

“It’s just one of the wonders of  
the world”: James Donaghue  
in *Under the Net*

*Ana Raquel Fernandes*

ULICES - University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies



## “It’s just one of the wonders of the world”: James Donaghue in *Under the Net*

There is only outward activity, ergo only outward moral activity, and what we call inward activity is merely the shadow of this cast back into the mind.

Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970)

### Introduction

Opening Iris Murdoch’s novel *Under the Net* (1954) the reader faces an epigraph: it is an excerpt from *The Secular Masque* by John Dryden (1631-1700). This brief dramatic piece, mythological in character, celebrates the end of the century – hence the ‘secular,’ from the Latin *saeculares*.<sup>1</sup> The verses that follow, performed by the Chorus, are the end of the play; they echo Momus’s satire directed at the gods: Diana (‘Thy Chase had a Beast in view’), Mars (‘Thy Wars brought nothing about’) and Venus (‘Thy Lovers were all untrue’), and epitomize the main theme of the masque, the end of one century (“‘Tis well an Old Age is out”) and the beginning of another (‘And time to begin a New’).

---

<sup>1</sup> John Dryden’s *The Secular Masque* was first published in: John Fletcher, *The Pilgrim, a Comedy [in five acts and in prose]: as it is acted at the Theatre Royal, in Drury Lane. Written originally by Mr. Fletcher, and now very much alter’d [by Sir John Vanbrugh]; with several additions. Likewise a prologue, epilogue, dialogue and masque, written by the late great poet Mr. Dryden, just before his death, being the last of his works* (London: Benjamin Tooke, 1700). For a recent publication see: John Dryden, *The Poems and Fables of John Dryden*, ed. by James Kinsley (1962; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980): 836-839.

All, all of a piece throughout:  
 Thy Chase had a Beast in view:  
 Thy Wars brought nothing about;  
 Thy Lovers were all untrue.  
 'Tis well an Old Age is out,  
 And time to begin a New.

The epigraph, representative of changing times, illustrates not only the metamorphosis suffered by the novel's main character, Jake Donaghue, but also the placing of Murdoch's style in a new literary context: that of post-war Britain.

### ***Under the Net: The Picaresque Plot***

The first-person novels, then, cause the reader to reflect on his or her interpretive role [...]: all the time the narrator is voraciously reading what goes on around him, someone else is reading him.

Bran Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: the Retrospective Fiction* (1999)

Indeed Iris Murdoch's first novel, *Under the Net*, has often been linked to groundbreaking fictional works such as John Wain's *Hurry On Down* (1953) and Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954).<sup>2</sup> The novel follows a picaresque structure, recounting a series of episodes narrated in the first person by James Donaghue, known as Jake. Moreover, London becomes the central setting of the main character's adventures (particularly Holborn and the financial districts), together with brief but important scenes that take place in another great and enigmatic city, Paris (for instance, Madge's

---

<sup>2</sup> Cf.: Kingsley Amis, 'Laughter to Be Taken Seriously,' *New York Times Book Review* (7 July 1957): 1-13; Kenneth Allsop, *The Angry Decade: A Survey of the Cultural Revolt of the Nineteen-Fifties* (1958; London: Peter Owen Limited, 1969) 51-103; Angela Hague, 'Picaresque Structure and the Angry Young Novel,' *Twentieth Century Literature* 32.2 (Summer 1986): 209-220.

offer of a job to the central character as a film scriptwriter and Jake's dream-like chase of Anna through the Tuileries gardens on the night of the 14<sup>th</sup> of July). From the very beginning, Jake remains an outsider in the society he depicts. Steven G. Kellman explains: 'Jake is perpetually homeless and on the move. A recurrent element in the novel is his quest for a place to spend the night.'<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in Jake's itinerary the nights are of particular significance, acting as moments of transition from one episode to another. As for the central character, Jake describes himself in the following manner:

My name is James Donaghue, but you needn't bother about that, as I was in Dublin only once, on a whiskey blind, and saw daylight only twice, when they let me out of Store Street police station, and then, when Finn put me on the boat for Holyhead. That was in the days when I used to drink. I am something over thirty and talented, but lazy. I live by literary hack-work, and a little original writing, as little as possible. [...] What is more important for the purposes of this tale, I have shattered nerves. Never mind how I got them. That's another story, and I am not telling you the whole story of my life. I have them; and one effect of this is that I can't bear being alone for long. That's why Finn is so useful to me.<sup>4</sup>

