

Seeking the Truth: A Deeper Look At Iris Murdoch's *Under the Net*

Exclamations of truth rang through the air before the two world wars shook humanity to its core. The world was left in a broken state after the First World War, and people sought after the nearest truth in order to receive hope. Due to this mass search, truth became Churchill's Britain; truth became Hitler's Germany; truth became Stalin's Russia; truth became Mussolini's Italy; and truth became Hirohito's Japan. The world had an overabundance of absolute truths. The Great leaders of that time were standing up and speaking brazen words that gave their people and that greatly needed hope. Consequently, people believing their words followed them into death's open arms. The brutality and shock from the wars created a void in the world, in which truth was not again so easily obtained. Even Great Britain, which fared the wars better than most, lost its great idealism and positivism. This postwar mindset of Britain is seen in the novel *Under the Net*, written by Iris Murdoch in 1954. It is a direct product of the world's clash of truths. By looking at Murdoch's novel, life, and other works, it becomes clear that the chaos formed by the wars weaved itself into the minds of people to such a degree that even the general idea of "truth" was no longer attainable. To Murdoch truth became something that only silence, rather than eloquent speeches, could convey.

The Plot of *Under the Net*: A Philosophical Quest

At first glance, Murdoch's *Under the Net* is just an entertaining tale about the life of a young man in England, but a closer look quickly suggests that there are deeper meanings within

her words. The story begins with the main character Jake being forced to leave the comforts of what was once his home. From there the story twists and turns from one experience to the next. He searches for a new place to live, he finds an old lover, he finds an old book, he uncovers a plot regarding a stolen transcript, he discusses truth with wise friends, and it all ends with Jake having the self-realization of what he wants to do with the rest of his life. He decides that creative writing rather than translating other works is his calling. Overall this modern tale has quite a bit in common with the classic tales of the young hero seeking truth with the aid of a wizened friend, and together they discover the young hero's destiny. However, what makes this novel most interesting is Murdoch's philosophical undertones coupled with the adventure of the quest. Together they form a quest for truth.

In this tale truth goes hand in hand with silence, and only those whom respect silence assist the hero on his quest. The first part of the tale leaves Jake searching for a new place to stay, and so finds himself at Dave's house. Dave considers himself to be a true philosopher, and can speak of nothing else. However, his tendency to always put "truths" into speech creates only confusion. When they discuss philosophical truths neither can understand one another. Jake sums this dilemma up nicely when he says, "Truth is a great word and the thing is greater still"¹. This is only to show how their speech was limiting to them, and kept them from fully grasping the truth. Dave's philosophical speeches were not helpful in themselves, but they did lead Jake to his next step—finding his old love Anna.

Anna herself seems to represent the mysterious nature of truth that makes it so difficult to attain, which is contrasted against her sister Sadie and her scheming ways. Anna is a director

¹ Murdoch, Iris. *Under the Net* (New York: Penguin, 1977, c. 1954)

of a mime theater, and it is during a rehearsal that Jake encounters her. The silence coming from the stage casts a spell upon Jake and he is soon entranced by the beautiful display of truth. This enchantment is only broken when words are once again spoken. In regards to Sadie, however, a spell was never cast. She herself is an actress who pretends in life. She is beautiful and often gaudy, and is very skilled in making people believe she is truthful². It is her plot to sell a stolen transcript that Jake uncovers, while staying in her house. This purposeful contrast between the two sisters serves as a means to better display the essence of truth within the mysterious Anna.

Nevertheless, nothing portrays the truthful silence that Murdoch describes better than the character of Hugo and Jake's book, "The Silencer". After visiting Anna Jake comes across the only book he has ever published, and thinks back to its beginnings. The book is essentially transcribed conversations that he has had with his friend Hugo. Like Anna, Jake could not define Hugo. He found Hugo to be extremely objective and detached from everything as if he were born differently than everyone else. Because of this Jake, who is always searching for truth, thought that Hugo would have the answers. During one of their discussions Jake asks if he could accurately describe something true, to which Hugo said that is impossible, "Language just won't let you present it as it really is"³. Jake's book *The Silencer* is his attempt to accurately portray their conversations on truth and the necessity of silence. However, writing the book creates the limitations that are discussed, and Murdoch makes sure that the irony of this is very unmistakable.

