

Also the Problem of Truth: Murdochian Murmurs of Browning

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There is no sure method of gauging these things, but I would wager that Iris Murdoch was one of *the* most widely read, if not the most widely read author writing in English in the twentieth century. The untold incalculable breadth of her knowledge of the works of other writers of all centuries and nationalities clearly colors her own literary output and the wide-ranging polished worldview(s) we may identify pullulating therein. That her own writing and thinking remains patently original under the weight of such substantial input is an amazing tribute to her own intelligence and intellect. Of course, she feels the weight of tradition, but displays, I think not Bloom's anxiety of influence but a positive delight in influence absorbed and deftly re-ordered to match her own intensely personal agenda and goals as a philosophical creative talent. As Eliot said, bad writers imitate, good writers steal: he meant stealing as a good thing, and Murdoch is the most astute of artful thieves, following Eliot's prescription of making what she borrows better and new.

Eclecticism governs. Thus a single page of a Murdoch novel may cite the names

or works of 2 or 3 seemingly disparate artists. A single page of one of her rich philosophical studies may cite 10 or 12. Likewise, mentioning no names in this case, a Murdoch poem, I believe, nevertheless often openly 'references' 2 or 3 poets that have come before and played some part in the new Murdochian work's conception, language, imagery and indeed *raison d'être*. The same group of poets tends to crop up, in particular the five first- and second-generation authors of the English Romantic movement in literature: Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, and Byron.

In this new paper, taking my cue from a single discrete reference embedded in the narrative of Murdoch's last novel *Jackson's Dilemma* (1995), I will argue that the precocious and controversial Victorian poet Robert Browning might be an important and logical additional touchstone (and, perhaps, in some ways a terminus) to fuller and further comprehension of Murdoch's poetic and philosophical vision as it developed and broadened into focus during the course of her career as an author. Initially offering a cautious close reading of Browning's loaded and enigmatic poem 'The Last Ride Together' (1855), crucially and significantly (I will show) cited in the text of *Jackson's Dilemma*, I will endeavor to protract and project certain of that work's detectable themes onto the canvas of Murdoch's vision as I have selected to sketch it in previous papers I have produced regarding one of the twentieth century's most intricate, erudite, elegant, elaborate, and remarkably sophisticated writers.