Chapter-7

THE GREEN KNIGHT TO JACKSON’S DILEMMA

The Message to the Planet (1989) was followed by Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals (1993), which is by far the most extensive of Murdoch’s philosophical works. Though it is not necessarily a guide to the reading of her last two novels. The Green Knight (1993) and Jackson’s Dilemma (1995), it is a fascinating expansion of, and reflection on, many of the themes she dealt with in fiction, particularly in the later books. One may easily discern how the novels themselves reflect her philosophical concepts: We fear plurality, diffusion, senseless accident, chaos; we want to transform what we cannot dominate or understand into something reassuring and familiar, into ordinary being, into history, art, religion, science.\(^1\) This applies to novels too by implication which attempt to effectively bring to life the old mythologies whilst simultaneously exploring the contemporary problems of morality.

At the centre of this philosophical treatise is a familiar concern-the struggle to set out a ‘guide to Goodness’ - which Murdoch has argued more single-mindedly than anywhere else. Her concern with goodness has dominated many of her earlier novels but Metaphysics seems to deliberately exclude evil as a foil to truth and goodness. Hilda Spear

argues: What is especially valuable to the reader of her novels is that certain philosophical concepts, as Murdoch understood them and as she employed them in her fiction, are discussed minutely and are considered from various points of view. Of particular interest to the reader of her novels is the dialectic concerning the connections between language and truth which runs throughout the book.² Like her first published book, Sartre: Romantic Rationalist, however, it is intricately bound up with the discussion of the way language works and can be usefully seen as an aid to the understanding of what she as a novelist expected to achieve in her novels.

Apart from the ongoing concern with language and truth, Metaphysics examines the question of Good without God which has been a matter of concern in so many of her novels as well as in the earlier philosophical work. It considers the place of religion in the modern world; it looks at the concepts of good and evil, of truth, of duty, to mention only a few of the themes relevant to the novels. It is equally preoccupied with the ontological proof of God’s existence and devotes a chapter to it. But what is, perhaps, more fascinating as also profitable to the readers of her novels is the fact that Murdoch is never far from discussing art and literature in the guise of philosophical concepts. Shakespeare often looms large in her deliberations and his plays often serve to illustrate some argument or point of contention, This together with the profound interest in religion which dominates the book, almost inevitably seems to lead us to the novels which follow it, The Green Knight and Jackson’s Dilemma. The remarkable thing

about these two final novels is that they move on from the mystic ideas of the previous group of novels to add palpable mystery to the mystic figures. A single instance may illustrate this: James in *The Sea, The Sea* had a real identity in the world of the novel as the protagonist’s cousin, as a traveller in the East, as a man intensely influenced by the Buddhist religion, whereas Peter Mir in *The Green Knight* lacks this substance and remains a mysterious figure. The reader is skeptic about Peter’s claim that he was a retired butcher but clings firmly to the apparent fact that he suffered death and resurrection. Likewise, Jackson of *Jackson’s Dilemma*, finds an uncertain place in the real world. He appears almost non-existent before he arrives one evening at Benet’s door step; he does not belong anywhere, has no background. He appears rather, like Peter Mir, to be a wanderer between two worlds and we see him only when he is present in the familiar world. That these two last novels represent a deliberate mystification is evident from Murdoch’s comment which she made in a conversation with the philosopher Bryan Magee in 1977: ‘Literature interests us on different levels in different fashions. It is full of tricks and magic and deliberate mystification.’3 This idea finds a good illustration in the last two novels under consideration.