Jake is a failed artist, who has stopped doing original work (he once composed an epic poem, entitled 'And Mr. Oppenheim Shall Inherit the Earth,' and published a philosophical dialogue, *The Silencer*) and earns his living by translating the novels of the French writer Jean Pierre Breteuil. At the very start of the novel Jake has finished translating Breteuil's *Le Rossignol de Bois* (*The Wooden Nightingale*). As the reader soon learns, there are striking similarities between the plot of this novel and the action in *Under the Net*. The former, according to Jake, is about 'a young

---

<sup>3</sup> Steven G. Kellman, 'Under the Net: The Self-Begetting Novel,' *Iris Murdoch*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York, New Haven, Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986) 98.

<sup>4</sup> Iris Murdoch, *Under the Net*, introduction by Kiernan Ryan (1954; London: Vintage, 2002) 23. Henceforward all quotations will be signalled by *UTN* followed by the number of the pages quoted.

composer who is psychoanalysed and then finds that his creating urge is gone' (*UTN* 22). Although Jake does not acknowledge Breteuil's talent, he confesses that this particular novel is entertaining ('I enjoyed this one, though it's bad best-selling stuff like everything that Jean Pierre writes'; *UTN* 22). Perhaps part of the enjoyment comes from the empathy he feels for the protagonist of *The Wooden Nightingale*. Jake is not psychoanalysed but it is after recording in *The Silencer* the conversations he had had with Hugo Belfounder (while at a cold cure clinic) that he stops writing creatively. It turns out that Hugo, or rather his philosophical ideas about truth and language, are the main subject matter of *Under the Net*. Jake explains: 'I omitted to mention earlier that I am acquainted with Belfounder. As my acquaintance with Hugo is the central theme of this book, there was little point in anticipating it' (*UTN* 60). This revelation bestows on Murdoch's novel a philosophical dimension, overtly related to moral concerns, which is less foregrounded in the first novels of other 'angry young men,' such as John Wain and Kingsley Amis. Nevertheless, Jake's major quest for Hugo Belfounder and for his love, Anna Quentin, together with the search for a home and money, are clear marks of a picaresque structure, reinforced by a comic form.

Indeed, throughout the novel, often with his friend Finn, Jake gets involved in the most awkward situations. In search of a place to live, he accepts the job of housesitting Sadie's home. However, he soon discovers that he has been deliberately locked in. He decides to pick the lock of the kitchen door and not finding a suitable tool he asks for the help of his friends, Dave and Finn:

It was a simple lock. I am in general not too bad at picking locks, a skill which was taught to me by Finn, who is very good at it. But I could make nothing of this one, largely because I couldn't find a suitable tool. [...]

I had been leaning there some while [...] when I saw two familiar figures coming down the other side of the street. It was Finn and Dave. [...]

"I can't come out," I said calmly, "and I can't ask you in either."  
[...]

Finn and Dave looked at each other, and then they collapsed helplessly. Dave sat down on the kerb choking with laughter

and Finn leaned weakly against the lamp-post. They rocked.  
[...]

"Look here," I said, impatiently, "stop laughing and get on with getting me out of here." (*UTN* 97-99).

On another occasion Jake and Finn break into Sam Starfield's flat in a failed attempt to recover Jake's translation of Breteuil's novel. Indeed, after overhearing a conversation between Sadie and Sammy, Jake is furious to find out that they plan to use his translation as the basis for a film, without telling him. This episode becomes one of the most comic scenes in the novel. Inside the flat the two friends find a cage with a large Alsatian dog (the Marvellous Mister Mars, a star of animal movies). Since they do not find the typescript Jake decides to kidnap the dog:

"Finn," I said slowly, "I have an absolutely wonderful idea."

"What?" said Finn suspiciously.

"We'll kidnap the dog," I said.

Finn stared at me. "What in the world for?" he said.

