When She Was Good
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Iris Murdoch: A Life
by Peter J. Conradi
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I.
How is moral philosophy related to narrative fiction? One would think that the relationship ought to be an intimate one. Both genres are concerned with character and choice, with motives and imaginings, with the vicissitudes of passion. And yet, from the time when Plato attacked the tragic artists, the relationship has often been characterized by mutual suspicion, philosophers viewing narrative literature as indulgent, emotional, and lacking in normative clarity, writers of fiction viewing philosophers as intolerant moralists who lack appreciation of what Proust calls the "intermittences of the heart." But some cultures and some periods have been marked by especially hostile relations between the camps. In the latter half of the twentieth century, fiction and philosophy drew close in France, with Sartre and Camus writing both kinds of books and blurring the distinction. In the English-speaking world, by contrast, things were very different. Very few noted philosophers attempted fiction, and Iris Murdoch was the only eminent novelist to publish serious works of moral philosophy.

To some extent, the reason for this estrangement was cultural. British academic society had a marked distaste for the public display of strong passions. For the typical Oxbridge don, novelists were a little like actors: amusing at a distance, embarrassing if they came too close. To some extent, too, the estrangement was stylistic. Anglo-American philosophy was written in a very austere and impersonal way, so that any incursion of narrative and emotion into the text would be regarded as an embarrassing anomaly. But how could a novelist not want to record the texture of concrete particulars--what Murdoch once memorably described in the hallowed precincts of the Aristotelian Society as "the smell of the Paris metro or what it is like to hold a mouse in one's hand"? Her remark was shocking in those quarters, because it insisted that such details of experience were the stuff of philosophy as well as the stuff of life. People were not yet ready to listen.

Above all, the estrangement between philosophy and literature was produced by issues of philosophical substance. Moral philosophy in the postwar period had become preoccupied--not surprisingly, given the tumultuous times--with the moment of ethical choice, and with the role of the will in choosing the appropriate action. R.M. Hare, who had spent time in a prisoner-of-war camp and on the Burmese railway, had no interest at all in the inner life, or in the effort to cultivate the thoughts and the feelings of a person of good character. He wanted a philosophy that would produce good in the world and help us understand the nature of good action. His analysis of moral language famously held that all moral statements were in essence commands to act, and this soldierly conception of morality became popular in a world intent on seeing the good defeat the bad. (On the Continent, a similar emphasis prevailed: Sartre depicted the moral agent as a free and isolated will, capable of choosing courageously for the sake of humanity only if it could first come to grips with the agony of being free.)

To this muscular conception of philosophy, the preoccupations of the novelist--the vagaries of emotion and desire, the variety of human character, the predatoriness of love--looked simply irrelevant, as if one had suggested that a grandiose salon painting of "The Choice of Hercules" could be improved by the addition of a floating indeterminate sky in the style of Turner. But the choice-of-Hercules conception of the ethical life left out a good deal, and these omissions were damaging to the postwar philosophers' own project of understanding how good can be done and evil can be avoided. For evil is very likely to begin in the inner world, with the struggle of love against infantile egoism and ambivalence, the laborious effort to form patterns of thought and action that defeat narcissism and acknowledge the reality of other people.

Oddly enough, these British philosophers were all teaching the Greeks, and they must have encountered there a richer view of the moral life. Teaching Aristotle, they would have reflected that a person's goodness does not consist in isolated moments of willing, but rather in a lifelong effort to cultivate patterns of motivation, attention, reaction, and, related to all these, choice. The effort was a virtuous one only if these patterns became genuinely rooted, suffusing the moral life. Aristotle certainly had too simple and too sunny a conception of the obstacles to goodness in the human personality, in part because he took no interest in children; but his conception is promising in its general shape, and it can be deepened by the addition of a more nuanced psychology. Still, teaching Aristotle did not affect the substance of what Oxford philosophers wrote--until much later, and under the influence of Iris Murdoch.

