Chapter Three

Iris Murdoch: Introduction

Iris Murdoch was a philosopher before she succeeded as a novelist, and continued to teach philosophy at Oxford for several years after her first novel was published. The place of philosophy in her fiction is, however, surrounded with paradoxes. She has said, ‘I mention philosophy sometimes in the novels because I happen to know about it, just as another writer might talk about coal mining’ (Biles 116); and that in fact ‘as a novelist, I would rather know about sailing ships and hospitals than about philosophy’ (Magee 535). It is, however, hard to imagine how the practical knowledge of some aspect of technology could replace the pervasive influence of her moral philosophy in her fiction. Apart from playful elements, like the Wittgensteinian jokes in Under the Net and A Fairly Honourable Defeat, her philosophical sophistication and informed attention to moral problems are some of her most distinctive features as a novelist: she refrains from preaching, but often presents moral and philosophical theories only to subject them to the strain which is inevitable in their practical application. She admits to being, ‘in a way, a Wittgensteinian; but if I am a Wittgensteinian, I am one in a proper, as it were, negative sense. It isn’t that one has got any body of theory, but one has got a style and a way of looking at philosophical problems’ (Bellamy 137). Writing fiction is part of her philosophical style, and this may be in the final analysis her greatest problem: James Wood remarks that it is possible to ‘read … her novels as hapless enactments of philosophy, as necessary metaphysical failures or lapses’ (‘Iris Murdoch’ 180).
Compared with other novelists, Naipaul for example, she has not said much at all about why she writes. In her 1968 interview with William Rose, she said that the impulse to write was an early one: ‘I started writing stories when I was about 9 or 10, and I always knew that this was what I wanted to do’ (63). She does not give the impression of anxiety or neurosis about her ambition; she ‘always knew that I would do something else as well’ (Rose 63). Her reasons for writing novels, insofar as they are defined at all, are implicit in statements like, ‘Literature could be said to be a sort of disciplined technique for arousing certain emotions. That is certainly one of the reasons why one enjoys it, and one of the reasons why it is both good for us when it is good and bad for us when it is bad’ (Magee 533). She does not, she says, ‘wait for inspiration; I just go ahead and work office hours, as it were’ (Rose 70).

Although she told Rosemary Hartill in 1989, ‘I can’t imagine not needing to write. I should be very unhappy if I couldn’t write’ (92), she evinces little curiosity, and few doubts, about her reasons for writing.

She is more concerned with her attempts to create ‘free’ characters, and the difficulties she finds doing so. The creative process is to some extent beyond the control of her conscious mind. She told Frank Kermode in 1963 that she was always attempting to represent ‘character in the old-fashioned sense … but I find it very difficult to do so’ (‘House’ 63); and fifteen years later she is still saying: ‘all the time, one is terribly conscious of one’s limitations as an artist … one’s ability to improve is still extraordinarily limited. One’s always hoping to do better next time: to create better characters, to break out of certain patterns’ (Biles 122). Talking about these patterns, and symbolism, she said, ‘When you are imagining the whole thing, much of this
happens absolutely instinctively. Sometimes, one notices later on various things one has done … The total situation is thoroughly set up and you are thoroughly imagining it; then, many of these effects happen automatically’ (Biles 124). ‘In a way,’ she said to Rose, ‘one is just a slave of one’s unconscious mind; but in so far as one can push one’s work one way or another, I am always pushing myself towards a starting-point in experience’ (Rose 65). At the beginning of writing a novel, there is ‘a period of reflection – when one has nothing, except notes, of course, to remind one … it’s a kind of deep free reflection which may be more difficult later on’ (Heusel 4). She finds this stage very frightening because you’ve committed yourself at this point. … A novel is a long job, and if you get it wrong at the start you’re going to be very unhappy later on. … You have the extraordinary experience when you begin a novel that you are now in a state of unlimited freedom, and this is alarming. Every choice you make will exclude another choice. (Meyers 211-212)

For her, the important attempt is not to control one’s characters, to let them be free from the patterns within one’s own mind. To submit them to the test of reality and contingency, to make them act as real people act, to avoid making them unnaturally heroic or saintly, to prevent them being agents of the author’s fantasy or wish-fulfillment, is her ideal. So, paradoxically, one must try to be conscious of the creative process in order to surrender the control one’s mind would otherwise unwittingly have over one’s characters:

Good writing is full of surprises and novelties, moving in a direction you don’t expect. The idea of the myth and the form have got to be present, but one has brutally to stop the form determining the emotion of the book by working in the opposite direction, by making something happen which doesn’t belong to the world of the magic … I am very conscious of this tension at the start, and I play it to and fro. (Haffenden 34)
‘The intellect comes in very much to prevent … the plot from being coerced by unconscious forces’ (Bigsby, ‘Interview’ 227), forces of fantasy and myth-making which would create characters who are not free.

She is tolerant, up to a point, of her readers’ differing interpretations. At a symposium on her work, she responded to a paper by Diana Phillips on *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* by saying ‘I think a novel is allowed to be ambiguous, I mean it’s not surprising if people interpret a novel in different ways. … One could have read the book without bothering about the refinements which you’ve drawn attention to’ (Todd 96). Because she realises that her intentions are not always fulfilled, and that ‘in a way, one doesn’t want to know altogether what one’s doing’ (Bryden, ‘Talking’ 433), she is willing to allow her readers a certain amount of freedom of interpretation. She said, perhaps a little testily, to Barbara Stevens Heusel, who was drawing comparisons with Dostoevsky and trying to discuss her work with her in Bakhtinian terms, ‘I’m just a novelist and critics are critics. If people want to explain something by saying that it is like something else then okay. Anyway we can’t stop them, so they will’ (8). She is, however, not prepared to surrender complete control to the reader:

I am sure that people can go too far in playing these games, for sometimes this can be actually misleading, because somebody can see a pattern which *really* isn’t there. I think out matters of symbolism and I’m very careful about names and so on; thus, the chances are, if there is something fairly telling in the book, then, that is something I intended. I feel there is a *small* area of conscious activity of this kind. … I should be surprised, in fact, if anybody pointed out anything of this sort in my own work which I wasn’t conscious of, but I wouldn’t rule out the possibility of there being an area of this kind. It isn’t very profitable to look at. (Biles 123)

In fact, because ‘a work of art has got to have a form, it has got to have notation, it has got to have something which is fixed and authoritative’, then ‘it
must have authority over its victim, or client or whatever you can call the
person who is meeting it. This of course is a principle which is now very much
disputed and even attacked but in this sense I am an authoritarian’ (Bigsby,
‘Interview’ 214). With this rather severe statement, with its extraordinary use
of the word ‘victim’ and its defensive tone, she is stating one side of the
equation. Talking to an interviewer in Israel in 1995, she changed the
emphasis a little, from the author’s authority to the author’s duty: ‘I believe the
writer is responsible for providing readers with real endings rather than
multiple options’ (‘Writing, Faith’). In the nature of artistic achievement there
is often, perhaps necessarily, a tension between the author’s intentions and the
reader’s interpretation, and without this tension art would lose its appeal: ‘If the
reader or observer can do anything he likes with the thing then one result, of
course, is that he becomes bored’ (Bigsby, ‘Interview’ 228).

Her expectations of readers are not unreasonably high, however; she is
not elitist. In response to Jo Brans’ question, ‘Your books are so full of
meaning. Would you be disappointed if people only read them for the stories
they tell?’ she said, ‘I would like the reader to see everything in the book. But
I’m glad if people like those stories, it gives me pleasure, because stories are a
very good way, you know, of getting away from one’s troubles’ (53-54).

Asked by another interviewer to describe her ideal reader, she said, ‘Those who
like a jolly good yarn are welcome and worthy readers. I suppose the ideal
reader is someone who likes a jolly good yarn and enjoys thinking about the
book as well, thinking about the moral issues’ (Meyers 224). In other words,
she is more disturbed by over-reading than under-reading.

She believes a novelist should offer something to the average reader:
A novel without a story must work very hard in other ways to be worth reading, and indeed to be read. Some of today’s anti-story novels are too deliberately arcane. I think story is essential to the survival of the novel. A novel may be ‘difficult’ but its story can carry and retain the reader who may understand in his own way, even remember and return. Stories are a fundamental human form of thought. (Meyers 225)

She has said several times that the novel is a very versatile form, ‘so versatile you can do virtually anything you like’ (Biles 120), but she nevertheless has certain ideas about what novels should and should not be. Once more, the idea of a creative tension seems important. A novel must be comic, not tragic: ‘a novel which isn’t at all comic is a great danger, aesthetically speaking’ (Bigsby, ‘Interview’ 230). It can be a tragi-comedy – ‘good novels are tragicomedies’ (Heusel 11) – but it needs to beware of satire: ‘satire is a dangerous game unless you are frightfully good at it and have a particular end in view … Satire goes with allegories and fables and a kind of story telling which is not like the novel’ (Heusel 3). The great writers she admires, Tolstoy and Shakespeare, are not satirists, and at their best ‘it is very difficult to see what exactly what the author is thinking’ (Bigsby, ‘Interview’ 216).

One thread that runs through all her aesthetic judgments is to do with the contrast between fantasy and imagination, which is connected with her struggle to create ‘free’ characters. She does not reject all fantastic elements, but

if fantasy and realism are visible and separate aspects in a novel, then the novel is likely to be a failure. In real life the fantastic and the ordinary, the plain and the symbolic, are often indissolubly joined together, and I think the best novels explore and exhibit life without disjoining them. (Hobson 28)

Fantasy is dangerous to fiction,

because creative imagination and personal fantasy are awfully close, in relation to fiction. The obvious example is the bad novel which turns out to be simply a fantasy of how the hero, who is the writer, triumphs
over all his enemies and is loved by the girls, and becomes rich, and so forth. This kind of fantasy is a menace to the creative imagination. (Magee 534)

Realism is her highest aim, and she sees the novel as ‘a marvelous form’ which tries to show that ‘human beings are very odd and very different from each other’ (Bellamy 137). In this way, it ‘fights against the drama’ because ‘ordinary life is not dramatic’ (Biles 117). Here is another area of creative tension, however, because, as she said to Haffenden,

of course a novel is a drama, and dramas happen when there is trouble. A completely harmonious life might not produce the drama. … In spite of the fact that people have a bad time – this is true of the novel in a general way – the novel is a comic form. (34)

Good novels, then, can be many things; however, they should be comic but not satirical, imaginative but not fantastic, or rather fantasy-ridden; their nature is to be dramatic, but this should be resisted; and realism of character and incident should be their goal. Experiment is fine, but not at the expense of plot, or a certain amount of determinacy: readers should have enough information to be able to work out the author’s true intentions as to the events in the story, although the interpretation of the events can be to some extent delegated to the reader. Above all, she values truthfulness: ‘Great art is connected with courage and truthfulness. There is a conception of truth, a lack of illusion, an ability to overcome selfish obsessions, which goes with good art, and the artist has got to have that particular sort of moral stamina’ (Meyers 218).

Social commitment is, she believes, out of place in the novel. ‘I think it’s a novelist’s job to be a good artist, and this will involve telling the truth, and not worrying about social commitment,’ which ‘can make the novelist nervous and anxious and not able to open himself to the whole of reality as he understands it’ (Rose 60). She once tried ‘to write a novel about the Trade
Union movement and put M.P.’s in it and so on, but I don’t know that world.

It’s no good; I don’t understand it and I don’t want to write political propaganda in that form.’ It is only in the novel that she rejects propaganda, however: ‘I prefer to write political propaganda in other forms, in the form of pamphlets or articles’ (Bellamy 133). This does not mean that novelists should or even could be amoral, however:

A writer cannot avoid having some sort of moral position, and attempting to be nonmoral is in a way a moral position, an artificial one. … a novelist, a storyteller, naturally portrays his own moral judgments. But these very judgments are not just a small area of human discourse; they’re almost all of it. We are always making value judgments, or exhibiting by what we say some sort of evaluation, and storytellers dealing with persons must constantly be doing this. (Brans 44)

‘In fact,’ she told Bellamy, ‘in a quiet way, there is a lot of social criticism in my novels’ (Bellamy 133).

Her own approach to the ethical techniques of writing largely, as one would expect, centre on her characters and the form of her novels. She makes a distinction between ‘closed’ and ‘open’ novels, and prefers to write the latter. She spoke to Frank Kermode in 1963 about the difficulties she had creating ‘a lot of people who are not me’; and the tendency too readily to pull a form or a structure out of something one’s thinking about and to rest upon that. The satisfaction of the form is such that it can stop one from going more deeply into the contradictions or paradoxes or more painful aspects of the subject matter. (Kermode, ‘House’ 63)

There is a ‘moral challenge involved in art: in the self-discipline of the artist, expelling fantasy and really looking at things other than himself’ (Magee 535).

‘With what exhilaration do we experience the absence of self in the work of Tolstoy, in the work of Shakespeare. That is the true sublime,’ she wrote in ‘The Sublime and the Good’ (218). This is a central tenet of her philosophy of
fiction. The expulsion of fantasy involves ‘fighting against … and blurring …
even destroying’ the dramatic shape of the novel, ‘because ordinary life doesn’t
have shape. Ordinary life is comic and absurd. It may be terrible, but it is
absurd and shapeless’ (Biles 117). Her desire for realistic characters different
to herself does not, however, mean that she draws her characters from life: ‘I
would abominate the idea of putting real people in a novel, not only because I
think it’s morally questionable, but also because I think it would be terribly
dull’ (Meyers 216).

She is well aware of the danger of overusing symbolism. ‘I think a
writer of a traditional novel is wise to rub out or fudge over a piece of
symbolism that is coming out too clearly’ (Hartill 89). Symbols are, in any
event, not always a direct statement by author to reader, but may be part of the
characterisation: ‘very often, the symbolism in a novel is invented by the
characters themselves, as happens in real life. We’re all constantly inventing
symbolic images to express our situations’ (Biles 125). She believes, however,
that symbolism has not always been sufficiently under control in her novels,
‘when it’s connected with a dominating myth’ (Rose 67). Nevertheless, on the
whole she believes she is not ‘a symbolic writer in any allegorical or complete
sense. … I would want them to come in in a completely natural way … through
the characters’ (Rose 66).

Concepts of freedom and the many ironies and contradictions they
entail are deeply interesting to twentieth century novelists. Murdoch’s view is
that freedom is only to be achieved ‘only by self-forgetfulness. As we
bec[o]me less obsessed by our own goals, drives and desires, and substitute
involvement with others, we mature spiritually and creatively’ (Heyd 139-140).
In 1968, asked if freedom was her main subject, she replied, ‘No, not now. I think it might have been in the past. No, I think love is my main subject. I have very mixed feelings about the concept of freedom now’ (Rose 68). In 1985, she spoke to William Slaymaker at length about the idea of freedom.

