

Jake's Narrative of the City and His Psychology

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1. Introduction

One of the leading novelists of twentieth-century Britain, Iris Murdoch (1919-1999) is a philosopher, which is reflected in her writings about Plato and Jean-Paul Sartre. Her writings mostly treat philosophical themes in connection with language, communication, and love. *Under the Net* (1954) deals with three concepts, however the text contains symbols signifying elements of the city, London as well.

Under the Net is Murdoch's maiden work with a protagonist whose name is James Donaghue (also known as "Jake"); a translator of French literature. The text forms Jake's first-person narrative and the novel consists of twenty chapters. The novel is set in London and Paris.

Junichi Furukawa (1996) argues that Jake's route of walking produces a city map that contrasts the old London to the new London. Iris Murdoch uses geography to reproduce the historical structure of the city which has been lost in the developing and modernizing of the civic space. This paper deals with Jake's narrative of the city through his psychological activities.

2. Jake's characteristics and Burton Pike's consideration of the city narrative

Jake is a person who has no sense of responsibility and he cannot bear solitude. "It is not in my [Jake] nature to make myself responsible for other people, I find it hard enough to pick my own way along." (Murdoch, *Under the Net* 13). Magdalen, (Jake's live-in partner), has a light quarrel with Jake for the reason that she was attempting to evict him from the house. On the other hand, Jake narrates "[...] I can't bear being alone for long" (23), so that he acts together with his cousin Finn. His "no sense of responsibility" and his hatred of "solitude" causes his psychological instability: Jake says "What is more important for the purposes of this tale, I have shattered nerves" (23). The purpose of the narrative is to cure his psychological damage, An American literary critic, Burton Pike, points out the relationship between the narrative of the city and psychology of the characters in the novel. Pike divides the narrative of the city into three types: "from above", "from street level", "from below" (Pike, *The Image of the City in Modern Literature* 34). "From above", literally, is that of an observer situated at a vantage point so that the observer is detached

daily from the lives of the people below. It could link up with the will of God. "From below" can be associated with myth or subconsciousness, accordingly it has a close affinity with psycho-analysis. "From street level" makes the observer become active because he/she is stimulated by the changing of places. The city narrative links up the movement of psychology. In *Under the Net*, Jake's city narrative is that of the street because he is always moving around in the city.

3. Paradoxical effect: Jake's flowing narrative and static narrative

In the second chapter of the novel, Jake and Finn (Jake's cousin) visit their friend, Dave. However, Finn suddenly knows intuitively that Jake is in search of his ex-girlfriend, Anna. At first, Jake goes to the Shepherd's Bush (34) which is in the west of London. Second, he gets on a bus and gets off at Oxford Circus (35), then he walks to the Soho (36). Finally, He goes along Brewer Street (36), Old Comton Street (36), Greek Street (36) and reaches a pub. A bartender happens to know Anna's whereabouts. From what Jake has heard from the bartender, she is involved in acting in Hammersmith. Without a chance to see her he goes to Leicester Square Station and the chapter ends there. The journey from Dave's house to Leicester Square station is described in three and a half pages, but they are full of significance of the city. Actually, Jake closes the chapter with "[...] I ran all the way to Leicester Square station." (37) This kaleidoscopic description of the city is found here and there in the text. The point suggests that Jake's moving about is related to the flow of his narrative. His psychological instability is remarkably expressed in the following:

I left the pub. I was somewhere in the Fulham Road. [...] "Holborn Viaduct," I said to the driver. I lay back in the taxi; and as I did so I felt that this was the last action for a very long time that would seem to me to be inevitable. London sped past me, beloved city, almost invisible in its familiarity. South Kensington, Knights Bridge, Hyde Park Corner. This was the last act which would provoke no question and require no reason. After this would come the long agony of reflexion. London passed before me like the life of a drowning man which they say flashes upon him all at once in the final moment. Piccadilly, Shaftesbury Avenue, New Oxford Street, High Holborn. (269)

This passage appears when Finn breaks up with Jake and leaves him for good due to Jake's miscommunication with Finn. In a similar way, Jake's friends leave him and Jake feels isolated. His agony and lamentation are represented by a revolving lantern image. The title, *Under the Net* could imply Jake's relationship and the psychological shelter under it for lonely Jake.

Thus Kind of flowing narrative paradoxically emphasizes his pauses and Jake's old

acquaintance, in other words, it becomes a “static narrative of the city”.