Murdoch was, for many years, an anomaly: a celebrated and also popular novelist, and at the same time a respected philosophy tutor at Oxford, who throughout her career (even after she quit teaching) continued to publish serious philosophical essays and books. For most of this time Murdoch opposed any effort to connect her two careers. In an interview with Bryan Magee in 1978, on the subject of "Philosophy and the Novel," she offered a caricature of Oxbridge philosophy at its driest as a definition of what philosophy was, and a similarly extreme definition of the novel as uncommitted play, as if to say to her baffled interlocutor: "See? You thought you'd do a program about how my two careers are connected. But there's no such connection, except in your well-intentioned head." As Peter J. Conradi's book makes clear, Murdoch had a constant desire to mystify and to prevent people from finding her where she was, and this interview was a splendid case in point.

Needless to say, there are profound connections between Murdoch's fiction and Murdoch's philosophy, and they become more apparent all the time. For Anglo-American moral philosophy has by now achieved a broader conception of its subject matter, which would today be agreed to include the virtues and the vices, the nature of imagination and attention, the vicissitudes of passion. And Murdoch's novels, which once looked like stylized social comedy portraying the foibles of the British upper middle classes, can now be seen more justly as complicated meditations about the nature of sin and the struggle of the personality with itself, in which artistic attention is not only the organizing force that drives the whole, but also, at the same time, an object of critical scrutiny.

The novels are a major part of Murdoch's philosophical contribution, because one cannot fully make the case for the moral significance of the strivings of the inner world without narratives that show at length and in detail what Henry James called "the effort really to see and really to represent," as it contends with "the constant force that makes for muddlement." Conradi misses this, and thus he misses Murdoch's large philosophical importance, assuming that like-minded souls in Oxford, such as Philippa Foot and John McDowell, are more important as philosophical writers about virtue because they were writing more of the conventional sort of philosophical work. What he fails to grasp (perhaps because he gets most of his information about philosophy from Foot) is that the ideas that Murdoch shares with these more conventional contemporaries require for their full exploration a different and riskier type of writing, which only she, with her complex erotic gifts, attempted to deliver.

II.

In 1947, Iris Murdoch wrote in her journal: "For me philosophical problems are the problems of my own life." Conradi's biography makes it clear that Murdoch's life, like her work, was shaped by a moral struggle against the forces of destructiveness and sadism. Conradi is the editor of Murdoch's philosophical essays (a fine volume called Existentialists and Mystics) and the author of a good study of the novels. He was also a close friend of Murdoch's, particularly in the final decades of her life. Elegy for Iris, John Bayley's moving memoir of his wife's descent into Alzheimer's disease, is dedicated to Conradi and his partner Jim O'Neill, and the last chapter of Conradi's biography describes O'Neill bathing Murdoch at a time when she could only say, with bafflement, "I wrote."

Murdoch gave Conradi access to the journals that she kept for most of her adult life (with some pages excised), and her friends, many of whom are still living, have extensively confided in him. So this is a biography rich in information, written in a humble and tasteful way by an intimate whose aim is to put a lot of material at the reader's disposal, obtruding his own personality as little as possible. (Conradi, a Buddhist, introduced Murdoch to Buddhist conceptions of "unselfing.") As Conradi says, it is not the only sort of biography of her that will be written; but it is, I think, a fine example of its kind.

Murdoch was born in 1919, the only child of an Anglo-Irish couple who soon moved from Dublin to London, though they returned to Ireland frequently for holidays. (Murdoch's identification with the Irish was very deep.) Her childhood was a placid one, as she was evidently the delight of her gentle father and her able, enterprising mother. Success at school came easily, in studies and in sports. After Badminton School she went up to Somerville College, Oxford in 1938, where she read Mods and Greats, the taxing undergraduate combination of Greek and Latin literature with ancient history and philosophy. Her interest in Greek conceptions of virtue thus got its start early, and she attended with great enthusiasm Eduard Fraenkel's famous seminar on Aeschylus's Agamemnon. (Fraenkel figures as a character in The Unicorn, one of her odder and less successful novels.) She was deeply influenced also by her philosophy tutor Donald MacKinnon, whose religious sensibility put him at odds with the times. She joined the Communist Party.

But this was wartime, and Oxford was greatly altered by the departure of so many young men for the front. Murdoch's first great love was Frank Thompson, the elder brother of the historian E.P. Thompson. They exchanged intimate letters while he served in Europe, and his death in Bulgaria in 1944 was a personal tragedy. After receiving a first-class degree, Murdoch went to London to work for the Treasury, sharing a flat with Philippa Bosanquet, later Foot. (Shortly before this, Murdoch left the Communist Party. Her past membership caused her no subsequent difficulty in Britain, though for years it made trouble every time she wanted to visit the United States.) In 1944, bored with the life of the bureaucrat ("I am inefficient and administration depresses me"), she joined UNRRA (the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration), and worked for two years with refugees and displaced persons, first in England and then on the Continent.

