

UNDER THE POLYPHONY OF VOICES: A BAKHTINIAN READING OF IRIS MURDOCH'S *UNDER THE NET*

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Özet

Çok Sesliliğin Ağında: Iris Murdoch'un Ağ Adlı Romanının Bakhtinsel İncelemesi

Iris Murdoch'un Ağ adlı romanı sıklıkla romanın ele aldığı ahlaki ve felsefi konularla bağlantılı olarak incelenmiştir. Bu konuların kurmaca bir metinde ortaya konması kuşkusuz tartışmaya değer bir husustur, ancak bu konuların romanda nasıl, diğer bir deyişle hangi yollarla ifade edildiği aynı derecede önemlidir. Bu sebeple, bu çalışmada Murdoch'un romanında ele aldığı güçlü felsefi fikirleri nasıl ustalıkla harmanlayıp; dil, kuram ve gerçeklik üzerine çok yönlü bir tartışmaya olanak sağladığını incelenmektedir. Bu bağlamda, bu çalışmanın amacı, romandaki kişiler tarafından aktarılan felsefi görüş ve düşüncelerin ne şekilde çok sesli bir anlatım içinde işlendiğini irdelemek ve Bakhtin'in kuramsallaştırdığı söylesimsel (diyalojik) ilişkinin, romanda oluşan çoğulluğu incelemeye elverişli diyalektik bir çerçeve sunduğunu vurgulamaktır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: *Iris Murdoch, Ağ, Rastlantısallık, Solipsizm, Dil, Kuram, Bakhtin, Söylesimsel (Diyalojik) İlişki, Çok Sesli Roman.*

Abstract

Iris Murdoch's highly-acclaimed novel Under the Net has often been studied in relation to the moral and philosophical issues that the novel raises. While the novel's playful representation of these issues in the form of fiction is certainly significant, the question of how these issues are presented and voiced in the novel is equally noteworthy. Therefore, this study explores how Murdoch's novel masterfully blends a multitude of philosophically compelling voices through which a multi-faceted debate on the notions of language, theory and truth is rendered possible. Thus, the aim of this essay is to look into the various ways in which these voices, conveyed by the characters, are weaved together in a polyphonic narrative, and to

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argue that Bakhtin's dialogic interrelation provides a dialectic frame to engage with the prevalent plurality constructed in the novel.

Keywords: *Iris Murdoch, Under the Net, Contingency, Solipsism, Language, Theory, Bakhtin, Dialogic Interrelation, Polyphonic Novel.*

Iris Murdoch's first published novel *Under the Net* (1957) is a highly stylised narrative that offers a debate on the notion of fantasy and the search for truth, ideas which are projected through Murdoch's protagonist Jake Donaghue's journey from his self-inflicted illusion towards self-awareness. Thus, the novel has often been described as "a philosophical adventure story" (Conradi, 2001:384), best read as a "light comedy" (Leavis, 1988:139). Obviously, *Under the Net* harbours comic propensities such as "chases, lockings in and lockings out" (Bradbury, 1962:47), incidents illustrating the so-called "parasite"¹ Jake's adventures. Yet, the incorporation of comic elements into the narrative, arguably, functions as a way to reveal, as in Cheryl Bove's words, "the accidental and contingent features of human existence" (Bove, 1986:6). For Murdoch, "comedy is the proper aesthetic mode for the novel and is a philosophical and moral necessity for art" in order to represent "the contingent dimensions of reality" (quoted in Hague, 1984:48). Hence, Murdoch's exploitation of comedy in *Under the Net* elucidates her statement, in that Jake's humorous adventures come to signify his ultimate assent to the "picaresque sea of contingency in which he, like everyone is immersed" (Conradi, 1994:331-332).

Much of the critical work² on *Under the Net* has laid emphasis on the novel's anti-existentialist stance in relation to the transformation of

¹ Iris Murdoch, *Under the Net* (London: Harper Collins, 2001), p. 24. Further references to the novel will be given in brackets.