² Murdoch, Iris. *Under the Net* (New York: Penguin, 1977, c. 1954)

³ Murdoch, Iris. *Under the Net* (New York: Penguin, 1977, c. 1954)

The entire novel is centered on Jake's search for truth, which always seems to elude him. Contrary to the heroes before the wars, this hero never has all of the answers, and he is never more heroic than when he embraces that fact. The coveted truth remains a mystery throughout the novel. It is always present, but no one, including the hero, can fully grasp it. Yet even through all of the haze and confusion the philosophical discussions of truth seem to be the silent bond that brings everything together.

The Life of Iris Murdoch: Her Own Search for Truth

Murdoch's *Under the Net* cannot be understood at a mere glance, nor can it be wholly comprehended by intense study of the text itself. This would only result in possessing the same confusion that entangles the characters themselves. Murdoch's mind is a web of great thoughts, and she has the great influences of Jean-Paul Sartre, Raymond Queneau and Ludwig Wittgenstein, which will be discussed in more detail later. Her novel is itself a product of intricate thoughts that began to develop during the First World War, and later matured amidst the simmering doubts after the Second World War. Suffice it to say, the meanings within this novel are not at all simplistic, but further understanding can be obtained by the act of searching for the truth. To begin with, nothing could be more necessary to understanding the intricacies of *Under the Net* than looking closer at the author herself.

Murdoch's life began in Dublin, Ireland on July 15, 1919, but moved to London while still young. She was only able to visit her homeland of Ireland on holidays. This dual identity created within her a strengthened sense of place, which is easily seen in her novels where great amounts of detail are given in the meaning and description of locations. Her family was of a long Irish descent, and therefore aided in her strong sense of place. Her father, Wills John

Hughes was a quiet man who served as a cavalry officer during World War I. Her mother, Irene Alice Richardson, was quite the opposite. She was an opera singer, and created a musical element to Murdoch's life, which often shows up "in the lives of her characters"⁴. Murdoch's family and heritage were very influential in her life, but it was her extensive education that first introduced her to liberal thought.

If anything, Murdoch's life and education show that she herself was a seeker of truth. She studied Latin, Greek, literature, history and philosophy from a young age, beginning with her education in Badminton school of Bristol. She received her college degree from Somerville College in Oxford, and then resided in London during the Second World War. She jumped into the mainland of Europe after the war to assist refugees after all of the devastation that took place. She was an administrative officer within the United Nations and worked in London, Belgium and Austria from 1944 to 1946. Yet working with refugees could not distract her longing for truth. Her work in Belgium actually served as her introduction to Sartre and his teachings. She became wrapped up in the existentialist movement, which focuses on "individual freedom and action".⁵ She also first acquired some of his works while there, whose existentialist heroes are often full of longing and angst, much like the main characters of her novel. Murdoch also had the honor of meeting Sartre and befriending Queneau [to whom *Under the Net* is dedicated]. Murdoch translated a novel of Queneau's to show her admiration for his work and penned his book *Pierrot Mon Ami* into her own novel. During this point in her young life her philosophical longings and aspirations were fully embraced.⁶

⁴ Bove, Cheryl K. *Understanding Iris Murdoch* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina, 1993), 2.

⁵ Bove, Cheryl K. *Understanding Iris Murdoch* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina, 1993), 2.

⁶ Bove, Cheryl K. *Understanding Iris Murdoch* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina, 1993), 3.

Another “fate-like” event put Murdoch under the direct guidance of Wittgenstein’s philosophy, which emphasizes the limitation of language. She had been accepted for graduate work in the United States but due to her previous membership in the Communist party while in Oxford she was denied a visa. Instead, she chose to study philosophy at Newnham College, Cambridge.⁷ Philosophy at Cambridge at this time was still heavily influenced by Wittgenstein’s thinking, and so the analysis of language and truth became a part of her, as well as, her work. It was here that she earned her fellowship and became a professor of Philosophy.

