

## Murdoch and the classics: a reading of *An Accidental Man*

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In *Jackson's Dilemma*, Murdoch makes a striking comment about the classical world in her description of her *alter ego* Benet:

Benet had had his classical education, but had inclined to the philosophical side. His sense of the Greeks had come to him later [...] from Tim and Tim's books. In a strange way the books, which were indeed not all 'classics', were somehow deeply soaked in the spirit of the ancient world. (*Jackson's Dilemma*, 9)

Two things are here implied: first that 'the philosophical side' of classics perhaps does not give us a true sense of the Greeks, and secondly, that their spirit pervades the popular and children's literature of the Western tradition – Tim's classics include books such as *Treasure Island*, *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Wind in the Willows*.

Murdoch's view of the classics in this valedictory novel run somewhat counter to the prevailing tone of scholarly work on Murdoch's Grecian themes, which has tended to focus on her engagement with virtue ethics and Platonic ontology. Her use of classical references in earlier works also goes beyond these preoccupations. This paper explores Murdoch's allusions to the Greek and Roman classics in *An Accidental Man*, and also seeks to extend the notion of the classical beyond that which is usually focused upon in Murdoch studies.

I argue that in this novel, although we do indeed find the spirit of Plato's Socrates and a case made for the claims of pure ethical imperatives, we also find more Dionysian and chthonic elements, engaging this Socratic wisdom in a vigorous dialectic, both on the level of open verbal debate between characters and on the level of recurring references, symbols and mythemes. We shall find, among others, Socrates' old enemy Aristophanes, the pre-Socratic Heraclitus, Sophocles, Tiresias and also many of the gods of the Greek pantheon (named or disguised) and Greek heroes from Patroclus to Pyrrhus (who gives his name to a dog). Athena/Minerva, goddess of wisdom, is indeed represented, but she has a rival in the unnamed presence of Persephone and the older and darker gods of vegetation and the underworld. We also argue that we find an intertwining of Greek mythology with Celtic elements and with the myths created by two twentieth-century fantasy novels – Alan Garner's *The Owl Service* and J.R.R.Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.