² For instance, Frank Baldanza's *Iris Murdoch* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1974), Cheryl K. Bove's *Understanding Iris Murdoch* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), A.S. Byatt's *Degrees of Freedom: The Novels of Iris Murdoch* (London: Vintage, 1994), A.S. Byatt's *Iris Murdoch* (London: Longman, 1976), Peter J. Conradi's *The Saint and the Artist* (London: Macmillan, 1986), Elizabeth Dipple's *Iris Murdoch: Work for the Spirit* (London: Methuen & Co, 1982), Patricia J. O'Connor's *To Love the Good: The Moral Philosophy of Iris Murdoch* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), Rubin Rabinovitz's *Iris Murdoch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), Richard Todd's *Contemporary Writers: Iris Murdoch* (London: Methuen, 1984), Lindsey Tucker's *Critical Essays on Iris Murdoch* (New York: G.K Hall & Co., 1992), Ben Obumselu's "Iris Murdoch and Sartre", in *ELH* 42(2) (1975), are among those critical works that engage with Murdoch's philosophy and its manifestation in her writings.

Murdoch's solipsistic narrator into a philosophically enlightened individual who comes to appreciate the forceful impact of contingency over human life. Viewed from this perspective, it could be argued that Murdoch, through her protagonist, voiced her own views about the notion of contingency, an insight which she discussed in-depth in her essay "Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch" (1961). In her essay, Murdoch stated that "we are not isolated free choosers, monarchs of all we survey, but benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy" (Murdoch, 1977a:29). Here, Murdoch associates "dryness" with the notions of "smallness, self-containedness" (Murdoch, 1977a:28), a state of mind, which paves the way for egoism and solipsism. Incarnating Murdoch's view, the novel's protagonist, after a series of picaresque events comes to realise that he is not an isolated individual but "a part of a highly complex human world" (Spear, 1995:9). In an interview, Murdoch pointed out that although she was "very anti-existentialist", her "philosophy [did] not influence [her] work as a novelist" (O'Bellamy, 1977:131). However, this statement does not seem to apply to *Under the Net* since the novel employs a subtle engagement with issues Murdoch discussed and explored in her interviews and in her non-fiction writing. Whilst the novel's playful representation of these philosophical and moral issues in the form of fiction is obviously significant in itself, how these issues are presented and voiced in the novel is equally noteworthy. Therefore, this study explores how Murdoch's novel masterfully blends a multitude of compelling voices through which a multi-faceted debate on the notions of art, language, theory and truth is rendered possible. Thus, the aim of this study is to engage with the ways in which these voices are weaved together creating a poignant narrative, and to argue that the prevalent plurality constructed in the novel entails a Bakhtinian appreciation of polyphonic novel, situated in a carnivalesque and theatrical landscape of masks, props and décors. Accordingly, the first part of the essay takes an eclectic route to explore Bakhtin's theorisation of the polyphonic discourse and the dialogic imagination, juxtaposing his theoretical approaches with Murdoch's literary aesthetics. The second part brings a textual exploration of the dialogic interrelation in *Under the Net* drawing upon the information and argument presented in the first part.

Bakhtin defined the canonised poetic genres – epic, lyric, tragic – as "monologic", employing a single style and expressing a single world-view. He pointed out that the novel as a genre should be viewed as a heterogeneous entity, incorporating a medley of many styles and voices into the narrative. Thus, the multiplicity of voices enables the narrative to be

“inherently dialogic” or in an alternative formulation “polyphonic” – that is, “an orchestration of diverse discourses culled from both writing and oral speech” (Lodge, 1990a:76). Certainly, the “polyphonic novel” brings a variety of “conflicting ideological positions” to the fore and situates them “both between and individual speaking subjects” (Lodge, 1990a:86). However, for Bakhtin “what matters is the dialogic angle at which these styles and dialects are juxtaposed or counterposed in the work” (Bakhtin, 1984:182). In other words, the mere existence of diverse voices emerging from the use of “different languages and speech types” (Bakhtin, 1981:263) does not necessarily facilitate a polyphonic discourse. As David Lodge has pointed out, “a variety of discourses” should be “allow[ed] into a textual space – vulgar discourses as well as polite ones, vernacular as well as written- [then] a resistance to the dominance of any one discourse could be established” (Lodge, 1990b:154-155). Bakhtin defined this “diversity of social speech types and individual voices” (Bakhtin, 1981:262) as *heteroglossia*. As Bakhtin stated, the term *heteroglossia* suggests “not only a static invariant in the life of language, but also what ensures its dynamics” (Bakhtin, 1981:272) such as “authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters” (Bakhtin, 1981:263). For Bakhtin, it is only through the help of these “fundamental compositional unities” that *heteroglossia* could “enter the novel” (Bakhtin, 1981:263).

