

# **‘One can only understand what one identifies with’: the Redeemer and the Holocaust in Iris Murdoch’s *The Message to the Planet***

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Various narratives are incorporated into the *The Message to the Planet* which, on the face of it, should help the reader to understand the novel’s enigmatic and central ‘redemptive’ figure, Marcus Vallar. These include Freud’s ‘Life of Leonardo’ (there are close textual echoes of Freud’s essay in Murdoch’s novel); this is closely linked to the narrative in which Alfred Ludens, Marcus’s ‘disciple’, wants Marcus to live and through which he wants to understand him—that of the archetypal quest for knowledge. An inescapable narrative background is that of the life of Christ: one Murdoch critic suggests that

The numerous Christ-references take in his Jewishness, his ‘resurrection’ of Pat, his regarding Ludens as John the Baptist... Other characters frequently compare him with Christ in a mocking tone.<sup>2</sup>

There are also accounts of Marcus given by other characters, including highly perceptive ones by Dr Marzillian, the psychiatrist, and Daniel Most, the Rabbi. There is Marcus’s account of his own life, in which his attempt to understand the Holocaust figures largely. But there is also a narrative buried for most of the novel which fully surfaces only at the end. This, a story from the Holocaust, impacts on our understanding of Marcus more than any other in the novel and challenges the very words ‘understand’ and ‘redeemer’. In this article I will consider some of these narratives and the impact on the novel of the Holocaust story.

Freud’s ‘Life of Leonardo’ is a classic of psychoanalytic biography; but there is much, Freud argues at the end of the essay, that psychoanalysis cannot explain. In a footnote he quotes Hamlet’s words:

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,  
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy<sup>3</sup>

—a powerful critique of psychoanalysis’s own claims to absolute knowledge. As it happens, Hamlet’s words to Horatio are quoted twice in *The Message to the Planet*, also by a student of psychology, Dr Marzillian. Marzillian explicitly alludes to the limits of Freud’s own knowledge—‘But these are dark regions where doctors too can make

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mistakes, Freud thought that children's stories of being sexually abused were all fantasies'<sup>4</sup>—and his main function is to clear a space in which the reader can approach Marcus without preconceptions, including those which a psychoanalytic narrative such as the 'Life of Leonardo' might put in her way. Marzillian also asks interesting questions. He shows the ability to go straight to the core of the 'problem' that Marcus represents:

'It seems that he wants to solve a philosophical problem about the nature of human consciousness. He also envisages some duty or enactment which is to benefit mankind. He also, and certainly, suffers from deep feelings of guilt. Do these things connect, or are they separate, and how do they relate to the fact that he is Jewish?''<sup>5</sup>

Having asked these fundamental questions about Marcus, Marzillian refuses to accept answers that simplify his complexity. C.S. Lewis reduced debate about Jesus to three propositions: either mad, or bad, or God. In a passage which recalls and rejects such simplifying thought, Marzillian suggests to Ludens that

'You envisage two possibilities, sane thinker, or insane fantasist. But is there not at least one other possibility... Is it not possible that Marcus is not insane, and not now... a deep thinker, but simply a sane, eccentric, neurotic person who happens to have paranormal gifts?''<sup>6</sup>

—a suggestion which he qualifies by saying that 'I do not yet know "what is really going on". I just think that for a while ... we must simply wait'.<sup>7</sup> The effect of his words is to reinforce his allusion to Hamlet's words to Horatio, to suggest that the narratives through which the reader (and Ludens) might be tempted to interpret Marcus, including those deriving from Freud, will take her only so far. For there are other narratives concerning Marcus, which might loosely be called 'religious', among which is Marcus's own.

Marcus's account of himself and his 'mission' is told to Ludens, whose incomprehension, I have suggested, results in the latter's constructing an 'alternative' narrative of Marcus—the archetypal narrative of the quest for knowledge. Early in the novel Ludens has good reason to construct this narrative. Marcus talks to Ludens of 'a kind of deep thinking, which would involve new concepts ... the only possible escape from the technology which would destroy the planet'<sup>8</sup> and continues that 'it's all got to depend on one thing'—the identity of which 'thing' he is unable to clarify other than to say 'it's under a cloud'.<sup>9</sup> It appears that Marcus is indeed searching for some kind of philosopher's stone, some 'radiant lump of deep fundamental knowledge'.<sup>10</sup> At their next meeting, in Suffolk, Ludens again attempts to clarify what Marcus is actually doing, whether he is writing a book,

only to be told 'No philosophy. No book'.<sup>11</sup> But in halting speech wrung out of him by Ludens he uses a word—'understand': 'One can only understand what one identifies with'.<sup>12</sup> The word that Marcus also uses, linked to 'understand', is 'suffering'. What one must identify with is 'A pure experience ... Of suffering'. It seems that here at least we have gained some clarification of what Marcus is pursuing. It has also been established that Marcus has 'several books about the Holocaust'.<sup>13</sup>