After a period studying philosophy in Cambridge--where she briefly encountered and was deeply impressed by Wittgenstein, though she was critical of his destructive use of his power, his capacity to destroy self-respect--she accepted a tutorial fellowship at St. Anne's College, Oxford. For the next six years or so, she taught philosophy by day, and by night she pursued the amazingly complex erotic life that she had already begun in London. The reader of Murdoch's novels tends to think that the constant changing of partners is fantastic high comedy; but life and art were closer than we thought. As Murdoch writes of herself, "Urge towards drama is fundamental. I am 'full of representations of myself.'"

Murdoch typically carried on simultaneous affairs with multiple men (and the occasional woman), affairs that were emotionally complex and often involved the betrayal of a friend. Sex, Bayley opines in Elegy for Iris, was of marginal interest to her where most of these men are concerned. Conradi's biography casts doubt on this, suggesting that she was a person of very strong physical passion. But sex was certainly, for her, about more than pleasure: it was about power, about mystification, about her own importance, about the desire, as she puts it in her journal, "to give moderately and yet have full attention."

She constantly caused pain to others, both the men who had to compete with other concealed rivals and the partners of these men. (Her friendship with Philippa Foot was broken for years on account of the suffering that she caused Michael Foot when she left him for the economist Tommy Balogh, a suffering for which Philippa consoled Michael. Murdoch wrote that Philippa "most successfully salvaged what was left after my behaviour," a characteristically self-dramatizing way of seeing the situation.) "Let me do no harm to [him or her]": this becomes a regular refrain in the journals. And yet she goes on doing harm.

Her lovers were almost all intellectually distinguished, and they fell into two types: the gentle and childlike (usually close to her own age) and the fascinating and cruel (usually much older). Murdoch indulged her fascination with the second sort while planning ultimately to settle down with the first sort. In the first category were the anthropologist and poet Franz Steiner, to whom she almost became engaged before he died young of a heart attack, and the literary critic John Bayley, whom she married--her "ideal co-child," in his words, with whom she had a relationship of immense gentleness and intimacy that seems to have kept at bay, at least for the most part, the more destructive aspects of her character. They created together a world of shared childhood, in which they called each other "Puss" and spoke a secret language, and at the same time shared a sense of life that only two sophisticated intellectuals could share. The marriage represented a remarkably successful incorporation of disparate elements.

But for some time before the marriage, and during the early days of her relationship with Bayley, the second sort held center stage. Murdoch formed alliances with a series of difficult and power-hungry older men, including Balogh and, most prominently, Elias Canetti, a charismatic figure who was constantly surrounded by worshipful disciples. Why Murdoch would spend even one evening in his company is more than one can fathom from Conradi's and Bayley's accounts of this loathsome and sinister egotist. Here is Bayley, in Elegy for Iris, describing a conversation in which Canetti asks him what he thinks of King Lear, and Bayley, after doing his best to answer the question, asks Canetti the same:

> He continued to be silent for what seemed a long time. Finally, he spoke. "Friends tell me that my book is unbearable," he said. Fortunately, I knew this to be a reference to his long novel Die Blendung, and I nodded my head gravely. There was a further silence. "King Lear is also unbearable," he pronounced at last.
>
> I bowed my head. Shakespeare and his masterpiece would never be paid a greater compliment than this.

Is this story true? (Bayley, who has publicly admitted to making up love affairs in a more recent memoir, is certainly capable of fabrication in the cause of maligning a rival.) But true or not in its details, it seems to be largely right about Canetti, who was grotesquely self-preoccupied, patently sadistic, incapable of non-exploitative love. When she chose the gently devious Bayley over the "great man," Murdoch ultimately chose wisely. And perhaps Bayley's reaction to Canetti is the basis for that splendid moment in A Fairly Honourable Defeat, one of her finest novels, when Simon, the young, gentle, pleasure-loving gay man, simply tosses Julius, the destructive enchanter, into his hosts' swimming pool. Simon, like Bayley, looks like a lightweight, but his whimsical humor, his ability to wear his heart on his sleeve, his total lack of cruelty, are the novel's moral core.