Yet, the dialogic, as Lodge has argued, is “not restricted to the subtle and complex interweaving of various types of speech³ – direct [*mimesis*], indirect [*diegesis*] and doubly-oriented” (Lodge, 1990b:154). It also “includes the relationship between the characters’ discourses and the author’s discourse (if presented in the text) and between all these discourses and other discourses outside the text which are imitated or alluded to by means of doubly-oriented speech” (Lodge, 1990b:154). Murdoch’s writing employs mostly this aspect of dialogic interrelation as it subtly reveals “the relations of words to actions” (Bradbury, 1962:47). Even though *Under the Net* came out earlier than Bakhtin’s theorisation of the dialogic imagination, it could be argued that it pre-empts Bakhtin’s conceptualisation of the discursive polyphonic novel, in that the novel both employs the inherent dialogism of language, in other words “the linguistic variety of prose fiction” (Lodge, 1990b:154), and offers a subtle presentation of polyphonic voices. In so doing, it accommodates Bakhtin’s conceptualisation

³ For Bakhtin the dialogic nature of language enables a polyphonic dialogue between the direct speech of the author (*diegesis*), the quoted direct speech of the characters (*mimesis*), and the doubly-oriented speech (a discourse defined as both describing an action and imitating a style of speech or writing).

of *heteroglossia* in a highly literary style, laying also a carnivalesque emphasis on “its cultural function as the continuous critique of all repressive, authoritarian, one-eyed ideologies” (Lodge, 1990b:154).

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin states that “there is nothing in the novel that could become stabilised, nothing that could relax within itself. [...] Everything is shown in a moment of unfinalised transition” (Bakhtin, 1984:162). Having experienced an oppressive totalitarian regime, Bakhtin’s revolutionary concept of dialogism paved the way for a liberatory and polyphonic discourse, offering a fluid and flexible point of view with diverse voices. As opposed to the restrictive, monologic narratives, the polyphonic form could facilitate this diversity, enabling a kind of “sublimity of freed perspectives” (Booth, 1984:xx). The polyphony of voices finds its embodiment in Murdoch’s novel through private and public interactions of the narrator Jake Donaghue with a number of characters by means of whom he arrives at a different, perhaps a reformed view of life and of himself. In fact, this could be true for other Murdochian novels⁴ in which her characters embark on a compelling journey, at the end of which they unburden their long-held beliefs and prejudices. In this respect, her characters are always in the act of becoming, and there is a sense of mobility attached to them, a position which resonates with Bakhtin’s conceptualisation of the subject in the literary imagination. As Michael Gardiner has stated:

The self for Bakhtin is not constituted through a unified, monadic relation to the external world; rather, the phenomenon of “selfness” is constituted through the operation of a dense and conflicting network of discourses, cultural and social practices and institutional structures. [...] This process is continuous and “mobile” – which is why the subject in Bakhtin’s eyes is unfinalised in a perpetual state of “becoming”. (Gardiner, 1992:165)

It could be argued that Murdoch constructed her character in a similar fashion, putting a specific emphasis on Jake’s transformation, and the gradual steps he takes towards an appreciation of contingency — an understanding which he acquires through his relationship with the other characters in the novel such as Hugo, Anna, Dave, Finn and Lefty. All these characters represent various social, political and philosophical ramifications

⁴ In her later novels such as *The Bell* (1958) and *The Black Prince* (1973) Murdoch presented characters (Dora Greenfield and Bradley Pearson respectively) who set out on a journey of moral growth and self-awareness.

of artistic/literary/sociopolitical expression. Viewed from a broader perspective, these characters also present a vigorous interplay of dichotomised discourses encompassing manifold conflicting dualities such as truth v. illusion, fact v. fiction, solipsism v. contingency – polarities that invite a polyphonic appreciation of the novel.

Hence, the novel's engagement with these polarities echoes Murdoch's own philosophical stance towards art and writing which lays major emphasis on the notion of truth – as Murdoch stated, “all art lies but good art lies its way into the truth” (quoted in Conradi, 1987:41). In one of her talks given at Morley College she asserted that “the novel is about facing up to the truth and living with a more realistic view of oneself and other people” (quoted in Kenyon, 1988:16); as a matter of fact, in most of her novels there is a search for truth. Yet, Murdoch's epistemological approach to art has been considered “anti-modernist” and “traditional” when viewed against the new directions that the post-war British fiction was taking in terms of “linguistic and formal daring” (Todd, 1987:13,14). However, as a philosopher and a writer Murdoch “pioneers the unfashionable concept of art as knowledge, based on humanistic realism” (Kenyon, 1988:17). Therefore, “an emphasis on characterisation has always been a primary concern” (Bove, 1993:4) in her aesthetics. Perhaps, this is why Murdoch had a great admiration for the nineteenth-century authors such as “Dostoevsky, Dickens and George Eliot whom [she] felt much closer than [she] did to James Joyce and Virginia Woolf” (Biles, 1978:121).