She distinguishes between different kinds of freedom:

> This problem about freedom and unfreedom is, of course, confused by problems about political freedom as opposed to or as contrasted with intellectual, emotional or spiritual freedom. Of course, if the law prevents you from publishing your book, you are unfree, and if you can get the law changed, then you are free. (426-7)

It is, she says, ‘important to distinguish between a political definition of freedom which isn’t to do with having good desires, and a spiritual definition which is to do with having good desires’:

> People torment themselves – this is obvious, one needs merely to look around to see this happening – by unworthy or irrational desires: envy, jealousy, and so on, frustrated ambition. I would think of ‘true freedom’ as being liberated from these desires, and having desires that are higher, like desires to help people or desires connected with great art or love of nature or one’s work, trying to see one’s work as something really creative, whatever it might be. (Slaymaker 430)

Asked by Rosemary Hartill about justice, another controversial topic which often arises in her novels, she replied,

> I think the concept of justice is a very difficult one unless you use it in a secular context – relating to courts of law and how they operate, and what you blame people for. … I think the concept to hang on to is truth. Let justice look after itself. Justice suggests judging other people, and punishment and so on. Truth and love are much more fundamental concepts. (Hartill 85-6)

As for people’s responsibility for their actions, she says:

> Now a great many things which people do are excused because we know the psychological background to them which makes us regard them no longer as responsible actions. All the time one is balancing what one can find out about history and the human mind and all these things, these factual things … against these other factors which are to do with things which seem self-evident, with natural law, with a conception of human nature, with certain religious ideas, and so on. …
In making a moral judgement you have to take to take into consideration a lot of things. A particular case is so particular. This is why novels are interesting objects; they explain particular cases in very great detail. (Bigsby, ‘Interview’ 221)

Implicit in these statements is a recognition of the difference between striving for good oneself and judging others. As a novelist, ‘you can’t help explaining characters and scrutinising their motives. The novelist is the judge of these people – that can’t help emerging – and it is more difficult for the novelist to be a just judge’ (Haffenden 35). This is an interesting paradox, because the novelist as judge is often criticising the characters for judging, as is the case with Julius in A Fairly Honourable Defeat. She is perhaps not totally conscious of this contradiction. Asked if all her characters were not ‘at the mercy of the egotistical fantasies,’ she replied, somewhat judgmentally, ‘Yes, but they ought not to be, ought they?’ (Slaymaker 431). Christopher Bigsby asked her if she saw ‘any connection between the coercive plotters in the novel and yourself as a coercive plotter, a writer of fictions’; she replied, ‘No, because it is quite different. … what the people in the novel are doing is working out their fantasy life in terms of some sort of pattern which suits them and I very much hope that I am not doing that’ (Bigsby 227). In her interview with Bellamy, she comes closer to the problem. Discussing the myths that people create about themselves and other people, a ‘mythology [which] is often very deep and very influential and secretive’, she admitted, one is talking of something which in ordinary life – this is where the whole problem of truth is so important – which in ordinary life one doesn’t necessarily see, which one guesses at. And one may have one’s own motives for wanting to think that other people have a certain mythology, and one may be wrong. What is the test of this sort of speculation? … The test of truth here is very hard, and I think the novelist must be awfully scrupulous about playing this game of explaining peoples’ [sic] secret concerns. But after all, it is the essential game. (138)
Chapter Three

These ‘persons who are imperfect’ (Slaymaker 431) whom she is representing are, of course, imperfect in her terms, and thus throw into relief an accurate picture of her ideals of moral perfection. However much she may wish to create ‘free’ characters, she can have no doubt that ‘any artist reveals himself to some extent in his work’ (Haffenden 33).

Murdoch is a deeply serious novelist, which is, of course, not to say that her novels are not comic. Her moral thoughtfulness and philosophical training give her novels a compelling sense of a broad and inclusive tolerance, backed by ‘an assertion of old-fashioned values, of the reality of virtue’ (Brans 44), but she combines these qualities with an unembarrassed use of suspense and other narrative techniques which makes her novels compulsively readable. She rather disarmingly believes that all writers are equally serious, even the writers of bestsellers: ‘I find it hard to imagine that even if one started off as a cynic one wouldn’t be converted by one’s own work’ (Gerard 139-40).

In the following three chapters I will examine some themes and techniques which are interesting in Murdoch’s case. Firstly, I will discuss her ‘theological myth’, the battle between good and evil, in A Fairly Honourable Defeat. The questions of freedom and justice are important themes in this novel, and there are some interesting differences between her intentions and readers’ interpretations. Secondly, I will look at the technique of first person narration in The Black Prince, and how it relates to her moral concerns; and how the reader is led to understand the ‘true’ course of events by means of an unreliable narrator. The third chapter is a survey of four novels which focus on marital unfaithfulness on the husband’s part, tracing a shift in her implied attitudes through more than thirty years of writing. Attitudes to personal
freedom, women’s issues and social problems are considered, as well as her use of symbolism and its limits.
Chapter Four

A Fairly Honourable Defeat: Good Versus Evil in the Post-Christian World

It is a commonplace observation that good characters are the most difficult for an artist to make interesting. This was one of Plato’s arguments against art: ‘[The] fretful temper gives scope for a great diversity of dramatic representation; whereas the calm and wise character in its unvarying constancy is not easy to represent, nor when represented is it readily understood’ (Republic 336). Perhaps for this reason many novels are about not necessarily evil characters, but imperfect people, often young, whose progress towards maturity claims the interest of the reader, and who at the end are presumed to have reached the less interesting state of ‘calmness and wisdom’. A writer who does not wish to glamorise evil may choose to write this kind of bildungsroman instead of trying to present a character who is good throughout the novel. The more difficult path is to foreground a good character who must deal with vicissitudes which form the interest of the novel. This, for example, was the task Jane Austen set herself when she wrote Mansfield Park, with Fanny Price as the central figure. The problem Austen faced in presenting such an unglamorous, passive and incontrovertibly good heroine is similar to that faced by Iris Murdoch when she dramatises a figure of good such as Tallis Browne in A Fairly Honourable Defeat (1970), although their methods are, of course, vastly different.

Although we have little external evidence about Austen’s moral philosophy, it is clear from her mature novels that she valued self-discipline, reticence and attention to the needs of others over wit and cleverness and a propensity to judge – very much Murdoch’s position – and nowhere is this dramatised so vividly as in the contrast and rivalry of Mary Crawford and Fanny Price. Mansfield Park is a great novel, and its greatness is absolutely inseparable from the qualities of Fanny. Trilling famously wrote that ‘its
greatness [is] commensurate with its power to offend’ (127). Austen’s courage in putting a passive and morally upright heroine at the centre of her work causes both the offence and the triumph: she deliberately defies the expectations of the reader in order to make a moral statement. Fanny’s refusal to act to bring about the outcome she desires gives all the other characters an advantage over her in attracting the reader’s attention. Austen counteracts this by presenting the novel almost exclusively through Fanny’s consciousness, when the voice is not that of a sympathetic omniscient narrator, which ensures that the attentive reader with an open mind will align sympathetically with her and not with the more superficially attractive characters. She also presents Fanny, albeit with a touch of irony, with her prize at the close of the novel.

Murdoch’s exemplary figure in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* has neither of these advantages. The narration is impersonal and apparently impartial, and Tallis’ point of view is one among many in the novel. In the end he is not rewarded, and the last word is reserved for the satanic Julius King.

Murdoch has explained the scheme behind the novel in subsequent interviews: ‘Of course, that book is a theological myth. … Julius King is, of course, Satan, and Tallis is a Christ figure, and Tallis’ father (Leonard Browne) is God the Father, who finds that it’s all gone wrong. … And then Morgan … is the human soul, for which the two protagonists are battling’ (Bellamy 135-6). However, the novel makes sense without this explanation, and the mythology remains somewhat puzzling for reasons I will discuss. What internal evidence does an uninformed reader have to construct a moral universe from the narrative? And how is the realism which is Murdoch’s overriding aim served in this witty and dramatic novel?

Although the novel is written in the third person, the point of view is shared mainly among five characters, with only occasional interpolations by an omniscient narrator who knows and can see more than the focaliser. A huge
proportion of the text consists of dialogue with no authorial comment and usually without attribution.

Statistical analysis has limited use in literary criticism, but it is interesting to survey the forty-four chapters of the novel and see how the narrative is shared among the five main ‘focalising’ characters. The count is Morgan, 12; Simon, 10; Hilda and Tallis 7 each; Rupert, 6; with the omniscient narrator providing the only non-conversational viewpoint in the first chapter, and Julius, clear of the chaos he has wreaked, alone and content in Paris in the last.

There is no simple relationship between the amount of narrative allotted to each character and the degree of authorial approval they appear to bear. Morgan could be regarded as the main character, in that more than a quarter of the chapters are focalised through her, and more importantly, it is her restless and irresponsible behaviour that to a large extent drives the plot. But it is quite plain, even without an explicit knowledge from external sources of Murdoch’s moral principles, that Morgan is not a character to be admired or emulated. Sympathy for her is tempered by impatience with her egocentricity. From the moment she first appears in Chapter 3, she behaves as if the world should revolve around her, and Murdoch surely means to convey an unfavourable first impression. At the 1986 symposium, Murdoch interrupted a discussion about Morgan’s exasperating characteristics, and whether the reader should pity her, with the typically modest comment that ‘it’s possible for one to take a simpler view here, which is that she’s just not a very successful character. … if Morgan had been a much more eccentric, interesting character, it would have been a far better book’ (Todd 100). The implication is that she prefers her readers to feel sympathy rather than annoyance with all her characters. Nevertheless, the fact that bad behaviour is psychologically explicable never makes it excusable in Murdoch’s novels. In The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, for example, she specifically raises the psychological excuse for Blaise’s sin, in order to
reject it: ‘He was condemned to live in a sinful state, although his mind did not consent to sin and rejected it. Reflection about his psychology did not help him at all. Much of the machinery was painfully clear, but irrelevant’ (69).

When her characters rise above their psychological and social constraints and have the courage to see and do the right thing, however difficult it may be, we can begin to see the moral underpinnings of her novels. In her interview with Christopher Bigsby, discussing the Kantian and Platonic views of morality, she says she is inclined to agree with Kant that

the recognition of duty … is a rational thing, that it is something which everybody can do, and that the unconditional nature of duty is something which is self-evident to every rational being. … This, of course, is a very unpopular view now; all kinds of ethical relativism are popular. … I think in a non-philosophical way some of the people in my books want to say this, that it is perfectly obvious what you want to do and if you fudge around and say well it is all very complicated and so on you are evading something. (220)

However, she goes on to say:

Another image which attracts me and which is rather different is a sort of platonic image, the notion that good is very, very far away and that … one’s task is to transform oneself, to discard selfishness and to undergo a very long process of conversion, … though nobody in my books ever gets anywhere really, or gets very far with the process. It is extremely difficult, there aren’t any saintly people … there is only one real saint as it were, or symbolic good religious figure in the books and that is Tallis. (220)

We cannot take rewards and punishments as any indication of the success or failure of these efforts. Simon, whose instincts are often sound, has the courage to tell Axel the truth and is rewarded by Axel’s forgiveness. Rupert, who is found out before he tells, drowns. But both Morgan and Julius get away unscathed and possibly even happy, after causing so much misery; and Tallis keeps on unchanging, his life in as big a mess as at the start, with no hope of Morgan’s return and the black prospect of his father’s death ahead. This refusal of poetic justice helps with the novel’s realism.
Morgan’s progress through the book does little to endear her to the reader, but most of the other characters seem captivated by her to some extent, which is another reason why she is not a successful character: it is hard to accept her popularity within the novel. The exceptions are Julius and Axel, and for this reason they are able to avoid the harm she inflicts on almost everyone else. She is often seen behaving lovingly to those she will later betray. Tallis is right about Morgan when, in reply to her statement, ‘I'm going to be free and love people,’ he exclaims, ‘Oh don't talk such sickening rot, Morgan!’ (212). He knows that freedom is not a virtue, and that loving people is often burdensome and unrewarding. The only character who is in any way free is Julius, who loves nobody. Morgan also, revealingly, refuses to allow herself to see the whole picture: ‘so long as I can keep it all completely dismembered, she thought. Keep everything small and separate and manageable. Frame no general picture’ (120). This is the only way she can prevent herself from breaking down and experiencing the ‘ghastly heart-breaking tenderness’ (120) which she would otherwise feel for Tallis; but ignoring the ‘general picture’ leads to a damaging limitation of perspective, and denial of responsibility for her own actions.

So it is clear that there is no relationship between the quantity of focalisation through a character and their moral worth; but can it be said that the more sympathetic characters are more morally exemplary? Conradi calls Simon ‘hugely sympathetic’ (‘Fairly Honourable Defeat’ 87), and it is a major compensation, in the disastrous outcome of Julius’ meddling, that he and Axel save and strengthen their love as a result Simon’s courage and strength of will, and his sound intuition about Julius. Simon also likes Tallis more than anyone else does, including his father and his wife.
Perhaps after Simon, Hilda is the most sympathetic character. Her self-congratulatory smugness at the beginning of the novel – less attractive than Simon’s quivering sensitivity to Axel’s moods – is entirely removed by the events of the novel. Her impatience with Tallis is understandable, although it is not really justified and is largely prompted by jealousy of her sister. But Julius’ assessment of her as ‘entirely truthful and genuine, unlike her sister’ is quite accurate. As he says, ‘she is a very good-natured and kindly person who doesn't think too much about herself’ (407). This, combined with a devotion to Rupert comparable to Simon’s devotion to Axel, is one of Murdoch’s sterling qualities. Self-knowledge is, she says in ‘On “God” and “Good”’, ‘except at a fairly simple level, usually a delusion … self is as hard to see justly as other things’ (355). Attention to other people as they really are, rather than as a construction of one’s own mythologising imagination, is the path to good. Hilda, also, refrains from judgment. She tells Julius, in relation to his affair with Morgan, ‘other people’s lives are very mysterious. … One can hardly ever see what another person is like. … Morgan talked about it, but I couldn’t really see – or presume to make any judgement’ (293). Morgan is her sister, the person to whom she is closest, closer even than her husband, but she still will not presume to judge.

As for Rupert, well-heeled, well-intentioned, pompous, humourless and rather unimaginative, he cannot help arousing a certain amount of sympathy, but as a character he is surrounded by ironies. Readers with no outside knowledge of Murdoch’s beliefs may initially concur with Julius’ judgment of Rupert. They, like Julius, may find themselves ‘wondering how old Rupert would stand up to a real test and what all this high-minded muck would amount to in practice’ (403). Murdoch allows Julius enough justification for
his views to lead unwary readers to feel that his actions are also justified. Rupert’s death would jolt most readers out of this opinion, and put Julius squarely in the wrong; but a vestige of contempt remains.

The more profound irony is that the philosophy Rupert professes is practically identical to that expounded by Murdoch herself in her non-fiction. Ramanathan points out that in the conversation between Julius and Rupert in Chapter 18 of Part One, ‘the case against her own choice [of philosophy] is given the fullest possible hearing’ (13). Part of her point is that no philosophy is of any use unless it is so much a part of one that it is lived rather than consciously believed. Tallis is the character, of course, who does not express abstract beliefs – perhaps is not capable of expressing them – but who lives the genuinely good life. Like Rupert under attack from Julius, he is unable to find the words to argue with what he can see is wrong in Morgan’s philosophy: ‘It sounds like sense ... but somehow – oh how stupid you make me feel’ (214). Morgan says, ‘You're not on the wavelength, you don't understand what I'm saying half the time’ (215). This is precisely Murdoch’s point. Ramanathan says

Julius cannot be answered on his own terms. Another set of assumptions, extending to real possibilities outside the natural world, has to be called up before the argument can proceed further. ... against such an onslaught ... belief in good can only stammer; it cannot provide the sort of proofs required, and finally has to fall back on faith. (13)

Both Morgan and Julius have chosen to view the world in a way which Tallis and Rupert, respectively, deeply feel is wrong, but their beliefs can ‘only stammer’ in reply. The situation is further complicated by the fact that Morgan’s beliefs are a watered-down and fanciful version of Rupert’s, that is, love is the key. It is this similarity of views that allows Julius to manipulate them into their disastrous ‘affair’. But Morgan’s understanding of love is
hopelessly self-centred, and only operates when she is feeling happy, hence her
cruel rejection of Peter. Rupert’s beliefs are deeper and more soundly based.

He tells Hilda:

I am sure love tells in the end ... There are times when one’s just got to
 go on loving somebody helplessly, with blank hope and blank faith.
 When love just is hope and faith in their most denuded form. Then love
 becomes almost impersonal and loses all its attractiveness and its ability
to console. But it is just then that it may exert its greatest power. It is
 just then that it may really be able to redeem. (26)

But he cannot practice what he so sonorously preaches. It is Tallis who loves
‘helplessly with blank hope and blank faith’. He is not tempted to act in any
other way. In spite of everyone’s urging, and even apologetically, he follows
his instincts.

