特別寄稿

Iris Murdoch, Charles Dickens and the Value of Comedy

Nick Turner

A couple of years ago, I had to read Angela Carter's novel *The Magic Toyshop* as part of a course I was teaching. The word 'had' gives the wrong impression really, for I decided it was a wonderful book, and then delved eagerly into the mass of criticism about the novel. I was appalled. *The Magic Toyshop*, a work of imagination and humour, had been transformed into a dull tome about sexual politics. The lovely image of the garrulous mute mother, with chalk dust worn into her finger from constant rubbing of her board, is so much more interesting than just a symbol of repressed motherhood. It is a comic image, and it is Dickensian. Carter had become the subject of over-reading, where dryness spoilt authorial fun.

Now Murdoch criticism is fortunately much more extensive and useful than that of Carter, although 'textual abuse' has been committed by some who should and shall remain nameless. Nonetheless, one begins to feel that the seriousness and profundity of much of the criticism tells only half the story. This concern was thankfully raised by Peter J. Conradi in *The Saint and the Artist*, as he addressed the sheer excitement reading a Murdoch novel brings; A.N Wilson does it too in his biography.[1] It is worth remarking, though, that there has been little of this since, and we are talking of a wide problem here: the failure of the humanities to take account of literary pleasure.

Comedy and laughter push literary pleasure as far as it will go; they are literary pleasure's nerve ending, which perhaps explains why it is now very hard for a comic novelist to attain canonicity. Comedy is hard to include in criticism. It was the very seriousness of Murdoch that led to her academic acclaim, while all the time her tale-telling gifts and her use of popular narrative endeared her to the public. Comedy is also an awkward bridge between high and low, literary and popular fiction, and marginal in pedagogy and scholarship today; in the past, comic writers Fielding, Sterne and Smollett were acknowledged masters. There is a line from Fielding and Smollett to Dickens; that line should now extend to Iris Murdoch.

Without doubt, Murdoch makes her readers laugh. What are Murdoch's most memorable comic scenes and characters? The Polish brothers and their mother in *The Flight from the Enchanter*, and, in that novel, Kitty the machine, and the eruption of old ladies at the meeting of Artemis, a glorious and unmatched scene of farce where someone ends up pouring tea on a lady's hat. Then there is Emma Sands's visit to Grayhallock in *An Unofficial Rose*, when, summoning the family one by one, Ann feels like a government inspector is in the house. There is Pattie's sugar mouse in *The Time of the Angels*, the twins, their games and the question about Greek

for poached eggs in *The Nice and the Good*, and nonsense-talking Auntie in *Bruno's Dream*. Let's not forget evil Aunt Bill in *A Word Child*, and crying Tommie and her glove puppets in King's Lynn; the teddy bear in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, the canny nuns in *An Accidental Man*, weighing up just how good a business proposition Valmorana is; the ice-skating vicar in *The Book and the Brotherhood*, the moment in *The Message to the Planet* when Franca thinks Vallar's healing of Pat Dumay is suddenly going to turn into something obscene and, in *Nuns and Soldiers*, as well as 'les cousins et les tantes', foul-mouthed Daisy, one of Murdoch's great comic characters. A contender for Murdoch's best comic chapter is Chapter Thirteen of *The Nice and the Good*, where Ducane encounters Judy McGrath, also known as Helen of Troy. This bizarre creation, who thinks cats and rats are interchangeable, calls Ducane 'Mr Honeyman', proffers him 'pink plonk' that is 'ghastly' and reveals that she once won a beauty contest in Rhyl (a famously ugly seaside resort in Wales).[2] These are what has made a grateful reader smile, and laugh. The list could go on and on.

Certainly, along the way, reviewers and critics have noted Murdoch's comic gifts but, aside from work by Angela Hague, there has not been anything of depth.[3] Hague does the ground work admirably, bringing in Freud and Bergson, and testing out Murdoch against several comic theorists and explaining what Murdoch's comic vision is. Conradi, in *The Saint and the Artist*, and in the Preface to *Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment,* addresses more closely the audience and its pleasure.[4] For Conradi, Murdoch is Dickensian, in her laughter at pain; for me, she is Dickensian in her joyousness. She is the comic, Aristotelian novelist *par excellence*, and this exuberance is both entertainment and part of her moral intention.