"Don't you see?" I cried, and as the glorious daring and simplicity of the scheme became even plainer to me I capered about the room. "We'll hold him as a hostage, we'll exchange him for the typescript." (*UTN* 142)

After taking pains to move Mr Mars and his cage down the stairs and into the taxi, the scene ends, after absurdly lengthy efforts to open the cage, with Jake and Finn celebrating Mr Mars' freedom. But the climax of this episode only really comes with the intervention of a third character, who has witnessed the efforts to free the dog:

As we talked, the taxi-driver was looking at the thing thoughtfully. "Unreliable," he said, "these fancy locks. Always getting jammed, ain't they?" He put his hand through the bars and pressed a spring on the underside of the roof. One of the sides of the cage immediately fell open with oily smoothness. That put an end to that discussion. Finn and I studied the face of the taxi-driver. He looked back at us guilelessly. We felt beyond making any comment. (*UTN* 151)

It is in the company of Mr Mars that Jake carries on the search for his philanthropist friend, Hugo. A. S. Byatt describes him in the following

way: 'a curious combination of pacifist, capitalist and craftsman.'<sup>5</sup> Indeed, after having inherited an armaments firm, he converted it to the fireworks business, viewing pyrotechnics as a kind of momentary art. Later, Hugo goes into films and his studio becomes very successful. Eventually, he abandons these activities and by the end of the novel he becomes an apprentice to a watch-maker in Nottingham.

The destruction of the Bounty Belfounder Studio, in South London, is directly related to Jake. In the film studio the protagonist will find a reconstruction of the city of Rome (the Catilinarian Conspiracy is being shot); he will also witness the meeting of the N.I.S.P. (the New Independent Socialist Party), recognising 'Lefty' Todd, the character who throughout the novel advocates the alliance between theory and practice in politics. Jake will finally meet Hugo but their encounter is abruptly interrupted by a riot (the United Nationalists break up the meeting and are followed by the police). In a successful attempt to escape, Hugo sets off a Belfounder's Domestic Detonator, destroying the structure of the whole city. Lefty and Hugo escape but Jake is left behind. Eventually, he eludes the police but only with the help of Mr Mars, who plays dead in what constitutes another extremely comic episode:

Imagine my dismay when I saw that between me and the railway line, across the piece of waste ground from one side to the other, there now stretched a thin but regular cordon of police. [...] I addressed Mars. "You got me in to this," I told him. "You can get me out." [...] "Sham dead," I said. "Dead! Dead dog!" [...] As I approached the main gate I came into a focus of attention [...]. The police barred my way. They had their orders to let no one out. [...] I strode resolutely on [...]. "The dog's hurt! I must find a vet! There's one just down the road." [...] I walked through the gates. The crowd parted with respectful and sympathetic remarks. As soon as I was clear of them [...], I could bear it no longer. "Wake up! Live dog!" I said to Mars; as I knelt down he

---

<sup>5</sup> A. S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom. The Novels of Iris Murdoch* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970) 28.

sprang from my shoulder, and together we set off down the road at full pelt. Behind us, diminishing now in the distance, there arose an immense roar of laughter. (*UTN* 170-172)

Examples of comic situations abound in *Under the Net*. And one could easily refer to other episodes, such as the escape from the hospital towards the end of the novel.<sup>6</sup> The three excerpts quoted above are reminiscent of well-known scenes in other novels of the period. Some examples may be found in Wain's *Hurry On Down*: the unpleasant interview between the protagonist, Edith and Robert Tharkles (the sister and brother-in-law of Charles Lumley's girlfriend, Sheila); the meeting with Charles's old headmaster, Mr Scrodd, who is outraged by the main character's proposal to work at the school as a window-cleaner; and the tricks Charles plays on George Hutchins at Mr Braceweight's home (in Sussex). Moreover, in Amis's *Lucky Jim*, there are many examples of humorous scenes: Jim's accident with the bedlinen at the Welches', his attempt to deceive Mrs Welch and her son Bertrand on the telephone and the drunken lecture on 'Merrie England' are just a few.

