Middle English translations: *Sir Launfal* and *Sir Landevale*).⁶

The house sheltered Louise's girls and Joan's son Harvey (Joan is Louise's friend) and their visitors. Louise frequently feared that the girls (19, 18 and 15) were almost unrealistically innocent and secluded and entirely unprepared for the corrupt world. In fact, the younger generation in the book seems to mix only with friends of their parents; very little life outside the house is depicted. Moy's (Moir) sixteenth birthday party illustrates this point. This court-like situation in which fair maidens practice their skills of sowing and develop their talents in playing instruments and singing is rather odd for the twentieth century household but perfectly emulates courtly ideal. They are all described as attractive, but Aleph (Alathea, 19) is usually referred to as the beauty. In the portrait of Aleph, eroticized innocence is presented through the same imagery Marie de France conjured for her heroines.

⁶ Cf. Jeager (1985: 237-238) for other examples of the so called "courtly narratives".

"The[at] physical beauty has been incorporated as an essentially social ideal is amply confirmed by the pictures offered in literature of the *villain*, the character who, by definition, is opposed to the *corteis* in all his aspects" (Burnley 1998: 46).

The latter directly concurs with the image of Lucas Graffe.

Lucas's story destroys the peace of the enchanted circle. To Lucas's close friends, Bellamy James and Clement Graffe (the latter was present at the scene of crime though never revealed himself), killing a man is an unthinkable deed, and Lucas's subsequent disappearance troubles them even more. Still, it is even more devastating to find out that the purported murder victim was not dead, and he is the figure who haunted their houses in the time of Lucas's absence. They all speculate whom this man reminds them of. Peter Mir whose name means peace in Russian; a Russian himself, is more than just an ordinary outsider to the enchanted circle. "I am a member of the green party [he says] 'that's why you dress in green' said Aleph 'you've got a green tie and a green umbrella, and your suit is sort of green too'" (Murdoch 1993: 194). After the introduction the characters played a game of literary characters resembling Peter Mir. Clement says: Mephistopheles, Moy: Minotaur, Aleph, brands him as the Green Knight (Murdoch 1993: 195). Lucas on another occasion observes: "I took him for a kind bafoon. Now I see he is a devil" (Murdoch 1993: 199). Peter Mir is invited to Moy's birthday party. As they all dress up he has the bull's mask, and asks Moy to lead him on a "leash", a green girdle, another Gawainian symbol. "Why does he look so like an animal? Clement thought, 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" (Murdoch 1993: 125). Bellamy later on: "You died and rose again. You became an angel" (Murdoch 1993: 297). The ambiguity of Peter Mir troubles all the characters involved.

To Bellamy, who hopes to become a hermit or a monk (another medieval theme), the situation is all the more difficult as he is at the time trying to regain balance in his life. He turns to spiritual things, aspiring to become a monk. The idea of being a recluse gives meaning to his torn existence as a homosexual too afraid to follow the need of his heart and yet unable to live a socially accepted lie. His correspondence with brother Damien concerns the subject of faith as well as more general religious matters and reminds one of the exchange of letters in Derrida's *Postcard*, the text which also, in a way, structures the homosexual experience.

I [the writer] resemble a messenger from antiquity, a bellboy, a runner, the courier of what we have given another, barely an inheritor, a lame inheritor, incapable even of receiving, of measuring himself against whatever is his to main-

tain, and I run, I run to bring them news which must remain secret, and I fall all the time. Enough to drop it (Derrida 1987: 8).