*The Green Knight* with a profoundly suggestive title brings together aspects of the Christian myth and Arthurian legend. The novel begins, like *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*, with a dreamlike tableau, where a strange person is seen standing at the bottom of a garden at

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night. It seems that Murdoch consciously introduced Kensington Gardens for the unfolding of the plot. On a chilly, wet October day, two middle-aged women, who have been friends since their schooldays, are walking in the garden, exercising Bellamy's dog Anax, himself one of the principal characters in the novel. It is through their conversation that we are introduced to most of the other characters as well as to what is apparently the focal centre of the plot—the death of an assumed mugger at the hands of Lucas Graffe. Lucas is a scholarly academic historian, friend of both the Anderson and Blacket families, and as Joan puts it, an ‘eccentric’. It is worthwhile to note that the opening words of the novel offer an obvious clue to its magic and mystery which accentuate the plot to a great extent. Significantly, the words ‘Once upon a time there were...’ evoke a fairy-tale atmosphere and call attention to a partial similarity with the opening of Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.

This fairy-tale element is further extended as Joan and Louise are shown to represent two diametrically opposed axes of morality. Joan appears as a ‘bad girl’ whereas Louise stands for the ‘good girl’. If Joan epitomises ‘lawlessness’ and ‘disorder’, Louise is shown to embody the virtues of docility and order or at least ‘a soothing possibility of order.’ It is worth noting at this point that Joan and Louise are by no means at the moral centre of the story. However, these two women are, to some extent, reflected in the Graffe brothers. Though Lucas is apparently a man of reserve, he really resembles no one in the book. On the other hand, his younger brother Clement is the anxious worrier about moral rectitude and, ironically enough, whose desire for truthfulness is
perpetually endangered by the devilish machinations of his brother Lucas.

More strangely still, the fairy-tale element of the novel gains momentum through Lucas’s three daughters, especially through Moy, the youngest of the ‘three little girls’ in Joan Blacke’s fairy tale. For Moy, everything around her is imbued with life, she can think and can feel, and she experiences somewhat whimsical mystic happenings when the stones which she has collected with such loving care move about in her room. Apparently even Anax, the dog observes this phenomenon. A more potent symbolism comes into being through Moy, particularly when her anthropomorphism leads to her encounter with the swan in the Thames. This seems to recall the classical story of Leda and Zeus, suggesting Moy as the chosen of the gods. A later incident, at the end of the novel, fortifies this belief when ‘silkies’ call her back to join them in the sea, but the sea-myth fails to materialise due to Anax, who helps his master, Bellamy, to save her.

Apparently, though The Green Knight is invested with various features of a thriller, it certainly refuses to be categorised as such for the murderer is an open secret to all. However, the identity of the victim is shrouded in mystery, almost turning into a puzzle. One can never be sure whether the victim was indeed murdered, for, like the legendary Green Knight, he appears to rise phoenix-like from his own ashes. When Louise first observes Peter Mir, despite the darkness, she notices his green umbrella. It immediately strikes us that green is Peter’s colour; he wears a ‘dark-green tweed jacket’, a ‘chic green tie’, a sort of green suit and he
claims to be ‘a member of the Green Party’. Curiously enough, Aleph is the first to suggest that Peter Mir is the Green Knight. And, no doubt, like the legendary Green Knight, he was struck down with a blow to the head and he undergoes resurrection (though not a quick one) to challenge Lucas on moral grounds. Hilda D. Spear has suggested many similarities with the story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but there are also many differences and after Peter’s second death Clement ponders on the original medieval story and concludes that ‘it is all mixed up.’

By this time, however, Clement has seen clearly ‘what is fundamental... Peter saved my life and gave his life for me’. These words carry an evangelical Christian echo that prompts us to realise that if Peter Mir is the Green Knight from pagan romance, he is also a Christ-figure. And, as quite often it is so, he is a jew like Christ with Jewish physical features. Like Christ, he is unmarried. More significantly, however, it is constantly emphasised that he sacrificed himself only to save Clement. Even Lucas acknowledges that ‘one man can die for another.’ In Christ like manner, he suffers pain before his death; he is resurrected and he seems to offer the possibility of redemption. Brian Nicol also agrees with this view when he remarks: ‘... the novel represents a variation on the common Murdochian theme of redemption, frequently explored by evoking a karmic need to pay for the past deeds.’