The power of the enchanter, such a major theme in Murdoch's novels as well as in her life: where does it come from? And what was it in Murdoch that made it impossible for her to have the healthy "into the swimming pool you go" reaction to these loathsome tyrants? Murdoch puzzled over this, again and again, in journals and in novels. Why do people let enchanters walk into their homes and destroy their relationships? In part because of their distinction--but she casts doubt on this source of erotic power by stripping Julius, the Canetti figure in A Fairly Honourable Defeat, of any real achievement. In part, no doubt, because of their wit and charm. But Julius is charming in the way that Mephistopheles is charming: he mocks everything that people hold dear, he gives the appearance of depth and profundity because he claims that human life is at bottom a sordid affair in which the baser instincts are driving everything. (So Canetti, casting doubt on Murdoch's political ideals, and insisting that the drives of the crowd produce all real historical events.)

So this just pushes the question back a step: why do people want this variety of enchantment? Murdoch's answer, in the end, is that it is the power of destructiveness and negativity itself that seduces, because many people have a sadomasochistic desire to be crushed, and to crush others in turn. She felt this at a personal sexual level. (Once she wrote in her journal that she felt herself to be a sadomasochistic homosexual man.) From the male enchanters, she endured--and evidently sought--an astonishing degree of exploitation and psychological abuse. With the gentle men, and also with women, she wanted to play, at times, the destroying man. (One journal entry reads: "Then I began to kiss her passionately and was desiring her very much. Understanding of what it would be to be a man, feeling very violent & positive, wanting to strike her body like an instrument.")

Murdoch connects sadomasochism with moral nihilism, and hence goodness with a gentleness that is free of sadism. For some, gentleness is a kind of grace with which they are fortunately endowed. (She once wrote that Bayley, like her father, was "a man entirely without the natural coarseness & selfishness of the male.")

For Murdoch, who found in herself much "male" selfishness and coarseness, it became a lifelong project to achieve a non-destructive relation to people. This struggle is the source of much of her fiction.

It is natural for the reader of the biography to hope that it will trace the struggle to some early source. One close friend does tell Conradi that he thinks "something in Iris's past had introduced her to the idea of evil." But nothing reveals to us what this something is. Her father was a gentle man, her childhood was a happy one. At most one might say that she won the Oedipal struggle too easily, becoming her father's delight while her parents' very amicable marriage was apparently almost totally asexual. While Julius's destructiveness is explained--somewhat too easily--by making him a survivor of Belsen, young Iris was head girl in a prestigious school, a success at everything she tried, courted and loved by a large proportion of those who knew her. The darkness seems indigenous, lurking, inexplicable--and so it apparently seemed to her. While initially sympathetic to psychoanalysis, she came to feel that it told comforting, too-orderly stories about good and evil, which she preferred to see as real, absolute forces in human existence.

Murdoch thus came to see her own life, and life generally, as a moral struggle against what we might without melodrama call Mephistopheles: the nihilistic wiles of the self-insulating ego, which seeks power and comfort, exploiting and using other people. Its adversary is the moral imagination, which must strive constantly toward a clear vision of the reality of other people, one not marred by the ego's demands for control. One can see how difficult the struggle against her tendencies to control must have been from the extreme forms that it took, as she increasingly cultivated a shapeless and asexual physical persona and domestic surroundings whose squalor greatly exceeded even the British norm.

The novels, too, often associate neatness with egoism, vile filth with virtue. Thus Tallis Browne in A Fairly Honourable Defeat, who lives amid mold and vermin of all sorts, is a moral hero, in part because of this neglect of surroundings, and Julius's controlling sadism is revealed in his determination to clean the place up. Worse still, it is supposed to be good for Tallis to take a troubled teenage boy into his house--whereas this (no doubt all-too-controlling) American reader keeps feeling that charges of child abuse would be appropriate, both against Tallis and against the mother who promotes this life-threatening and (so it seems to me) quite sadistic arrangement. Bayley perceptively writes that Murdoch wanted to have objects around her and yet did not want to take care of them. Perhaps this neglect of the worldly was a part of her exacting idea of virtue, though it can easily look like a kind of aggression toward anyone who dares to come too close. Toward the end of her life Murdoch also re-wrote past journal entries, removing the names of sentiments, such as anger and contempt, that she felt she should not have had.