But Tallis as a figure of good, someone for the reader to admire and
even emulate, is not the obvious choice of a reader who is not versed in
Murdoch’s particular brand of Platonism. Dipple notes that ‘disappointment
[with Tallis] is built in very carefully by Murdoch and is felt as much by the
reader as by Julius. The Christ figure as good cannot appear in the post-
Christian world Murdoch insists on in the light of any sentimental or romantic
radiance’ (184). Further, ‘Murdoch, who denies expectations of many sorts in
this novel, alters both the Christ figure and Satan, and it is questionable
whether the reader can follow her entirely in either case. Tallis’ interest comes
largely from his sheer peculiarity’ (185). Although he is sympathetically
portrayed, Tallis’ messy, dreary life is unlikely to excite admiration, and like
Austen’s Fanny Price once again, most readers would find him an unattractive
role model. Murdoch told Jo Brans, ‘it’s symbolic of the situation that
nowadays the holy man is sort of shaky, hopeless, muddled, he hasn’t got a
place’ (53). But, although he suffers, he is not vulnerable like other characters.

He asks himself,

Would this muddle just go on and on or would it end in some sort of
final catastrophe? Sometimes he wished for that catastrophe, wished
that someone would come and just cart him away. Yet he knew his
own toughness and knew that in all probability while he lived the muddle would simply go on and on and on. (113)

When he is regarded as a symbol of good, this amounts to a guardedly optimistic statement that good will survive almost any attack, although it lacks the power to overcome evil. However, as personal qualities that the reader may want to identify with, Tallis’ passivity and toughness engage the reader less than the more wayward traits of other, more realistic, characters, who make mistakes, and may either sink or swim.

Julius is a deconstructionist. He is an inveterate destroyer of other people’s value systems and a demolisher of grand narratives. He believes that he is ‘an instrument of justice’ (431) and indeed many of his assessments of people are accurate. He admires Hilda, as I have discussed, and he is delighted by Simon’s courage and spirit, even though, or perhaps because, they are directed against him; for example when he pushes him into the swimming pool. Conradi writes,

the gap which lies at the heart of this tragi-comedy is that between the wisdom which is professed and the wisdom which is lived from the heart. It is a gap which Julius as artist is uniquely equipped to unmask, and one which only Tallis – significantly a man who does not rate himself as an intellectual – is able to overcome. (‘Fairly Honourable Defeat’ 93-94)

It is not Julius’ perceptions which are at fault, it is his passion for justice, untempered by love. As well as seeing himself as a judge, he longs to be judged. He says to Rupert, ‘If there were a perfectly just judge I would kiss his feet and accept his punishments upon my knees. But ... there is no such being’ (226). Later, however, he tells Tallis that his ‘picture of Rupert and Morgan is entirely just’ (402), and his answer when Tallis asks why he has told him the truth is, ‘Oh, you know why’ (408), which implies that he now sees Tallis as a worthy judge. Even when he is flattering Hilda into trusting him, the line he uses is that he cares about her opinion of him – that she is a judge he has instinctively selected (296). Murdoch’s ideal is a person who refuses to judge others, and who realises it is never possible to know other persons well enough
to judge them. Tallis refuses judgement: at the end of the novel, left suffering at least partly through the actions of others, he does not ‘speculate about the guilt of any person, not even about his own’ (443). Julius’ understanding of human nature is not profound enough to admit of such mysteries. He several times describes human beings as puppets, and is amused by how easy they are to manipulate. But he admits himself that ‘it all got rather out of hand’ (408), which means that his earlier claim that ‘no one would really suffer, that’s part of my point’ (234), was fundamentally wrong. The defeat of the title begins to seem more of a problem in this light. Is Julius is a meddling human being who gets out of his depth, or a Satanic figure who intends the consequences of his actions? In the former case, it is all more accidental than the ‘battle between good and evil’ schema implies; in the latter case, the self-deprecating confession to Tallis is out of key.

That Murdoch intends Julius as a demonic figure is, I think, fairly plain to a careful reader. Many of his appearances are sudden and mysterious, without normal, socially acceptable door-knocking or bell-ringing to announce him. His friendships are cool, and his affair with Morgan is characterised by a lack of warmth and a refusal to love. In the last chapter, there is a slight, easily missed hint in the sentence, ‘He was so much better now that he was not closely involved with human beings’ (447). The absence of one word, ‘other’, to qualify ‘human beings’ sets him neatly apart from the human race. There are also little, playful touches which might have significance, such as when Tallis tells him to ‘go to hell’ (339). Like a supernatural being, his physical appearance is odd and changeable; his face is more than once referred to as a mask, and his eyes are constantly changing colour. But if he is Satan, there is hope for good against evil, because he so underestimates the bond between Simon and Axel. And even Rupert and Morgan are not led to extremities of vice by Julius’ machinations. In fact, they both display delicacy, kindness and thoughtfulness until the strain of deceit becomes too great for them to bear.
This is not what Julius expects. He foresees an affair, with the comfortable accommodation of half-truths into the marriage. No one will be hurt very much: ‘They’ll gain a little experience. It will all unravel quite painlessly’ (268). Rupert’s inability to live without what Julius calls his ‘condition of high-minded illusion’ (383) is actually a good quality. He dies rather than accept Julius’ cynicism – is this really defeat? Dipple says that ‘Julius’s major characteristic is his ability to pervert the perception of anything or anyone he comes in contact with’ (187-8) but Rupert’s vision is troubled rather than perverted by Julius. If it were perverted he would have succumbed to falsehoods and the convenience of the second-rate, as Julius expects, and advises, him to. As Swinden points out, ‘Rupert … died because he was what he was’ (256). Tallis is, of course, not perverted by Julius either.

Rice claims that ‘throughout her career Iris Murdoch has proved to be subtler than her critics’ (75). In order to test this novel’s reception by some (no doubt, in some cases, rather jaded) readers, more than thirty contemporary reviews have been surveyed. They divide roughly equally into three categories; favourable, ambivalent and damning. Conradi is right in saying that ‘few writers divide their audience so radically’ (Iris Murdoch 3).

The faults noted by the damning group include weak, puppet-like characters (the dust-jacket of the first American edition had an illustration of a puppet), insistent design, too obvious a moral intention, flat and stilted dialogue, bland narrative style, lack of interest in or sympathy for the characters, brittle tone, artificial plot. David Lodge sums up the unfavourable reaction: ‘Miss Murdoch must be getting tired of being told by reviewers that she is abusing her formidable gifts, but there it is’ (317).

Some of these detractors admit to finding the book readable, but the pleasure of the text does not figure largely in their reviews.

Many of the ambivalent reviewers note that the puppet-theme (which almost everybody mentions) and the contrivances of the plot are a deliberate
part of the design. They often mention a cool, or even cruel, author sitting back and enjoying the suffering of her characters. They recognise her wit, and are for the most part entertained in spite of their reservations. Several mention that her people are viewed philosophically rather than psychologically – sometimes this is a criticism, and at other times not. Several critics in this category are looking for a moral message. They look to the closure for the poetic justice, and are puzzled by the lack of it.

The favourable reviewers write of a book that is life-like, subtle, enjoyable, ‘tremendously liberating’ (Reynolds), witty, fascinating, engrossing, with amazingly convincing characters, a well-made plot, and touches of clever self-parody. Anthony Paul, however, points out:

People who complain that this novel is too explicit and schematic are looking for an entirely different sort of novel, which this only pretends to be. One may easily be led astray by Miss Murdoch’s skill in entertaining, in dealing with locality, clothes, houses, the accessories of life and the luggage of traditionally consoling or life-enhancing fiction. But this novel is on the other hand a masque of ideas, jokes, metaphors, a dance in which every incident and thing has its place.

As this implies, realism is not, whatever Murdoch’s intention, the final effect of this novel, and its realistic trappings are entertaining but superficial. Paul is one of the few who saw that Tallis is the force for good at the opposite pole from Julius. Obviously the blurb on the first edition made no mention of the ‘battle between good and evil’, as my more recent paperback copy does. Julius is almost universally identified as a force of evil. He is variously likened to Iago, Iachimo, Prospero, Mephistopheles, Satan, a cowboy, a scheming slave, and even God. As for Tallis, one reviewer decided, and made a fairly convincing argument, that he is Job to Julius’ Satan (Rabinovitz). Few others recognised his status as a figure of good opposed to evil. Some assumed that it was Rupert who sustained the title’s defeat. Rupert’s status in the theological scheme is indeed enigmatic. If Morgan is the soul over whom the battle is waged, it seems odd that it is Rupert who is the casualty. Morgan, on the other hand, ends up out of the orbit of influence of both Julius and Tallis.
Chapter Four

Would readers have guessed that Tallis is a Christ-figure, if Murdoch had not enlightened us? There is a deeply suggestive passage in Chapter 17, Part One, which describes his feeling

a bond ... not with anything personal but with the world, possibly the universe, which became a sort of extension of his being. Occasionally the extension was gentle and warm, like the feeling of a river reaching the sea. More often it was uncomfortable or even horrible as if he had immense dusty itching limbs which he could not scratch. (208)

There is an echo of this a few pages later when Julius speaks contemptuously of the human dream ‘of the extension of goodness beyond the pitiful level at which they muck along’ (224). Mucking along accurately describes Tallis’ life: one certainly needs to reject any link between cleanliness and godliness to see Tallis in this role. Later critics, for example Ramanathan, Conradi and Dipple, explore the Christ identification in detail, and find much evidence for it. Murdoch herself, mentioning the theological myth, said, ‘I think hardly anybody notices this, but it doesn't matter; it’s just something in the background’ (Bellamy 135).

Barthes writes that the pleasure of the text is ‘an oblique, a drag anchor, so to speak, without which the theory of the text would revert to a centred system, a philosophy of meaning’ (64). It is noticeable that, in the ambivalent and even in some of the unfavourable reviews, readability and entertainment are mentioned in passing, as if scarcely worth considering. Many reviewers mention the scene in Julius’ flat, where Morgan and then Simon are deprived of their clothes (the dust jacket of the first English edition depicts a naked woman, obviously meant to be Morgan), the unfavourable ones sometimes citing it as an isolated bright spot. However the pleasure of the text is a more delicate affair than is perhaps implied by this. Reviewers are looking for something striking to write about, and a man shredding a woman’s clothes and then walking out on her is an interesting anecdote; but the real tension in the text comes from the pacing; the delays, the spurts of activity, the reflective pauses. Murdoch is, on the whole, very good at pacing her narratives. Her
propensity to relate the philosophising of her characters is very important to the
moral framework of her novels. These passages are usually full of subtle
ironies which can be appreciated by readers familiar with her beliefs. They are
also probably the passages which many readers skim, or where they may find
the book easier to put down. Deborah Johnson notes that

the famous ‘page-turning impetus’ … which results from the strongly
involved plotting, the continual surprises, actually prevents a first-time
reader from paying attention to the local dramatic strengths: the
moments of extreme tension between characters, the sharply focused
detail of the settings, the ways in which the language reflects
psychological shifts of awareness. (99)

Perhaps the most common emotion her narratives excite is pure curiosity. She
does not hesitate to use well-tried narrative techniques to heighten the
suspense. In the case of Simon and Axel, for example, we do not ever read
Axel’s thoughts: we see their relationship entirely through Simon’s insecure
and troubled eyes, which means that the reader is as surprised and relieved as
Simon by Axel’s acceptance of his explanation in Chapter 17 of Part Two.
Indeterminacy remains, in the timing of events, to undercut retrospectively the
suspense aroused by Hilda’s frantic attempts to contact Rupert from their
holiday house, for example, and to increase the sense of the accidental nature
of reality. Rupert is probably already dead by the time Julius makes his
confession to Tallis, or at least Julius thinks so (427), so Tallis’ prompt action
may not have potentially saved Rupert’s life after all. In a more conventional
novel, it would be made clear that Rupert is still alive when Hilda left the
cottage – her attempt would have the heroism of a nearly-successful ordeal,
which it lacks if it were already too late.

The least effective aspect of this novel is the exposition of past events
and the current state of things by conversation. Often the conversation is
brilliant and effective. Leonard and Tallis bickering in the kitchen (Ch. 9 pt 1),
Julius with Simon in the swimming pool (Ch. 14 pt 2), all the passages
between Morgan and Tallis – these all work well. But sometimes characters
seem to be merely chatting, and the tension dissipates. The first chapter, as many critics have noted, is a flagrant piece of scene-setting. With a thin veneer of plausibility, Hilda and Rupert tell each other things they must already know. Perhaps it is when two characters are discussing a third person that this problem most often occurs: exposition by conversation is usually less compelling than lively narration. The story of Simon’s meeting with Axel in Athens is narrated directly, even though Simon is purportedly telling Morgan about it, and it is far more satisfying than if it had been punctuated by Morgan’s interjections, and couched in the more hesitant style of naturalistic verbal expression.

It is difficult to be good in Murdoch’s terms. Rupert thinks that he can keep his life orderly, bestow love where it is needed, and live the good life openly and honestly, but disorder – or reality – overcomes him. It is tempting to see in this an analogy with writing a philosophical novel (which Murdoch denies she attempts). The ideas in the novel try to impose order, but the chaos of characters and events and the openness of the novel form overcome the neatness of ideas. Murdoch is profoundly aware of this. Ramanathan suggests that

‘transgressions’ of this kind necessarily occur because Murdoch’s mind constantly moves back on itself, questioning the assumptions of her moral base, of its genuineness, its possible falseness, its inevitable inefficacy in the world, and its exhaustion. (6-7)

In this way, she is expressing, rather than a moral code, a philosophical position of plurality, uncertainty, and ambiguity in her novels, and in this sense she can be called a philosophical novelist. She wrote that ‘imaginative prose literature ... is par excellence the form of art most concerned with the existence of other persons’ (‘Sublime and Beautiful’ 278). Murdoch’s characters are not intended as role models. Rather, they are ‘other persons’ whom readers may contemplate, and in doing so perhaps become more tolerant in their dealings with non-fictional persons, whose minds they cannot read. For this to happen,
the reader needs to be convinced – provisionally and temporarily at least – that the characters resemble real people, and in this aim, as is shown by the opinions of the various reviewers discussed above, she succeeds only partially.

The clear moral tendency of *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* is against a desire for justice, because one human cannot know others well enough to have all the facts needed to judge them, as both Hilda and Tallis realise. But difficulties arise as to the ethical status of the author, who possesses all the facts, can read minds, and implies judgements herself, if not of all the characters, at least of the judgemental Julius. Can we allow that an author is ‘in his work as God is in creation, invisible yet all-powerful’, as Flaubert declared (Allott 271), or is there an assertion of superiority over the readers involved here which undermines her own moral scheme? She wishes to disappear in her work – she values highly the ‘exercise of overcoming one’s self’ (‘The Sublime and the Good’ 216) in art – but in this case, the invisibility of the implied author behind the invisible narrator gives the morality of the novel a transcendence which is a little fraudulent. In the next chapter, I will examine a different type of narrative technique, which shields the author in a different way – behind a mask rather than a vacuum.
Chapter Five

First Person Narrative: *The Black Prince*

Many critics place Murdoch’s first-person novels, narrated by a more or less egotistical and unperceptive male who is also the protagonist, near the summit of her achievement as a novelist – Deborah Johnson says that ‘they constitute, it will readily be agreed, some of her most distinctive and thoughtful work’ (2) – and most agree that *The Black Prince* (1973) is one of the best, if not the best, of all her works: Bloom includes it in his top four (1); Bove, in her *Dictionary of Literary Biography* article suggests that ‘readers who are unfamiliar with Murdoch’s work would do well to begin with *The Black Prince* … the most critically acclaimed of Murdoch’s novels’ (‘Iris Murdoch’); and A.N. Wilson, writing after her death in 1999, suggests that ‘it is possibly the last entirely successful novel she wrote’ (80).

In a novel like this, which is full of veiled meanings, ironies and mixed messages, how does the reader decide where the truth lies? How can a narrator such as Bradley Pearson, who is patently misguided throughout much of the book’s action, convince us that at the time of writing he has attained true wisdom from his ordeals? And what made Murdoch choose, for the fourth time, to impersonate her protagonist in this ‘complex and brilliant exploration of the relationship between the author and her male narrator’ (Deborah Johnson 35).

