



Books

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LITERARY HORIZONS

Rector for a Dead God

ALTHOUGH I missed Iris Murdoch's first novel, *Under the Net*, when it was published in 1954, I caught up with it a little later because I had undertaken to review its successor, *Flight from the Enchanter*. Since then I have read each of her novels as it has appeared, always with pleasure and admiration, though of course I have liked some better than others. Her tenth, *The Time of the Angels* (Viking, \$5), is one that I like very much indeed. In fact, it seems to me to be her best since *A Severed Head* (1961). There is much to be said for the intervening novels, *An Unofficial Rose*, *The Unicorn*, *The Italian Girl*, and *The Red and the Green*, but this is top-quality Murdoch.

In reviewing *The Sandcastle* (1957) I wrote, "No one is more skillful or more plausible than Miss Murdoch in creating men and women who are highly unconventional if not a little mad," and everything she has written since bears me out. In *The Time of the Angels* seven or eight characters whose behavior can only be described as unpredictable are brought together in a number of complex and constantly changing relationships. The central figure, though he is rarely on stage, is Carel Fisher, a priest of the Church of England, who has been assigned to a rectory in the London slums that is about to be demolished. With him are his daughter, Muriel, and his niece and ward, Elizabeth, who is a semi-invalid. Also accompanying him is his housekeeper, Pattie O'Driscoll, illegitimate child of an Irish mother and a Jamaican father, and we soon learn that she was for some time his mistress. The caretaker of the rectory is a Russian emigré named Eugene Peshkov, whose son, Leo, is handsome, irresponsible, and precocious in wickedness. The only important character who does not live under the rectory roof is Carel's brother Marcus, a schoolmaster and amateur philosopher.

Miss Murdoch has a deceptively

forthright manner of introducing her characters. That is, she makes direct statements about them in a way that is currently unfashionable, but what she says, though always true, is rarely the whole truth. Of Muriel and Elizabeth, for example, she writes: "The girls prided themselves on being theoretical immoralists of some degree of refinement. Being high-minded and superior and tough made them by a natural development nonmoral and free. They were not themselves tempted by excesses. They lived indeed the strictly ordered life which Muriel imposed and Elizabeth accepted. But they took it for granted that all was permitted." We are near the end of the book before we realize all that this statement implies and in what ways it has to be qualified.

Miss Murdoch moves the story along smoothly, and then abruptly, as often in her novels, there is an unexpected and explosive climax. It has elements of both slapstick and melodrama, but it gets the effect the author wanted.

Trained in philosophy and for many years a teacher of the subject at Oxford, Miss Murdoch has a persistent interest in the large questions about man and the universe that the philosophers have always raised. She is particularly interested in the consequences of disbelief in God. Many people say there is no God, but, she holds, few are capable of feeling deep in their beings what that denial involves. The seemingly demented rector in this novel, Carel, is one of the few who really know that God is dead. As he says in an argument with his brother Marcus, a conventional sort of skeptic, "Oh, yes, people have often uttered the words, but no one has believed them." "Perhaps Nietzsche did for a little," he adds, but Nietzsche went mad. He continues: "Any interpretation of the world is childish. Why is this not obvious? All philosophy is the prattling of a child. The Jews understood this a little. Theirs is the only religion with any real grim-

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ness in it. The author of the Book of Job understood it. Job asks for sense and justice. Jehovah replies that there is none. There is only power and the marvel of power, there is only chance and the terror of chance."

Later Carel says, "The death of God has set the angels free. And they are terrible." "Those with whom the angels communicate are lost." Marcus does not know what Carel means by his talk about angels, and neither do I, but it was not Miss Murdoch's intention to present a coherent philosophy. She is interested not in Carel's theories but in Carel, and what he does is more important than what he says.

Some of Miss Murdoch's novels, such as *Flight from the Enchanter* and *A Severed Head*, have large elements of fantasy, whereas others are predominantly realistic. But, as she once said in an interview, "In real life the fantastic and the ordinary, the plain and the symbolic, are often indissolubly joined together, and I think the best novels explore and exhibit life without disjoining them." They are not disjoined in *The Time of the Angels*. The setting itself—the ruined rectory, the rumble of the subway trains, the only briefly interrupted fog, Carel's

constant playing of Tchaikovsky—suggests that something more is involved than the simple reproduction of everyday experience. To certain of the other characters, especially Pattie but also Marcus, Carel appears to be a superhuman figure, and the story, like that in *A Severed Head*, may be regarded as a myth.

The theme of the novel is Dostoevskyan, but the technique is close to that of the comedy of manners. All through the early part of the book the author comments wittily on the behavior of her characters, and even after the most serious note has been sounded there is an ironic epilogue, in the course of which two or three screws are given additional twists. In telling the story Miss Murdoch moves freely from one point of view to another, but we never enter the mind of either Carel or Elizabeth, and the latter is not given a chance, as the former is, to speak for herself. We know them only as the others do, and we are aware that our knowledge is partial.