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7 Ibid, p. 430.
8 Ibid, p. 91.
Green Knight, ‘the idea of retribution is everywhere fundamental to justice... An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth serves as an image for both retribution and revenge.’¹⁰ It would be naive to suggest that Peter, when he regains his memory after reliving his death experience, changes from the pagan Green Knight to the Christian hero, for the Green Knight himself was chivalrously moral, offering a challenge and a test to the knights of King Arthur’s court. What is more, Peter claims to have recovered his understanding of the Buddhist, not of the Christian faith. Like James in The Sea, The Sea, he had become a Buddhist, though the blow on his head had apparently made him forget this. This second experience might, however, be seen as akin to the Pentecostal fire, which brings about a change from the Old Testament dispensation of justice to the New Testament dispensation of mercy and love. The two myths appear to run along the same trajectory: Peter offers the Green Knight’s token punishment to Lucas but Peter’s second death is that of Christ. As a representative of Christ, Peter has died, first to save Clement and secondly to break all spells and set everyone free. At his ‘Last Supper’ - the party at his house - which follows his resurrection into the fulness of life and precedes his second death, twelve invited guests arrive and he talks to each of them in turn. However, when Teresa arrives, she is both the thirteenth - the carrier of ill-luck- and the betraying Judas. Ironically, once more it is all mixed up. What is remarkable, at this crucial point, however, is the fact that the novel is again struggling with the problems of morality, of Good and Evil, of the place of God and religion in a godless world.

¹⁰ Iris Murdoch, The Green Knight, p. 126.
In fact, the moral theme, as is often the case, lies at the heart of the novel and this theme is explored in various ways, Bellamy, the spiritually minded character, is the principal seeker after God, his whole life a religious quest, which has found no resolution despite his conversion to Roman Catholicism. Like Catherine Fawley in *The Bell* he decides to renounce the world and enter a monastery in an enclosed order, to isolate himself from social life and dedicate himself to Truth. It is worthwhile to notice the communication through the exchange of letters between Bellamy and his mentor, Father Damien, for a sizeable part of religious discussion issues from these letters.

We hardly need father Damien’s explanation to apprise us of the fact that Bellamy has romanticised the religious life, that the monastery is to be for him an escape from reality. It is clear, moreover, that he is playing a Christian role to disguise himself from the very fact that he has not convinced himself of Christ’s existence, first in the flesh and then in the spirit:

If we have a mystical Christ can that be the real Christ? Is a mystical Christ ‘good enough’? Could there be Christ if that man never existed at all.\(^\text{11}\)

In other words, Murdoch is opposed to the idea of religion as a metanarrative, but values its endorsement of ascesis. Christ himself removed from the specific framework of the Bible, remains an important model for Murdoch’s ascetic ideal. He is never far from Murdoch’s recent

\(^{11}\) Iris Murdoch, *The Green Knight*, p. 41.
fiction. In her philosophical treatise *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* Murdoch has explained her religious stance:

Perhaps (I believe) Christianity can continue without a personal God or a risen Christ, without beliefs in supernatural places and happenings, such as heaven and life after death, but retaining the mystical figure of Christ occupying a place analogous to that of Buddha: a Christ who can console and save, but who is to be found as a living force within each human soul and not in some supernatural elsewhere.¹²

Bellamy adopts exactly this position after Father Damien tells him that he has lost his faith. This happens just before what Bellamy is to interpret as the vision on the road to Damascus when he Peter is burning in the Pentecostal fire. It is not an orthodox Christian belief but is based on the dictum of the thirteenth-century Christian mystic Meister Eckhart, which Father Damien refers to in several of his letters to Bellamy: do not seek for God outside your own soul.¹³ Bellamy finds himself returning to this concept later in his conversation about religion with Peter Mir. This sits well with the modern rejection of God but at the same time enables to retain faith in a ‘Good-based’ morality. And this contemporaneity of thought makes Murdoch revere Eckhart as a thinker for today.