Murdoch's thoughts on comedy are well-known, but worth briefly restating. In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* she writes that

> Tyrants fear funniness ... The absurdity of art, its funniness, its simplicity, its lucidity connects it with ordinary life and is inimical to authoritarian mystification ... Comedy is chaotic and concerned with accidental details and unreflective absurdities.[5]

Increasingly, Murdoch came to believe that just as the novel was the highest form of art, so too was comedy of greater value than tragedy, because of its contingency and its tendency towards openness. For Murdoch, in her lists of the greats, Dickens figured frequently.

Hague notes that

> She wants to free her characters from the story, to create people with "depth and ordinariness and accidentalness," and to write fiction that, like Dickens's novels, is filled with characters who are able to escape from the constriction of a highly structured plot and to gain an importance and reality of their own. "I sometimes think", she has said, "that if I could have a novel which was made up entirely of peripheral characters, sort of accidental people like Dickens's people, this would be a very much better novel."[6]

Does Murdoch do this? Yes. Conradi has noted that only Murdoch and Woolf inherit the mantle of novelist of London after Dickens (p.5). It has already been shown that Murdoch is a comic novelist, but why is she funny, and why is she like Dickens?

Let us consider some examples from Dickens. Now, while much of Dickens's humour lies in the portrayal of human beings as near-machines or puppets, stuck in the same tics (he has of course a moral point about his age too), and there is a darkness in his comic vision, consider some of his joyous inventions: Micawber, Sleary, Peggotty, Betsy Trotwood, Sam Weller, Pickwick, The Artful Dodger, Flora Casby. They have sometimes been called caricatures, or, in the case of darker figures like Quilp, Fagin and Miss Havisham, grotesques. What he did in effect was to retain in his fiction the child's view of the world, and capture the tics and eccentric mannerisms of his characters. This can be compared with Conradi's view that Murdoch does not, as has been suggested, write unbelievable characters, but simply notices the eccentricities which likely as not are part of all of us.

Although *Under the Net is*, as Conradi suggests, like *The Pickwick Papers* in its high-spirited picaresque (p.34), it is in *The Flight from the Enchanter*, notably in the first appearance of Mrs. Wingfield and Miss Foy, that Murdoch becomes truly Dickensian.[7] Obviously, here are two eccentric characters in a London environment, living in an eccentric household, allowed to display their comic mannerisms, such as Mrs Wingfield's questioning of Rosa as to if Miss Foy is a virgin, and Miss Foy's excessive caution. Murdoch, in fact, is much more impersonal as a novelist than Dickens and gives these characters more of their own space. We are reminded, perhaps, of comic Dickensian households such as Mrs. Jellyby's domicile in *Bleak House*, or Wemmick's moated home with the 'Aged P' in *Great Expectations*. Murdoch develops this comic scene by way of dialogue, chiefly, but it is worth noting how realism, and truth, is conveyed by use of physical detail.

> "I am Miss Foy", said this person, with the air of one uttering a famous name. The dry skin undulated as she spoke, like the skin of an alligator.[8]

I want to turn now to *An Accidental Man*, the work right at the centre of the *oeuvre* and, because of its comic *largesse* and debts to Dickens, a contender for being Murdoch's greatest novel. There is without doubt admirable technical accomplishment here, as critics have already shown, but not enough has been said about the figures themselves and how they operate – and, more to the point, why we *laugh*.

The key players here are Mitzi Ricardo and Owen Secombe-Hughes. The latter is

> ... a Welshman suffering in exile. His age was uncertain. He wore a bowed Druidic persona, would like to have a beard only it would not grow, and had once won a small prize at an Eisteddfod ... drink and ill-luck and betting and Mr Secombe

> Hughes's own special Welsh devil and, he occasionally hinted, women had done for him somehow.. [he] might have been good-looking once ... but his face was podgy and crawled over by tiny scarlet veins and his longish greasy hair looked soaking wet. He had always been given to tossing his hair and peering, and it took Mitzi some time to realize that he was ogling her.[9]

He explains with much hair-tossing that he cannot pay all her wages, 'Welsh honour forbade the continuation of attentions to a lady to whom money was owed, and ogling ceased' (p.25).

The important thing here is that Mr Secombe-Hughes is not a lead character; like Mrs. Carberry or the Monkleys, they are peripheral. Murdoch appears to have made her recipe work. Not only does Murdoch clearly love these 'free' characters: they are also amusing. What is it that makes him funny, for there is a sympathetic laughter there? It is not just because he is odd, and ridiculous, but because he is somehow real. His oddities are simply that he tosses his hair and peers, writes poetry in Welsh, and is bohemian. Murdoch's comedy, like Dickens, then, is rooted in a sharp realism and an ability to capture individual tics that mark us out.