In her essay “The Sublime and Beautiful Revisited”, Murdoch talked about “the creation of character” as “a literary problem” (Murdoch, 1959:247) for the modern novelist, a situation that could be explored in relation to the conflicting forms employed in modern fiction. Murdoch pointed out that:

The modern novel, the serious novel, does tend toward either two extremes: either it is a tight metaphysical object, which wishes it were a poem, and which attempts to convey, often in mythical form, some central truth about the human condition – or else it is a loose journalistic epic, documentary or possibly even didactic in inspiration, offering a commentary on current institutions or on some matter out of history. We are offered things or truths. What we have lost is persons. (Murdoch, 1959:265)

In her essay “Against Dryness”, Murdoch expanded this tendency and argued that the modern novels were either “crystalline” or “journalistic”, and further stated:

It is either a small quasi-allegorical object portraying the human condition and not “containing” characters in the nineteenth-century sense, or else it is a large shapeless quasi-documentary object, the degenerate descendant of the nineteenth-century novel, telling, with pale conventional characters, some straightforward story enlivened with empirical facts. (Murdoch, 1977a:27-28)

For Murdoch, “crystalline works are usually the better ones” since they exhibit a sense of “clearness” (Murdoch, 1977a:28). However, in her interview with Frank Kermode in 1963, two years after the publication of “Against Dryness”, she took a contradicting stance by assigning both of these aspects to her conceptualisation of a well-written novel, and said:

There is a tendency, on the one hand, and especially now, to produce a closely-coiled, carefully-constructed object wherein the story rather than the people is the important thing, and wherein the story perhaps suggests a particular, fairly clear moral. On the other hand, there is and always has been in fiction a desire to describe the world around one in a fairly loose and cheerful way. And it seemed to me at present in the novel that there was a flying apart of these two different aims. Some ideal state of affairs would combine the merits of both. (Kermode, 1977:113)

Although Murdoch viewed these restrictive categorisations with suspicion, in *Under the Net* she nonetheless exploits them in the form of a dialogic interrelation that encompasses both the presentation of the story and the construction of the characters. That is to say, whilst the novel is partly “crystalline” in the sense that it explores the idea of “human condition”, it also presents the story straightforwardly in “a cheerful way”. Moreover, it is “traditional”, in that Murdoch pleads for “a return to the realistic depiction of ‘free, separate characters as a way out of a philosophical solipsism” (Byatt, 1992:148).

Arguably, it is Murdoch’s subtle construction of her characters, and her sophisticated engagement with the notion of “existential self-definition” (Byatt, 1992:27) that is prevalent in her writing. In *Under the Net*, this issue is projected through Jake Donaghue’s picaresque adventures which put him on a philosophical journey towards truth. As A.S. Byatt, a novelist and a critic who has published extensively on Murdoch, has pointed out: “Jake

tries an internal monologue, but discovers that the world is full of other people whose views he has misinterpreted but can learn. [...] No single view of the world, no one vision, is shown to be adequate” (Byatt, 1976:19). It can safely be asserted that Jake acquires, what Johnson calls, “a plurality of vision” (Johnson, 1987:25), and this notion of plurality of vision could only be established through the polyphony of voices, a state that is set against monologism.

Under the Net reinforces this polyphonic vision through Jake’s public and private interactions with other characters in the novel, ultimately stressing the idea that all the characters are interconnected and dialogically interrelated right from the outset. The novel opens with Jake, “the literary hack” (12), conveying his thoughts about his remote cousin Finn after his journey back to England from France. There is a sense of superiority embedded in his narrative at this stage. He considers himself “subtle” (9), and describes Finn as his “servant” (8). He assigns certain roles to people around him, and his self-confidence seems presumptuous for he thinks of himself as a man of profundity compared to Finn. He says: “Finn misses his inner life, and that is why he follows me about, as I have a complex one and highly differentiated” (9). Jake and Finn find themselves in need of a new place to live since Magdalen (Madge) throws them out as she is planning to get engaged with the “diamond bookmaker” (15) Sammy Starfield. A former lover, Anna is not much of help, yet her sister Sadie agrees to have Jake around her house. Sadie leads Jake to another old acquaintance, Hugo Belfounder – the philosopher in the novel – who takes a significant part in Jake’s transformation.