The letters of Bellamy describe his private experiences and thoughts on seclusion. Homosexuality remains hidden here in the deep structure of the text, and it can only be seen in the mirror of masculine, chivalric identity of Peter Mir. The secrecy of a homosexual act equals the secrecy of illicit courtly love, and, in both cases, love depends on mystery. The reasons for the intended self-imposed solitude are never fully explained. One hint is given at the beginning of the book, which is connected with Bellamy's long gone unhappy affair and subsequent abandonment. Still, in the letters Bellamy's attempt to become a hermit is not sufficiently explained. He talks about the need to be "immured", the reference which Father Damian perceives as a metaphor used by Bellamy which, in fact, has a direct reference to anchorage and the anchoritic mystical experiences of the fourteenth century writers. Even Bellamy's need to experience death ("I want to be, thereby overcome and *destroyed*. I desire this death" (Murdoch 1993: 40)) is directly connected with the ritual of enclosing the anchorite in a cell near the church. Anchorites were treated as dead to the world and Bellamy feels he is as if living dead. Father Damian, however, fears that Bellamy is too romantic about the dedicated life (Murdoch 1993: 39). The monk also points out that it may be "a form of masochism to which many well-intentioned people are addicted" (Murdoch 1993: 95). In yet another letter he discourages Bellamy from the dramatization of Christ as a soldier (Murdoch 1993: 113), although such was a recurrent medieval metaphor. He dismisses his preoccupation with the Anglican church's attempt to refer to God as a "She". Bellamy writes: "After all, God is beyond human distinctions of sex and changing the traditional He to She raises a senseless problem, bringing God down to the level of a human" (Murdoch 1993: 114). In fact the use of He poses the same problem but that is yet another story. This is Murdoch's ironic commentary on feminist as well as strong anti-feminist tendencies of the church. As the story progresses and Bellamy is strangely engulfed by it, the letters are his only consolation, tangible things that guard his sanity. Bellamy constantly analyzes himself. "He thought, I am turning toward evil. This tapping is to summon it. I am crammed with darkness. Thrusting his letter aside he started at the rain streaming down the window" (Murdoch 1993: 116).

Father Damian discourages Bellamy from having no work occupying his time by Eckhart. Meister Eckhart appears several times in their correspondence as a reference both to the lifestyle as well as theological issues. He is another of those clear intertextual references that expand the scope of the book beyond the limits of the story. Invoking the work of the well known medieval mystic and scholar, Bellamy is fascinated as much by the writings as he is by the person. Meister Eckhart is one of those controversial personalities of the medieval world

(b. 1260 – d. 1327/28), a Dominican theologian and writer, and the greatest German speculative mystic. In the transcripts of his sermons in German and Latin, he charts the course of union between the individual soul and God. The four stages of the journey of the soul end with, what he calls, "detachment" (breakthrough) which signifies that the soul engenders God. Eckhart amalgamates Greek, neo-platonic, Arabic and Scholastic elements. His writings were only pronounced heretical after his death in 1329. Such condemnation (as we find out from Murdoch's book, p. 113) was only revoked in 1380.

What Bellamy perceives as exalting a "sentimental Christ" (Murdoch 1993: 154), Father Damian sees as "Byronic romanticism" rather than true religious experience (1993: 221) and consequently urges Bellamy to seek professional medical help (1993: 154). Bellamy's exchange with Father Damian ends when the latter decides to leave the monastery and become a secular person again. Damian explains that he failed in his lifelong mission, "abnegation of the world and the saving of souls" (1993: 265). But as a last precept he quotes Meister Eckhart again:

"Remember Eckhart's advice (for which he was doomed as a heretic): do not seek for God outside your own soul. My more worldly advice to you is as follows ... do not seek solitude ... get a job (not unlike the one that you left) wherein you can be extremely busy every day relieving the needs and the sorrows of others" (Murdoch 1993: 266).

Bellamy's indecisiveness, his search for purpose in life as well as homosexuality, which is accepted but not talked about, and can be contrasted with the masculine, chivalric identity of Peter Mir.

The pre-Christian motif of the Green Man, as well as the fearful figure of the Green Knight rendered through Peter Mir, furnish mysterious, even unreal associations. Green has always been the symbol of Christianity but also the symbol of liturgy. Green is the color of hope, a light green symbolizes Christening. One of the first description of Graal was from St. John (4.3.) who claimed that Graal was of emerald color. But the figure of the Green man in European folklore can also have fearful associations of the devil dressed as a hunter of the souls (for more see Sadowski 1996: 78-108). The Green Knight in the medieval romance was neither an essentially good nor essentially evil figure but a synthesis of all such traits, and so is Peter Mir.