Although Bellamy has lost his vision of a personal God, he persists in his desire to have an ‘avatar’ or a ‘mediator’ whom he can venerate. He is a man for whom religion is a necessity and he believes that

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¹³ Iris Murdoch, *The Green Knight*, p. 266.
he has received a sign. He looks up to Peter as an embodiment of goodness, and yet when Peter is rushed to Dr. Fonsett’s clinic, it is Emil who solves the realistic problems of Bellamy’s life, insisting: You will stay with me... you must get your dog back. What is surprising, at this juncture, is the absolute loyalty of Anax to his master despite the love bestowed on him by Moy. Early in the novel, through Moy’s anthropomorphic interpretation of Anax’s mind, the dog too enters the realm of religious thought. His reconciliation with his master when he is reclaimed helps Bellamy to find his purpose in life: ‘I have got so much to do, I’ll find that job [Father Damien] spoke of, and yes he was right about happiness, don’t be miserable thinking you can’t be perfect.’

An altogether different kind of goodness can be seen in Moy. She is the youngest of the three Anderson girls and celebrates her sixteenth birthday during the course of the novel. She is a vegetarian by conviction because of her concern for all living things. In the novel, she is seen as a strange child even by her friends and relations, for she appears to live in a slightly different world from them, a world in which everything, animate and inanimate, is endowed with its own life. In the given circumstances, ordinary life becomes almost untenable and she is in a constant agony of apprehension about the feelings of such natural objects as rocks and stones. Her goodness might be called a kind of naive innocence which has not had to make uneasy adjustment with temptation. By the end of the novel the fall is still ahead for Moy but we know that it is approaching; she has lost her mystic powers which had earlier made the stones in her room move. Her

\[14\] Ibid, p. 471.
fey powers have faded and she is suffering the agonies of unrequited love. Still, the fact remains that Moy crosses over innocence only to achieve the intended goodness.

However, the most significant discussion of Good and Evil in the novel is focused on Peter Mir’s death and resurrection. His involvement in the original act of aggression, the intention of Lucas to kill his brother remains a mystery. The first version of the story floated by Lucas and Clement and told by the narrator is simply fabricated; the true version emerges later. Lucas gets Clement completely drunk before taking him in his car to a remote place amongst trees and construction rubble with the pretence of showing him something but with the intention of striking him on the head with a baseball bat and killing him. As the murder weapon begins to come down Clement senses it and tries to spring away, observing as he does so ‘the figure beside Lucas of another man’. The mysterious third figure reminds us of the Christ-figure who walked hooded, and unidentified beside his two disciples on their journey to Emmaus finally revealing his identity to them. Likewise, the mysterious third figure (with its religious implications) manifests himself at the crucial moment and saves Clement’s life at the apparent expense of his own. When Lucas returns from his self-imposed exile he explains, ‘one man can die for another’, and Clement asks, So he died for me?; a little later, as they continue to talk, Lucas comments, ‘An angel might have stayed my hand’\(^{15}\) Soon after this we are introduced to the figure of Peter Mir- revived, resurrected, or perhaps an avenging angel from the beginning. In short, Peter emerges as some sort of

\(^{15}\) Iris Murdoch, The Green Knight, pp. 91-92.
mystic messenger, an instrument of justice.

But Lucas Graffe is by no means as demonic as Julius King in a Fairly Honourable Defeat. Although he has invented a story to tell to the world, he has involved Clement in his machinations and he appears to feel no remorse. When Peter appears, however, he demands justice, though it is soon apparent that it is not legal but moral justice that he is seeking. Peter’s sense of justice is rooted in the Old Testament and he desires that Lucas should acknowledge his sin and confess the truth to his friends. The real implication behind this demand is that truth is greater than mere justice. Lucas’s sin is not only against Peter but also against Clement. Furthermore, he has trapped Clement into compounding the sin, for Clement, who is normally decent and truthful, essentially good, has become embroiled in his brother’s evil.