Kenneth Allsop, in his study *The Angry Decade*, considers Wain's *Hurry On Down*, Amis's *Lucky Jim* and Iris Murdoch's *Under the Net*, among others. After quoting a passage from the latter, in which Finn rescues Jake from Sadie's apartment, Allsop remarks: '[t]hat Lucky Jimmish situation, familiar in its tone of moral bigandry, is from one of the early chapters of *Under the Net* by Iris Murdoch, which came out in 1954 – about a year after *Lucky Jim* and Wain's first novel.'<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, he affirms that judging from Jake's 'rootless and restless' lifestyle ('[c]adging, scrounging, pinching and sleeping around'), he is undoubtedly a character born of the fifties: 'Jake's existence is instantly recognisable in the context of the novels of the early Nineteen-Fifties.'<sup>8</sup> Moreover, according to Richard Todd, *Under the Net* is decidedly: "a novel of its time, its central character an 'outsider' figure, its form a tale of picaresque adventure –

---

<sup>6</sup> *UTN* 242-266.

<sup>7</sup> Allsop 97.

<sup>8</sup> Allsop 97.

a form itself raising questions about the way in which ‘necessary’ and ‘contingent’ elements go into the making of novels.”<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, the comparison between Murdoch’s Jake Donaghue and Wain’s Charles Lumley as well as Amis’ Jim Dixon is not without controversy. Peter Wolfe, for example, has suggested that Jake deviates from the picaresque tradition precisely because he is too meditative. Wolfe argues:

The strong satirical interest and wide social sweep generally associated with the picaresque novel demand that the hero be roguish and cunning, but not meditative. If he reflects deeply, narrative movement is choked and the social panorama diminished and blurred. Jake’s defect is that he is simply not rascal enough.<sup>10</sup>

Wolfe is accurate when he suggests that the main character of the picaresque novel is roguish and cunning. And since the picaresque follows an episodic structure he is also right when he affirms that action prevails over meditation. However, moments of meditation abound in both the picaresque novel and the rogue novel. The latter was much influenced by the former, but slowly managed to secure a definite position in the

---

<sup>9</sup> Richard Todd, *Iris Murdoch* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984) 26.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Wolfe, *The Disciplined Heart: Iris Murdoch and her novels* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1966) 64.

Furthermore, Hilda D. Spear explains this deviation contextualizing Murdoch’s first novel in the whole of the author’s oeuvre: “Iris Murdoch repeatedly concerns herself in her novels with art and artifice and it is this aspect of them, perhaps, that denies the appellation ‘Angry Young Woman’ that was foisted upon her in the 1950s. The picaresque character of Jake’s adventures and the apparent rootlessness of his own character encouraged the critics to see him as a kind of ‘Lucky Jim’ (his adventures could never, surely, have been equated with those of John Osborne’s Jimmy Porter in *Look Back in Anger*, the original ‘angry young man’). Murdoch has always denied the association and the further we travel from the 1950s, the clearer it is that, whilst the novels of the ‘Angry Young Men’ were the forerunners of the disillusioned ‘University novels’ of today, Murdoch was in process of creating a novelistic world unique to her own art, a world which attempts to grapple, not with the so-called social realism of the 1950s and 1960s, but rather with the malaise that lies at the heart of life [...]” Hilda D. Spear, *Iris Murdoch* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995) 23-24.

development of the British novel. The solipsistic view of life presented by the first person narrators of both the picaresque and rogue novels demonstrate the ambiguity that fills these narratives. And the comedy of situation, the humour and wit proper to these novels do not in the least obliterate the moral dimension that lies beneath. Even if not explicitly, the picaresque and the rogue novels present characters that think about the world they live in, who survive in adverse circumstances, denouncing society's hypocrisy and contradictions, and eventually prompting the reader to reflect. The main character of *Under the Net* is certainly a rogue and may therefore be linked with the celebrated novel protagonists of the fifties, such as Lumley and Dixon, as well as with previous examples of roguish characters in British literature, such as Gulley Jimson in Joyce Cary's *The Horse's Mouth* (1944). Indeed both Gulley and Jake are excellent illustrations of the rogue depicted as an artist and as such, they meditate on the way art can accommodate life.

### ***Under the Net: The Humanistic Tradition***

The end is in the beginning and yet you go on.

Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (1957)

"I am not telling you the whole story of my life" (*UTN* 23), Jake informs the reader at the beginning of the novel. What is *Under the Net* all about, then? In his introduction to the novel (2002 edition), Kiernan Ryan explains:

In a nutshell, *Under the Net* is Jake Donaghue's account of how he became the writer who wrote *Under the Net*. It's Murdoch's portrait of the artist as a restless, feckless, penniless young man on a quest to find out what he thinks, who he loves, and where his life is heading.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Iris Murdoch, *Under the Net*, introduction by Kiernan Ryan, ix.

Jake's adventures cover a period of one week and they start and end in the same location: the mysterious Mrs Tinckham's newsagent's shop. However, during this interval of time the main character radically changes his attitude towards life. If at the beginning of the novel Jake states: 'I hate contingency. I want everything in my life to have a sufficient reason' (*UN* 26); at the very end he is open to the randomness of the world. When asked about a very simple circumstance, the difference between Mrs Tinck's kittens, Jake reacts in the following way:

"Oh, but that's how it always is. It's quite simple," I said.

"Why is it then?" said Mrs Tinck.

"Well," I said, "it's just a matter of..." I stopped. I had no idea what it was a matter of. I laughed and Mrs Tinckham laughed.

"I don't know why it is," I said. "It's just one of the wonders of the world." (*UN* 286)

Steven G. Kellman suggests that this scene reveals the protagonist as a complete being, ready to accept reality as it is: '[h]is final comment, "It's just one of the wonders of the world," is an indication of Jake's progress as human being and artist in embracing the untidy dappledness of the world.'<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Jake's final words are illustrative of his metamorphosis and are also an echo of Iris Murdoch's ideas on reality. She discusses this subject at length in her essay 'Against Dryness.' Commenting on the inadequacy of existing theories of personality (mostly inherited from Romanticism), she opposes imagination to fantasy and advocates the need for a Liberal theory of personality. According to Murdoch, art and literature in particular play an important role in conveying the truth about the density of life:

[R]eality is not given whole. An understanding of this, a respect for the contingent, is essential to imagination as opposed to fantasy. [...] Real people are destructive of myth,

---

<sup>12</sup> Steven G. Kellman, 'Under the Net: The Self-Begetting Novel,' *Iris Murdoch*, edited and with an introduction by Harold Bloom (New York, New Haven, Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986) 101.

contingency is destructive of fantasy and opens the way to imagination. [...] But since reality is incomplete, art must not be too much afraid of incompleteness. Literature must always represent a battle between real people and images; and what it requires now is a much stronger and more complex conception of the former.<sup>13</sup>

At the end of the narrative Jake is ready to undergo an artistic regeneration, realizing that he can, in fact, write a novel.<sup>14</sup> This is only possible because the main character is impelled, apparently randomly, to further explore reality. Jake's enlightenment is mainly due to his (re)encounter with two main characters: Anna Quentin and Hugo Belfounder. It is Anna who leads Jake to Hugo (though Jake will only actually search for him after meeting Anna's sister, the actress Sally Quentin). The episode in the Riverside Miming Theatre in Hammersmith is highly significant: the protagonist finds the woman he loves, Anna, a former singer, now committed to the philosophy of silence. The description of the theatre is dominated by dream-like imagery:

[A]nd then in an instant I understood. I was in the gallery of a tiny theatre. The gallery, sloping and foreshortened, seemed to give immediately onto the stage; and on the stage were a number of actors, moving silently to and fro, and wearing masks which they kept turned toward the auditorium. These masks were a little larger than life [...]. (*UTN* 40)

---

<sup>13</sup> Iris Murdoch, 'Against Dryness: a Polemical Sketch,' 20.

<sup>14</sup> As Steven Kellman suggests, *Under the Net* can be linked to the tradition of the self-begetting novel, a major sub-genre of the twentieth century. The self-begetting novel finds its paradigm in French literature, more specifically, in Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*: 'It is an intensely reflexive novel, employing, in addition to the nascent artist Marcel, such figures as Vinteuil, Bergotte, and Elstir in an effort to keep the reader conscious at all times of the problematic status of art.' Kellman 95.

Like Marcel, Jake is a writer concerned with language, truth and art. Furthermore, he is surrounded by characters, such as the singer Anna Quentin, the philosopher Dave Gellman and the philanthropist Hugo Belfounder, all of whom will help him in his quest.