Conradi, who knew Murdoch in the last decades of her life, feels that her struggle was in the end successful. Her marriage to Bayley, though a source of great happiness, was not without tumult. A passionate lesbian affair in the early 1960s led her to resign from St. Anne's (this is the only instance in which Conradi conceals the name of a lover). One gets the impression that there were other lesser affairs. Still, as time went on Murdoch increasingly, if unevenly, distanced herself from her erotic self. The philosopher David Pears has remarked upon her "luminous goodness ... when she came into a room, you felt better." And many have attested to her intense aliveness to others. Murdoch's moral serenity seems proportionate to her focus on her husband. As time went on, Bayley's elaborate jokes and small kindnesses struck her as goodness itself. "4 January 1978. Puss singing in kitchen below. He is a good man." A year later, quoting a silly yet sophisticated impromptu Bayley poem about Strindberg and a skunk, she writes: "Of such is the kingdom of heaven."

III.

For someone with such a tumultuous inner world, the muscular choice-is-all school of moral philosophy could not be satisfactory. Murdoch felt that we would get to the right choices only if we understood better the forces militating against goodness. And in her view the main force was our inability to see other people correctly. We are always representing people to ourselves in self-serving ways, she believed, ways that gratify our own egos and serve our own ends. To see truly is not the entirety of virtue, but it is a very crucial necessary part. And even where the overt choices go along well, if the inner vision is lacking, then an important part of virtue itself is lacking. (Here Murdoch agrees with Aristotle: there is a morally large difference between self-control and real virtue, even though the overt acts may look exactly the same, because the self-controlled person has not yet achieved the motives, the reactions, and the patterns of seeing that are characteristic of the good person.)

To make this point clear for philosophers, Murdoch invented an example that has become famous. In her lecture on "The Sovereignty of Good," she asks us to imagine a mother-in-law, M, who has contempt for D, her daughter-in-law. M sees D as common, cheap, low. Since M is a self-controlled Englishwoman, she behaves (so Murdoch stipulates) with perfect graciousness all the while, and no hint of her real view surfaces in her acts. But she realizes, too, that her feelings and thoughts are unworthy, and likely to be generated by jealousy and an excessively keen desire to hang on to her son. So she sets herself a moral task: she will change her view of D, making it more accurate, less marred by selfishness. She gives herself exercises in vision: where she is inclined to say "coarse," she will say, and see, "spontaneous." Where she is inclined to say "common," she will say, and see, "fresh and naive." As time goes on, the new images supplant the old. Eventually M does not have to make such an effort to control her actions: they flow naturally from the way she has come to see D.

Murdoch claims that this change is of moral significance. Getting the behavior right is one good thing; but getting the thoughts and the emotions right is another, and in some ways a more fundamental, good thing. She challenges moral philosophy to attend more to these long-term tasks in vision and self-cultivation, to focus on patterns of character that extend over a life rather than simply on isolated moments of choice. The challenge was first voiced in her splendid and highly critical book on Sartre, which appeared in 1953. Murdoch argued that because of his focus on the moment of choice, Sartre could not understand the sources of good or evil, which requires depicting "the mystery and contingent variousness of individuals." To Sartre's impoverished world she contrasts "the messy accidental world of the novel, so full of encounters and moral conflicts and love."

Murdoch's challenge to moral philosophy was given its most forceful articulation in 1970 in The Sovereignty of Good, which includes three of her most influential essays, and it was expressed strongly again six years later in The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists. (The meandering Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals, Murdoch's expanded Gifford Lectures, which appeared in 1992, was a much less successful treatment of these themes.) It was Murdoch's early work that had a transformative impact on the discipline. Younger philosophers, themselves reacting against the neglect of the inner world, found illumination in the challenge of this example. Now few would deny that the then-unknown subject of "moral psychology" is one of the most important and fascinating branches of ethics; or that thinking about the nature of the emotions and the imagination, and what they contribute to moral choice, is one of the most significant tasks of the moral philosopher.