Romberg calls the narrator’s situation when writing a narrative ‘the epic situation,’ and ‘in a novel of the first person … the epic situation … belongs to the fiction,’ and ‘can, from the aspect of narrative technique, be an important key to the novel’ (33). Further,
the narrative technique, whereby the main character himself surveys his eventful life, or describes particularly exciting parts of it, or else lays bare his soul to his friend, gives to the author the opportunity to take advantage of the primitive but remarkably persistent demand that the novel-reader in general makes of a narrative: namely, that it shall give an illusion of reality and truth.

The authoritative ‘I’ binds the reader more tightly to the fiction; there is a sort of two-man partnership between reader and narrator, and here we glimpse the primeval epic situation, where someone who has had some experience or other relates this experience to someone else. (58-59)

On the other hand, Wallace Martin claims

any first-person narrative ... may prove unreliable because it issues from a speaking or writing self addressing someone. This is the condition of discourse, in which, as we know, the possibility of speaking the truth creates the possibility of misunderstanding, misperceiving, and lying,

whereas ‘we cannot question the reliability of third-person narrators’ (142). These two statements are not necessarily contradictory, but may refer to different levels of reader response. Romberg’s ‘illusion of reality and truth’ may be the primary, naïve response of a reader – even an experienced reader – whereas the ‘possibility of misunderstanding, misperceiving and lying’ may be inferred by readers on a second or more thoughtful reading, and is often implied with more or less subtlety by the author behind the narrator’s back. In fact, in recent fiction, it is difficult to think of any first person narrative in which the narrator is the main character, where the narrator can be relied upon to the same extent as a third-person narrator, whether omniscient or not. One interesting reversal of this tendency is Margaret Drabble’s *The Waterfall*, where the apparently omniscient and reliable third person narrator is interrupted at intervals by her own first person voice, commenting on and criticising the narrative, exposing its distortions of reality, and laying bare its bias. This technique was perhaps suggested by the third person novel within the first person narrative in Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook*. However, this reversal only works when the two voices are counterpointed within the same novel. The apparently objective voice is shown to be in fact subjective, and
this has the corollary that the subjective voice becomes the objective, critical and reliable authority.

In a sense, this is the opposite of what Murdoch does in *The Black Prince*. She appears to take full advantage of her readers’ demands for the ‘illusion of reality and truth’ in the novel, only to unsettle and undermine them, not only in the postscripts at the end, but also in the narrator’s addresses to his ‘dear friend,’ P. Loxias which interrupt the narrative from time to time. All first-person narratives must contain more than one point of view: the writing ‘I’ is necessarily distinguished from the ‘I’ written about. The temporal distance between the narrating voice and the narrated events is important here. In the diary novel or the epistolary novel, there is a closer relationship between the epic situation and the narrative, and this may entail a betrayal of the narrator’s beliefs by unconscious irony. In a novel like *The Black Prince*, however, the narrating Bradley Pearson is a transformed character, and is quite aware of the ironies with which his former self is surrounded. He lets the reader know in his preface that a transformation has taken place, but explains frankly that he will ‘inhabit my past self and, for the ordinary purposes of storytelling, speak only with the apprehension of that time, a time in many ways so different from the present’ (xi). The ‘ordinary purposes of storytelling’ prohibit any but the most general hints at the nature of the crisis which precipitated his transformation into ‘a wiser and more charitable man’ (xi). Iris Murdoch does not tend to relinquish the privilege of a writer to maintain suspense to keep the reader interested in any of her novels. The technique of deliberate abrogation of suspense which V.S. Naipaul uses in *A House for Mr Biswas*, for example, holds no attraction for her. Narrative foreshadowing does appear, but serves rather to heighten the reader’s curiosity, for example, after describing the day before Arnold’s death and his arrest, Bradley continues: ‘The morning brought the crisis of my life. But it was not anything that I could have conceived of in my wildest imaginings’ (317). Thus we have the
situation whereby the narrating voice of what Dipple calls ‘the flayed BP’ (113) (referring to the deep mythology of the novel and its basis in the legend of Apollo’s flaying of Marsyas) is holding back his knowledge of events and his understanding of their meanings, and letting the ‘unflayed BP’ speak, nonetheless hoping ‘that the light of wisdom falling upon a fool can reveal, together with folly, the austere outline of truth’ (xi).

Within the world of this fiction, we have little alternative but to trust our narrator when he is describing the course of events, while suspecting his assessments of the significance of these events, and his knowledge the thoughts and motives of the other characters. This is indeed what he asks of us in the Foreword, when he writes ‘I have endeavoured in what follows to be wisely artful and artfully wise, and to tell the truth as I understand it’ (xi). That we should trust this truth – which is the domain only of P. Loxias, the ‘editor,’ and the ‘flayed’ Bradley, is an assumption upon which the novel is founded. Loxias’ postscript, following the postscripts of four of the other characters commenting on the novel and denying its accuracy, draws attention to their self-serving motives; their egotism in each believing Bradley to be motivated by love of themselves, and their self-promotion. So in the person of Bradley Pearson, we have a protagonist acting in a fantasy-ridden and prejudiced manner, but who we must believe was able to take note of the events and the facts of the narrative as they happened; and also a narrator relating these past events in prison, some years after they happened, who still has perfect recall of letters he wrote and received during this period (including the one from Arnold which he destroys) and who can remember conversations verbatim, even when he was under severe emotional stress when they occurred. These beliefs in the reader would usually go unnoticed; they are so large a part of the conventions of first-person writing. Consider the consequences if we allow that Bradley the narrator mis-remembered, or even misrepresented, any of the conversations he reported. For example, if Rachel had not been the prime mover in his abortive
romance with her – if the version of events in her postscript is correct – then
the very foundations of the novel’s action begin to shake. Part of the reason
we are willing to accept Bradley’s version of events is that it is backed up
within the text by letters from the main characters, but the main reason is, I
believe, Romberg’s ‘authoritative “I”’ which ‘binds the reader more tightly to
the fiction’. Murdoch works to unsettle this illusion, but does not destroy it.
Thus, we see that Bradley lies to other characters within the narrative – for
instance, when he returns from Bristol, he lies to Priscilla about her husband’s
domestic situation; and we are quite willing to believe he is wrong in his
opinions of other characters. Even the Bradley of the Foreword regards
Francis Marloe as insignificant, ‘an excellent fifth wheel to any coach’ (xiv),
whereas he seems to a more objective observer to be the best-intentioned and
perhaps even the wisest of any of the characters. (It is he who suggests that
Bradley distract himself from his inappropriate passion for Julian by
concentrating on helping Priscilla, a course of action which would have averted
most of the problems Bradley brings upon himself.) We are even invited to
believe that he does not understand his own feelings, particularly in regard to
his ex-wife Christian. He has a very definite idea of himself: for example, he
comments that he refrains from returning to spy on Arnold and Rachel after
their argument early in the novel because ‘such an action was not in my
character’ (29), but he speculates in detail and feels a strong curiosity about
what was happening in their ‘strange and violent world … of matrimony’ (29).
It would be more accurate to say, ‘such an action was not my style’: he is
crippled throughout the action of the novel by his anxiety to convince both
himself and others of his artistic and fastidious nature. But although the
character Bradley is sometimes a liar and often mistaken about the nature and
feelings of both himself and other people, and even the narrator Bradley may
be wrong in his beliefs about others, we are not prepared to accept that Bradley
the narrator is ever a liar.
If this is the case, why does Murdoch so patently ask us to question Bradley’s reliability? That she does not intend to create factual indeterminacy is clear from her interview with Christopher Bigsby:

The thing is *The Black Prince* has got its own inbuilt mode of explanation. It is made pretty clear in that book how you should interpret the wanderings and maunderings of a narrator and where you should believe him and where you should not believe him. ... The epilogue is just play. I mean it adds, pretty clearly, further comments on the characters of the people who were in the story but I think it is quite clear what you are supposed to think. (216)

However, in an earlier interview with Jack Biles, she answered, ‘Yes, yes’ to his statement that in the novel ‘there is no way in the world to know what really did happen. Which is what you were aiming for’ (125). More trust can be placed in the Bigsby statement, which is in her own words, rather than something she assented to, possibly absentmindedly, in the Biles interview. On a first reading of the novel, it seems that the nature of reality is being questioned, but on a second reading, it is easier to see beyond the assertions of the other characters to a more stable idea of the truth and to understand that the distortions of the evidence are part of this novel’s contemplation of the nature of reality and perception. Part of its subtlety is in the attention one must pay to all the details if one wants to make sense of the whole.

Bove writes, ‘Murdoch’s vision admonishes her readers to attend to others, to really see them as distinct and separate individuals with rights of their own’ (*Understanding* 17-18). In most of her novels she moves freely among the points of view of several characters, which seems to be a more obvious way of achieving this end. In this novel, on the contrary, an attachment to Bradley is encouraged, so that the idea that he is really the pathetic creature described by Christian and Rachel in their postscripts is repugnant. The implied reader is inoculated from believing that he murdered Arnold, of course, but is also invited to excuse his admitted crimes and negligence. What else is he to do when he is about to escape with Julian, and Priscilla arrives demanding to be looked after? Leaving her in Francis’ care
seems reasonable in the circumstances, given the urgency of the situation with Julian. In the case of the more shocking episode of what Johnson calls his ‘virtual rape presented as an act of passionate love’ (38) of Julian, his justification of the need to consummate his passion for Julian, which ‘had come to seem a symbol of the whole dilemma’ (279), before telling her of Priscilla’s suicide and bringing on their inevitable return to London and the real world, is persuasive – and the immediate consequence is Julian’s feeling that ‘we are joined forever’ (283). It is, as is so often the case in Murdoch’s novels, his decision to keep back the truth, rather than his violent and impetuous lovemaking, that has unfortunate consequences; it provides a foothold in Julian’s mind for Arnold’s argument against their romance, although it is not until she reads Rachel’s letter giving her version of the Rachel-Bradley ‘affair’ that she decides to leave Bradley. As the narrator points out, ‘There are moments when, if one rejects the simple and obvious promptings of duty, one finds oneself in a labyrinth of complexities of some quite new kind’ (278). Bradley is often unwise in his decisions, and impetuous and irresponsible in his actions, but at worst he is guilty of what he himself calls ‘a semi-deliberate inattention,’ a series of momentary rejections of ‘the simple and obvious promptings of duty,’ rather than ‘a sort of conscious leeringly evil intent’ (154). The awkward and sometimes intransigent nature of these promptings is, however, fully recognised and dramatised, as in all her novels. As Johnson points out, though, the compulsive readability has the effect of hurrying the reader past such ‘local dramatic strengths’ as, in this case, ‘the ways in which the language reflects psychological shifts of awareness. These can only be seen fully if the reading process is slowed down or even halted for a moment’ (99). Bradley’s justification, when re-read slowly, is seen to be loaded with irony and retrospective self-accusation.

It is Bradley’s inattention which provides much of the comedy in the novel. Hague comments that the narrator ‘revel[s] in his comically grotesque
descriptions of characters, ... so that he can bring them under his imaginative control and limit their power to affect him’ (107). Certainly there are comic descriptions of characters, often juxtaposed with darker, more sombre situations, as with Priscilla – the ‘woo-woo-woo’ sound she makes when crying, her concern over the ‘things,’ the stripey vase and the mink stole, she has left behind with Roger. But Bradley the narrator turns his comedic vision on his former self more than on the other characters. He is describing these characters through his former self’s eyes, and his failure to sympathise with or to help Priscilla properly is treated, overall, with a grim irony. Dipple says ‘the comic genius of [the narrator’s] presentation consists in the risible contrast between the wisdom he believes he has and the tyranny of his compulsions’ (119). Part of this presentation consists of refraining from commenting during much of the narration of the action. He alerts us in his Foreword to the fact that these events have left him chastened, and therefore the reader looks for signs of his folly. Of course, we can see foolish and worse than foolish behaviour in the other characters as well – Arnold and Rachel in particular. The point is that everyone is acting on their own private set of compulsions; Priscilla on the compulsion to leave Roger, Arnold to stop Rachel screaming, Rachel to enlist Bradley’s loyalty against Arnold, Francis to make himself a place in the world by being helpful; and out of clashes between these compulsive sets of behaviour arise most of the novel’s comic set pieces. We see at the beginning the foreshadowing of the delays and frustrations that drive the plot. Bradley

was about to leave London ... I had my suitcases ready and was about to telephone for a taxi, had in fact already lifted the ’phone, when I experienced that nervous urge to delay departure, to sit down and reflect, which I am told the Russians have elevated into a ritual. (1)

Because he delays his departure (which we can see already is characteristic of his behaviour) he is home when Francis arrives to tell him that his ex-wife, Francis’ sister, Christian, has arrived in London; he is home to receive the
phone call from Arnold which summons him to mediate in his domestic troubles with Rachel; and these events keep him in London long enough that he is still home the next day when Priscilla appears. Thus these three threads of the plot are set in motion, to ravel and tangle together until the novel’s climax. The way all the plots jostle with each other, often in an accidental way, is part of the comedy, but the deeper comedy is in the irony of Bradley’s incapacity to cope, his inability to think the situation through clearly enough to act effectively and prevent the final disastrous train of events. Murdoch’s comedy might be called the comedy of accident and inattention, and it is intensified in *The Black Prince* because the narrator-protagonist is at the centre of most of the accidents, and the dilemmas and decisions that the novel ‘lives through’ are all his. The excitement and suspense the reader feels are all Bradley’s, which means that when we come to read the other postscripts we are reluctant to break the emotional bonds with him which have been strengthening throughout the novel, even while alerted intellectually to the possibility of disagreeing with many of his opinions and disapproving of his actions.

This feeling of identification would seem logically to be a function of the first-person narrative, but it does not happen equally in all Murdoch’s first-person novels by any means. There are six novels with narrator-protagonists. In the first, *Under the Net*, Jake seems uncertain himself of his goals, and we do not feel any genuine desperation in his attempt to find Anna. *A Severed Head* is such a comedy of manners, with everybody falling in love with everybody else, that it is only a source of mild satisfaction when Martin is accepted by Honor Klein at the end. *The Italian Girl* is a slighter work, with comparatively little hold on the reader’s attention. Hilary in *A Word Child* wants only what he obviously cannot and should not have, and it is other characters we would rather see happy in the end. And in *The Sea, The Sea*
Charles is so patently behaving according to a ludicrous fantasy that we want him not to succeed with Hartley in the end.

Other characters for whom strong sympathy is aroused occur in third-person novels; for instance in The Sandcastle, where Mor loses what seems like a possibility of real happiness, in Nuns and Soldiers where Tim gains and loses Gertrude so often that the ending, with the couple reunited, comes as a relief, and in A Fairly Honourable Defeat when Simon is reunited with Axel. There may be something vulnerable about each of these characters which is particularly appealing, but perhaps Murdoch is also trading on an incorrigible belief in the legitimacy of mutual sexual love, deeply ingrained in the western tradition, that makes it seem so important that these lovers achieve happiness at almost any cost. Murdoch’s characters often tell each other that love should not be wasted. Frequently the love they are talking of is dangerous and inappropriate, and there is always an ironic twist to these conversations: sometimes the irony is local, at other times it is dramatic irony which becomes clear in the light of later events. Innocent love is another myth Murdoch’s characters often subscribe to – Morgan, for example, in A Fairly Honourable Defeat, wants love with no responsibilities or pain. But when it seems that people apprehend each other, with what Murdoch would call real love, the accidents and outside forces which threaten these relationships seem particularly cruel – which is no doubt her point. She said in her interview with Bellamy,

> Love is a kind of bombshell that breaks peoples’ [sic] lives, really falling in love. It’s obviously a dangerous condition, because it’s so tremendously self-centered. To really love somebody in an unselfish way is not perhaps thoroughly natural to human beings; certainly in romantic love, in ‘falling in love’ love, one is tremendously selfish. One feels that everything in the world has gone away to the other person, but then this becomes a function of one’s own will, too. (138)

The self-centred life is antithetical to the good life she believes one should aspire to. But she also believes that art should express the accidental nature of
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reality, and not be merely the acting out of fantasies, and Bradley and Julian’s love is too fantastic to withstand the power of contingency.

