

Original Paper

Jackson's Dilemma is Iris Murdoch's "Tempest"

Nobuko HASHIMOTO

*Department of Medical Social Work
Faculty of Medical Welfare
Kawasaki University of Medical Welfare
Kurashiki, 701-0193, Japan
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Abstract

Iris Murdoch tells us that she does not usually write from live models. However, in her last novel, *Jackson's Dilemma*, Murdoch's private life does echo here and there. Especially Benet, a central character in *Jackson's Dilemma* has many similarities to Murdoch herself. When we see Benet's remorse and loneliness, we see Murdoch's remorse and loneliness in her old age. Jackson is described as a person who has the nature of Christ and Hindu gods. How Murdoch comes to terms with Christianity which she used to criticize will be clarified by examining how Benet accepts Jackson and how Mildred makes up her mind to become a priest. We see that Murdoch finds hope and a future in children when we examine her descriptions of Bran who straightens out the situation just as Prospero in *The Tempest* finds hope for the future in his daughter and her beloved.

I

Jackson's Dilemma is Iris Murdoch's 26th novel and will be the last one because it is impossible for her to write any more novels because of her illness, Alzheimer's Disease. Considering that she was born in 1919 and is fairly old, everyone had sadly anticipated the day when she would pace down or stop writing. Contrary to most people's anticipation, it is miraculous indeed that she neither slowed down her pace of writing nor stopped writing completely until recently. The shocking news of her illness forced us to accept the sad reality that *Jackson's Dilemma* would be the last one. Murdoch says, "There's always a

novel," and tells us that each novel was begun half an hour after the previous one was finished as if she had cut off a part from one long continuous story.¹⁾ So it can be supposed that the last novel, *Jackson's Dilemma*, is something which sums up all she has written and that tells us something about how she feels and the frame of mind she has finally reached after writing so many novels over a long time. Different from her other novels, her private life is strongly reflected in *Jackson's Dilemma*. It contains what she wants to tell us as her last message. It must be her final gift to us as a seeker of goodness. In this paper, her last message in *Jackson's Dilemma* will be investigated.

II

Contrary to what Murdoch said to Shena Mackay in the interview in which she stated that she did not write from live models except for a few cases such as Anax in *The Green Knight*,²⁾ Murdoch's own private life echoes here and there in *Jackson's Dilemma*. Especially Benet, who is the central character in the story and is always at the center of the circle of the people he loves, has a great similarity to Murdoch. He owns a grand house in the country and people visit him there. Benet's mother was trained as a singer just as Murdoch's mother was trained as an opera singer. The mention of Benet's father's dislike of music may be based on the fact that Murdoch's mother gave up her career as a singer when she got married. Her giving up music when she got married is reflected also in the fact that both Anna, Benet's close friend, and Anna's mother gave up music when they married totally unmusical men. The point that both Benet and his father were in the civil service coincides with the fact that Murdoch's father rose up to the rank of Deputy Registrar General in the civil service and Murdoch herself worked at the Treasury and also worked for a short period in refugee camps in war-torn Austria and Belgium.³⁾ There is a young man named Tuan who is patronized by Benet. The following passage which refers to Tuan's parents who deeply loved each other, "... what he [Tuan] could see as virtue and goodness, which he had perceived in his parents"(p 126) ⁴⁾ reminds us of the words, "perfect trinity of love"⁵⁾ by which Murdoch described the relationship between herself and her parents. Benet's educational background is very similar to Murdoch's. He learned Greek Classics and is now struggling to write a philosophical book on Heidegger. Murdoch took a first-class Hon-

ours Degree in Classics and completed a philosophical work, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* which was published in 1992. Benet's beloved and deceased Uncle Tim's favorite books are Murdoch's favorite ones and the books in Tim's library are familiar to Benet. Benet's regret that he had not kept on making poems may be shared with Murdoch who used to make poems when she was young but was too absorbed in philosophy later and then in writing novels. Benet's regret about giving up poetry is shown in the following passages:

How I wish I had stayed in the light and devoted my life to poetry, not philosophy. I used to write poems when I was young, before I became bemused by *that* philosophy! And now it is all impossible.(p 47)
 Why did he not, from the start, dedicate himself to poetry? Not of course to *be* a poet, but to live with great poetry all his life and understand and love it... He had tried to write poetry. Should not he try once more? (p 93)

Here poetry is considered as the light, something which gives hope to Benet who is obsessed by darkness. Also the comment, "Not that he, Benet, was a philosopher, not a *real* philosopher, and would never be"(p 93) must have some relation to the fact that Murdoch retired from St. Anne's College where she was teaching philosophy to devote herself to writing novels. The comment on Benet's ability in Russian, "far from good"(p 93) has some similarity to Murdoch's words, "I know Russian very moderately but it's getting rusty now."⁶⁾ Even Benet's dislike of a typewriter or a word-processor reminds us of Murdoch's dislike for these machines. Benet's attitude towards Christianity which is only simply referred to is the one which Murdoch herself used to have:

Of course Benet had never believed in God, but he had somehow believed in

Christ, and in Plato, a Platonic Christ, an icon of goodness.(p 14)

From the above similarity or closeness which Benet has to Murdoch, although some apply also to other characters, it would be appropriate for us to conclude that Murdoch herself is a model for Benet.

III

In some of Murdoch's novels we often detect some link to Shakespeare's works. The frame of *Jackson's Dilemma*, the disappearance of a bride to be followed by a happy ending to the marriage is Shakespearean. Just as in some stories by Shakespeare in which someone's marriage leads to another person's marriage, three marriages take place at the end in *Jackson's Dilemma*. Rosalind in boyish clothing in *Jackson's Dilemma* reminds us not only of Shakespeare's Rosalind but also of other beautiful and clever Shakespearean women disguised in men's clothing such as Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* or Viola in *Twelfth Night*. But above all, there are some explicit references to *The Tempest* so that our impression of the close relationship of *Jackson's Dilemma* to this play is overwhelming. The breaking of the news in the beginning of the story that Marian cannot marry Edward changes the whole situation as if it were by magic as Rosalind in the novel points out. People who are concerned with Marian's and Edward's wedding are suddenly put into a turmoil of horror and agony of worrying about Marian's whereabouts and her safety and all blame themselves by thinking that it's their fault. Rosalind's mention of magic also reminds us of Prospero in *The Tempest* who causes a storm by his magical power and brings his enemies to the island where he lives with his daughter. Just as in *The Tempest* nobody's life is lost in the storm, Marian's life

is not lost although she is obsessed by the thought of suicide. Benet who used to think he is a leader and organiser has something of the nature of Prospero, the central character of *The Tempest*, about him. But Benet is not the one who caused the disappearance of Marian although he thinks again and again that he should be blamed for pushing her to marry Edward. Her disappearance is actually caused by layers of accidental incidents, just as Murdoch used to say that human relations are accidental: what caused Marian's disappearance was her encounter with Cantor Ravnevik in Australia when she was engaged to Edward, and Marian's and Cantor's reunion during his visit to London exactly on the day before her wedding. Unlike Prospero who can cause a storm, Benet is not almighty at all. Prospero has Caliban and Ariel as his servants while Benet has Jackson as his servant although Benet does not willingly accept him in the beginning. Murdoch's talent will be seen in her creation of Jackson. He is one of those mysterious figures which Murdoch's novels usually have. He is referred to as someone like Ariel or Caliban in *The Tempest*. Mildred's following words might reveal Jackson's nature:

He was the one who really knew the island, the animals and the plants and was useful and gentle and ... and we cannot judge him. He is more likely to judge us... There is such a thing as redemptive suffering. Weren't there scars upon his back? (pp 63-64)

IV

Benet is the only person who is unwilling to accept Jackson while others instantly like him and Jackson becomes more than a servant to them. The three times that Benet refused Jackson's offer to help remind us of the three times that St. Peter denied Jesus.⁷⁾