While teaching philosophy at Newnham Murdoch, she wrote her first novel *Under the Net*. This began her writing career. She went to write many other novels, and to win just as many literature awards. Her philosophy matured and became her own as time went on. She did not remain aligned with Sartrean existentialism, as she was in her youth. Instead she devised her own moral philosophy, which focused more directly on the correlation of virtue and the search for truth. As Cheryl Bove puts it, Murdoch’s views are that “Only those who are able to lose themselves and attend diligently to the concerns of others are capable of moral advancement”⁸. Nevertheless, even before her death in 1999, Murdoch has always been thought of as an existentialist thinker.

Despite where her life went after the initial postwar shock, *Under the Net* was written when Murdoch was still caught up in the frenzy of French existentialist thinking, Wittgenstein’s language philosophy and Queneau’s existentialist work. According to Peter Conradi, her longtime friend and autobiographer, her novel is creative means of writing her own personal story, “Although *Under the Net* is not strictly a ‘diary’, male first person narrative liberated

⁷ Bove, Cheryl K. *Understanding Iris Murdoch* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina, 1993), 3.

⁸ Bove, Cheryl K. *Understanding Iris Murdoch* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina, 1993), 5.

her”⁹. Writing the novel, in addition to explaining truth, is a means to confidently speak through the character of Jake. Conradi states that it is not a coincidence that her male leads are always the same age as she is. Jake does indeed have many similarities with her besides age. He is an Irish-Londoner, he was once a part of a communist league, and he translates French novels just as Murdoch translated Queneau’s *Pierrot Mon Ami*. To think that *Under the Net* is based off of Murdoch’s own quest for truth during her younger years is indeed fascinating, and yet no sense can be made from it without knowing more about existentialism, Sartre, Queneau and Wittgenstein.

Existentialism: A Word Used for Many Seekers of Truth

Existentialism is not a narrow term, but rather a broad term that covers a vast array of thoughts. It is “not a philosophy but a label for several widely different revolts against traditional philosophy”.¹⁰ It is not necessary for there to be agreement between existentialists. Essentially, all that is required is a rebelling stance against the norm. Many, who fall under the existentialist label, including Murdoch, do not desire it. The majority of existentialists seem to “have a marked aversion for each other”.¹¹ Many writers have been put into this bracket based on their work, but this placement has not necessarily been appreciated. Their views are obviously different from the other existentialists, and this makes the term feel alien to them. It appears as though existentialism is a term coined by followers of what is normal to throw every rebel thought into one huge pile.

⁹ Conradi, Peter. *Iris Murdoch: A Life* (New York: Norton, 2001), 380.

¹⁰ Kaufmann, Walter. *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (Cleveland: World Pub), 11.

¹¹ Kaufmann, Walter. *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (Cleveland: World Pub), 11.

Looking back at existentialism, the greatest of them all did not have much in common either. The extended timeframe, from Dostoevsky- the Greek-Orthodox imperialist, to Sartre - the French intellectual, is quite expansive. There are those, like Pascal and Kierkegaard, who are Christians and those, like Nietzsche, more inclined to an anti-Christian perspective. These existentialists could not even agree on whether there is a God or not, and this is not where the differences stop. Even those with similarities cannot agree, Pascal was a Catholic and Kierkegaard was a protestant. Then there are divides between non-Christians. Nietzsche hated Christianity, while existentialists like Heidegger and Sartre were just atheists who neither liked nor hated it. The one common ground that can be seen between all of them is their sense of individualism. Kaufmann states it in this way,

*The refusal to belong to any school of thought, the repudiation of the adequacy of any body of beliefs whatever, and the especially of systems, and a marked dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy as superficial, academic, and remote from life—that is the heart of existentialism.*¹² [12]

Existentialism encompasses so many thoughts and views that its definition is very broad, which makes a unity among existentialist an impossibility for most. With all of this in mind, it is not surprising that, although Murdoch changed her philosophy over the years, the existentialist label remained with her.