In this case, then, the rebellion the reader has been induced to feel against the outcome of the story is certainly a part of what Murdoch would call the ‘moral orientation’ (Heusel 5) of this novel. Wayne Booth, in The Rhetoric of Fiction, writes of narratives where

the narrator’s bewilderment is used not simply to mystify about minor facts of the story but to break down the reader’s convictions about truth itself, so that he may be ready to receive the truth when it is offered to him. If the reader is to desire the truth he must first be convinced that he does not already possess it. Like a well-written philosophical treatise, any work depending on this desire must raise an important question in a lively form if the reader is to care about reading on to find the answer, or to feel the importance of the answer when it comes.

(285-6)

Given what Murdoch says about The Black Prince’s ‘inbuilt mode of explanation,’ and that ‘jokes like [the postscripts] are one thing but deliberate and total mystification, a willingness to hand over the interpretation to the reader, is another thing and I don't want to do the latter’ (Bigsby 217), we can as I have said, assume that factual indeterminacy, in the sense of there not being a stable reality, is not part of her aim. However, uncertainty about other people’s feelings and beliefs remains important, and it is certainly part of her moral scheme. Her belief in the opacity and independence of other minds is fundamental, and in a way she is, in this novel and all of her others, setting up a situation (that is, Bradley’s world view before the trial) where the reader’s and the main characters’ convictions about truth itself are broken down so that they ‘may be ready to receive the truth when it is offered’. This novel may therefore be seen as an example to the reader of how this process works, as we see in Bradley the consequences of his blindness to the truth and his failure to really see other people, and we see also his post-trial calm and contentment.

How deeply behind Bradley, or Loxias, is the ‘real’ voice of Iris Murdoch is still uncertain, however. The idea that Murdoch chooses to write
in the first person as a male in order to distance herself from her narrator and thus create a character who is not herself (see Kermode, ‘House’ 63-4) has occurred to some critics. Steven Cohan writes:

Murdoch’s preference ‘to be male’ is in many ways central to her art. Her choice of male narrators allows for a playful act of male impersonation as an ironic commentary on the paradox of fiction writing. She uses the male voice to articulate a sense of lived experience unique to another self, while making sure that her narrators themselves remain bound to the limits of their own identities. (223)

She seemed to confirm this in a 1967 interview, saying, ‘The oppositeness in the person of a man is good for the imagination’ (McGill). Bellamy brought up the question in a later interview:

Is your choice of men as first-person narrators a way of avoiding the introspective, solipsistic novel you have so frequently criticized? I should think that imagining you were somebody of another sex would ensure the creation of a character different from yourself. The process would involve quite an impressive leap for the imagination. (132-3)

However, in answer to this question, she said, ‘I identify with men more than women, I think,’ which seems to contradict this idea. Unfortunately she left unremarked an earlier comment Bellamy made to the effect that Bradley Pearson ‘seems closer to the author than the narrators of your other novels’ (132). Johnson observes that

she is able to project her more personal sense of the connection between artistic, erotic and religious experience through the meditative narration of her persona, Bradley Pearson. … The mask of the male narrator … allows the author both the pleasure of projecting herself in a dramatic role and protection in exploring difficult and dangerous regions. (45-6)

In any event, most of the beliefs of Loxias and the ‘flayed’ Bradley correspond closely with Murdoch’s own. For example, Bradley says in the postscript that suffering is a kind of false idea – ‘no doubt we need these ideas, we may have to live by them, and the last ones we will abandon are those of dignity, tragedy and redemptive suffering’ (337): as Murdoch wrote in her essays, ‘The idea of suffering confuses the mind and in certain contexts … can masquerade as a purification. It is rarely this, for unless it is very intense indeed it is far too
interesting’ (‘On “God”’ 355); and ‘Masochism is the artist’s greatest and most subtle enemy’ (‘Sovereignty’ 371). Furthermore,

art is an excellent analogy of morals, or indeed … it is in this respect a case of morals. We cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else, a natural object, a person in need. We can see in mediocre art, where perhaps it is even more clearly seen than in mediocre conduct, the intrusion of fantasy, the assertion of self, the dimming of any reflection of the real world. (‘On “God”’ 348)

Thus, in the final paragraph of his Postscript, Bradley writes of Priscilla, ‘may I never in my thought knit up the precise and random detail of her wretchedness so as to forget that her death was not a necessity,’ and of Julian, ‘I do not, my darling girl, however passionately and intensely my thought has worked upon your being, really imagine that I invented you. Eternally you escape my embrace. Art cannot assimilate you nor thought digest you’ (339). These words show how far he has come even from his feeling during the trial that ‘I had been confronted (at last) with a sizeable ordeal labelled with my name’ (331), and that the book he would write ‘is my gift to [Julian] and my final possession of her. From this embrace she can never now escape’ (336). Dipple writes, ‘in no other book has she taken a character so far, from irritating inadequacy to the absolute of art and thence to death’ (131), and this feeling of a journey well completed is clear in the postscript. However, the Foreword, which also purports to be written after the main text, is more confusing. He says he will write in the persona of his former self, but sometimes it is hard to sift the strands, especially because the tenses tend to change:

My life, until the drama which brought it so significantly to a climax, had been an uneventful one. Some people might call it dull. ... I was married, then ceased to be married, as I shall tell. I am childless. I suffer from intermittent stomach troubles and insomnia. I have usually lived alone. ... I have had few intimate friends. (I could not I think be ‘friends’ with a woman.) (xv)

Read very carefully, the changes of tense have a certain logic if the present tense is regarded as referring to the time immediately before the action, but some of the statements could be attributed to the narrator rather than the
character, and would certainly be far from Murdoch’s opinions or thoughts: she surely could not believe it is impossible for a man to be friends with a woman. As a writer, he is clearly very different from Murdoch, with his pretensions, his fear of ‘profan[ing] the purity of a single page with anything less than what is perfectly appropriate and beautiful’ (xii), his ‘pride, … as well as sorrow’ (xvi) in having destroyed most of what he has written, his fastidious distaste for ‘an intemperate flux of words’ (xvii). Talking to Simon Price in 1984, she said, ‘The poor old hero is full of illusions. He’s not to be thought of as a great writer manqué. He’s just a man who’s obsessed with the idea of art, but can’t actually do it.’ (4) She does not explain how Bradley manages to write what is self-evidently a work of art. This is another part of the first-person narrative convention that the reader accepts, along with the exact memory of the narrator – the fact that this ‘poor old hero’ can write such a novel. His rival author, Arnold Baffin appears to be partly a caricature of herself, with his new book each year, his urge to write and publish and get on with the next book, even when he knows what he has written may not be perfect. The prose style of the narrator differs a little from Murdoch’s usual voice, especially at first. Bradley has a more pedantic voice, a little more precious, with fewer Murdochian strings of three or four adjectives. These are interesting points but operate in the realm of characterisation or impersonation rather than moral judgement. I think one must agree with Dipple that the latter Bradley is as truly enlightened as it is possible to be, given that Murdoch says she can think of no people in her novels who achieve goodness; ‘How many people do we know who achieve goodness? I think it’s extremely rare. Even so-called saints are imperfect’ (Heusel 5-6). However, although the fundamental beliefs of the narrator in his last days may be close to those we know of from Murdoch’s other writings, the character she has created is in this case a distinct person with a vividly imagined life of his own, not just a projection of the author.
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Whether Murdoch writes in the first person as a male because she identifies more with men, as she claims, or because it is easier to create a distinct character with a life of his own when crossing the gender boundary, there is a fundamental importance in the choice. Talking about first person narratives at a French symposium on her work, she said:

I think it is a very important decision that the novelist makes. When I make that decision I'm always anxious about it, for I know that things will come out quite differently if it's written in the first person. The advantages of writing in the first person are obvious. In a way, they are enormous because you can then ramble around endlessly, you can address your reader, and you can produce a tremendous amount of verbiage which has got a sense in relation to the speaker. Also, I think, there's often a bigger emotional charge. ... On the other hand, the danger of this is that it's harder then to create other characters who can stand up to the narrator, because they're being seen through his eyes. (Chevalier 81)

She does not name the freedom that Johnson proposes – that it allows her to shelter behind the ‘protection’ of her narrator ‘in exploring difficult and dangerous regions’ (46), but this may perhaps be inferred from freedom she does name, to ‘ramble around endlessly’. Nevertheless, in her later novels especially, she does not let the third person perspective hinder her ramblings. The success of this novel partly lies in the way the ‘tremendous amount of verbiage’ contributes to a vivid, rounded portrayal of Bradley, whereas in other books it becomes separate from the characterisation and in effect impedes it.

Could this novel have been written in the third person? The first-person form, as I have shown, is not necessary to engage the reader’s sympathy. It may be that being only briefly privy to the points of view of any other characters – and even then only through their own letters or carefully-worded postscripts, rather than omniscient narration – that we are more closely aligned with Bradley’s point of view than any other character. On the other hand, we can also see and understand his failings from our privileged view into his consciousness. The obvious gap between what the narrator says and the reader perceives is more marked in the other first-person novels, particularly
The Sea, The Sea and A Word Child, where the narrators are closer to themselves as characters, and are not so conscious of their faults. We do not feel that either Charles Arrowby or Hilary Burde have learnt a great deal from their experiences. The choice between ‘open’ and ‘closed’ novels which Murdoch has described does not seem to pertain, either, although John Burke suggests re-defining the closed novel as that in which we are ‘by definition locked into or closed inside the consciousness of a single character’ (488). At any rate, The Black Prince is, by her definition, a closed novel, and choosing to write it in the first person does not diminish this tendency. Nevertheless, in this novel she has come close to achieving a synthesis between powerful plot and fully rounded characters. Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, claiming that ‘few … perhaps none’ of Murdoch’s characters ‘resonate in the mind, memorable as unique, created beings, returning to trouble or nourish us … no one remembers the names’ (2), overstates the case.

One of the most important factors in choosing the first person for this novel is the epic situation which is thereby created. It is in the form of a confession, and it would be a very different novel indeed without that aspect. The story could have been related in the third person, it is true, but the reflections on the nature of reality and art would sit oddly in a novel told by an omniscient third person. These events are so closely allied to the perceptions and experiences of the main character that they lend themselves more readily to the subjective narration – in fact, they are really inseparable from it.

Although Bradley rejects redemptive suffering as a false idea, paradoxically it is his ordeal which has enabled him to reach the state of mind where he is able to make this judgement. Although he is literally not guilty of the crime for which he is convicted, he feels during the trial that he is guilty of something wicked. This picturesque explanation certainly had some force, perhaps simply because of the appeal of the picturesqueness to my literary mind. I had not willed Arnold’s death but I had envied him and (sometimes at least) detested him. I had failed
Rachel and abandoned her. I had neglected Priscilla. Dreadful things had happened for which I was in part responsible. (335)

He realises later in prison that ‘I surrendered myself to the trial as to a final exorcism of guilt from my life’ (335). The fact that Bradley judges himself harshly enough to feel that his ordeal was deserved, even predestined by some ‘divine power which held me in its talons’ (337), allows the reader to judge him more leniently. Murdoch is always more interested in explaining than either excusing or judging her characters’ behaviour. The reader may be inclined to accuse Rachel of being the villain in this novel, but this is not Bradley’s opinion, or Murdoch’s evident intention. We know too much of Rachel, even though we see her mainly through Bradley’s eyes, to condemn her outright, and on the other hand we know too little of her, as a separate and distinct person with mysterious thoughts and motivations, to be able to judge her. One point on which Murdoch and her narrator agree is their dislike for ‘semi-educated theorizers who prefer any general blunted “symbolic” explanation to the horror of confronting a unique human history’ (xiv), even though the particular theorist Bradley has in mind here is Francis Marloe, the only character whose actions approach, however distantly, the good life.

Finally, the first-person form of this novel gives it a frame. Its intention is clearly stated in the Foreword: ‘The elementary need to render a truthful account of what has been so universally falsified and misrepresented is the ordinary motive for this enterprise’ (xiii). No other Murdoch novel has such a definite close. Bradley’s life is over before the novel is published, and this fact, coming to us in Loxias’ postscript at the very end of the book, gives what precedes it more status as a work of art, a self-contained object which nevertheless transcends its boundaries. The fact that we have lived with Bradley through these events, and that he is now dead, gives the events of the narrative, in retrospect, a profounder significance. As Loxias says in his postscript, ‘death always seems to commit truth to some wider and larger
court’ (362). In spite of the fact that Murdoch seems to resist closure in most of her novels, readers look to the close of a novel for some indication of how the lives of the characters are likely to continue, if not for the moral. For once, in *The Black Prince*, she has indulged her readers with the death of her protagonist, and a closing moral from Loxias, the editor:

Bradley Pearson’s story, which I made him tell, remains ... durable... Art is not cosy and it is not mocked. Art tells the only truth that ultimately matters. It is the light by which human things can be mended. And after art there is, let me assure you, nothing. (364)

The feminist implications of Murdoch’s male impersonations are thoughtfully dealt with by Deborah Johnson. She states that ‘the problem is complex because so much more is involved in Iris Murdoch’s use of male perspectives than mere ironic distance and implied didactic attitudes’ (13). The same complexity attends her treatment of female characters, and in the next chapter I discuss the development over Murdoch’s career of the idea of the wronged wife.
Chapter Six


David Parker, in *Ethics Theory and the Novel*, discusses ‘the suggestive fact that some of the richest stories in European culture over the past 150 years or so, many of those most widely regarded as “canonical”, have been about adulterous and/or triangular relationships’ (69). He goes on to point out that ‘in these novels it is the dilemma of a woman, always a woman of some sexual vitality, married to a figure D.H. Lawrence called a “social being”’ (71). This woman falls in love with a ‘man Lawrence called an “innocent”: he is in some sense at one both with his own darker nature and with “the great living continuum of the universe”’ (72). There are cases of this type of situation in Murdoch’s novels, but her more interesting triangular plot situations explore from various angles the male adulterer.

The situation of adultery obviously fascinated Murdoch as a novelist – as of course it has many other writers. Again and again in her novels we see a situation where one party to a marriage, often the husband, has divided loyalties. And the attraction for Murdoch is clearly the conflict of moral codes implied in these choices; not simply that one is wrong and the other is right, but that the choice is infinitely complicated and any decision will be a compromise. She maintained a belief in moral standards, despite what D.J. Taylor sees as the erosion of values after the war:

The implications of moral uncertainty, social change and an accompanying linguistic failure for the serious novel, the traditional evocation of manners and morals at which the English customarily excel, are wide-ranging. … Novels about sexual morality tend to flourish in a morally stable society, or one that is only beginning to break up. Take away moral prohibition, and the traditional novel of manners is robbed of most of its point. (Taylor 237)

Murdoch is quite clear, for example, about the evils of promiscuity: ‘I’m very, very hostile to promiscuity, which … does not occur in my books. …
promiscuous world goes with thinking that you don’t have any value. It can represent a kind of despair’ (Mars-Jones). Nevertheless, A.N. Wilson does not think that Murdoch was out of tune with her times:

As the novels of Iris Murdoch appeared, from the early 1950s onwards, there is a sense in which in they represent a phenomenon. They tell us much about the preoccupations of her generation … in some strange way Iris Murdoch explained a generation to itself. (81)

Her values, though, are not repressive social rules but a personal morality, which refuses to ignore the effects of behaviour like adultery on the individuals involved.

Of the four novels which deal with male adultery as a major theme, *The Sandcastle* fits Parker’s model of ‘social beings’ and ‘innocents’ – with a reversal of the sexes – but significant differences appear in the later novels, as sympathy is transferred from the erring male to the wronged wife, and implied criticism of the husband’s egotism increases.