Gracie Tisbourne, who we meet in the opening scene, is also comic character, yet she is not really a caricature. Gracie is comic partly through her actions, and in her contrast with Ludwig Leferrier (there is a shade of the decidedly uncomic Rosamund and Lydgate from *Middlemarch* here), and partly through her dialogue. On the opening page of the novel, she tells Ludwig she has loved him ever since he kissed her 'behind that tomb thing in the British Museum' (p.1). An unlikely place for romance? The 'tomb thing' becomes a comic image, and part of the clutter that surrounds Gracie, who lives in a house full of nick-nacks in Kensington and is, like her creator, a great consumer of cakes. 'Have some tennis court cake' she invites Ludwig, 'have some Russian gateau' (p.4) and, best of all, 'Have a milk chocolate kitten' (p.108).

The milk chocolate kitten sums it up: it means nothing and tells us nothing that we don't know already, but is exactly the sort of treat Gracie would eat. Deliberately random, it is also true, and funny because it is irrelevant. We laugh because it does not need to be there, and yet it is, in a way that is not an excrescence.

This is precisely what Dickens does. To name a few examples of many: in *Bleak House*, we are introduced to the family of Mr Bagnet: his wife, every year on her birthday, is forced to sit in state and watch dinner being cooked badly by her family, and then to see them botching the clearing up, as a 'special treat'. The same novel has Mrs Jellyby's house, where she is over-concerned with the business of Borioboola-Gha, a window is fastened with a fork, and a guest has to wash their hands in a pie dish.

The point, really, is that both novelists quite deliberately give us too much, and *An*

Accidental Man, along with the more Russian *The Philosopher's Pupil*, is the novel where Murdoch gives us too much most. It is comic to hear repeatedly about offstage characters (e.g Henrietta Sayce, who has gassed a cat, and Karen Arbuthnot, the 'pig maiden'); but the excess of famous Murdochean mess and jumble ought to make us laugh. I have chosen just a couple of examples out of many: the number of possibilities is of course the point. I have established, I hope, that Murdoch is a Dickensian novelist, and that her humour comes partly from her ancestor; that this engagement with the tradition solidifies her standing. But is Murdoch actually *intertextual*? In fact she is not, for she does not consciously use Dickensian tropes, images, or plots. She does not engage with these texts; in fact, her philosophical approach pleaded against modern theories of language such as these. Murdoch may not be theoretically intertextual, but the influence brings her close. Both novelists are allied to realism, to contingency; both are concerned with truth, the watchword of George Eliot, who achieved the verisimilitude without the humour: it is clear why Murdoch preferred Dickens.

Reading *David Copperfield*, novelist Nick Hornby offered the following verdict:

> People like superfluity ... [how hard it is to write] long books, teeming with exuberance and energy and life and comedy ... [to] move, provoke and entertain ... last month I've been living in this hyperreal world, full of memorable, brilliantly eccentric people, and laughs ... and proper bendy stories you want to follow. I suspect that it'll be difficult to read a pared-down, stripped-back, skin-and-bones novel for a while.[10]

He could surely have been talking about Murdoch, who, ideally we read not only to think about philosophy, morals, and ethics, but for pure pleasure and to be made to laugh.

Notes

1. Peter J. Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: The Saint and the Artist*, Third Edition (London: Harper Collins, 2001). All references will be to this edition. Wilson, A.N. *Iris Murdoch: As I Knew Her* (London: Hutchinson, 2003).
2. Iris Murdoch, *The Nice and the Good* (London: Vintage, 2000), pp.110-8.
3. Angela Hague, *Iris Murdoch's Comic Vision* (London: Associated University Presses, 1984).
4. Anne Rowe (ed.) *Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
5. Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Vintage, 2003), pp 90-1.
6. Hague, p. 71.
7. The bizarre household of Mrs Wingfield and Miss Foy is defined by nonsense, really; the feel is of Lewis Carroll.
8. Iris Murdoch, *The Flight from the Enchanter* (London: Vintage, 2000), p.107.
9. Iris Murdoch, *An Accidental Man* (London: Vintage, 2003), pp.24-25. All references will be to this edition.
10. Nick Hornby, *The Great Polysyllabic Spree* (London: Penguin, 2007), pp 97-8.

(Associate Lecturer, Edge Hill University, UK)