⁷ The teachings of Eckhart describe four stages of the union between the soul and God: dissimilarity, similarity, identity and breakthrough. The last stage – referred to also as "detachment" is the most problematic one, as according to Eckhart, the soul is now the Father: it engenders God as a divine person. Detachment thus reaches its conclusion in the breakthrough beyond God – see Eckhart (1981).

When Mir identifies himself, the courtly game is transformed into the deadly game, as he maintains that he saved Clement, whom Lucas wanted to kill. “‘I was dead you know, but they revived me’” (Murdoch 1993: 94). Such a claim indirectly toys with the romance’s love for the supernatural. Still, while the reality of the romance was enhanced and explained by means of magic, here it seems to serve the purpose of justice. “He [Mir] turned to Clement. He said: ‘I think you were there too. Weren’t you the third man? In a daze Clement nodded and moved forward. They shook hands’” (Murdoch 1993: 94). “My death was news but not my resurrection” (1993: 101). Murdoch never gives a rational explanation for his resurrection, nor does she explain why Lucas tried to kill Clement. Lucas was the adopted brother, and from their rather infrequent talks one can gather that he was the less loved, ugly one. Lucas’ conspicuous ugliness contradicts the courtly ideal of beauty and, in an old fashioned way, points out to his villainous character. “‘Why did Cain kill Abel? Why did Romulus kill Remus? I have always wanted to kill you, ever since the moment when I learnt of your existence. Do not let us waste time on that’” (Murdoch 1993: 88). Lucas maintains that Clement was cruel when they were little children (1993: 198). As for Clement: “He was appalled to find himself feeling so guilty, so touched by *evil*. He wanted from Lucas some reassurance, some liberation, some absolution. But what for? Of course, for being so unkind when they were little children. He must have been unkind” (Murdoch 1993: 93). In other conversations and in all that Clement does, it seems that he was always trying to please Lucas and throughout the book this appears to be so.

The first attempt of murder was the challenge; when the “Green Knight” reappears there comes the time of the trial for all the characters involved. The medieval text of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* asked the question of ordeal and test; Murdoch asks a question of evil and retribution for evil. Lucas, who is greatly admired by everyone is threatened with the loss of his heroic identity should the true motif and context of the incipient accident come to light.

Mir: “You sir [turning to Lucas] must be well acquainted with the relation between evil fantasies and evil acts. I am quite capable of enacting any one of them, and I may say there are many more, more foully ingenious and extreme, than the ones I have just mentioned. However, if I desire to ruin your life as you have ruined mine, I have also a choice of less crude methods” (Murdoch 1993: 196).

Mir wants to act out the scene of their first unfortunate meeting again. For Lucas this is the true trial. Sin, defined customarily as a willful act to do wrong threatened not only his own stability but also the peace of the community Lucas represents. “He [Mir] said more than that, he said that it would be a rite of purification, a sort of mystery tale, a gesture, a divine intervention” (Murdoch 1993:

168). Lucas understands that “he’ll want to deal with it man-to-man – like a duel – or rather, he’ll want to torture me personally. The police would just spoil the fun” (Murdoch 1993: 199). Clement wonders “whether we are not here confronted with a great possibility of choosing good instead of evil” (1993: 280). Clement thought Mir’s words “the mystery play”, but really he had thought about it as a farce (1993: 219). Stressing the element of the theater, Murdoch instigates a complex game in which the “Green Knight” might be mentally ill rather than supernatural (Hansson 1998: 79). Even if we accept the assumed ironic intertextuality, still, in medieval romance, testing was also part of an elaborated societal game, as it is in Murdoch’s book. The original Green Knight challenges Gawain to a life and death duel, a violent game in which Gawain must accept his death. Mir wants the game to be a pretended scene, which, although assuredly non-violent, might end with a fatal blow for Lucas (the one who ruined Mir’s life). Both Green Man and his alter ego, Sir Bertilak are characterized by animal vitality, which so much defines the presentation of Mir himself. Whereas Gawain acts on an impulse in the name of the Arthurian court and, by accepting the green girdle and withholding the information from Sir Bertilak, transgresses the private/public domains, Lucas vows secrecy, appealing, as he does, to the male solidarity of his brother and friend to protect himself. Thus, he is able to camouflage his deed. What was part of the chivalric code in the fourteenth century in the twentieth a well-staged game to which they all try to appropriate some meaning.