The consensus among critics, sympathetic and antipathetic alike, is that *The Sandcastle* is a problematic novel. Even John Fletcher in his defence of Murdoch’s reputation in *Dictionary of Literary Biography* says that in this novel ‘the moral thrust becomes too intrusive’ (547), and L.R. Leavis dismisses it as ‘a pot-boiler’ (‘Anti-Artist’ 139). Elizabeth Dipple, in her book *Iris Murdoch: Work for the Spirit*, does allow that the novel, in some respects at least, ‘is better than many have thought it’ (17). But only G.S. Fraser, in his early, appreciative article, ‘Iris Murdoch: The Solidity of the Normal’, sees the novel as a mature and successful attempt at the difficult problem of treating a ‘very ordinary theme’ (42).

*The Sandcastle* is Murdoch’s third published novel, and is a departure in style and setting from *Under the Net* and *The Flight from the Enchanter*. As
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Fraser remarks, these two novels are reminiscent of the early Aldous Huxley, especially the latter, with its ‘puppet-like’ characters; and ‘people who enjoyed these two first novels, were disconcerted by … The Sandcastle’ (41). The picaresque quality of the first, and the multiple points of view of the second, perhaps made the concentration on a single sympathetic protagonist in The Sandcastle a surprise, and the central romance which is the focus of the novel has drawn dismissive remarks about its ‘women’s magazine theme’ (Dipple 16). But as Murdoch says, romantic love is ‘a great subject for a novel … because it’s the central drama in the lives of most people’ (Bellamy 139); and in 1961, she said that in writing The Sandcastle, ‘my aim was simply to write a love story’ (Barrows). Given Murdoch’s belief, expressed throughout her non-fiction writings, in the power of and necessity for love, and its intimate connection with morality and spiritual freedom, it is natural that she would want to concentrate on a situation like this, in which different kinds of love are explored. As she told Rose in 1968, ‘love is my main subject’ (68).

The Sandcastle was published in 1957. In 1956 Murdoch published a paper entitled ‘Vision and Choice in Morality’. She writes of positive and radical … moral attitudes which emphasise the inexhaustible detail of the world, the endlessness of the task of understanding, the importance of not assuming that one has got individuals ‘taped’, the connection of knowledge with love and of spiritual insight with apprehension of the unique. (87)

These attitudes are proposed in opposition to a ‘universal rule’ of morality. Elsewhere, she makes explicit links between this type of moral attitude and the aim of the artist. She sees the novel as ‘the form of art most concerned with the existence of other persons’ (‘Sublime and Beautiful’ 278). One would therefore expect that these qualities of receptiveness to others would be an indication of some measure of moral worth. The Sandcastle’s central character,
Mor, for all his weaknesses, has this kind of openness to others: it is this that makes him vulnerable to the emotions which get him into trouble. The language the narrator uses in describing Mor’s thoughts – words like ‘attend’, ‘apprehend’, ‘mystery’ – often echoes that of her philosophical essays, and so do the ideas: as he anticipates his second meeting with Rain Carter, with whom he later falls in love, Mor thinks, ‘Nothing is more educational, in the end, than the mode of being of other people’ (67). And his unpleasant wife, Nan, is a representative of the opposite opinion. ‘Nan hated eccentricity, which she invariably regarded as affectation. She did not, it seemed to Mor, care to conceive that other people might be profoundly different from herself” (20).

But it seems that these qualities are also partly shared by Bledyard, whom most critics see as the moral centre of the novel. For instance,

it was characteristic of Bledyard’s conversation that he did not always attend to remarks made by his interlocutor, but pursued his own train of thought aloud. ... It was also characteristic of Bledyard that whereas he might sit completely silent for long periods at a social gathering, if once he did start to talk he would dominate the conversation. (74)

This sits oddly with his moralising lecture advising Mor, inter alia, to ‘make yourself nothing in your awareness of’ the other people involved in the situation (213). It could perhaps be argued that there is a difference between conversational politeness and moral virtue, but the difference is surely a matter of degree rather than quality. If Bledyard cannot bring himself to listen to the other half of a conversation he is involved in, how can he advise Mor to ‘make himself nothing in his awareness of others’, without hypocrisy? A.S. Byatt remarks in Degrees of Freedom that Bledyard ‘has too much moral force for the events he is set against’ (64). Bledyard, however, is dangerously close to proposing a ‘universal rule’ of morality when he advises Mor to ‘do the thing ... that is right’ (212), in contradiction to the novel’s implicit value system.

Byatt also complains that the novel, in a sense, falls between two stools:

in another book, what he might build [that is, a life with Rain] could have had less flimsy power from the beginning, and this could have
made the whole less of a foregone conclusion; in another book again the foregone conclusion might have had more real compelling necessity and less consolation about it. (68)

The life he might have built with Rain is indeed difficult to envisage, but it cannot be described as a consolation that the defeated Mor returns to the victorious Nan, who, despite the access of self-knowledge and interest in her husband which has resulted from the threat to her marriage, still engineers the destruction of his future with Rain in an underhand way: Mor feels that ‘his whole previous life contained him like a strait-jacket’ (295). There is more than a little narrative sympathy with Demoyte’s exasperation with Mor after Rain leaves – ‘Nothing was inevitable here. You have made your own future’ (307). The dilemma is presented strongly enough that novel could be read as a criticism of Mor’s cowardice in not grasping his chance of happiness and fulfillment, while the consequences, had he done so, are not ignored: ‘there would be a new life and a new world. But that which he was about to break would never mend, and he now knew he would never cease to feel the pain of it’ (278).

In an interview in 1978, Murdoch said, ‘Of course, the author’s relation to his characters reveals a great deal about his moral standpoint’ (Magee 535). In *The Sandcastle*, the third-person narrator stands in a clearly sympathetic relation with Mor, which is not to say, of course, that approval of all his actions is implied. It is significant that Murdoch chose to write this novel principally from his point of view, rather than that of Nan, or Rain, or one of the children. She has commented that it would have been a far better novel if I had spent more imaginative time detaching Nan from the story and not letting her just play the part of this rather tiresome wife but making her somebody with quite extraordinary ideas of her own, playing some quite different game perhaps, having some dream life of her own which is quite different
from that of the other characters. (Bigsby, ‘Interview’ 227)

It certainly would be a different novel if Nan excited the reader’s empathy to a greater degree. The mistake Murdoch makes is a tactical one. By the time we are exposed to any sympathetic treatment of her, we have been enlisted on the side of her husband and his would-be lover, and the demoralising effect on Mor of her casual domination within the marriage has been well established. Her final ploy, which could have been regarded by a sympathetic reader as the justifiable act of a woman desperately afraid of losing the husband she loves, only confirms the earlier bad impression. It is also significant that Mor does not sleep with Rain before they are discovered by Nan. This allows him to accrue even more of the reader’s ‘moral sympathy’ to outweigh any indignation felt on Nan’s behalf. The reader’s sympathy is more actively evoked by their daughter, Felicity. The narrative closes, significantly, with her tears of relief at the reunion of her family, and for her sake we are glad that her father has not abandoned the family. The only clear moral thrust is one that tends towards ambiguity, or perhaps the Hegelian idea that Murdoch discusses (without endorsing) in ‘The Sublime and the Good’: ‘the experience of tragedy ... is the envisaging of a conflict between two incompatible goods. Not a conflict between good and evil but between two goods, which are seen to be such because they incarnate different real social forces with real claims in society’ (213).

The introduction of the occult in the form of Felicity’s supernatural beliefs and practices, and the mysterious gipsy, helps give the novel a typical Murdochian flavour and adds a dimension not usually found in romantic fiction. But, as Byatt says, the symbolism is not always sufficiently integrated with the action of the novel to work well. Murdoch explained to her that ‘the gipsy, called up by Felicity’s enchantment is, as well as being Felicity’s familiar, an image for Rain’s other “gipsy” self, that which endangered her relationship with Mor’ (Byatt 63n). This is far from clear to the uninstructed
reader. The dramatic function of the gipsy is to appear and disturb the other characters, the most significant occasion being his accidental early morning ringing of the doorbell which startles Mor and Rain and puts them off their guard, so that Nan surprises them when she arrives home. The mysterious and supernatural elements are incongruous in this novel, which is primarily a work of psychological realism. They could be analysed in the light of Frank Kermode’s notion of secrets which are ignored by many readers, and which are not necessarily under the control of the author; but they seem too artful and heavily symbolic. It is possible to read the novel without taking much notice of them, in the same way that it is possible to avoid the frequent allusions to dryness, for example. They do, however, play a part in building up a deliberate atmosphere of unease, and add to the sense that the course of events is, in some inexorable way, working against the lovers, which contributes to the force and compulsion of the narrative.

_The Sandcastle_ is not a major work, and it is not one of Murdoch’s best, but it is far from a failure. It has a richness of texture in its early chapters which provides an almost sensual pleasure, and the latter half of the novel is absorbing and exciting. In her 1956 essay, she wrote:

> Certain parables or stories undoubtedly owe their power to the fact that they incarnate a moral truth which is paradoxical, infinitely suggestive and open to continual reinterpretation. ... Such stories provide, precisely through their concreteness and consequent ambiguity, sources of moral inspiration which highly specific rules could not give. (‘Vision’ 91)

Perhaps this novel was written with this aim, and if it falls short of ‘moral inspiration’, it at least entertains and provides plenty of ‘concreteness and consequent ambiguity’.

* * * * *

‘None of her novels,’ writes Lorna Sage in ‘The Pursuit of Imperfection’, ‘dwells exhaustively on its subjects, or on its own language. The imaginative curiosity that is always left over feeds into a new book’ (119). Thus, _An Unofficial Rose_ (1962) could be regarded as a reworking of the love
triangle in *The Sandcastle*. It is, of course, much more than that, but the lyrical opening, with the elderly Hugh Peronett thinking back regretfully from his wife’s graveside to the love affair which he abandoned many years before for his conventional marriage, puts one in mind of Mor as he might be twenty-five years after his affair with Rain. Hugh is certainly not an older version of Mor, and the other characters are clearly quite distinguished from those in the earlier novel, but there are suggestive parallels.

In the exploration of some of Murdoch’s recurrent themes, such as the mythologising of an enchanter figure by other characters in a novel, the plots and characters are not always given enough grounding in psychological realism to be convincing and distinctive. However, in the case of the adultery theme, her novelistic imagination has worked well to give the situations she is exploring realistic settings and emotional justification, and too schematic an analysis of the parallels between these four novels may do her less than justice and play down the important ways in which she has re-imagined new possibilities. Thus, both Mor’s beloved and Hugh’s ex-mistress are artists, but one is a young *ingenue* and a painter, and the other is a highly intelligent ironist and writer of detective stories; each novel has its ‘demon child’, but Felicity is confused and pathetic, trying to use magic rites to influence events, while Hugh’s granddaughter Miranda is clever and manipulative and wields more than her share of influence by force of personality and cunning.

Compared to *An Unofficial Rose*, the plot of *The Sandcastle* is simplicity itself. One interesting aspect of the later book is that, unlike those in many of her more dramatic novels, where people implausibly fall suddenly and often disastrously in love, few of the attachments between characters are new – nearly all have been formed or forming for years, and this adds to its naturalism. Among the older generation the situation is relatively simple; the recently-widowed Hugh hankers after his former love Emma, whereas his old friend Mildred wants him to fill the vacuum left in her life by her homosexual
husband Humphrey. Among the other seven characters, however, the network of desires and entanglements is far more complicated. Humphrey (a peripheral character) is attracted to Hugh’s teenage Australian grandson Penn, who is visiting his English relatives. Penn falls in love with his cousin Miranda, who is secretly in love with Mildred’s half-brother Felix. Felix is in love with Miranda’s mother Ann, who is torn between him and her delinquent and estranged husband Randall. Randall is in love with Lindsay, Emma’s secretary (in fact even Emma, Lindsay and Randall form a triangle of a sort). Lindsay is (probably) in love with Randall, and it is their romance which is at the centre of this intricate plot.

The novel is framed by narrative focalised through the consciousness of Hugh, a slow man, unperceptive to the point of innocence, gently selfish, and quite lovable. The quiet irony with which he is portrayed, with his rationalisations, misinterpretations and timidity, give the opening and closure of this book a charm which does not characterise all Murdoch’s novels. Hugh’s own dim awareness of people around him, and his imperfect grasp of the significance of what is happening at any time, begin and end the narrative, and this echoes the other characters’ tendency to misunderstand, and to be misled and manipulated. On the first reading, therefore, indeterminacy is built into the novel. The narrative passes like a spotlight from scene to scene, from the mind of Hugh, who knows something (but not everything) of his own feelings, and nothing of anyone else’s, with a slight but enlivening jolt to Randall in the company of Lindsay and Emma, his relationship with whom had been only obliquely hinted at before, and then to Mildred in conversation with Humphrey, where we learn of Felix’s attachment to Ann and her own to Hugh. And so it goes on, the exposition in this case delicately and unobtrusively handled so that even the unexpected revelation of Miranda’s destructive obsession with Felix, saved until Chapter 36 when her plan to separate him from her mother has succeeded, seems to come at its appropriate time. In other
novels, the withholding of such important information to the understanding of events and motives can seem like authorial cheating. In *The Green Knight*, for example, the teenager Moy, all along assumed by others to be in love with Clement, is finally revealed to be in love with Harvey, and this late discovery jars because she has been the focaliser in several parts of the narrative, and we are thus denied knowledge of a significant fact, for no apparent reason but to increase the dramatic irony. Miranda, on the other hand, has up to this point in the novel been a source of mystification for many of the major characters as well as the reader, who has had no access to her thoughts until now. Her actions make a mockery of the adults who believe they are acting from their own free will, or on the dictates of their consciences. (In this she is like Emma, and it is significant that Emma dislikes Miranda, seeing in her a rival manipulator or enchanter.)

One way in which this novel improves on *The Sandcastle* is in its more balanced view of the central marriage, and its more circumspect and intricate analysis of the dynamics of the relations between husband and wife. The demoralising effect of Randall’s behaviour on Ann is well conveyed:

> The particular quality of her long battle with Randall had seemed progressively to empty the certainties by which she lived, as if the real world were being quietly taken away, grain by grain, and stored in some place of which she had no knowledge. This did not make her doubt the certainties. There would be for her no sudden switch of the light which would show a different scene. But there was a dreariness, a hollowness. She could not inhabit what she ought to be. (119)

Murdoch has named the struggle between Ann and Randall as an example of the conflict she often dramatises between the artist (Randall) and the religious figure (Ann). Discussing the qualities that can make a ‘good character’ interesting, she admitted the possibility of a ‘demonic’ or eccentric aspect of these characters overriding their ‘good qualities’. ‘I think Ann ... is a good character without being demonic, but then, of course, it may be that she’s not interesting enough. There is always this problem’ (Bellamy 136). Ann’s refusal of happiness and lack of self-assertion does give her a dullness that
many readers would find not only unattractive but irritating. Ann rejects Felix partly from a sense of wifely duty:

Looking back on her last interview with Felix, Ann felt that it had simply been a muddle. Yet deep in the muddle there was, there must have been, some decisive form. What had most struck her, before seeing him, as essential had been her image of Randall returning, Randall searching for her, Randall crying for her, and not finding her. She had been, at this, overwhelmed by a tide of pity and compassion for Randall, a tide she could only in the end say of love for Randall. This feeling, which was in its way blinding and suffocating, seemed to make it impossible for her to say yes to Felix; (304)

and yet ‘she had not meant the words as Felix had taken them’ (305), and ‘if he had only seized her when he came in, if he had kissed her ... she felt she must have submitted’ (305). She does not believe that Randall will come back, and even believes that her moral duty is perhaps to set him free, but she

had never really had the conception of doing what she wanted. The idea of doing what she ought, early and deeply implanted in her soul, and sedulously ever since cultivated, had by now almost removed from her the possibility ... of a pure self-regarding movement of will. ... She was prepared, moreover ... to see in her absence of straightforward operative desires something corrupting, something deadening. (266)

Murdoch’s narrator asserts, though, that Ann is wrong to accuse herself, and that she is calling ‘her good an evil’. The reader is explicitly warned not to make the same mistake.

