

“Cheating the Dark Gods”: Iris Murdoch and Racine

Just as it is characteristic of Modernism to ponder the great literary archetypes of our civilization, so Postmodernism, too, looks back to the past. But it does so in a looser, freer way. *Ulysses* reworks the *Odyssey*, but Beckett's *Molloy* merely reflects it: the allusions are more subterranean, even incidental. Works written, like *Molloy*, since World War II, tend to show an awareness of the classics which is much more oblique than Joyce's or Thomas Mann's; and yet the presence is there, and often strongly felt.

This is the case, for instance, with Iris Murdoch's novel *A Severed Head* (1961).¹ In it a group of characters rearrange their relationships at least once and in some cases twice during the course of the action. Specifically, the hero Martin Lynch-Gibbon realizes he loves neither his wife Antonia nor his mistress Georgie, but Honor Klein, the sister of his wife's lover. Palmer Anderson, the brother in question, starts the novel as the lover both of Honor his half-sister and of Antonia Lynch-Gibbon, and ends it leaving for New York in the company of Martin's ex-mistress Georgie Hands. Antonia herself, having run away from Palmer whose attitude towards her changes dramatically once Martin has discovered him and Honor in bed together, goes back briefly to Martin before declaring that her true passion is Alexander, Martin's brother, who has been her occasional lover for many years. But before he leaves for Rome with her, Alexander has had time to become engaged to Georgia Hands and provoke her to attempt suicide. The only character not linked sexually to any other (although it is implied she has her own affairs elsewhere) is Rosemary, the divorcée sister of Martin and Alexander. And the only two characters who have nothing sexually to do with each other are Alexander and Honor Klein. Otherwise, Antonia loves Martin, Palmer, and Alexander; Georgie loves Martin, Alexander, and Palmer; and Honor is loved by Palmer and Martin: all in that order. Honor's attachments are referred to in the passive voice because she is the rather mysterious dynamo who generates the tensions which cause the others to act; she herself takes no initiatives, except perhaps at the very end when having seen the others off the stage she calls on Martin with the evident intention of offering herself to him.

This plot, inevitably rather crude sounding in summary, is by no means as frivolous as might appear at first sight. In the final pairings each hitherto morally blind partner (Martin, Antonia, and Georgie) is linked up with a lucid one (respectively Honor, Alexander, and Palmer), undoubtedly for his or her good. It is undeniably better for Martin to grow up into full moral adulthood: he has tended in the past to take refuge in filial relationships with women. The shock of Antonia's adulteries, and of Georgie's misadventures culminating in her departure in Palmer's company, and above all of his own demonic passion for the “severed head,” Honor, hurls him brutally but salutarily from his cosy Eden. As for Antonia, she has to stop enjoying the possession of three men, who flatter different facets of her makeup, and settle for one of them. And Georgie, abandoned by one brother after the other, learns the hard way that a girl makes herself a doormat at her peril. Under the surface comedy of this game of musical beds lies a closely argued moral statement: that to play with people is to hurt them, that to abase oneself in love is to invite humiliation, and that only upon mutual respect can a mature and adult love be based. Under the dazzling appearance of comic contingency, in other words, lies the tougher substance of an almost tragic determinism.

¹Iris Murdoch, *A Severed Head* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970). The first edition was published in London: Chatto & Windus, 1961.

The subterranean parallel with Racine—of the kind alluded to earlier—is striking. Like Racine, Iris Murdoch achieves what one critic has described as “the paradox of combining uncertainty and predetermination.”² Just as, in spite of the numerous peripeteia in *Andromaque*, Pyrrhus unwittingly moves closer to his rendezvous with death, so Martin Lynch-Gibbon moves closer to *his* rendezvous with a too-long-deferred and therefore deeply painful and unsettling realization of his emotional immaturity. The moment in which he grasps the fact that he is “desperately, irrevocably, agonizingly in love with Honor Klein” (p. 124), is akin to the moment when a Racinian hero or heroine realizes that he or she is trapped and cannot escape the tragic net. But, as in *Andromaque* and other major tragedies by Racine, the “serried determinism of the action only becomes apparent at the dénouement.”³ Like Oreste, who cries out against his own helplessness in face of his destiny, Martin perceives that he “was chosen, and relentlessly, not choosing” (p. 124). The suspense in *Andromaque*, the rabbit-out-of-hat surprises in *A Severed Head*, exist merely to distract the reader temporarily from the inexorable workings of fate and the outcome of what Martin calls his “monstrous love, a love out of such depths of self as monsters live in” (p. 125); the love of a Hermione or of a Phèdre.

John Fletcher
University of East Anglia

²Peter H. Nurse, “Racine and His Gods,” *Modern Language Review*, 72, No. 1 (January 1977), 45.

³Peter H. Nurse, p. 45.

FERNANDE SAINT-MARTIN

Samuel Beckett et l'univers de la fiction

Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1976. Pp. 271.

BRIAN T. FITCH

Dimensions, structures, et textualité dans la trilogie romanesque de Beckett

Paris: Minard, 1977. Pp. 205.

The necessity to find order and significance in the works of Samuel Beckett has obsessed readers, spectators, and critics since *Waiting for Godot* brought Beckett to the attention of the world. Our culture and heritage are fundamentally Cartesian, and we therefore demand and often impose method and structure. We wanted Godot to be God; we wanted Pozzo and Lucky to represent the dominance of corporeal reality over the enslaved spirit; and later we wanted the room of *Endgame* to be the inside of a skull.