There are major gaps in Murdoch's philosophical vision. She seems almost entirely to lack interest in the political and social determinants of a moral vision, and in the larger social criticism that ought, one feels, to be a major element in the struggle against one's own defective tendencies. Her examples, and her characters, are almost always undone by something universal about the ego and its devious workings, almost never by prejudice or misogyny or other failings endemic to a particular society at a particular time. Indeed, although her journals fairly often complain about the hardship of being a woman at Oxford, she offers us little guidance in understanding how sexism thwarts perception. Race is almost totally unmentioned, except in the form of an erotic longing for, and anxiety about, Jews--a theme in her own life as well, but one that is never treated with the critical detachment that it deserves.

Only with regard to the lives of gay men does Murdoch retain a sense of the purely social and political obstacles to correct vision and action. She was a vigorous crusader for the abolition of sodomy laws, and in her fiction she depicted gay couples as fighting an uphill struggle for love and self-respect in a society that makes fun of them, or worse. In A Fairly Honourable Defeat, the older gay man Axel, working in Whitehall, has learned habits of secretiveness and denial that make it hard for him to express his love to Simon, or even to allow himself to be a person who fully loves. Simon, treated by straight society as a sex addict, has learned to doubt his own capacities for commitment and for goodness. But such suggestions of a complex relation between virtue and its social world should have played a more prominent role in the philosophical essays and the novels: all too rarely does Murdoch suggest that goodness requires reflection about social justice. Too often, indeed, the absence of a more textured social world impoverishes her characters, who seem to play out their erotic dance in a void.

Another problem, a deeper problem, is the tension between Murdoch's Platonism and her vision of particulars. Murdoch keeps on suggesting that "The Good" is a unitary abstraction of some kind, even while all her writerly instincts work in the direction of showing its irreducible many-sidedness and its kaleidoscopic variety; even while she also insists that what it is to be a good person is to see other particular people clearly. Her Platonism leads in the direction of the big abstract entity, but her moral instincts--I am tempted to call them Aristotelian--lead in the direction of the variegated world of surprising humanity. This tension is never fully resolved in the essays, where it simply sits there generating difficulty, or in the novels, where the vision of the particular predominates, but characters whom the writer appears to admire keep on talking what sounds like nonsense about "The Good." This fault in Murdoch's work may derive from her own experience of good and evil as original powers that stand somehow outside her, not generated by her particular biography. But they do mean that anyone who wishes to make philosophical use of her work must choose between the Aristotelian many-sidedness or the Platonic mysticism. (I know which I regard as the more fruitful, in philosophy and in life.)

Finally, there is an acute problem about action. Hare's vision of life is certainly incomplete; but it contains much that matters greatly. As the postwar generation knew, it does matter what one does. If one resists tyranny and saves the lives of the innocent, who cares if one was thinking "coarse" and "common" or, more virtuously, "spontaneous" and "fresh"? Murdoch is so preoccupied with the goings-on of the inner world that she seems almost to have forgotten about the difference that action can make; and the resulting obsession with one's own states looks strangely like egoism, in a world in which a forthright commitment to action can make the difference to people who are suffering, no matter whether the agents' intentions are pure.

Many years ago I had dinner with R.M. Hare in Oxford. With typical testiness, he complained about the new fashion for virtue ethics, which had eroded, he felt, philosophy's commitment to good works. Mentioning the cover of a book by one of his targets, which showed a naked man carrying a question mark over his shoulder, he said scornfully that this is what philosophy had become: meaning, I think, that it was all preoccupied with our naked insides and the interminable questions they pose, rather than armed for combat against real bad people and

things. I have some sympathy with this way of seeing the movement that Murdoch inspired. Although there is no doubt that the big questions of social justice and human well-being need to be approached with an adequate moral psychology, Murdoch herself tended to veer sharply away from those questions, and even to suggest that in the end they did not matter, that the only important thing was each person's struggle for self-perfection.

That is a hopelessly egoistic vision of life, in a world in which sharp thinking about poverty and prejudice may actually make a difference to human lives. Whatever combination of Platonism, Christianity, and Buddhism shaped her sensibility, it was an oddly otherworldly sensibility in the end, as if we were already dead and in purgatory. But we are still on earth, so if we must try to see other people as well as we can, we must also try to create just institutions and just laws. This does not mean that it is the duty of every philosopher to talk only about justice; we all have our own projects. The mistake in Murdoch is her subtle suggestion that the search for justice is superficial.