Bellamy describes Lucas as ‘anti-Christ’ several times but he nevertheless loves him. Lucas is thus an evil enchanter figure who is certainly loved by a number of characters in the story. However, one feels that the love accorded to Lucas is insufficient to bring about his salvation. Thus the denouement seems difficult to come by, for Peter, resurrected a second time, recognises that his feelings of hatred and vengeance are more harmful to him that to Lucas, metes out symbolic justice and makes peace. Lucas, on the other hand, appears to take the reconciliation cynically. Even the symbolic retribution of the small slit between his ribs is inflicted not to bring Lucas to a sense of moral right but in order to complete Peter’s healing. Here again, it may be observed that the two stories- that of Gawain
and that of Christian redemption - are once more brought together. The symbolic retributive wound is a significant aspect of justice in the Gawain legend whilst the wound given to Lucas is, like that of Christ in the crucifixion, in the side, a connection made for us by Lucas himself when he equates Christ with doubting Thomas. When Clement asks whether the event was about forgiveness, Lucas concurs with the suggestion and ends up with the outrageously smug act of forgiving Clement for ‘all the suffering you caused me when we were children’. The final act seems as though Peter, like Julius King, has failed to learn anything at all and his piece of the story ends up with him taking Aleph from her family and leaving the country. The last short section of the novel is titled They Reach the Sea. For Murdoch, as has already been suggested, the sea is both attractive and awe-inspiring. Here it signifies the end of all the journeys, all the quests and we can perhaps see the regenerate characters as ‘finding god in their own souls’. Sefton and Harvey are ecstatically happy together in Florence. The final events of the plot take place by the sea. Moy emerges from her dark night of the soul and from a near-death experience into a revitalised anticipation of the future. Bellamy, in saving Moy, finds his life transformed; only over the lives of Louise and Clement a question-mark hangs. Through musing about Peter, Louise expresses the sorrows of Christianity: ‘how can we ever be happy now? Peter didn’t die for anything, he died accidentally, senselessly- he appeared out of a mystery which I have never understood, and now he has vanished leaving all this behind.’

16 Iris Murdoch, The Green Knight, p. 322.
17 Iris Murdoch, The Green Knight, p. 454.
Clement, on the other hand, strives to see the point of it all and finally expresses the joys of Christianity: ‘And so... we betray him, we explain him away, we do not want to think about him or puzzle about him or try to make out what he was in himself.’ But then follows the triumphant acceptance of belief, ‘Peter saved my life, he gave his own life for mine.’ 18

It is a concept that he frequently repeats to himself; he does not see Peter in an orthodox Christian context as an instant saviour of them all but he finds him as a god in his own soul. Thus, The Green Knight, with its mysticism, its interest in religion, its philosophical viewpoints is a far cry from the first novel Under the Net. And, finally we move on to the last novel of all, Jackson’s Dilemma, published in 1995. It is crucial for two reasons: it was written in a critical phase of the author’s life, and it is her last novel. Richard Todd has found it ‘a disturbing novel.’ 19 Hilda Spear has observed: It has often seemed to me that inside this novel there is a much better novel screaming to get out. Probably the first thing that strikes the reader is that it is a short novel, perhaps not much more than half the length of the half-dozen or so novels that precede it. There is no doubt that the actual physical writing of it took place when its author was already in the early stages of Alzheimer’s Disease, though in 1993, when she visited us in Dundee, just before the publication of The Green Knight, the novel was, as I understood, already in gestation; this leads us to assume that, because of her methodical preparation of her novels, it was, in essence, already written

19 Richard Todd, Realism Disavowed? Discourses of Memory and High Incarnations in Jackson’s Dilemma, Modern Fiction Studies Fall 2001, 43:3 Iris Murdoch Special Issue, p. 692.
in her head before the disease took hold.  