Nevertheless, such a game sustains the sense of magic, in which the knife becomes the ceremonial sword but the trial always entails the choice between good and evil, to gain mercy and forgiveness. “Had Clement imagined that he could somehow cure them all by creating something absurd? Salvation by the absurd. A conjuring trick by Clement Graffe” (Murdoch 1993: 219). Undoubtedly, the theater casts a kind of magic spell, mesmerizing the audience, and Clement, being an actor, knew its power. When he gazed at the two men he felt the atmosphere of the contest, “his sense of them as two great rival magicians” (Murdoch 1993: 317). Test and challenge primarily reenacted spiritual death and rebirth of the whole circle, although this rebirth entailed profound changes into its structure. According to Mir “Buddhists say that enlightenment is found by a blow” (Murdoch 1993: 299), an angel is a messenger of the divine, sometimes an unconscious one. For Mir, in the re-enactment of the scene Lucas become an angel (Murdoch 1993: 199). Thus casting away the evil, he was reincorporated into the community again. As a gesture of reconciliation Peter throws a party at his house and is taken away to a psychiatric hospital by a demanding Dr. Fonsett, the scene very much reminding one of *The Birthday Party* by Harold Pinter. At the party he is an almost Christ-like figure during the Last Supper, leaving

Bellamy as his apostle. All of this further magnifies the ambiguity of this figure. Mir dies later on in the hospital.

Peter Mir shattered and restored order in the enchanted universe. But was it all a true test or jester's/madman's joke? Strikingly Lucas is not being punished, he is only forced to realize his fault. In the scene Peter draws a bit of Lucas's blood but doesn't injure him. The trifling wound as a punishment for Lucas's attempted murder reflects the wound Gawain received for the momentary impulse to save his own life. Lucas's need to confess and accept the chastisement for moral failure does not parallel the kind of dynamics played in the original Green Knight story, where the public and private codes of behavior fused courtesy and heroic assertiveness. Unlike Gawain, Lucas was never tried on his commitment to chivalric ethos, neither did he go through the right of passage as Gawain does. Upon his mysterious return he is already re-incorporated into his community. Refusing to write a new identity for himself, Lucas, the beast, leaves England with Aleph, the beauty, the temptress. Their secret marriage opens a whole new alley in the re-reading of a love story. Moi, the pantheist, restores the stone she took from its place a year before and somehow everything seems to be falling into its place. Her symbolic gesture not only reminds one of the temporal frame of the original *Green Knight* text but also points out to the solar year and various nature myths.

In the Middle Ages the key philosophical question was what God's relation was to man and the universe. In the Renaissance and the following periods, the question was reformulated, e.g., what is man's relation to God and the universe? More pertinent in the contemporary world Murdoch induces other issues of human interrelation pertaining to man's relation to the universe and the guiding, perhaps secular, principles of life. Iris Murdoch's book escapes easy identification. She constantly provokes reflections on what is right what is wrong, good and evil, moral and immoral. Chivalric romance motifs are not the only ones exposing the connections with the Middle Ages. The mystical-theological references liberate the text from assumed realistic representation once again stressing the links with the magical and miraculous as well as with the religious and self-evasive. Undermining the notion of intertextual, thematic symmetry enables one to discover complexities and contradictions, which are at work in the transaction between the contemporary novel and medieval romance. The revalorization of the earlier text, however, is sometimes played out at the expense of an ironic commentary on the later one. Nevertheless, Murdoch's novel skillfully embraces the moral ambiguity of the medieval work, enabling the reader to see the moral, literary and philosophical mechanisms which are still at work now, and probably continuing in the future.

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