IV.

Murdoch's philosophical vision is fulfilled in her novels, which dramatize again and again the struggle to see clearly, in a world of self-delusion, the revelations and the blindings of erotic love. Although the more schematic essays were crucial in laying out the essential elements of her view, showing what is really at stake required the creation of extended patterns of vision and struggle. The best of her novels, such as The Black Prince, The Bell, and The Sea, The Sea, are plainly continuous with the themes of her philosophy, and make good on its promises in a rich, devious, and open-ended way.

Since the imagination played such a central role in Murdoch's moral thought, she arrived at a grave and highly critical view of the artist's moral role. In her view, artists are our guides to a vision of the world: they shape and nourish, or they fail to shape and nourish, the moral imagination. So art cannot evade morality. The artist is inevitably a moral figure: for art either assuages the ego, portraying an easy, flattering vision of the world and making us cozy within it, or it challenges us outward, toward the reality of others.

Where did Murdoch place her own fiction within the contrast between great art and egoistic art that she develops in The Fire and the Sun? In purgatory, no doubt: struggling to be pure, but full of silly self-regard. Conradi is probably correct to see her own parody of herself in the comic figure of Arnold Baffin in The Black Prince, a popular novelist who produces a novel a year, all full of high metaphysical matters and comforting the reader with the sensation of having experienced deep thoughts. And some of the later novels do seem pseudo-profound, in part because they give expression to a monistic metaphysical vision that she never made fully compelling in any genre. Still, the complex moral and literary richness of Murdoch's best novels grows more evident all the time, now that we no longer read them as realist social satire, and can appreciate their allegorical elements.

There is an odd paradox in the relationship between the novels and the morality that they (and the philosophical writings) contain. The paradox is that their very coming-into-being would appear, by the lights of Murdoch's morality, to be an immoral act, an act of manipulation and excessive control. No artist wants to give an unfinished work to the world as a token of her vision. "Here is my messy moldy verminous novel": no writer says this. That is why Tallis Browne is no artist; indeed, he cannot even finish the one lecture that he keeps trying to write. Murdoch's art, like all good art, is highly structured and controlled--a house neat and clean enough to satisfy the most morally obtuse of her upper-class British characters. Indeed, her novels draw attention more than most to the presence of centralized control, as the characters execute a complicated erotic dance whose choreographer is always just offstage.

For such an artist, as Proust's narrator says, real people are just material, the stones that the artist uses to build his monument. The artist's vision of reality is finally a vision that he makes completely, using and even exploiting others; and its relation to the real surprisingness of people

can never be morally simple. Murdoch sought uncontrol and "unselfing" all her life, as a corrective to egoism and sadism. Yet she so plainly seeks control, too; and she knows it. Moreover, she herself makes Proust's connection: in one period of emotional suffering, she observes in her journal that "like Proust I want to escape from the eternal push and rattle of time into the coolness & poise of a work of art." Can the perfection of art possibly co-exist with the attempt to perfect one's life, as she sees that aim? In the form of such a question the struggle renews itself, as the morality of art and the artist's own rage for control become a topic of anxious rumination on the part of characters, such as Bradley Pearson in The Black Prince, who seem to be surrogates for Murdoch's own sense of herself as artist. Does the artistic enterprise record and extend the struggle against the ego, or is it the ego's most subtle victory?

I connect this problem, very tentatively, to my own acquaintance with Murdoch. We met in New York in 1985, and she invited me to lunch at the house in Charlbury Road, Oxford where she and Bayley lived at the time. I went round to the house, very nervous and awkward, and sat for two hours in the chaotic kitchen being scrutinized, as I felt it, by her sharp probing eyes. We talked about Proust and Henry James, about postmodernism and current developments in ethical thought, about Charles Taylor, whom she admired, and R.M. Hare, whom she did not. All the while I felt that her very intense gaze was going straight through me, to something that was not me at all, but to which I was somehow related. More than once I had the thought that Julian Baffin, in The Black Prince, has about Bradley Pearson: "You don't really see me." I cannot forget those predatory eyes, and the way they attended to something of immense importance that was, as I say, not exactly outside of me, and that was perhaps more real than me, but that was not precisely me either. Nor can I ever forget the essential mysteriousness of her face, so much more alive than most people, so blazing with uncompromising passion, so intent upon things that were not exactly in the room. (I remember thinking a sad thought: that this was going to be the hoped-for friendship with a brilliant woman, but it is after all an encounter with just another predatory man. Erotic control and artistic control: where did one leave off and the other begin?)