The number three is repeated in Tuan's three times refusal of Rosalind's love and in Rosalind's three days' patience while waiting in agony before returning to Tuan's place. Tuan answers the third knock on the door when Jackson comes to his flat. It is obvious that Murdoch intentionally used this number although she gave less importance to Tuan's and Rosalind's case than to Jackson's case. The first work done by Jackson for Benet, fixing the electricity which enables Benet to turn on the lights in his house, must symbolize the giving of light in the darkness. Other descriptions about Jackson, "He seemed to have some air of authority," (p 79) or "He had touched Benet," (p 79) remind us of Jesus and his healing touch. Jackson's extraordinary character is shown in the descriptions of Benet's and Tuan's feeling that something like electricity comes from Jackson. Jackson's Christ-like nature is seen in his exhaustion and his feeling faint while he is working to help Marian and is taking her to Cantor, which led them to their happy wedding. Jackson's act of saving Marian from shame and desperation can be understood as redemptive suffering. Even the snake in a basket floating down the river in Benet's dream has biblical connotation and reminds us of Moses as a baby in a basket floating in the Nile.

The strange experience which Benet had in Venice has also Christian connotations. It may be understood as something which makes Benet prepare for accepting Jackson. When Benet was walking on the street in Venice, he noticed someone was following him. Benet could neither shuffle him off nor take refuge anywhere. When Benet saw the strange man for the first time Benet thought the man smiled at him. When Benet abruptly turned around to survey him and saw the man the second time, the man gazed at Benet with

tender affection. Then Benet felt something like an electric shock passed through him. The third time that Benet saw the man, he felt something much stronger than an electric shock and was going to faint. The passage, "He struggled as if against a power to which he must soon succumb." (p 81) shows Benet's psychological state then. Benet saw the strange man three times and each time there was a strange offer of love and affection to Benet from the man. Here again the number three is repeated with special meaning. The words, "soon succumb" hint at Benet's acceptance of Jackson in the near future, although Benet himself attributed this incident to the heat of the sun, the water of the creek and walking without a hat. Jackson's answer to Benet toward the end when Benet pleads with Jackson to stay with him as his friend not as a servant, "I shall be back in three days," (p 244) reminds us of Christ's resurrection in three days after his crucifixion. Benet's words to Jackson, "I just want you to be here as my friend," (p 244) also remind us of a passage in the New Testament, "not servants but friends."⁸⁾

Murdoch's feeling about Christianity is more clearly seen in Mildred's behaviour and her words. We are very familiar with characters who are obsessed by a wish to be nuns or priests in Murdoch's novels. They usually give up their wish or lose faith in the end. Murdoch has repeatedly described such characters. But in *Jackson's Dilemma*, Mildred is different from the others. She neither becomes restless in doubt nor loses her faith. Her faith is not shaken, rather she makes up her mind to become a priest in the end. The only change she undergoes through the story is that she realizes that she does not need to go to India although she used to believe it necessary, and realizes that she is needed here in London when she sees an Anglican

priest's humble holy selfless way of life, which looks to her like "a new ray of light"(p 185). It is a kind of revelation to her. Mildred who used to imagine herself working with "Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, servants of God or of gods"(p 206) has come to realize the following:

What was now so necessary, coming to her in a beam of light, was the preservation of Christianity in the form which the time, the new century, demanded, like the other great religions who knew how to mediate the past into the future, to preserve in this pure form the reality of the spiritual, keeping and cherishing what was profoundly and believably true, onward into the new eras of the world. This deep mystical understanding, which had once belonged to Christianity, had been therein eroded by the great sciences and the hubris of the new Christian world which had kept their Christ and God as stiff literal persons who cannot now be credited. But what is *real*, the mystical truth of Christianity, as the great mystics saw it, Eckhart, Saint John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, as it was now seen by the few great saints of today, *that* is what must be preached now where it is needed, in the West. So, Mildred concluded, it is here, in England, in London, that I am destined to preach religion in my own very humble way, and not in India.(pp 185-186)