Jean-Paul Sartre and French Existentialism

Sartre gives his best description of what French existentialism is in his work “Existentialism is Humanism”. He notes the vast differences between existentialists, but

¹² Kaufmann, Walter. *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (Cleveland: World Pub), 12.

maintains that what makes existentialists is the belief in existence over essence. So for the French aesthetic existentialist like Sartre, if God is non-existent then humanity [people] are the one thing that can exist before it is defined.¹³ Sartre claims that people are what they make of themselves—people define themselves. Some during this time viewed existentialists as dreary pessimists who stray from mainstream thought, but he cleverly illustrated how he is only explaining how existentialism is a far less dreary path than popular wisdom of that time. Sartre references their everyday sayings “dismal proverbs”, and shows that not only do they view the world with just as much pessimism, but they give themselves no way out. There are many sayings that encompass the ideas that condemn the non-traditional and that criticize all attempts to venture down new paths.¹⁴ Sartre then wonders if it is really his pessimism that they dislike or his existentialist optimism that gives people the opportunity to rise up and define themselves. Sartre’s goal here is to show that people have the ability to rise up above the grim reality of the world. Sartre essentially put to paper what he saw in the lives of the people around him, but with his own addition of hope for change.

The influence of Sartre in *Under the Net* is best seen by comparing it to his novel *La Nausée*. Both contain the same existentialists focus on experience and their characters, Antoine Roquentin and Jake Donahue, view the world through a somewhat dismal lens. The characters both become aware of the limitations of language during the course of their story, and want to discover the truth. However, their main characters deal with their realities by different means.¹⁵ Antoine chooses his career path through a spontaneous realization at the

¹³Kaufmann, Walter. *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (Cleveland: World Pub), 290.

¹⁴Kaufmann, Walter. *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (Cleveland: World Pub), 288.

¹⁵ Obumselu, Ben. “Iris Murdoch and Sartre” *ELH* 42 (1975): 296.

end of the novel, while Jake is essentially given his path after he struggles with the envy of another writer's work. Just like their endings, their prospective novels show that "Roquentin freely chooses" while "Donahue obeys".¹⁶ This difference could be seen as a precursor to Murdoch's moral philosophy. Nevertheless, both authors create worlds with their pens that reflect their own disillusionments.

Raymond Queneau and Pierrot Mon Ami

Queneau had a special place in Murdoch's heart. Not only was he an inspiration through his writings, but he also gets the endearing title of friend. Sartre's teachings might have influenced *Under the Net*, but it is Queneau to whom it is dedicated. He, like Murdoch, was very existentialist in writing style. His own novel, *Pierrot Mon Ami* is very similar to *Under the Net* in that its main heroic character bounces from place to place with the realization that having all of the answers is impossible. Pierrot, the main character, begins his story working at the "Palace of Fun", he fall in love somewhere in the middle, and he ends up training animals in a circus. A year of his life is nothing more than a continuous line of experiences with no plot to tie them together.¹⁷ What is even more interesting about this book is that Jake Donahue actually carries it with him when he is forced to leave his apartment, and begin his chain of experiences. However, the reasoning behind the dedication to Queneau and the use of his book, friendship aside, is somewhat contradictory to the main idea of the novel—that silence is truth.

Queneau loved words, and was without a doubt he was passionate about language. He too was very philosophical but he viewed language as the "shaper and shared basis for

¹⁶ Obumsele, Ben. "Iris Murdoch and Sartre" *ELH* 42 (1975): 297.

¹⁷ Hedges, Inez. Afterward to *Pierrot Mon Ami* (Gallimard, England: Dalkey Archive Press, 1942), 157.

existence”.¹⁸ Language, to Queneau, was not a hindrance to truth, but instead a tool for truth. He was, in many ways, the liberator of the French language. He found that humanity had prescribed too many rules for language, and it needed to have some life put back into it. He enjoyed breaking the rules of semantics. He would switch in and out of tenses within the same sentence, he would utilize repetition in order to exaggerate scenes and use words like “ekcetera” that only make sense when the reader speaks it aloud.¹⁹ His work uses language to make the comical serious and the serious comical. It is a resource that of which he has mastered to create literary masterpieces that show language as an experience in itself. So for Murdoch to draw attention to Queneau and his novel within *Under the Net* suggests that perhaps she still found writing to have its purpose in the world after all. In the end she did give Jake a career in creative writing, rather than a philosophical career.