Besides its shorter frame, the plot of the novel is fairly straightforward. Central to the action is the non-happening of Edward and Marian’s wedding. The book opens with Edward, sitting in his London house, contemplating his coming marriage to Marian, a stone is hurled through his window. This sudden and bewildering incident causes Edward little concern, however, for he clears up the glass fragments, picks up the stone, places it on his mantel piece and drives off to his country house. Readers familiar with Murdoch’s interest in stones, may well suspect some special significance in this incident, though our curiosity is not fully satisfied until fairly close to the end of the book. This happens after Edward has proposed to, and been accepted by, Anne Dunarven; he then returns the stone to Bran the perpetrator of the deed. Nevertheless, it is Cantor, not Bran and his stone, who prevents Edward’s marriage to Marian. The usual Murdochian love complications are not very evident; the action relies on flashbacks into the past lives of Edward and Marian in order to provide the final romantic solutions for them both. For good measure, Murdoch also pairs off Rosalind and Tuan; she even saves Mildred from going to India, so that her passionate but oddly a-sexual affair with Owen can go on.

Compared to The Green Knight, Jackson’s Dilemma has a more circumscribed religious discussion which finds its centre in Mildred. But the thematic thrust lacks angst about God and Good or God and Forgiveness in a godless world that informs the majority of the later novels.

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20 Hilda D. Spear, Iris Murdoch, p. 124.
Mildred wants to see a believable form of Christianity before it is too late, and she returns many times to the idea of redemptive suffering, which she particularly associates with Jackson. This tenet has already been rejected by Murdoch quite early on. But Mildred is a romantic and seeks a romantic fulfillment in her life. She enjoys her love for essentially untouchable Owen, yet yearns for the ‘deep mystical understanding, which had once belonged to Christianity.’ She dreams of suffering squalor and misery in Calcutta, until she meets an Anglican priest who can offer her such sights and experiences in the East End of London, as well as the possibility of her becoming a priest herself. So, she stays in London but at the same time she is unwilling to surrender her romantic fondness for gods of India, ‘Ganesh ... Shiva ... Parvati... KalaNag’ She appears for the last time at the Sea Kings Inn after the wedding feast, as she kisses Owen good night and tries to recall a conversation she had been having with Jackson.

Jackson and his dilemma are essential to the novel. It is also quite likely that the initial impact of Alzheimer’s Disease had created a dilemma in Murdoch herself. This is evident from what she told John Bayley in 1994: It’s this man Jackson, I can’t make out who he is, or what he is doing... I don’t think he has been born yet.

Jackson is, in fact, one of Murdoch’s most successful characters, remaining enigmatic and sympathetic, displaying elements of many of her familiar types without conforming neatly to any: the unattractive yet good

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21 Iris Murdoch, Jackson’s Dilemma, London: Chatto & Windus p. 207.
man (like Tallis Browne in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* the remorseless evil man (Julius King, Tallis’s adversary) the pathetic servant figure (Francis Marloe in *The Black Prince*), the charismatic manipulator like Mischa Fox (The Flight from the Enchanter). In the course of the book he is compared to numerous artistic or mythic forbears: Christ, Othello, Macbeth, the Fisher King and Caliban. In one sense, these references in the novel illustrate the working of Murdoch’s ‘anti-modernist’ use of mythic allusion, in that none of them seem to apply absolutely.