Ann is thus one of the few characters in the novel who does not claim the credit for Randall’s departure with Lindsay, but few of the calculations characters make about the effects of their actions are accurate, whether their motives are selfish or altruistic. Mildred is the most active schemer as far as we know, but she is not the only one. One of the novel’s many moral dilemmas is whether she should advise Hugh to sell his valuable Tintoretto painting to finance Randall’s escape. She believes that if she does, Randall will take Lindsay away from Emma, which will leave Ann available for her brother Felix, but will also leave Emma available for Hugh, whom she covets
for herself. So when she decides to initiate this train of events, she believes
she is sacrificing her hopes of Hugh. However, neither of these consequences
occurs, and she ends up with Hugh after all – rewarded for her unselfishness.
But poetic justice is far from satisfied in the novel as a whole (and Mildred’s
action certainly has its morally questionable side quite apart from the fact that
it is to her personal disadvantage). The egotist Randall gains his freedom, and
with the knowledge that if it fails to please he is free to return to Ann, who he
believes, with justification, will wait for him indefinitely. Felix behaves like
‘an officer and a gentleman’ (279), and thus loses Ann, but he has the
delightful Marie-Laure awaiting him in Delhi as a consolation prize. The
Murdochian figure of good, Ann, like her later version Tallis in *A Fairly
Honourable Defeat*, is left waiting for an errant and unreliable spouse, blankly
and without hope carrying on her mundane life. Ann is one of Murdoch’s
‘saints’, and Randall is one of her demonic artistic men, and their marriage
looks like a wreck. But, in the ironic closure of the book, Murdoch makes it
clear that Randall is likely to come back to Ann – in a sense he has never left
her, as he wakes each morning from dreams of her, believing he is still at
Grayhallock with her and his rose nursery.

Randall has a fantasy, lying in bed with Lindsay, in which he ‘picture[s]
himself based on Ann and the roses and having as many other women as he
pleased without troubling’ (292). This particular form of male egotism is
worked through in two later novels. Blaise in *The Sacred and Profane Love
Machine* (1974) runs two households for many years, until he is forced to tell
his wife about his other family. Here for the first time the question of the
wife’s complicity in her husband’s adultery arises, to be more fully explored in
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There is only the faintest suggestion, contradicted by the narrator, in *An Unofficial Rose* that Ann’s nature – her ‘dreadful lack of vigour, ... [her] lack of any hard surface to grasp or to brace oneself against’ (266) – may have involuntarily caused Randall’s bad behaviour. Harriet, the wife in *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*, is also innocent in every way of her husband’s love affair with Emily – unknowing, and guiltless. When she is finally confronted with the truth, however, her instinct is to try to control the situation by taking over and giving Blaise ‘permission’ to allocate time and money to her rival. The existence of Luca, Blaise and Emily’s son, seems to make it all the more essential to behave fairly. This situation, however, is not sustainable. It relies on too many evasions of the truth. ‘It was psychologically necessary to Harriet to feel that she had played a good, even an absurdly good, part. But she was aware enough to know that the sheer awfulness of the situation had an impetus of its own which was beyond her will and beyond the will of others too’ (213-4). She can only sustain her ‘absurd goodness’ by believing Blaise’s transparently insincere denial of his continuing love for Emily. She likens his predicament to a physical disability:

> Harriet’s marriage vows had indeed prepared her to travail for her husband, and she had always been ready to. Was she to repine that the ordeal, when it came, was such an odd one? If Blaise had become blind would she not have read to him, condemned to a wheelchair, would she not have pushed it? (192)

That there is a significant qualitative difference between these situations and the existence of a mistress during half of their marriage is another fact Harriet tries to suppress. The turning point, the crisis which destroys these illusions, not only in Harriet but in Blaise and Emily as well, occurs when Edgar, the friend of their neighbour Monty, a bumbling, well-meaning but rather ridiculous man reminiscent of Francis in *The Black Prince*, drunkenly interrupts a party where all the principals are gathered, and delivers an
impassioned homily to Harriet which breaks the spell:

No one here, not even you, is good enough to redeem this thing. They will not tolerate your forgiveness, in the end they will hate you for it, they will go on intriguing as they have always done, they will not even be able to help it, and you will find too late that you have not been a healer but an accomplice of evil. He must decide, he must choose, that is where he has put himself. He has not acknowledged his fault, he is continuing in it, and you will be eternally his victim, abandoning him to wicked ways and conniving at his sin. For his sake you must not allow this foul thing to continue. (210-1)

The chain of events consequent upon this confrontation leads inexorably although accidentally to Harriet’s violent death, but it is nevertheless the clearest available expression of the novel’s ethics – and Murdoch characteristically puts it in the mouth of an inept drunkard.

The narrative of this novel has the most even balance of focalisation between the three main characters of any of those under consideration. All are fully dramatised in their attempts to deal with the invidious situation, their rationalisations and evasions of the truth; and all are treated with some degree of sympathy, although it is undercut by varying levels of irony. The narrative voice keeps its distance even from Harriet, who is the most sympathetically portrayed of the three. Her desperate need of a love object after Blaise leaves her makes her a little ridiculous as she appeals to Monty, then Edgar, then seeks the fictional Magnus Bowles (whom Blaise and Monty have created as an alibi for Blaise’s absences); and finally her desperate flight to Germany to seek her brother’s protection is beginning to appear futile when she dies so absurdly in an airport massacre.

Emily is herself an ironist. She uses sarcasm in her fights with Blaise, attacking him contemptuously for his weakness and belittling Harriet (before she meets her) by naming her ‘Mrs Placid’. She, like Harriet, wants to believe herself to be the one Blaise truly loves, but being more of a realist than Harriet, and also having been in the position of the ‘other woman’ from the first, knows that Blaise is probably lying to both of them. Emily blames herself for not
forcing Blaise to leave his wife at the beginning: ‘If I had threatened to break with him, he would have done anything. I should have forced him’ (67), she says to herself, but she is afraid of the consequences of any dramatic action on her part to bring things to a head. Her squalid circumstances before the revelation to Harriet, with her bad teeth, alienated son and busybody lodger, are graphically portrayed, but her shrewish desperation is beginning to put Blaise off and the reader may at this stage find it difficult to sympathise with her fully.

It is, of course, Blaise’s moral dilemma which is at the core of the plot. His hand is forced by the appearance of Luca, Emily’s son from their relationship, in the garden of his marital home, and he decides he must now tell Harriet about Emily before she finds out in some other way. Typically, then, it is not a brave decisive move but a desperate attempt to salvage the situation and keep it under some sort of control. His mental gymnastics are recounted at some length. He is absolutely divided between the two women, and he is of course honest with neither of them.

Men in other ages and societies had been able to have two, or many more, women whom they kept incarcerated in separate places and visited when they felt in the mood. An elderly less-loved wife could be retained as an amiable companion, or simply out of pity, and should feel no resentment at that. A man, any man, surely needed various women, there were so many possibilities and styles of love and affection and habit. Why should some of them automatically exclude the others? He led a double life. Did that make him a liar? He did not feel a liar. He was a man of two truths, since both these lives were valuable and true. (80)

The egotism of this train of thought, and its sexism, are plain. Blaise exalts his selfish desires into a rational system of belief. He and Emily share a physical bond which the narrator refers to as ‘peculiarity’ or ‘strangeness’, presumably some form of sado-masochism, and this justifies them at the beginning: ‘sin was an awful private happiness blotting out all else; only it was not sin, it was glory, it was his good, his very own, manifested at last’ (72). Expressed like this, his love for Emily acquires an almost spiritual status. When he is living
with her in their new flat, having left Harriet, he feels at first that their ‘intense mutual erotic love, love which involves with the flesh all the most refined sexual being of the spirit, which reveals and perhaps even \textit{ex nihilo} creates spirit as sex’ (261), creates its own justification. This passage calls into question the natural assumption that the sacred love of the title is Harriet, and the profane Emily. In his affair with Emily, it has been a matter of reproach that Blaise has settled for second-best in his marriage, while Emily has ‘remained true to her deep thing’ (72). His materially secure and rather mundane relationship with Harriet could then be seen as a type of profanity. However, there are two moral systems operating here (calling to mind Parker’s idea of the conflict of the Romantic and the Judeo-Christian ideals) and it is explicitly stated elsewhere that Blaise has felt ‘that Harriet was his sacred love and Emily his profane’ (342). What is clear is that Blaise feels justified in his double life, and has not the moral strength and imagination to act rightly at first, and to conduct himself creditably later on. The narrator makes it clear that the cage which he finds himself inside is ‘made of long wrong-doing’ (216), and although he believes his sin to be a good, it is still a sin. The other part of the title, the machine, refers to the automatic, unstoppable series of ‘deep inevitable consequences’ (261) that attend upon this wrong-doing, a Murdochian theme that occurs again and again in her novels, and an image which appears frequently in the text – characters are caught in machines, made from their own actions and those of others, but they are also often described, mind and body, as mechanical in themselves.

The fact that Harriet is disposed of so fortuitously gives Emily an unexpected and complete victory over her. We see her happiness at her new status as Blaise’s wife, as she and Blaise work ‘silently, surreptitiously, feverishly, like people trying to conceal a crime, to erase all traces of Harriet’s existence’ (339), but Murdoch balances this by sixteen-year-old David’s terrible grief at his mother’s death and alienation from his father, as well as
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eight-year-old Luca’s retreat into silence after the shock of witnessing Harriet’s violent death. The novel could logically end with Emily, pregnant again, seeing her future stretching ‘out before her like a golden land’ (346). However, there follows a coda in which the focus moves to Edgar, whose ‘testimony’ has been so crucial in the chain of events, but who has otherwise had a fairly small part to play in the novel. Part of the function of this passage is to recount his conversation with David, where we can see his unhappiness contrasted with Emily’s joy, but then it moves off to concentrate on Edgar’s personal story, about which the narrative has previously concerned itself hardly at all. Edgar is one of the survivors. He is able to be optimistic and overcome his grief and look forward to a new beginning, as perhaps David will as well, it is hinted, and even perhaps Luca, whose case the psychiatrists ‘did not regard … as hopeless’ (337). Life goes on, the dead are left behind, if not forgotten. Ending there, with several new beginnings, may be principally designed to make the novel more open – ‘a reminder that there is another world outside the work of art’ such as Murdoch writes of in Metaphysics as a Guide To Morals (195), and, characteristically, to resist closure.

* * * * *

The Message to the Planet is a large book and contains two fairly loosely linked plots. The primary narrative concerns a young historian, Ludens, and his frantic attempts to wrest the meaning of life from the tiresomely enigmatic sage Marcus Vallar – one of Murdoch’s enchanter figures who exert an implausible influence on other characters. The secondary plot concerns a more humanly involving and realistic triangular situation between the egotistical painter Jack Sheerwater, his wife Franca, and his young girlfriend Alison.

In this case, the focus has shifted entirely to the wife. Her point of view is the only one of the three which is dramatised, and her dilemma is explored in depth, so that it becomes irrelevant within the moral scheme what Jack or
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Alison decide to do, even though they are *prima facie* the guilty parties.

The new element in this triangle is that Franca has known about Jack’s infidelities and has forgiven him, condoning his affairs so as to keep the peace with him. If it is part of the moral framework of *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* that Blaise’s deceit is a major cause of the tragedy, this novel re-examines this idea by exploring the ‘open marriage’ where deceit is explicitly excluded (which does not mean that it is not implicitly present). Jack affects to believe that ‘the bad thing about adultery was the lying, that was the poison’ (26), and proceeds to have affairs whenever he pleases, keeping Franca informed and always declaring that she is his permanent, eternal love. She feels at first that she must accept this: ‘It did not occur to her that she might be pitied, she did not think of herself as a wronged or defeated woman. Her love connived at what she now took to be inevitable’ (26). On this basis their marriage continues for some years. At the point where the novel begins, however, Jack is conducting an affair with the 24-year-old Alison, and he decides to offer her a permanent relationship. Franca is to remain his wife, and to continue living in the matrimonial home with them as a kind of dowager wife. She has long trained herself to hide her feelings: ‘Of course she uttered no reproaches and learnt to conceal her unhappiness, to conceal it even from herself” (26). The breathtaking solipsism of Jack’s assumption that she will be content with this new arrangement is made possible by her continued concealment of her feelings from him, but she finds it increasingly difficult to conceal them from herself. Behind her calm exterior she seethes, entertaining fantasies of murder and worse.

At one time, even lately, she had thought that she could bear it, turning it all into pure love. She had imprisoned her anger and hate in a part of her mind, as something unworthy which could be overcome. Jack had said, and said again and again, that all would be well provided no one told lies. But now she herself, her mind and her heart, was composed entirely of lies, the anger and the hate were everywhere, and worse, the calculation, the conspiracy, the dreams of revenge. (171-2)

Even when she breaks down and confesses her real feelings to Ludens, he does
not believe she means it: ‘You've simply got to live this, be kind and good, be what you're really like, be patient’ (234). Her reaction is to wonder if he is right, ‘Can one simply, in the name of truth or good, carrying it like a banner, deny the existence of such a fierce awful tumult?’ (234).

Shortly after this conversation with Ludens, she tells her new friend, the American painter Maisie Tether, about her situation, and finds someone who echoes her thoughts, even though she denies them herself: ‘So you collude in a situation which demeans you, and exposes him as a rotter. ... I find this disgusting, I pity you’ (250). Franca, although she argues with Maisie, looks back at these remarks and finds them ‘invigorating’ (253). Maisie thus plays a similar role to that of Edgar in *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*, but where Edgar’s truth gives Harriet only momentary strength which propels her on an ill-fated journey to seek her brother’s protection, Franca is fortified by Maisie to the point of deciding to abandon Jack. She is just about to leave for America to join Maisie, having left a letter telling Jack of her decision, when she discovers, before Jack knows, that Alison has left him as well. She has the choice, through chance, of intercepting Alison’s letter telling she has left him, or her own. Franca decides to destroy her own letter and return to him. Thus her love for and loyalty to Jack overrides her pride:

   I can't fight, not against him, whatever pains there be, for I do love him eternally. As for the future, there might be bitter tears, but she felt that whatever the suffering she had fought the battle of it already. She had fought rightly, and been perfectly defeated, and that was right too. (539)

Jack is not to suffer for his behaviour, and for once I believe Murdoch has weighted the scales against romantic love and in favour of independence and pride. There is disappointment built into this ‘happy ending’.

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Murdoch does not write as a ‘woman’s author’. Nevertheless, it seems that in the case of this particular theme, her sympathies have undergone a change over the years. After *The Sandcastle*, with its sympathetic male (would-be)
adulterer and unsympathetic wife, she has, in this procession of novels, shifted her authorial approval from the husbands to the wives, in keeping with her self-criticism about Nan’s limitations as a character. She has said that she is ‘not interested in women’s problems as such’ and that ‘one’s just a human being’ (Bellamy 133), and that ‘the ordinary human condition still seems to belong more to a man than to a woman’ (Biles 119), so she usually prefers to write about men; but the problems her male adulterers face are generally typical of their sex in her fictional world. They struggle to reconcile their imagined need for more than one woman with the reluctance of their women to share (and note Blaise’s jealousy when he suspects either of his women of having an interest in another man). They want, in short, to have it all with impunity.