Ludwig Wittgenstein and *Tractatus [tractatoos] Lugico [loogeeco]-Philosophicus [pheelosopheecoos]*

Out of all of Murdoch’s influences for her novel, Wittgenstein’s thoughts are the most prevalent within her philosophical undertones. Wittgenstein wrote the *Tractatus* during World War I, and became very popular while Murdoch was studying in Oxford. The book in its entirety makes direct statements of fact that support the idea of the limitations of words on truth. Wittgenstein believes that “In practice, language is always more or less vague, so that what we assert is never quite precise”.²⁰ [Bertrand Russell 7]. This idea is scattered throughout *Under the Net*, and it is not surprising considering she was in Oxford studying his philosophy at the

¹⁸ Hedges, Inez. Afterward to *Pierrot Mon Ami* (Gallimard, England: Dalkey Archive Press, 1942), 158.

¹⁹ Wright, Barbara. Preface to *Pierrot Mon Ami* (Gallimard, England: Dalkey Archive Press, 1942), ii.

²⁰ Russell, Bertrand. Forward to *Tractatus Lugico-Philosophicus* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1922), 7.

time. Wittgenstein had concerns with language and wanted to provide a way in which to bring truth back into the equation.

Wittgenstein brings four problems concerning language to attention, and focuses a great deal on the fourth. The first problem regards psychology: what truly takes place in the mind when language is used with intended meaning. The second deals with epistemology: what is the relationship among sentences, words, or thoughts and how they are defined? The Third, he sets aside for the “special sciences”: the use of sentences for false purposes. Lastly the issue of how closely a fact must be to another in order to be a symbol for the other? This last problem is one in which he spends the longest deciphering. He shows his concern for “accurate symbolism” [Russell 7]. Language itself, he believes cannot be guaranteed to accurately portray anything. Language lacks logic. For example, syntax is easily negotiable, and symbols usually do not have a definite meaning that are unique unto themselves. The perfect logical language needs to have exact meanings for every component that cannot be interchanged [Russell 8]. He concedes that the probability of people truly adapting this is slight, but that the problems of language must still be addressed in some way. With these problems in mind he lays out his theory of pictures.

Wittgenstein starts by declaring that “We make to ourselves pictures of facts” [Wittgenstein 28]. Reality is best displayed through pictures or thoughts. According to him, thoughts can picture the world, and because of that they can create accurate representations. However, language is limiting in that one person can say what they are thinking, but the person listening could easily envision something completely different. Language does not come with pictures of reality. As Wittgenstein puts it,

*Language disguises the thought; so that from the external form of the clothes one cannot infer the form of the thought they clothe, because the external form of the clothes is constructed with quite another object than to let the form of the body be recognized.*²¹

Therefore, language fails at truthful depictions of reality. Truth, he believes, comes from the real world through pictures, “In order to discover whether the picture is true or false we must compare it with reality. The totality of true thoughts comes from the world” [Wittgenstein 30]. It is better to be shown truth than told truth. In the end silence is the best form of truth.

Wittgenstein’s thoughts permeate the philosophical realm within *Under the Net*. Hugo’s character alone unmistakably portrays the voice of Wittgenstein’s thoughts in Murdoch’s pages. Once Hugo has read Jake’s book, *The Silencer*, he does not even realize that the majority of the thoughts are in fact his. He even goes a step further and with complete sincerity congratulates Jake on his original work. Hugo never says anything about writing down truths, nor does he ever even think about writing them down himself. It is clear that he firmly believes that it is an impossible task. When Wittgenstein looked back on his work he felt somewhat ridiculous, because he had attempted to explain truth and even to show that truth cannot be explained with words. Murdoch too, in retrospect, thought her novel was foolish in some ways, because she tried to explain what Wittgenstein had already conceded as impossible. The Philosophy in *Under the Net* is in a predominately confused state, not unlike the world at that time.

Postwar Britain: Changes in Culture and Literature

²¹ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1922), 31.