In Mildred's following thoughts, the selflessness and goodness which Murdoch used to seek for as something which substitutes for religious faith, and love which reminds us of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians⁸⁾ are integratedly combined:

This was religion, the giving away of oneself, the realization of how small, like to a grain of dust, one was in the vast

misery of the world — and yet how vast the power of goodness, of love, like a great cloud, lifting one up out of the meanness, the deadliness, of the miserable ego.(p 207)

In her mind, the Ganges and the Thames exist together, and so do the gods and 'Christ upon His Cross'(p 108). Mildred thinks about God together with the Indian gods and Greek gods. Murdoch's intention to combine Christianity with an Asian religion is seen in the following descriptions in which Mildred sees a range of Himalayan mountains when she thinks about Jackson and in the fact that Tim used to invite people to come to see the Himalayan mountains and that he sees Himalayan mountains in the extreme terror of death at the last moment of his life when Tim, dying, found Jackson behind Benet. Tim's words to Jackson then, "I see, I see," are the words uttered to a saviour. Mildred's idea that Jackson had been beaten as Christ was beaten shows Jackson's Christ-like nature along with his Hindu god-like nature. Here we see Murdoch's attitude of approval of other religions and her endeavour to combine Christianity with them. Yet Mildred's words, "... most of all we must develop a believable form of Christianity before it is too late."(p 20) must be what Murdoch herself thinks urgently necessary.

V

The word "remorse" is repeated as a leit motif in *Jackson's Dilemma*. It is like a ringing tone and almost all the people in this story are suffering from remorse, their own private pain. Owen is still in terror from his unhappy childhood and annoyed by his strange nightmare. Even Tim whom Benet adored as a heroic romanticist was not an exception. Benet comes to understand that Tim had an awareness of the tragedy of

human life. The fact that Tim's life in India is not clearly known even to Benet and to other close friends makes us readers wonder if there was some darkness in his life there. Edward who suffered from not being loved by his father in his childhood is still suffering from his brother's death because Edward thinks he could have prevented it. Edward has suffered from his father's silent blame ever since. There is another darkness in Edward's mind which is kept secret till the end. He says to Benet, "You do not know how much grief I have in me and what terrible things I have suffered, and done." (p 119) Tuan's remorse also seems to be difficult to overcome. His father told Tuan about an event that happened in Tuan's father's childhood when Tuan's father's sister jumped out of the train to get back her dog when his family were running away from persecution and then the train suddenly started. She was left on the platform and they could never see her again. Tuan feels his parents' or his fellow people's pain as his own, the pain they had had during the holocaust. Historical or fictional persons who are in remorse are endlessly cited: "Macbeth with bloody hands, Othello having killed his wife" (p 10) and so on. Heidegger on whom Benet is writing must have been in remorse, too. Heidegger's life was ambivalent, as seen in his loving a Jewish girl, Arendt, while being a follower of Hitler. Murdoch shows us how human life is filled with pain and remorse by describing all kinds of pain and remorse in *Jackson's Dilemma*.

Benet's remorse has nothing to do with killing or dying. His remorse partly comes from not having loved his parents enough but mainly comes from loneliness and loss of identity. He wanted to arrange everything for Edward's and Marian's wedding, but things did not work out that way. Even Tim made Benet feel lonely and jealous by getting more

and more dependent on Jackson when Tim's sickness got worse, although Benet was possessive and wanted to be the only one at Tim's bedside when Tim died. Contrary to Benet's wish, it was Jackson that Tim was searching for in his fear of death. Three couples, Marian and Cantor, Rosalind and Tuan, Anna and Edward, decide to marry without Benet's knowing. He feels that he is totally neglected by those whom he loves. But it is Benet that they actually want to inform of their happy news first. Benet's remorse is as follows:

... how he had really not loved his parents at all. ... he had never really understood him [Tim]. ... Now he, Benet, was suddenly useless and lost. Had he ever enjoyed happiness, did he know what it was? (p 213)

He also felt remorse about dismissing Jackson because of his misunderstanding of Jackson:

He had just wantonly missed a chance, and simply, carelessly, lost the affections of a most valuable friend. (p 201)

His remorse endlessly continues:

What was the use of going on like this [trying to write a book on Heidegger]. ... He had really *done*, nothing. Long ago he had thought of writing a novel. ... He had got nowhere with it anyhow. ... He had been a leader, an organiser." (pp 209-210)

He is depressed by the thought that he has done nothing and that he is not needed any more. The thought which lies under his various kinds of remorse is the feeling, "I am nothing" (p 11). To understand Benet's feeling of nothingness, Murdoch's radio drama, *The One Alone*, which was broadcast on the BBC in 1987 is very helpful. The main character of the drama is a prisoner. She confesses that she wanted fame and admiration and love.

The interrogator tells her that she has sacrificed everything for nothing. The angel, however, tells her as follows:

What's most good is often felt as pain. It is however your most precious gain. . . . There is nothing which is simply deprivation, bitterness and remorse and negation. There is another nothing which is real and full of pain, but if you can, full of joy as well.¹⁰⁾

In *Jackson's Dilemma*, Jackson comes back to Benet as a friend not as a servant. Benet finds a companion in Jackson while the young people are concerned with their own affairs. They find someone to love and to be loved by. Their remorse and pain will be lessened by loving each other. Murdoch wrote about human weakness, everyone's and her own, through Benet's possessiveness, jealousy and loneliness. We see Murdoch's loneliness and her acceptance of it in her old age in Benet's following feeling:

Things were changing, the younger generation were taking over, they were now in charge.(p 210)

The last chapter of *Jackson's Dilemma* tells us that both Marian and Rosalind are expecting a baby. The story ends with descriptions of Jackson and also Anna's son, Bran. He is actually Edward's son but it is not revealed to

others. In the beginning of the story Bran threw a stone out of anger and broke the window of Edward's room just before Edward's and Marian's wedding was to take place. Bran's stone-throwing played the important role of making Edward realize that it is wrong for him to marry Marian and that he should marry Anna instead.

The expectation of two babies and the description of Bran in the last chapter overlap with the angel's words in *The One Alone*:

They are your children.

With children hope returns

Always, and the world

Begins again.

What you hear is the sound of the future.¹¹⁾ *Jackson's Dilemma* begins with a description of the child Bran and ends with it. So we can see how much weight Murdoch puts on Bran. We see that she herself finds hope and future in children and young people's love as in *The Tempest*, Prospero in his old age sees the future in his daughter and her beloved and through their love he comes to terms with his enemy. Murdoch who used to write about people who lose their faith seems to come to terms with Christianity as shown in Benet's acceptance of Jackson and Mildred's resolve to be a priest. So *Jackson's Dilemma* can be seen as Murdoch's "Tempest".

Notes

- 1) Appleyard B (1992) Paradox of all the Virtues. *The Times Saturday Review*, October 3, 4.
- 2) Mackay S (1993) When Shena Met Iris. *The Independent Magazine*, September 11th, 41.
- 3) Mackay S (1989) A Fabulous Story-Teller. *Woman's Journal*, July, 36.
- 4) Citations with pages in the body of this paper are from *Jackson's Dilemma* by Iris Murdoch. Murdoch I (1995) *Jackson's Dilemma*. Chatto and Windus Ltd., London.
- 5) Mackay S (1989) A Fabulous Story-Teller. *Woman's Journal*, July, 36.
- 6) Mackay S (1989) A Fabulous Story-Teller. *Woman's Journal*, July, 40.
- 7) Matthew 26: 57—58, 69—75 Mark 14: 53—54, 66—72 Luke 22: 54—62 John 18: 12—18, 25—27 in the New Testament.
- 8) John 15: 15 in the New Testament.

- 9) I Corinthians **13**: 1—7 in the New Testament.
- 10) Murdoch I (1995) *The One Alone*. Colophon Press.
- 11) Murdoch I (1995) *The One Alone*. Colophon Press.