In his analysis of the novel Malcolm Bradbury alludes to the surrealistic features found in *Under the Net*, mentioning some of the possible literary influences on Murdoch: '[t]here can surely be no doubt that surrealistic is the right word to use here; the dedication to Raymond Queneau should remind us that [...] there is a very modern vein of fantasy at work here too.'<sup>15</sup> Jake's two crucial (mis)encounters with Anna – at the Mime Theatre and his unfruitful chase at the Tuileries gardens in Paris – are good illustrations of Bradbury's argument. Indeed the two scenes are permeated by an atmosphere of reverie.<sup>16</sup> A.S. Byatt further explains Jake's relationship with this female character, Anna, emphasizing her naturalness:

[S]he is seen as pure art, divorced from social distortions, divorced as far as possible from the distorting effects of speech. Her theories of art resemble those of Hugo, although they are not identical, and it is not her 'philosophy of silence' that Jake finds attractive in her or pursues [...].<sup>17</sup>

When the protagonist first meets Anna, she elucidates the relationship between art and life: she refuses singing because it is corrupt,

---

<sup>15</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, Iris Murdoch's 'Under the Net,' *The Critical Quarterly* 4:1 (Spring, 1962): 53. And indeed right from the beginning of the novel there are direct allusions to Raymond Queneau's *Pierrot mon ami* as well as to Samuel Beckett's *Murphy*, which hold a place in Donaghue's bookshelf.

Also according to Richard Todd: 'Early reviewers of *Under the Net* were prolix in their comparisons, reading affinities with Cocteau, the Marx brothers, the Crazy Gang, Joyce Cary, Henry Green, E. M. Forster, Kafka and Dostoevsky. But the fruitful comparisons remain with Beckett and the dedicatee, Raymond Queneau.' Todd 29.

<sup>16</sup> For the scene at the Riverside Miming Theatre see *UTN* 38-54; for the episode in Paris (at the Pont Saint-Michel and the Tuileries gardens) see *UTN* 213-220.

<sup>17</sup> Byatt 23. Also according to Byatt: "The relationship of Anna and her view of art to Jake's freedom becomes clearest, perhaps, if we examine her relation to Miss Murdoch's study of Sartre's *La Nausée*. [...] Anna, in *Under the Net*, is surely related to the world where 'circles and melodies retain their pure and rigid contours'. The last scene in *Under the Net* where Jake, in Mrs Tinckham's shop, hears Anna on the wireless, singing 'an old French love song' is surely a deliberate parallel of the final scene in *La Nausée* [...]." Byatt 25.

choosing rather mime as a 'very simple' and 'very pure' form of art:

"What is this place, Anna?" I asked.

"That's one of the things that would be hard to explain, Jakie, [...] It's a little experiment."

This phrase grated on me. It didn't sound like Anna at all. There was some other voice here. I thought I would pick my way round this.

"What about your singing?" I asked.

"Oh, I've given up singing," said Anna. "I shan't sing any more." [...] "The sort of singing I do is so" – she searched for the word – "ostentatious. There's no truth in it. One's just exploiting one's charm to seduce people." [...]

"How about the theatre?" I asked. "How does that come in?"

"This is pure art," said Anna. "It's very simple and it's very pure." (*UTN* 46)

Eventually Jake recognises in Anna's experiment the influence of a former acquaintance, Hugo Belfounder. And indeed, once the nature of the relationship between the two characters (Jake and Hugo) becomes clear – after the narrator/protagonist introduces the reader to Belfounder – the novel's focus shifts. *Under the Net* evolves into a reflection on the relationship between language and reality: how truth can only be obtained in silence and how all acts of theorizing are flights from truth.

Jake and Hugo's acquaintance goes back to the time in which both characters participated in a cold-cure experiment. They engage in a philosophical discussion about the nature of communication:

"But suppose I try hard to be accurate," I said.

"One can't be," said Hugo. "The only hope is to avoid saying it. As soon as I try to describe, I'm done for. Try describing anything, our conversation for instance, and see how absolutely instinctively you..."

"Touch it up?" I suggested.

"It's deeper than that," said Hugo. "The language just won't let you present it as it really was." [...]