At the beginning of the novel, Jake is portrayed as a selfish, solipsistic man who “hate[s] contingency” (26) and who seeks a sufficient justification for everything in his life. However, as the story unfolds, Jake’s superficial view of life and his preoccupation with surface appearances lead him to misinterpret the incidents around him. It is largely Hugo who shatters Jake’s solipsistic anxiety and enables him to get rid of his false assumptions both in life and in art. Thus, the narrator Jake ascribes a saint-like appropriation to Hugo towards the end of his narrative, and aggravates Hugo’s significance in his life by saying: “He towered in my mind like a monolith: an unshaped and undivided stone which men before history had set up for some human purpose which would remain forever obscure” (268). Certainly, Jake’s philosophical discussions with Hugo have a strong impact on Jake, as he says: “During these conversations I began to see the whole world anew” (66). The intensity of their intellectual exchange leads Jake to develop one of

their philosophical debates on theory into a dialogue called “The Silencer”. The dialogue takes place between two characters called Tamarus and Annandine, who are “broken-down caricature[s]” (92) of Jake and Hugo respectively:

Annandine: It is true that theories may often be a part of a situation that one has to contend with. But then all sorts of obvious lies and fantasies may be a part of such a situation. But then all sorts of obvious lies and fantasies may be a part of such a situation; and you would say that one must be good at detecting and shunning lies, and not that one must be good at lying.

Tamarus: So you would cut all speech, except the very simplest, out of human life altogether.

Annandine: [...] Only the greatest men can speak and still be truthful. Any artist knows this obscurely; he knows that a theory is death, and that all expression is weighted with theory. Only the strongest can rise against that weight. For most of us truth, can be attained, if at all, only in silence. [...] This was something which the ancients understood. (91-92)

On a dialogic level, this extract functions as a polyphonic dialogue, in that it interweaves the author’s speech with the speech of her characters. That is, the dialogue between Annandine and Tamarus represents Murdoch’s own skeptical view on language and theory, situating it in a Platonic dialogue designed to explore the inadequacy of language and theoretical systems to attain and describe the truth. In other words, juxtaposing the “dignity of silence” with the “vulgarity of speech” (161), Murdoch points to the conflict between “the form-maker and the truthful, formless figure” (O’Bellamy, 1977:135), that is, the conflict between the artist and the saint, and in this case the “short-sighted” writer and the “illuminating” philosopher. The representation of this clash finds its embodiment in the characters of Jake and Hugo who allegorically represent the disparity between certainty and contingency; necessity and chance.

The overt Wittgensteinian overtones⁵ encapsulating Jake and Hugo’s fictive dialogue have been addressed in a number of critical works⁶ which

⁵ The dialogue has been thought to be an allusion to a passage (6.341) in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* in terms of its exploration of the ways to make the world intelligible.

explore “The Silencer” within the frame of Wittgenstein’s theories on language. According to Wittgenstein, ordinary language may lead to philosophical problems and misunderstandings arising from the discrepancy between what is said and what is thought. In like manner, Hugo argues that language is not the right means of communication, as “the whole world”, in his words, “is a machine for making falsehoods” (66). What is intriguing is that Hugo’s insights into language have affinities with Bakhtin’s very views on the subject. In fact, Bakhtin’s articulation of the spurious nature of language, saying “I am in fact constantly expressing a plenitude of meanings, some intended, others which I am unaware” (Bakhtin, 1981:xx), presents a similar standpoint that encompasses the logical structure of language and the limits of what can be clearly and meaningfully communicated.