But the connection with *The Tempest*,- as is often the case in Murdoch’s fiction-goes further. Like this play, the atmosphere of the book is subtly magical; the plot begins expectantly only for a quiet to descend over it as the characters seem to achieve contentment sooner than we thought. With about a third of the book to go, one might anticipate shock of sorts, but the surprise in this case is that there is none. This is because Jackson is playing the role of Prospero, but an understanding of Jackson’s role warrants a prior knowledge of his antecedents. Soon after he has been introduced into the novel, Jackson has become established as Benet’s servant and appears to be on good terms with the rest of the cast. Yet, the first time we see him alone, as an independent character he is breaking into absent Marian’s flat and rifling her desk. We know him simply as Jackson. He has no other name. The curious vagueness of his existence is exacerbated by his own thoughts. Lying on in Marian’s bed in her flat, he attempts to come to an understanding of his own identity. He sees himself as a watcher; he carries a burden laid upon him by a mysterious ‘them’ but he has lost sight of the purpose in his life.
He had dreamed of something precious, a message carried to an emperor- or to a great scientist. No, not that, but holiness... Time was passing and no signal came. Not yet... perhaps he must again move on. Death had removed what he had thought of as a precious jewel. Not for the first time. Oh how he pitied himself. Remorse, remorse.24

This obviously explains that Jackson was suffering for something in his past. The problem of coming to terms with the past explains the title of the novel. As a result of being surrounded by people, the troubled Jackson becomes aware that ‘he carried a weight, a burden placed upon him by them.’ So he accepts it as inevitable, inspite of his dilemma. Throughout the novel Jackson’s relationships with the other characters have a peculiarly personal flavour. He is seen in a different light by each of the characters: Owen recognises him as his brother and later sees him as ‘something out of Kafka.’ To uncle Tim he is ‘an expert’, though what he is expert in we are not sure. For Tuan he is some sort of wise father figure, Rosalind envisages him as ‘forgiven and... alone forever’; Cantor is proud to have him ‘as his brother’; Mildred fantasises, ‘he belongs with people who go on and on living... how old he is he, a hundred years, a thousand years, they come like guardian angels, they are guardian angels.’26 Even Benet, who for a long time held out against personal involvement with Jackson, finally succumbs to his enchantment, making rambling confessions to him.

24 Iris Murdoch, Jackson’s Dilemma, p. 122.
Evidently Jackson acts Prospero, presiding over the cast, registering their movements and knowing everything about them yet not exploiting this power like Murdoch's other Prosperi, like Mischa Fox or Charles Arrowby. He has worked to ensure that there are no shocks and no unhappiness, engineering the situation so that all ends well. The three weddings in the novel are born of his magic, with Jackson himself agreeing to settle down with Benet to ensure he is happy too. The energy he has expended in doing so leaves him exhausted, much as James's similarly selfless rescue of Charles in The Sea, The Sea exhausts him.

At the end of the novel Jackson is left waiting for a sign, not knowing whether he will ever be given an assignment again. That he sees himself as ‘extra human’ is clearly indicated: my power has left me, will it ever return, will the indications return?... Have I simply come to the end of my tasks... My powers have left me, will they return?... Do I after all fear those who seek me? I have forgotten them and no one calls. Both James in The Sea, The Sea and Peter Mir in The Green Knight appear to the reader to have been translated into another sphere of being but Jackson simply fades out of the story with a smile as the novel does.

For most of the novel, Jackson’s inner world remains enigmatic and we are unsure whether he is working for someone, or for some darker purpose. But at the end we recognise that Jackson’s dilemma is a moral one. Specifically it relates to his decision about whether he should return the confused Marian to Cantor, the man she loves, or ‘turn

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27 Iris Murdoch, Jackson’s Dilemma, p. 248-9
her into an over-protective network of friends and family. On a wider level, Jackson’s dilemma is how to help those around him deal effectively with their past and by implication life. By directing them into situations where their guilt can be assuaged he allows them practical solutions which point to a way of truth and happiness.

Jackson’s Dilemma has the magical world with Jackson to achieve redemption for others. It also contains a background discussion about religion and mysticism, conducted chiefly through the Jew, Tuan, who is writing a book on the subject, and Mildred who wants to be a priest. In final analysis, Jackson’s Dilemma is a sad last novel, for Murdoch had intended Jackson to have been a more significant figure, cutting across the boundaries of the known world to bring reconciliation to the troubled/vexed lives of the various characters in the story. The novel is certainly an achievement, considering the circumstances in which it had been written.