"So we never really communicate?"

"Well," he said, "I suppose *actions* don't lie." (*UTN* 67-68)

Hugo will have such a tremendous influence upon Jake that the latter will feel compelled to produce a book entitled *The Silencer*. In it, and through the fictional characters of Tamarus and Annandine, he gives voice to both his and Hugo's points of view. However, Jake never shares this with his friend and once the book is published, he feels he has betrayed Hugo and vanishes (until the moment he meets Anna again). This episode creates difficulties for Jake, which he will try to solve throughout the novel. Within this context, the title *Under the Net* becomes extremely significant, pointing to the central problem of the book.<sup>18</sup> To begin with, the expression 'under the net' is employed by Hugo (Annandine):

All theorizing is flight. We must be ruled by the situation itself and this is unutterably particular. Indeed it is something to which we can never get close enough, however hard we may try as it were to crawl *under the net*. (UTN 91, my emphasis)

It is Hugo who raises the dilemma of the novel and it is Jake, the artist, who will have to find a solution for it: 'picking one's way between the opposed camps of theory and silence, the "unutterably particular quality"

---

<sup>18</sup> According to Byatt: "Miss Murdoch has said that the image of the net of which she was thinking when she wrote the book was that of Wittgenstein (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.341). Here Wittgenstein uses the net as a picture of the way in which concepts, ideas, connections of thought, can be used to 'bring the description of the universe to a unified form'. (He instances Newtonian mechanics.)" Byatt 15.

Marijke Boucherie further explains the relation between Wittgenstein's philosophy and Iris Murdoch's fiction: 'A separação ascética entre facto e valor que Wittgenstein preconiza em *Tratado Lógico-Filosófico* constitui o termo contrastivo da arte de Iris Murdoch que tenta fazer nos romances o que o pensador austríaco diz ser impossível na filosofia: "Acerca daquilo que se não pode falar, tem que se ficar em silêncio". [...] Ao contrário de Wittgenstein, Iris Murdoch não se cala e, romance após romance, cria personagens cujos pensamentos, actos e reacções perante pessoas e objectos são imbuidos de medos, paixões, obsessões, alegrias e prazeres. Em Murdoch, o silêncio puro de Wittgenstein é paradoxalmente criado por *reductio ad absurdum* da tagaralice caótica da contingência humana que os romances colocam em cena.' Marijke Boucherie, "'Joie de Vivre": A Arte Romanesca de Iris Murdoch,' *Actas do XVI Encontro da Associação Portuguesa de Estudos Anglo-Americanos* (Vila Real: Universidade de Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro, 1996) 312.

of human situations and the social presentation of them in art.<sup>19</sup> Thus, it is no mere coincidence that the title of the book Jake is producing (as he narrates his story, taken from the conversation that he includes in *The Silencer*) and the title of Murdoch's novel are the same. Iris Murdoch explains:

[*Under the Net*] plays with a philosophical idea. The problem which is mentioned in the title is the problem of how far conceptualizing and theorizing, which from one point of view are absolutely essential, in fact divide you from the thing which is the object of theoretical attention.<sup>20</sup>

Jake's great achievement by the end of his adventures is his capacity to accept that contingency is intrinsic to life and that one ought to be open to different interpretations of reality. Indeed, throughout the novel Jake suffers delusion after delusion until he is free from all misconceptions and ready to become a true artist. His final meeting with Hugo at the hospital towards the end of the novel helps the protagonist to understand that he has often formed hasty and false impressions of people and situations around him. Hugo, against Jake's assumptions, praises *The Silencer*: 'Your thing was so clear. I learned an awful lot from it' (*UTN* 250), and clarifies the love rectangle in which Jake takes part (clearly showing Jake that he had got it all the wrong way around): 'I'm terribly sorry about all this, Jake; it's like life, isn't it? I love Sadie, who's keen on you, and you love Anna, who's keen on me. Perverse, isn't it?' (*UTN* 256). As Widmann further explains:

---

<sup>19</sup> Bradbury 50.