In his next major conversation with Ludens Marcus's references to the Holocaust become explicit. He appears to argue that after the Holocaust the nature of consciousness itself has changed—but that thinking about what happened during it is in some way a burden laid on 'those who are thinkers who think for mankind, and peoples who represent mankind. The Greeks and the Jews have been such peoples and produced such thinkers. The Greeks have gone. The Jews remain'.<sup>14</sup> The act of thinking about both victims and torturers is 'extremely dangerous' because of the 'dark thoughts and evil yearnings' such thinking may awaken. 'The spectacle of extreme cruelty appals, it also fascinates'.<sup>15</sup> The word 'understand' is again used, by Ludens, who also suggests the word 'forgive', which Marcus rejects:

'If one thinks of what was done one must also think of those who did it.'  
'To forgive them?'  
'I'm not sure what that would mean. Rather to join them.'  
'To understand them by identifying with them, like you said? To—experience them?'  
'To attempt, in some intuition of evil, to understand them, to enact them, and so to activate and reveal the evil in one's own soul.'<sup>16</sup>

Ludens rejects such thinking about the Holocaust as a kind of self-willed madness. 'It was a particular thing, an episode, a historical event, one can't extract a world meaning from it ... It's nothing to do with the thing you are looking for'.<sup>17</sup> The puzzled reader, as suspicious as Ludens of what the latter later calls Marcus's 'high tempered religiosity', may concur. But before agreeing with another character's assessment of Marcus as 'stark staring raving mad',<sup>18</sup> the reader needs to be aware of what is happening within Marcus's discourse to words like 'understand' or 'know'. For Ludens, as we have seen, knowledge means 'a radiant lump', to be found at the end of a journey. As Marcus uses them, the words begin to mean something very different.

For as Marcus's thought develops, it becomes clear that he is finished with rational discourse of the sort that Ludens wants him to pursue. He refers to Ludens's paradigm of a quest for knowledge—

'you taught me my thoughts, all my old thoughts, you rehearsed them and set them in order as it were pointing forward, pointing toward the hidden conclusion which you wanted me to reach'<sup>19</sup>

a paradigm that for him has become worse than meaningless:

'for me, it was a nightmare—it was like walking barefoot on sharp stones or breathing black dust with a sack over one's head ... as if in hell, being unable to think any more, one had to keep rehearsing all one's old dead thoughts.'<sup>20</sup>

His account of 'an attempted understanding' of the Holocaust's torturers and victims is filled with images of the sea, of fish leaping to the surface:

'But sometimes a thought, an experience, can rise right up, as if it were breaking the surface, breaking the waves like a fish leaping into the air, into another dimension. And not just them but the wicked people too, they must be carried up, inside a thought, in an experienced shaft of being, in an attempted understanding.'<sup>21</sup>

The 'famous poem about the rose, that it is without "why"',<sup>22</sup> is a model of the kind of understanding he is seeking. But it is not enough to say that 'a description of the rose means nothing' for Marcus finishes the sentence with the words 'unless, as in poetry, it can be the rose'.<sup>23</sup> Here we are close to the centre of Marcus's thought. 'When words, even thoughts, fail, one might attempt, as it were an identification, something one might die of—'.<sup>24</sup> On the face of it this is no different from Marcus's earlier use of the word 'identification'.<sup>25</sup> But whereas there he could not name what he meant by identifying with suffering—only that it was 'deeper than compassion'—now he can. Identification means 'sacrifice':

'It is more as if, perhaps suddenly, all one could do would be to offer it—one's whole being becoming it—as a sacrifice—'<sup>26</sup>

This, then, is the centre of Marcus's thought, his account of what it means to know or understand. Nor can knowledge or understanding exist as abstract propositions; it is a question of knowing and understanding the Holocaust. 'I have to return to it, to *that*'.<sup>27</sup>

Within the novel itself there are two sympathetic accounts of why Marcus had, indeed, to return to 'that', which contrast with Ludens's despairing attempt to steer Marcus's attention in a different direction. The first, that of Marzillian shortly before Marcus's death, describes Marcus's encounter with suffering:

'Marcus has travelled far into remote and strange regions, not just as an objective scholarly spectator but as one who lives and becomes what he knows. He has the godlike power of metamorphosis, he participates, he

tastes. It is impossible to travel so far and live so completely without enduring the black contingent grief which underlies all human existence, without taking the pathway into the most extreme places of human suffering. That price is paid for other knowledge.<sup>28</sup>

In Marzillian's account, Marcus's preoccupation with the Holocaust, 'the most extreme places of human suffering', is not the result of neurotic obsession but an inevitable product of his mode of thinking. For Marzillian, Marcus was 'a very remarkable person' who 'walked to his death with his hand on your shoulder'.<sup>29</sup> The other sympathetic narrative, that of Daniel Most, refers (before Marcus's death) to 'an abyss which he has always known of and perhaps can now name',<sup>30</sup> and, after his death, to its having been

'given to his great soul to open itself to that absolute, to experience the inconceivable and to perish by it. This meaning must attach itself to the mystery of his death. We shall revere him as one who faithfully and fully lived out his role of prophet and martyr.'<sup>31</sup>

This then, in the interpretations of Marzillian and Most, is what Marcus meant by knowing something so intensely that 'one's whole being becom[es] it—as a sacrifice—.' One might describe these interpretations, these narratives, as 'religious': but if so they are minimalist, scarcely articulated. If a psychoanalytic narrative can only take us so far in understanding the main subjects of this novel, Marcus and the Holocaust, then 'religious' narratives—Murdoch appears to say—can take us little further.

But, it might be argued, the tentative religious narratives of Marzillian and Most, neither of which is Christian, at least take us further than a Christian narrative might do. For the novel's relation to Christianity is complex. Firstly, it is primarily concerned not with Christians but with Jews and what it means to be Jewish after the Holocaust. And secondly, while the novel offers the narrative of the life of Jesus as one through which it may be understood, it also, itself, offers a retelling of that narrative. The narrative of the life of Jesus behind the life of Marcus is, as we have seen, clearly visible. Within the novel there are 'orthodox' Christian narratives which assimilate Marcus, the most notable being the letter from Fr O'Harte to Ludens, after Marcus's death, which describes Marcus in Pauline terms:

In his mode of death he signalled his identification with the sufferings of his people and through them with the sufferings of all creation.<sup>32</sup>

This is one possible meaning that might be ascribed to Marcus's life and death, which does nothing to challenge the meaning ascribed to the life of Christ in orthodox Christian thought. But there is another narrative of

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Marcus's life, and, by extension, Jesus's life, which the novel also describes, to be seen most clearly in the conversations between Ludens and the ex-priest, Gildas Herne. In this account Marcus was 'fundamentally muddled':

'So you think his life and death meant nothing, you think he died in despair and confusion and—'

'Perhaps Christ died in despair and confusion. Any death is essentially accidental. As for meaning, that is our affair'.<sup>33</sup>

This, the life of Christ retold in the bleakest terms, is, perhaps, the narrative through which Murdoch, finally, wants Marcus's life to be understood. One might equally reverse the proposition: out of all her novels, Marcus's story is Murdoch's deepest meditation on the life of Christ, her retelling of it in human terms. But even this way of attempting to understand the novel has too much of a rhetorical flourish about it. There are other stories behind the novel one must read in order to understand it.

For behind and beyond the novel there is, in Marzillian's words, 'the background of that terrible silence of the great majority who travelled dumb from the railway chamber': the background of the countless stories of the victims of the Holocaust. Murdoch does not attempt to retell any of these, but she alludes, twice, to one man's story, that of Primo Levi, survivor of Auschwitz. Both allusions are too marked to ignore. Levi's narrative must, therefore, take its place with the others through which we have attempted to read Murdoch's novel. The first allusion is Marcus's reference to a camp guard:

'I read in a book that someone *there*, in one of the camps, asked a guard "why?" and the guard answered "*Hier ist kein warum*", here there is no why.'<sup>34</sup>

The book Marcus refers to is that by Levi, *If This is a Man*. Levi was the 'someone', newly arrived in Auschwitz after four days herded with men, women and children on a transport train without water:

Driven by thirst, I eyed a fine icicle outside the window, within hand's reach. I opened the window and broke off the icicle but at once a large, heavy guard prowling outside brutally snatched it away from me. 'Warum?' I asked him in my poor German. '*Hier ist kein warum*' (there is no why here) he replied, pushing me inside with a shove.<sup>35</sup>

The context in which the story occurs reinforces the contention that 'Why?' is indeed one of the questions that must be asked about the camps. In Marcus's memory the detail of the story is lost, and he makes the guard's brutal statement carry a 'metaphysical' weight it does not warrant. But at another level Marcus is right. To ask the question 'why?'

implies that one can have knowledge of what happened in the camps—and Marcus's story as lived by him is a definition of what such 'knowledge', to deserve the word, would have to consist of: the total identification of the 'knower' with the sufferer leading to the former's 'sacrifice'. But in Murdoch's second allusion to Levi's narrative the meaning of such 'sacrifice' is itself implicitly challenged, with a force surpassing an identification of Marcus with a broken and muddled Christ.