As “a great admirer of Wittgenstein” (O’Bellamy, 1977:137), Murdoch comments on the inadequacy of language as follows:

What is the sickness of language? It is impossible to give a neat answer to the question. The fact is that our awareness of language has altered in the fairly recent past. We can no longer take language for granted as a medium of communication. Its transparency has gone. (Murdoch, 1977b:36)

The point Murdoch makes in the above statement concerning the restrictive potential of language in terms of getting one’s thoughts across, is one of the issues that Jake and Hugo ponder on. In one of their conversations Hugo, a character who is utterly suspicious of words, brings up the issue of Jake’s preoccupation with translating Jean Pierre Breteuil’s works into English, and questions the extent to which the activity of translating can be faithful to the original. In one of their conversations, Hugo bombards Jake with a series of questions about translation such as:

What do you mean when you say that you think the meaning in French? How do you know you’re thinking it in French? If you see a picture in your mind how do you know it’s a French picture? Or is it you say the French word to yourself? What do you see when you see

⁶ See Heather Widdows, *The Moral Vision of Iris Murdoch* (Hampshire, Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), Maria Antonaccia and William Schweiker, *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), Maria Antonaccia, *Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003)

that the translation is exactly right? Are you imagining what someone else would think, seeing it for the first time? (65)

These questions prompt Jake to ponder on the complexity of translation, an issue which he has underestimated. Previously, he was interested solely in the market value of translation. At the beginning of the novel Jake says that he translates Breteuil “because it’s easy and because it sells like hot cakes in any language” (22). Yet, Hugo introduces a highly sophisticated and intricate appreciation of translation, an aspect that is totally new to Jake. After his conversation with Hugo, Jake starts to view the activity of translation from his newly-acquired awareness, as he says: “The activity of translating, which had seemed the plainest thing in the world, turned out to be an act so complex and extraordinary that it was puzzling to see how any human being could perform it” (65-66).

It is significant to note that after his interaction with Hugo, Jake comes to see the weaknesses in his work, and starts to question the accuracy and soundness of his prose writing, “The Silencer”, which is based on his dialogues with Hugo. He comments on his endeavour as follows:

The curious thing was that I could see quite clearly that this work was from start to finish an objective justification of Hugo’s attitude. That is, it *was* a travesty and falsification of our conversations. Compared with them it was a pretentious falsehood. [...] Some of the most illuminating moments of our talk had been those which, if recorded, would have sounded the flattest. But these I could never bring myself to record with the starkness which they had had in reality. (70)

“The Silencer”, as Jake points out, receives a number of reviews that label it “unitelligible”, “pretentious and obscurantist” (75). Jake shares some of these criticisms, attributing the major flaw of his work to its incapability of representing the truth. In fact, Jake’s insights into his writing bring to mind Plato’s theory of mimesis and Plato’s analogy between the work of art and the carpenter’s bed with regard to the representation of truth. According to this notable analogy, the carpenter makes the bed which already exists in the intelligible world then the poet writes about the bed made by the carpenter; so the work of art becomes distorted as it is a copy of the copy, being twice removed from reality. Viewed from the perspective of the theory of mimesis, Jake’s manuscript is a distorted version of the original, for the ideal concepts that the dialogue engages with are already situated in the intelligible world. Therefore, the presentation of those concepts in the form of a narrative makes it twice removed from reality. That is the reason why

Jake defines his work as “travesty” (70), and affirms Hugo’s conclusion that “language just won’t let [one] present it as it really was” (67), for no language can be an ultimate medium to express truth. In line with this, Hugo thinks that “all stories are lies” (91) since they conceal the world as much as language and theory. For Hugo, it is only “actions” which “don’t lie” (68), and the remaining part of “The Silencer” engages with this issue in depth:

Tamarus: We are rational animals in the sense of theory-making animals.

Annandine: [...] Has a theory helped you when you were in doubt about what to do? Are not these very simple moments when theories are shilly-shallying? And don’t you realise this very clearly at such moments?

Tamarus: [...] there are theories abroad in the world, political ones for instance, so we have to deal with them in our thoughts.

Annandine: [...] If by expressing a theory you mean that someone else could make a theory about what you do, of course that is true and uninteresting. What I speak of is the real decision as we experience it; and here the movement away from and generality is the movement toward truth. All theorising is flight. (91)

During these conversations Jake arrives at a kind of self-awareness, and realises that his “vision of the world was blurred by generality” (68) as opposed to Hugo who “only noticed the details” (69). Hugo is constructed as a character who argues that theory like language is not the right means of representing the truth. In the context of dialogic interrelation, it could be argued that Hugo’s views illustrate Murdoch’s insights into theoretical systems. In an interview Murdoch covertly hinted at her distance towards jargonistic theories, and stated that “one has to keep a very open mind about literature and just look and respond to the work with one’s whole self” (O’Bellamy, 1977:136-137), avoiding the intrusion of theories. According to Hugo, a fair appreciation of art and life comes in the silence of understanding, as “truth can only be attained in silence” (92).