<sup>20</sup> Frank Kermode, 'The House of Fiction. Interviews with Seven Novelists (1963),' *The Novel Today. Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury (1977; London: Fontana Press, 1990): 117-144. [Frank Kermode's 'The House of Fiction' was first published in the *Partisan Review* 30 (1963): 61-82.]

In the novel (*Under the Net*) the reference to the title appears in the following excerpt: 'ANNANDINE: [...] All theorizing is flight. We must be ruled by the situation itself and this is unutterably particular. Indeed it is something to which we can never get close enough, however hard we may try as it were to crawl under the net' (*UTN* 91).

Jake, in actuality, is the person bound by nets of delusion. He is mistaken about almost everything. He thinks Finn will never go back to Ireland; Finn goes to Ireland. When he finds Anna again he plans a reunion: Anna will not allow it and escapes him, in London and Paris. He thinks that Jean Pierre Breteuil is a no-good hack; Jean Pierre wins the Prix Goncourt. Jake thinks Sammy is completely dishonourable; Sammy sends him the check for horserace winnings. Jake thinks Mister Mars will be useful for blackmail; precisely the reverse occurs, because Jake has to pay for Mars. Jake thinks that Hugo is a philosopher; Hugo disclaims responsibility for philosophizing.<sup>21</sup>

Thus the end of *Under the Net* is contained in its beginning; to be precise, in its epigraph. Just as in Dryden's final verses in *The Secular Masque*, Jake will find out that it is time to begin anew ("Tis well an Old Age is out" / "And time to begin a New"). As Kellman so accurately argues: "[t]he sense of rebirth, rededication, and liberation at the conclusion of *Under the Net* derives from the promise of a work which will succeed in understanding the contingent world and thereby uttering what is "unutterably particular."<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Murdoch's adoption of the picaresque structure (highlighting contingency and discontinuity) and of the corresponding rogue character is a clear indication of her philosophical ideas as expressed in her novels.

---

<sup>21</sup> R. L. Widmann, 'Murdoch's *Under the Net*: Theory and Practice of Fiction,' *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction* 10.1 (1968): 14.

<sup>22</sup> Kellman 101.

## Works Cited

- Amis, Kingsley. 'Laughter to Be Taken Seriously.' *New York Times Book Review* 7 July 1957: 1, 13.
- Bloom, Harold. Ed. and introd. *Iris Murdoch*. New York, New Haven, Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986.
- Boucherie, Marijke. "'Joie de Vivre": A Arte Romanesca de Iris Murdoch.' *Actas do XVI Encontro da Associação Portuguesa de Estudos Anglo-Americanos*. Vila Real: Universidade de Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro, 1996: 311-316.
- Bradbury, Malcolm. Iris Murdoch's 'Under the Net.' *The Critical Quarterly* 4.1 (Spring 1962): 47-54.
- Byatt, A. S. *Degrees of Freedom. The Novels of Iris Murdoch*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1970.
- Dryden, John. *The Poems and Fables of John Dryden*. 1962. Ed. James Kinsley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980.
- Hague, Angela. *Iris Murdoch's Comic Vision*. Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1984.
- . 'Picaresque Structure and the Angry Young Novel.' *Twentieth-Century Literature* 32.2 (Summer 1986): 209-220.
- Kellman, Steven G. 'Under the Net: the Self-Begetting Novel.' *Iris Murdoch*. Ed. and Introd. Harold Bloom. New York, New Haven, Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986: 95-103.
- Kermode, Frank. 'The House of Fiction. Interviews with Seven Novelists (1963).' *The Novel Today. Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*. 1977. Ed. Malcolm Bradbury. London: Fontana Press, 1990: 117-144.
- Murdoch, Iris. *Under the Net*. 1954. Introduction by Kiernan Ryan. London: Vintage, 2002.
- Nicol, Bran. *Iris Murdoch. The Retrospective Fiction*. Houndmills, U.K.: Macmillan Press; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.
- Spear, Hilda D. *Iris Murdoch*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995.
- Todd, Richard. *Iris Murdoch*. London and New York: Methuen, 1984.
- Widmann, R. L. 'Murdoch's *Under the Net*: Theory and Practice of Fiction.' *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction* 10.1 (1968): 5-16.
- Wolfe, Peter. *The Disciplined Heart: Iris Murdoch and Her Novels*. Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1966.