Unlike the other mainland European countries, Britain did not need to completely reconstruct everything after the devastating wars. However, Britain had its own challenge of redefining its place in the world. The entire idea of empire was called into question, which in turn questioned British identity. The British were exhausted from all of the wars, and to top it off their diminishing empire was not easy an easy fact to accept.²² They were broken, tired and lost. The war changed their country and consequently changes began taking place within society itself. Not only were intellectuals, like Murdoch, searching for truth, but the country as a whole was doing that exact same thing.

Before the wars there was such a distance between the British elite and the lower classes that neither really knew much about the other. People were contented to believe as they were raised rather than searching for the truth themselves. For example, before the wars most upper-class students in Oxford and other universities were not inclined to Marxist thinking, nor were they liberalists. Instead they were perfectly content to live a life of friends, literature, sports and music with the satisfaction that they could succeed in life with little to no effort.²³ Why be skeptical and existentialist in thought if everything in life is good? They truly had no idea how the other half lived. It took being attacked on their homeland for awareness of this problem to really take hold. The living conditions brought on by the Blitz served as the portal to the everyday living conditions of the poor. Even before people were forced to live for months in the underground, the living conditions of the poor were horrendous. The working classes were already living in damp, cold dwellings with burdens of debt on their malnourished

²² James, Harold. *Europe Reborn: A History, 1914-2000* (England: Pearson Longman, 2003), 249-250.

²³ Sinfield, Alan. *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 11.

shoulders.²⁴ And not until the Blitz rained down on everyone the same sense of despair did the governing British elite inquire into these problems of society.

Unlike the upper class, the working class was never able to change their surroundings or flee from them; they merely coped with what they had. This same sense of entrapment became the postwar mentality that engulfed people from every class. The lives and thoughts of the working class have become applicable to every person:

*History...has helped to make working-class attitudes—the skepticism about an established truth, the belief that survival is mostly a matter of luck—applicable to a much wider range of British society.*²⁵

It seems as though the working class have been plucking along as existentialists for quite some time, and it took two world wars for anyone to really notice it.

Britain's identity crisis did not end by simply gaining a more enlightened view of the lower classes, as the classes began to mingle challenges arose from their changing identities. There are many instances where the middle class parent is angry and concerned about their now university educated child, and the lower middle class students living amongst upper class students is a problem on in itself. Middle and lower class parents would encourage their children to attend university thinking of it as only good means to obtain money and an education never guessing that the real education and money received would in turn change their children's values as well. Britain was suffering the unavoidable challenges of the class based problems of a rapidly progressing society. People were wandering lost in a new society without any idea as to where they belonged.

²⁴ Sinfield, Alan. *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 10

²⁵ Gindin, James. *Postwar British Fiction: New Accents and Attitudes* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1962), 104.

Initially, many did join the war effort to keep Britain as it was, which included the traditional class division. However, the tendency for the wars to level society was unavoidable.²⁶ The war brought the elites down to a similar level of hopelessness and their search for a different truth began. Skepticism and Existentialism do not thrive where everyone is living in luxurious comforts. But rather they thrive in a world that has been torn, and whose people are lost. Likewise authors, like Murdoch, are not anomalies in their time, but are instead products of it. And because of this even in fiction, heroes sought truth instead of victory, and plots became a series of experiences. Not even imagination could relieve the world of their new reality.

Conclusion

In Postwar Britain truth was the one thing that people desired above all else, and yet it was the one thing that no one could fully grasp. The wars left behind skepticism, doubts and a longing for the assurance of truth. No one fully escaped this. The working class, the middle class and the upper class became entangled in the same absence of truth. Murdoch and other intellectuals attempted to explain this void through their philosophies, but in the end all that was left for them was to accept that the search for truth would continue. Jake, just like Murdoch and her philosophical mentors, had to eventually accept the fact that truth would always be a little out of his reach. No words, eloquent speeches, or exclamations of truth could persuade them, because “truthful words” had lost their meaning in all of the rubble.

Murdoch’s *Under the Net* shows that truth must be sought, rather than devised for personal

²⁶ Sinfield, Alan. *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 13.

benefit. Even if truth could never be found, the search brought, and continues to bring purpose to a world torn apart.