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Tragic Existential Nationalism in the Novels of Iris Murdoch

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Abstract

The paper discusses the concepts of Irish nationalism and national identity in Iris Murdoch, dealing mainly with her 1965 novel of the Easter 1916 uprising, *The Red and the Green*, but also with reference to the identity of other Irish characters in her fiction. I focus on her philosophical exploration of the connection between nationalism and existential conceptions of self, self-fashioning and freedom. I also show how in *The Red and the Green*, this takes the form of an ongoing intertextual dialogue between Sartre and Yeats. Murdoch's nationalist 'martyr' Pat Dumay rejects the Yeatsian nationalism of a personified Ireland in favour of something more Sartrean: "the refined purified concept of his own Irishness, the necessary magnetic pole of his own resentment of the bondage which he saw around him and most of all within him." This existential nationalism, however, is not essentially Republican, but functions on both sides of the religious-political divide, as is seen in the tragic variant on the master-slave dialectic played out in the conflict between Pat Dumay and his Protestant cousin Andrew Chase-White. Moreover, the seeming rejection of a Yeatsian personification of Ireland as an idealised female figure is only part of a continuing dialogue with Yeatsian images of Ireland and of the nationalist struggle which is played out in the novel. This dialogue with Yeats culminates in the close paraphrase of his poem 'Easter 1916' at the conclusion of the novel, which seems to endorse his ambivalent view of the tragic existentialism of Irish nationalism.

Keywords: *Iris Murdoch, existentialism, tragedy, intertextuality, nationalism*