If the gaze of art is fixed on the person and is at the same time intent on a creative work that appropriates and goes beyond the person, the question is whether this gaze can ever be, in the fullest sense, a humanly loving gaze, exemplary of the virtue that Murdoch's philosophy describes. Why not? It sees more truly than most loving people see. I had no doubt that Murdoch could have described me, after an hour, far more precisely than any lover of mine might have described me after some years. In this sense Proust seems right when he says that art is the fully lived life, life without patches of deadness and obtuseness.

And yet I believe that there is something more to loving vision than just seeing. There is also a willingness to permit oneself to be seen. And there is a willingness to stop seeing, to close one's eyes before the loved one's imperfections. And there is also a willingness to be, for a time, an animal or even a plant, relinquishing the sharpness of creative alertness before the presence of a beloved body. Does the artist's vision have about it these aspects of vulnerability, silence, and grace? Or does the artist's eye almost inevitably look down with something like disdain at the muddled animal interactions of human beings with one another, so obtuse and so lacking in nuance?

till, if the novels were only tales of control, and their characters only the creatures of a sadistic enchanter, they would be, as Murdoch says, mediocre works. Some of them are indeed mediocre. The Unicorn, for example, is a rather sordid and pretentious melodrama about varieties of sexual sadism, in which Murdoch's own self-hatred becomes a hatred of humanity. And often the skepticism about human motivation is so thoroughgoing that one can hardly breathe. But the best of Murdoch's novels get beyond this. Perhaps this is because they are animated by a kind of humble opening toward reality in all its surprising diversity, by a quality of love for the world that even artistic polish cannot defeat.

And notice, really, that the moral problem I have outlined arises only for a writer who is both deeply moral (as Proust is not) and who has an extreme horror of her own destructiveness--who

will not believe that anything she controls could possibly be all right for others. It is the same problem as the problem of the filthy house: only a certain sort of person would feel that her own efforts to clean up must inevitably be sinister, bringing death and destruction in their train. Someone less self-hating might think that there is glory, not sadism, in the beautiful thing.

In the end Murdoch transcended in her best books her own horror of control and cleanliness, allowing herself to express human love (and the artist's love for her characters) in a shapely and beautiful form. Consider this passage from A Fairly Honourable Defeat, in which good prose and tenderness unite, for once, to create a vision of happiness:

> Simon went on through the hallway and out into the garden. The sun was still warm and bright, though the evening star had strengthened. The vine was hung with grassy green translucent grapes and the leaves and tendrils glowed with a pale green radiance, outspread and welcoming and still in the quiet sunlight. Simon moved towards the vine, bowed his head under its shadowy arch, and touched the warm pendant beads of the grape bunches.
>
> Axel came out, removing his jacket and rolling up his white shirt sleeves. The sun made gold in his dark hair. "I've asked the patron to bring us a carafe of wine out here straight away. I'm just going up to look at the room. You stay here."
>
> Simon sat down at the table. The patron bustled over wearing purple braces, with a carafe and two glasses. "Merci." Simon poured out some wine and tasted it. It was excellent. The serrated green leaves extended above him, before him, their motionless pattern of angelic hands. The air quivered with warmth and a diffusion of light.
>
> Simon thought, it is an instinct, and not a disreputable one, to be consoled by love. Warily he probed the grief which had traveled with him so far, and he felt it as a little vaguer, a little less dense. His thoughts of Rupert now reached back further into the past, to good times which had their own untouchable reality. He drank some more wine and raised his face to the dazzle of the sun among the leaves and felt his youth lift him and make him buoyant. He was young and healthy and he loved and was loved. It was impossible for him, as he sat there in the green southern light and waited for Axel, not to feel in his veins the warm anticipation of a new happiness.

What is surprising in this passage is not just the suggestion of happiness, but more particularly the suggestion of an erotic happiness and even an erotic goodness, the Dionysian images linked with the imagery of angels' hands. There is no false comfort in Murdoch, but sometimes there is a comfort that is true.

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