This allusion offers an 'interpretation', though that is not the word, of the meaning of the words uttered by Marcus and heard on tape, after his death, by Ludens and Marzillian. In Murdoch's account Marcus speaks 'in a rambling way as if to himself' in a language that is 'indeed not Yiddish, nor is it Sephardic Spanish, nor is it a Slav language. Finnish, Hungarian, Greek? No!'.<sup>36</sup> The language is, indeed, of no known origin. Marzillian has sent copies of the tape 'to several distinguished linguists of my acquaintance who were all completely baffled',<sup>37</sup> leading Ludens to suppose that 'Perhaps he discovered it after all ... The formula, the message to the planet'.<sup>38</sup> In Levi's *The Truce* there is an account of a little boy which runs as follows—the episode occurs shortly after the 'liberation' of Auschwitz:

Hurbinek was a nobody, a child of death, a child of Auschwitz. He looked about three years old, no one knew anything of him, he could not speak and he had no name; that curious name, Hurbinek, had been given to him by us, perhaps by one of the women who had interpreted with those syllables one of the inarticulate sounds that the baby let out now and again. He was paralysed from the waist down, with atrophied legs as thin as sticks; but his eyes, lost in his triangular and wasted face, flashed terribly alive, full of demand, assertion of the will to break loose, to shatter the tomb of his dumbness. The speech he lacked, which no one had bothered to teach him, the need of speech charged his stare with explosive urgency: it was a stare both savage and human, even mature, a judgement, which none of us could support, so heavy was it with force and anguish.<sup>39</sup>

'None of us, that is, except Henek', Levi continues, Henek being a fifteen year old Hungarian boy, another survivor, who sets himself the task of teaching Hurbinek to speak. 'After a week, Henek announced seriously, but without a shadow of selfconsciousness, that Hurbinek "could say a word".' Levi continues:

Hurbinek continued in his stubborn experiments for as long as he lived. In the following days everybody listened to him in silence, anxious to understand, and among us there were speakers of all the languages of Europe; but Hurbinek's word remained secret. No, it was certainly not a message, it was not a revelation; perhaps it was his name, if it had ever fallen to his lot to be given a name; perhaps (according to one of our hypotheses) it meant 'to eat' or 'bread'; or perhaps 'meat' in Bohemian,

as one of us who knew that language maintained.

Hurbinek, who was three years old and perhaps had been born in Auschwitz and had never seen a tree; Hurbinek, who had fought like a man, to the last breath, to gain his entry into the world of men, from which a bestial power had excluded him; Hurbinek, the nameless, whose tiny forearm—even his—bore the tattoo of Auschwitz; Hurbinek died in the first days of March 1945, free but not redeemed. Nothing remains of him: he bears witness through these words of mine.<sup>40</sup>

The message which is no message, the revelation which is no revelation, the redemption which is no redemption: this, the story of Hurbinek, is the narrative which, together with the others we have heard, also sounds through *The Message to the Planet* and which challenges the idea that such suffering can be ‘understood’, or, by sacrifice, redeemed.

- 1 Iris Murdoch, *The Message to the Planet* (Chatto and Windus 1989; reprint ed., Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990). Page references are to the Penguin edition.
- 2 Suguna Ramanathan, *Iris Murdoch: Figures of Good* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan 1990), p. 210.
- 3 Sigmund Freud, *The Penguin Freud Library*, ed. Angela Richards and Albert Dickson, Vol. 14: *Art and Literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985; reprint ed., 1990), p. 231.
- 4 *The Message to the Planet*, p. 498.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 262.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 335.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 336.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 55.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 165.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 167.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 167.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 167.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 96.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 342.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 342.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 380.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 380.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 381.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 381.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 443.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 380.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 431.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 500.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 417.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 485.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 488.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 557.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 380.
- 35 Primo Levi, *If This is a Man* and *The Truce* (London: Sphere Books Ltd, 1987; reprinted 1990), p. 35.
- 36 *The Message to the Planet*, p. 508.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 508.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 508.
- 39 Levi, *op.cit.*, p. 197.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 198.