In a lecture she delivered at Yale several years ago Miss Murdoch said: "Form is the temptation of love and its peril, whether in art or life: to round off a situation, to sum up a character. But the difference is that art has got to have form, whereas life need not." Life, she warned, may be sacrificed to form, reality twisted to suit the needs of art. "To combine form with a respect for reality with all its odd contingent ways is the highest art of prose." What she preached Miss Murdoch beautifully practices.

—GRANVILLE HICKS.

**FRASER YOUNG'S
LITERARY CRYPT No. 1212**

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 1212 will be found in the next issue.

OLWSPROKI OP JIVEROQIVC

IEPC RU AIEJ; OR OP WSP-

ROKI RFER FSJRP.

—F. V. BILKNIL

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 1211

Whistling to keep up courage is good practice for whistling.

—HASKINS.

LETTERS TO THE Book Review Editor



Book Price Trends

I REGRET THAT, though David Dempsey himself is hardly at fault, his article "The Best Title of All" [SR, Oct. 1] is seriously inaccurate in its statement about book price trends. Mr. Dempsey states that book prices to libraries have risen 45 per cent since the 1957-1959 base period in contrast with a 9 per cent increase in the consumer price index. This figure is derived, perhaps at second hand, from a mistitled *Library Materials Index*, which does not in fact purport to record prices actually paid by libraries for books. That index is simply an arithmetical average of the retail list prices of all hard-covered books published annually for the book trade. It excludes backlist books, paperbounds, encyclopedias, book-club books, and specially bound library editions, which among them in fact make up the majority of library purchases. It records only list prices, from which American libraries traditionally have been granted discounts.

Even more serious, the *Library Materials Index* is not weighted in any way. A hundred-dollar art book which sells fewer than 1,000 copies has exactly the same weight in the index as a \$4.95 novel that sells 250,000 copies. These would be added and divided by two to produce an "average" book price of \$52.47½! As a result, what the 45 per cent change from 1957-1959 measures is not primarily a change in prices of comparable books but primarily a change in proportions of different kinds of books in the output of titles. In 1957 about 10,000 different hard-cover books were published; in 1965 about 20,000. Most of this increase fell in the categories of advanced scientific, technical, and medical books; university press books; art books; and very small editions (fewer than 1,000 copies, sometimes fewer than 500) of long out-of-print and expensive scholarly books and series reprinted by specialized firms primarily for university libraries. All of these are very expensive books to produce and are published in small editions; hence their prices are relatively high. Though they make up a very small proportion of total sales, they are a very high proportion of the total titles, and their addition to the "mix" is the principal explanation of the sharp increase in the *Library Materials Index*. Precisely the same kind of statistical illusion can be produced in reverse by including paperbound books in the calculation and noting that the average price received by publishers per copy sold has remained almost unchanged in some recent years (which is true, but which measures not price trends but the increasing proportion of paperbounds in sales). Both kinds of figures are meaningless as a measure of actual price changes.

There exists in fact no accurate general measure of price changes of comparable books, but an informed guess would put the change somewhat, though not greatly, more

than that in the consumer price index but considerably less than the increases of materials and of wages and salaries in book production. We can say with some precision, however, what the price increases have been in recent years for comparable special library editions. That increase has been about 2.4 per cent a year, less than the movement of other prices and much less than increases in printers' and binders' wages, salaries, or the cost of paper and binding cloth.

In view of the fact that British libraries get only 10 per cent off retail prices and that most European libraries pay the full retail price at the bookstore, American libraries (though they pay much more than European libraries for everything else they buy, including—happily—two to four times as much for salaries) I believe pay less, not only proportionately but in actual dollars and cents, for their books than libraries anywhere else in the world.

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Clemens vs. Cash

IT MAY BE TRUE, as Justin Kaplan writes, that Mark Twain was "obsessed in his life and work by the lure, the rustle and chink and heft of money," and that he wrote a kind of "pornography of the dollar" (whatever that means) and also that he did desire to make a million dollars, as A. Grove Day states in his review of *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain* [SR, June 18]. Yet a curious fact emerges—he apparently often turned down rather large offers of money. For example, Mr. Kaplan tells us, "He turned down Redpath's offer of \$5,000 a month to lecture that fall, saying he was already making more money than necessary." The author states that "When the *Herald* started a subscription fund to help him pay off his debts, he declined the contribution and asked the *Herald* to close the list and return the money." (Here Mr. Kaplan informs us that Mr. Clemens hesitated a few days before doing so.) Also we learn that he turned down an offer of \$50,000 and all expenses for 125 nights in America, "having decided a hard winter of traveling would destroy Livy's health and unwilling to leave her behind in her depression."

Mr. Kaplan also tells us that after Mark Twain went bankrupt, he paid back his debts; although "he had no legal obligation to pay 100 cents on the dollar," he did so. Here the author is careful to point out that Mark Twain's wife insisted on this. Yet, on the other hand, he several times tells the reader that Twain was influenced by Livy only to the extent he wished to be. What is one to make of all this?

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