Mrs Tinckham keeps a newspaper shop in the neighbourhood of Charlotte Street. It's a dusty, dirty, nasty-looking corner shop, and it sells papers in various languages, and woman's magazines, and Westerns and Science fiction and Amazing Stories. (16-17)

This quote is in the beginning of the description of the shop. Jake drops in, feeling relaxed at Mrs Tinckham's shop and narrates “Here I have spent many peaceful hours.” (17). Moreover, he adds “I needed soothing peace of Mrs Tinckham's shop [...]” (18) about Mrs Tinckham's shop. For the previous condition of Jake's “shattered nerves” is soothed there. After breaking up from his friends, Jake often returns to Mrs Tinckham's shop and the narrative breaks there. Jake's flowing narrative of the city completely changes “the static narrative of the city”, and also the “dusty, dirty, nasty-looking” Mrs Tinckham's shop is able to grasp the remains in the city. What brings Jake peace of mind? Mrs Tinckham shop provides stability because of her constant presence there. Stability generates “solidness”. It is relief from Jake's solitary state and divided relationships. Solidness gives him peace, which secures his static narrative of the city.

Nevertheless, Jake's flowing or static narrative can paradoxically read as “An openness” and “a closedness”. An element of stability is likely to be categorized into positive images. Jake feels at ease in Mrs Tinckham's shop because of its unchangeable strength. Therefore, he continues to be there at the end of the novel. Defiance of change works to stabilize his disturbed mind, while the urban view outside paradoxically suggests “closedness” in his relationships. On the other hand, Jake's flowing narrative of the city could be interpreted as his expression of instability. The source of his activeness is paradoxically generated by his instability, that is “openness” created by his instability. Thus, two narratives contain a reversal effect. The stability/instability functions with a contrasting effect of “closedness” and “Openness”.

4. An enchantment of the light in the city/the maze

Jake searches up and down for Anna in Paris in chapter fifteen. Paris is a place of nostalgic recollection for Jake as he has been there together with Anna. The Paris festival is being enjoyed by the citizens. Jake unexpectedly finds Anna. The tone of his narrative changes totally. Before Jake finds Anna he narrative goes,

I left the Jardin in haste and ran along the quais. I dashed into the churches, one after the other, St Julian, St Gerain, St Sulpice, in case I should find Anna there, her head thrown back, feeling some sad wish. Nobody. I went to the garden behind Notre-Dame where the church bears down like a ship and we had often fed the sparrows. I crossed to the right bank and went to the garden with the

cascade, behind the Gland Palais, which is open all night. Nobody. (209)

The churches are conspicuous and Jake's unstableness is caused by Anna's absence. After Jake finds Anna, the city becomes full of light. In his pursuit of Anna, the fireworks of the festival is reflected on the surface of a river. Jake notices "[...] a black mirror in which every lamp raised a pole of light and the conflagration in the sky above dropped an occasional piece of gold." (214) and a building "floodlight" (216), moreover, he perceives "roadway was glowing with light" (216) and he narrates that "an explosion of light" (217) shines on a public square. Jake discovers the light to appear everywhere in the city. He narrates that he is in a state of "enchantment" (217). In other words, he is not only affected by the spell of Anna's existence but also his narrative of the city is tinged with color. However, after he discovers the woman is not Anna, the narrative changes: "I ran to and fro for some time like a lost dog." (219). The disappearance of his "enchantment" is caused by his finding of Anna's absence, and he is disoriented by his disappointment. His feeling "like a lost dog" means that the city has been transformed into a maze. Thus, this transformation of the city makes a strong contrast considerably with the narrative of Mrs Thinckham's shop.

5. Conclusion

Burton Pike argues that the narrative of the city and observer's psychology enforce each other. Especially, a narrative of "the street" stimulates psychological energy, as Jake also is an observer of the city and can affect his narrative of the city with his psychological acts. The flowing narrative and Jake's instability are two sides of the same coin: On the one hand, Jake feels relaxed and stable in Mrs Thinckham's shop so that his narrative becomes stable, and yet two narratives contain a twist: "openness" for Jake's instability and "closedness" for his stability from another point of view. In Paris festival, Jake feels an enchantment and excitement with the light in the city, and then Paris is completely transformed into the maze. The transformation is disillusion with his realization of Anna's absence. Thus, Iris Murdoch manipulates the urban landscape to express Jake's complicated psychology through a detailed representation of the city.

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