The “dignity of silence” as a path towards truth is reinforced by the other characters in the novel such as Dave and Anna, characters who also embody the notion of contingency. Dave is a linguistic philosopher and he represents a “utilitarian view of the world” (Bradbury, 1962:48-49). According to Dave, “human beings have to live by clear practical rules and not by the vague illumination of lofty notions which may seem to condone

all kinds of extravagance” (24). Dave is another character who gestures at the inadequacy of language in communicating thoughts. Anna, with whom Jake had a romantic relationship, represents a more flexible yet artistic articulation of the world. She is an artist who has taken up acting in a mime theatre following her career as a singer. For Anna, mime is “very simple and very pure”; it is “pure art” (46) that could potentially facilitate the attainment of truth. It could be argued that Anna starts to associate “singing” with “speech”, both of which, she describes as “ostentatious” (46), “corrupt” (48), and devoid of truth. According to Anna “only very simple things can be said without falsehood” (48). Obviously, Anna’s views are informed by Hugo, an affinity which Jake soon recognises. He says: “Anna’s ideas were simply an expression of Hugo in a debased medium, just as my own ideas were such an expression in yet another medium” (93). Arguably, “Lefty” Todd stands as a counterpart to these characters who express their rejection of theories in their very unique ways. Lefty, as the name suggests, is involved in socialist party, and he represents the role of the intellectual in society. More importantly, Lefty seeks a “political unity between theory and practice” (Bradbury, 1962:51), a standpoint which Hugo resists.

It is in this polyphonic landscape that Jake comes to realise that he has “littered up his life with half-truths” (206). His acquisition of a new awareness of himself and life operates on two levels. On a dialogic level, Jake is exposed to a variety of conflicting discourses which prompt him to meditate on the concepts such as language and theory. Through his interaction with other characters, he starts to appreciate the particulars. As for the dialogic interrelatedness of the text, one could say that the novel subtly merges the characters’ discourses with that of the author, creating a philosophically dialogic narrative, at the end of which Jake becomes aware that he has misinterpreted the signs around him. At the beginning of the novel, Jake had the false assumption that Hugo loved Anna, whom Jake himself loved; and Sadie loved Hugo. Yet, at the end of his narrative Jake, with the help of Hugo, resolves his misunderstanding, and finds out that Hugo loves Sadie, but Sadie loves Jake himself; and Anna whom Jake loves, is in love with Hugo.

The closure of the novel establishes an obvious parallel with the beginning. The reader is taken back to Mrs Tinckham’s shop, but this time with a note that Jake has done away with his solipsism. On his visit to Mrs Tinckham at her cat-congested newsagent at the end of the novel, Jake finds out that one of her cats produced two tabby and two pure Siamese kittens. Mrs Tinckham wonders “why the two cats are pure Siamese and the others

are tabby, instead of their all being half tabby and half Siamese” (285). Jake replies by saying, “it is just one of the wonders of the world” (286), a statement which signals Jake’s transformation. Jake’s newly-acquired view that life is momentary and transient, overlaps with what Wittgenstein put forth in *Tractatus*: “In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen” (quoted in Murdoch, 1977b:47). By accepting a world of contingency, Jake gets rid of his solipsism and his “dryness”, and is ready to embrace a new “pattern of life” (127). More importantly, he realises that he is not the centre of the world, and that his friends and acquaintances have their own lives in which he is rather one of the many figures situated under the net.

Thus, the net in the title of the book has been discussed in relation to the net of “philosophical theorising” (Turner, 1993:17). However, for Murdoch “the net under which one could not get” is “the net of language” (quoted in Spear, 1995:21). In fact, Murdoch’s dedication of her novel to the great French linguist Raymond Queneau hints at the significance of language for her work. However, the dedication of the novel to Queneau does not necessarily imply that the novel is going to present a playful engagement with language as Queneau did in his *Exercises in Style* (1947). In *Under the Net*, Murdoch brings a complex representation of language, that is, “language moving towards silence, and the difficulty of relating concepts to anything which lies behind them” (Spear, 1995:21). Yet, as this essay has argued, an exploration of the text as a polyphonic novel could enable one to “crawl” (91) under the net. In other words, it is under the polyphony of voices that the net could be unveiled and made intelligible.

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