ISSN 1347-4189

The Iris Murdoch Newsletter of Japan

No.14 February, 2013

London through the Novels of Iris Murdoch

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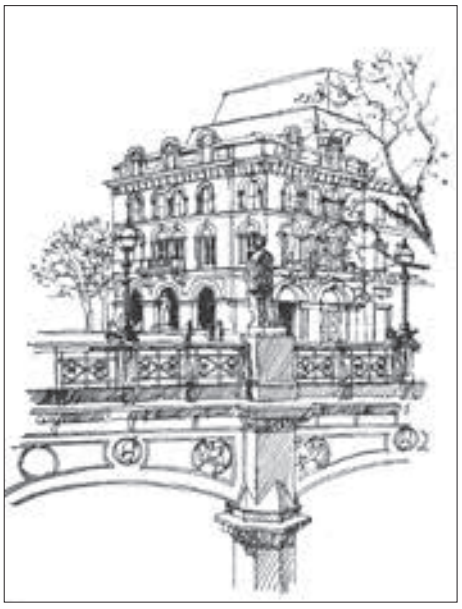
Like many of you, I began reading Iris Murdoch's novels before ever seeing London, and later visits to that city increased my interest and pleasure in discovering more about Murdoch's London. Directing a writing program for architecture students of all levels at my university also led me to pursue a study of Murdoch's description of space; it is this element that has colored my reading of her novels and fascinated me for several decades. The following few examples from her first novel, *Under the Net* (1954), indicate the ways in which Murdoch's specific use of London settings leads to joining the experience of history, monument and shared memory in her readers.

Architectural historians note that the 'art' in architecture involves the architect's vision of the whole building and the theory that lies behind the design. Briefly, buildings speak to us; we recognize monuments because of the importance of shared history and ideas. The meaning of a monument is not static; it changes with time, prominence, and use. For example, the Egyptian obelisks from Ancient Rome were given new meaning when a Renaissance pope decided to reorient them and use them as guideposts for Christian pilgrims. Similarly, the Thames-side Egyptian obelisk termed 'Cleopatra's Needle' recalls something—both positive and negative—about Britain's past empire. Beyond this, each person's interaction with and image of architecture, in this case the image of City, involves "a re-presentation of past forms" (Boyer 174-75) that has been cast from historical imagery and from collective memory. Accurately representing a specific period in time involves an act that is illusory, an imaginary reconstruction or reinterpretation based on "the sedimented layers of history where different time series and personal memories break into each other, creating new pattern and forms" (174). Concrete images drawn from memory combine with "imaginary figures and archaic symbols retrieved from the deep structure of memory" (175); these mingled layers alter our visual construction.

This process can readily be seen in our perception of Wren's City Churches in

London, so poignantly portrayed during Jake Donaghue's pub crawl with Lefty, Finn and Dave in *Under the Net*. Readers vicariously participate in Jake's comprehension of the City through Murdoch's fine and detailed narration of this set piece. Yet we also bring to our visualization our own understanding of these churches, and this understanding, according to architectural historian Kerry Downes, is quite reliable. Speaking in the 18th century, Sir Edwin Lutyens remarked that "Wren's genius gave character to London" (cited in Downes, 6). However, that effect is no longer what it once was. "Above all the panoramic effects that Wren consciously strove to achieve have vanished irrevocably" (Downes 8). In 1639 there were 97 parishes within the City walls. In 1666 the Great Fire destroyed 86 churches (Ellen 3). Wren rebuilt 51 churches, and 18 more were restored after WWII (Ellen 4). Yet even these churches were not as Wren had designed them. Through the centuries many parishes were combined. It was common to include relics such as weathervanes and rood screens from churches that had not been rebuilt as representations of former churches. Wren's panoramic effects and his desired street perspective from their neighborhoods have also been destroyed by the infill of warehouses and other large structures. Thus Wren's monument, in the sense of Lutyens' tribute, no longer exists (Downes 9).

Murdoch's brilliance in capturing public monument and memory is seen in her presentation of Wren's City churches in *Under the Net*. For one thing, the steeples and towers are viewed from the Holborn Viaduct, a dramatic viewpoint above the steeples that affords a more comprehensive view of the district with less interference from neighborhood infill. Her vocabulary and her use of simile in describing Farringdon Street evoke both the history of the River Fleet and the combined memory of nearly every Londoner: "Farringdon Street swept below us like a dried-up river" (UN 91). Holborn Viaduct, now a conduit for water [hole-born] through the City, is also the highest point in the district. Through her description Murdoch also reminds us that the viaduct was built to bridge the valley of the old Fleet River. From this vantage, Wren's steeples are recognizable, and their combined effect more comprehensible. Furthermore, the 1950s City would not have been completely rebuilt from the WWII bombing as is evident in her description: "From the darkness and shade of St. Paul's churchyard we came into Cheapside as into a bright arena [this term evokes earlier history of Roman habitation] and saw framed in the gap of a ruin the pale neat rectangles of St. Nicholas Cole Abbey..." (UN 103). History and individual memory are at work here.



Holborn Viaduct Sketch
by Paul Laseau

While Murdoch's remarkable use of shade and

shadow has Platonic resonances in this early novel, it also resounds with the Japanese aesthetic reverence for shade and shadows that are associated with nature and mystery, and in particular with temple architecture（See Junichirō Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*）. Her description of the Wren towers and spires by moonlight and their contrast with the riverscape between Blackfriars and Southwark bridges remains one of the most vivid passages in her canon:

Blackfriars Bridge
taken by the author

Southwark Bridge
taken by the author

> The sky opened out above me like an unfurled banner, cascading with stars and blanched by the moon. The black hulls of barges darkened the water behind me and murky towers and pinnacles rose indistinctly on the other bank. I swam well out into the river. It seemed enormously wide; and as I looked up and down stream I could see on one side the dark pools under Blackfriars Bridge and on the other the pillars of Southwark Bridge glistening under the moon. The whole expanse of water was running with light. It was like swimming in quicksilver. （UN 106-07）

London Skyline Sketch by Paul Laseau

Landscape architects have referred to the Thames River as London's fifth Royal Park, citing its use for pageantry and procession from earliest times. St. Paul's originally had an approach to the Cathedral from the Thames, one that was later lost to neighboring infill. Today, that ancient approach has been restored with the building the Millennium Footbridge and a new gateway park leading from that bridge to the Cathedral. When *Under the Net* was published in 1954, Murdoch had no idea that this would take place, yet she centers the location of Jake's swim, with his views upriver to Blackfriars Bridge and downriver to Southwark Bridge in the exact placement of today's Millennium Footbridge.

Public sculpture and particular landmarks evoke emotional responses from Murdoch's characters and from her readers. Moreover, she uses these architectural settings to reinforce her themes and to promote an aesthetic theory. Murdoch's London-specific novels involve her readers significantly in their shared memory and often infuse a significance of place in that shared memory. Her London is alive and vibrant, and it is a London personal to both her characters and her readers.

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