Unfaithful wives like Midge in *The Good Apprentice* and Jean in *The Book and The Brotherhood* naturally face conflicts of loyalties as well, but they do not imagine that they can continue both relationships indefinitely the way Blaise and Jack do, or expect their spouses to wait for them indefinitely as Randall does. In each of these husbands, the conflict between the two strands of morality, the Judaeo-Christian-Kantian and the Romantic-Enlightenment-Nietzschean (Parker 37), is dramatised. Mor is tugged both ways, and Randall feels the pull of the Romantic morality more than the social: he is fascinated by the idea that Lindsay and Emma obey a moral code quite different from what he is familiar with. He says to Lindsay, ‘Your morality is not [depressing] ... It invigorates, it inspires, it gives life’ (*Unofficial* 124). Jack, it seems, believes he can honour both strands, but ends up happily finding that passion and duty can in the end be reconciled. Blaise practically embodies both, and the resultant split in his loyalties is fatal – if it had not killed Harriet, something or someone else would have been destroyed – and he finds when his
profane love Emily becomes his wife, their relationship subtly changes: ‘The fact of being *married* to Emily came to him with a kind of shock of innocence and blankness, like a very white light, and while it made him feel deeply tender towards her it seemed to diminish their old vertiginous feeling of a unique kinship’ (*Sacred* 342). In a way, these men resemble a bad novelist, whose ‘drive to resolve all conflicts’ causes their work to become ‘schematic, shallow, sentimental, evasive, insistent, or non-explanatory’ (Parker 57). Their lives exhibit some of these qualities – Randall’s shallowness, Blaise’s evasiveness, and Jack’s sentimentality all spring to mind.

It is interesting to consider where the ‘goodness’ of the wives in the later three novels resides, given Murdoch’s philosophical stance. Ann is good in Murdoch’s classic way. She has schooled herself in good behaviour as Murdoch recommends in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*:

> The whole of morality involves the discipline of desire which leads to instinctive good action. This slow discipline, this gradual shift of inclination, is less visible, and indeed less interesting, than the dramatic head-on encounters between duty and interest, or duty and passion, which can be so effectively displayed and explored in literature. (384)

But in what way does her acceptance of Randall’s behaviour – or at least her failure to reject him – differ from Harriet and Franca’s condoning of evil? All three are traditional good wives – faithful home makers, unambitious for themselves, supportive of their husbands’ work, quiet and undramatic. But in Franca, the ‘discipline of desire’ has cost too much, and it is obvious that her ‘good behaviour’ is a facade behind which bitter and revengeful feelings are barely concealed, and that although she smiles over the thought that she ‘might be in danger of actually becoming as saintly as I seem’ (155), she is on a more reliable path to a good life by following Maisie Tether’s advice and refusing to martyr herself. Harriet’s attempts to be good, like Franca’s, are partly to do with maintaining a favourable self-image, but the shock to her long habit of
trusting and loving Blaise leaves her without any refuge such as that Franca has in Maisie, and her violent death almost seems the only viable solution to her problems as well as those of Blaise and Emily: her dreadful misery is, at least, at an end. In this way, having created an ideal figure of good in Ann, Murdoch subjects this ideal to increasing stress to see how it will break.

In a review of *The Message to the Planet*, Paul Duguid wrote that Murdoch’s novels ‘collectively resemble an artist’s insistent attempt to keep reworking a subject until the right picture emerges’. In these four novels, we can see her mind at work on the theme of male adultery, if not seeking a ‘right’ picture, at least considering the implications, in each case, of a similar situation is altered in one or two important ways. The ‘facts’ change – which of the characters knows about the adulterous relationship, what they believe about it, whether or not there are children involved – but also, just as importantly, the point of view alters. The particularities of all these situations are, as I have said, vital to an understanding of their moral structure. But the particularities themselves have been given their arrangement by an author who is herself a moral agent, and Eagleton notes that ‘it impoverishes the literary to see it as all particularity, just as it travesties the political to see it as all abstraction’ (‘Is Theory’). Thus Murdoch made the decision to tell Mor’s side of the story in *The Sandcastle*, and then to give equal time to Randall and Ann in *An Unofficial Rose*, to include Emily as well as the married couple in *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*, and finally to focus only on Franca in *The Message to the Planet*. It is tempting to read into this progression an increasing sympathy with feminism: Johnson observes that ‘in general, the opening out of the plot-structures brings with it a liberation of the female characters’ (70). However, there is a parallel with these adultery plots in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, where Tallis, the wronged husband, becomes the figure of good, trapped in his dreary life, passively waiting for his circumstances to change, while Morgan is an egotist who believes she is free,
and indeed has a freedom of movement traditionally available only to men. Caution is advisable before making generalisations about trends based on a small selection of examples.

The morality of these novels is complex. It is important, as Murdoch insists in her moral philosophy, to try to live well and unselfishly, but the ‘slow discipline of desire’ (*Metaphysics* 384) is easier to describe than to enact. Another review of *The Message to the Planet*, by Anatole Broyard, quotes her have as having said ‘that good art is philosophy swimming, or philosophy drowning.’ He goes on, ‘it may be too that fiction is her revenge on philosophy.’ It is the place where she tests her philosophical ideas and, often, implicitly finds them wanting; but it also provides the field for a struggle between her philosophy of fiction and her novelistic instincts in which the casualty has been, increasingly over her career, the very illusion of realism which is her highest aim. However, in these novels, the adultery theme has provided scope for her exploration of ethical questions without the intrusion of the bizarre. Sexual passion and jealousy cause enough eccentric behaviour to create narrative tension without the need to invent the kind of wild and improbable situations and odd characters which have often characterised her later novels.
Iris Murdoch: Conclusion

How do Murdoch’s novels live up to her ideals as she has expressed them outside her fiction? She has developed an ethical view of what novels should be, not based on the way she can best use her particular talents, but on what James Wood calls ‘a stern metaphysics’ (‘Iris Murdoch’ 183). Her most important aim is to create ‘free’ characters in ‘open’ novels. She is conscious of failing to achieve this aim, but to what extent do her opinions about the nature of that failure correspond with those of her readers?

She said in 1986 that she thought her later novels were better:

I think in novels with a great many characters one just has more successful ones because they have a larger field to play in. The danger with a very strong plot and a few very strong characters is that other characters, perhaps, haven’t got any space in which to develop themselves. I think there’s more detail in general in the later novels. They are longer novels, and there’s more opportunity for descriptions of all kinds, and I think they are more realistic. The characters are better, and I think this is the main thing, to be able to invent characters who have a life of their own, who seem to exist, and who may not be obviously like ordinary people at all, but then they may be what ordinary people are like in the eyes of God, as it were. I think the advantage of the novelist is that he can see into the soul. (Todd 101)

Characters who have a life of their own, one would expect, would live on in the reader’s memory long after the novel had been read, and would seem to amount to more than their physical description and their thoughts and utterances – in other words, they would be more than the sum of their parts. Murdoch has created so many characters in her career that it is not surprising that certain types recur. There are certain peculiarities which keep appearing – many middle-aged people are childless, for example; hardly anyone, in the age of the supremacy of television, owns a set – they prefer the radio; and women setting up new households with their lovers, however temporary, delight in
Buying domestic utensils – even characters as different as Emily in *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* and Julian in *The Black Prince*. She has, nevertheless, succeeded in creating some ‘real people’ who remain in the memory. It is not, in spite of her belief to the contrary, in the later novels that most of these people appear. They tend to be characters seen principally from the outside, as is natural: an outside view can show memorable idiosyncratic details which are not registered via the inside view, except via contrived views in mirrors. Both Simon and Tallis in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* remain in the memory, because they are objects of focalisation as well as focalisers; Emma Sands in *An Unofficial Rose* is memorable, with her clever face, her voluminous skirts, and her cigarettes. They are not always major characters, either. Often they are economically sketched, like Miss Handforth, Demoyte’s housekeeper in *The Sandcastle*. Wood writes that her novels ‘are full of characters who are clearly not their author, but who often seem savagely meaningless in any way other than in their histrionic freedom’ (‘Iris Murdoch’ 183). A.N. Wilson sees ‘her fictions as an endless series of make-believes, of Iris imagining herself in different roles like the only child with a crowd of imaginary friends’ (80), while Harold Bloom observes that of all her talents, the gift of plotting is the most formidable. … that is how Murdoch tends to manifest her considerable exuberance as a writer, rather than in the creation of endless otherness in her characters, which nevertheless (and rather sadly) seems to constitute her largest ambition. (1-2)

Her success in creating characters is qualified, but nevertheless, as Schneiderman says, ‘in her many novels, Murdoch gives testimony to the wide range of her empathetic capacity, made possible by her moral intensity and her ability to imagine lives very different to her own’ (392). It may be that
Murdoch’s reiteration of this as her most important aim has made readers over-critical in this regard: the chief problem is not that characters are indistinguishable in looks or personality, but that emotional preoccupations and intellectual obsessions carry over from one novel to the next, embodied in different people in different, but often similarly bizarre, situations. Patricia Waugh quotes Murdoch’s discussion of *Under the Net* in her interview with Kermode: ‘The problem which is mentioned in the title is the problem of how far conceptualizing and theorizing, which from one point of view are absolute, essential, in fact divide you from the thing that is the object of theoretical attention’ (65); and goes on to say, ‘However, her obsessive concern with the self-conscious presentation of this dilemma in her fiction often precludes the possibility of developing the “opaque” or “contingent” characters which she desires’ (81). She herself acknowledged that ‘in order to tell the truth, especially about anything complicated, we need a conceptual apparatus which partly has the effect of concealing what it attempts to reveal’ (‘Existentialists and Mystics’ 221).

Her other criteria for good novels are perhaps easier to measure against her work. Comic they certainly are. Awful things happen, but they are most often absurdly awful, surrounded with irrelevancies and distractions, rather than the stark and beautiful terror of tragedy. Life goes on for the survivors, the dead are left behind and superseded by other loves, other obsessions. Even Bradley Pearson’s death, which could almost aspire to tragedy, is cushioned with the postscripts of other characters who comically demonstrate their continued vitality. She also resists the satirical urge: it is difficult to think of a passage in any of the novels which could be described as genuinely satirical,
although there are some which she could have steered that way if she were so inclined: Rupert’s philosophical explanation of why stealing is wrong in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, perhaps, or Blaise’s professional psychological activities in *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*. Perhaps the closest approach to satire comes in ironic touches in her first-person narratives, for example, when Bradley describes a childhood experience of beauty: ‘the child wept and knew himself an artist’ (87); but satire is a mode of writing which refuses to countenance explanation and understanding and stands apart from and above its subject matter, and its particular hard brilliance is not Murdoch’s style at all.

Another of her criteria is the all-important distinction between imagination and fantasy: imagination being an impersonal force, and fantasy mere wish-fulfillment on the artist’s part. Schneiderman points out that ‘we know so little about her private life, that it is difficult to estimate the extent to which she has been able to compose her novels without drawing upon her deepest personal concerns’ (391-2). In what she regards as imaginative, truthful writing, ‘poetic justice’ must be resisted. Tallis must sustain his fairly honourable defeat, but go on trying, while Julius enjoys himself unpunished, because that is the way of the world. This does not mean ‘happy endings’ are disallowed. As Joyce Carol Oates remarked, in a perceptive essay written in 1978, some of Murdoch’s characters ‘realize that they are doomed to happiness and to the mediocrity that seems to imply’ (‘Sacred’ 3). Happy endings occur, but they are never unqualified. Tim and Gertrude reunite in *Nuns and Soldiers*, but the Count remains alone as a result; Simon and Axel re-establish their happiness in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, but in the shadow of Rupert’s absurd
and horrible death. The characters who end up happily are not always the ‘best’ or most deserving, or the most identifiable with Murdoch and her ideas.

Her novels, she would like to think, dissipate drama and allow ordinary life to leak in: the comic and absurd play their part in this dissipation. But many of her novels contain highly dramatic situations; and they tend to be the memorable parts, rather than the philosophical conversations or reflective musings of her characters, or, in many cases, the individual characters themselves: as Bloom points out, plotting is her greatest talent. One way drama can be resisted effectively is at the close of a novel, and this is perhaps where she is most successful in this regard. The end of *The Sea, The Sea*, after all the drama, shows Charles, the protagonist, drifting back to his old ways. Mor, at the end of *The Sandcastle*, wanders, resigned and undramatic, back into his family circle and picks up the threads. Drama is not interested in the accommodations made by the survivors of catastrophe, whereas Murdoch’s novels make a point of noticing them.

Murdoch is an authoritarian novelist in the sense that she does not want her novels to be factually indeterminate. A careful reader, she believes (or hopes), can always establish what ‘really’ happens in her novels. It is clear, however, from her interviews that this is not always the case. She has had to explain that Bradley did not kill Arnold in *The Black Prince* (Todd 103), that Anne in *Nuns and Soldiers* really may have been visited by Jesus (Heusel 11), and that James in *The Sea, The Sea* did save Charles’ life by some super-human feat accomplished through his Buddhist training (Bigsby 213). Most of her novels, though, do leave one in little doubt as to the events, natural and supernatural. The deeper meanings and myths are naturally not so obvious, but
she has said several times that she is not concerned if readers fail to notice them. The novels she feels are better, her later novels, as she says, are longer and have room for descriptions of all kinds; the elliptical statement and the pregnant silence are not her style. The later novels are not in fact uniformly better than the earlier ones. It could be argued, for example, that Ludens’ quest for the truth he believes Marcus possesses in *The Message to the Planet* is merely an unwieldy and overblown reiteration of Jake’s pursuit of Hugo Belfounder in *Under the Net*. Her belief in the superiority of the later novels is a symptom of her central problem: that she regards her great dramatic gift as, in a way, a drawback, which impedes her in the impossible aim of creating the perfect open novel. Because she was continually worrying at the problem of writing the novels she believed she should aspire to, she failed to develop in the way she might have had she accepted her considerable novelistic gifts for what they were. Patrick Swinden analyses her problem thus: some of her characters have learned to accept their situation, like Tallis, and in a world where most people are for ever exercising their claim to be free, such behaviour is … bound to seem eccentric. The form of Iris Murdoch’s plots, and the positions occupied in them by these natural and eccentric characters, reveals the ambiguous position she finds herself in vis-à-vis the worlds of nature and of freedom. Intellectually, she escapes the trap this modern dilemma sets for her. But her very intellectuality narrows the scope of her work to an enrichment of the concepts by which we grow to understand reality. (257)

Her plots, meanwhile, become increasingly tailored to demonstrate these concepts, rather than to portray realistic situations, and are driven by a similar set of compulsions embodied in her various major characters, with the ironic consequence that her strivings for realism are undermined by the very techniques she has developed to attain it. The fact remains that, though her plots may be ‘silly [and] inconsequential’, in the words of Joyce Carol Oates,
they are nevertheless ‘deeply absorbing’ (Oates 5): her attempts to suppress her plotting skill never entirely succeeded.

She told Michael Bellamy that there was social criticism in the novels, ‘in a quiet way’ (Bellamy 133). And it certainly is quiet. It is difficult to think of an example of what would ordinarily be called social criticism, in the same way, and for similar reasons, as it is difficult to identify any satire in the novels. D.W. Harding said, talking about Jane Austen, ‘Not to be preoccupied with abstract social questions is almost a necessary condition of writing a good novel’ (Harding 65). Murdoch is sometimes too preoccupied with abstract moral questions, but although social reality constantly obtrudes in her characters’ lives, it most often comes in the form of necessary personal responsibilities, like Mor’s duty to his children, or Bradley’s duty to Priscilla. The belittling and destructive power of gossip is sometimes mentioned, but more as an example of human nature than as social criticism. Individual responsibility is too important to Murdoch for her to be a social critic.

Individual responsibility is connected with individual difference. One of her most striking techniques for conveying her moral position that individual people have value and are profoundly different is to show how often people’s opinions and feelings are very different to what other characters believe, or assume, they are, even when there is no intention to deceive. Sometimes very close siblings, or lovers, or happily married couples are able to read each other’s thoughts, but more often assumptions are inaccurate, often with desperate consequences – for Hartley in The Sea, The Sea, for example, whom Charles disastrously misunderstands. Schneiderman says ‘her favorite strategy is to reveal, at the end of a novel, how the protagonists’ perceptions of various
relationships were entirely mistaken’ (380). Her detailed descriptions and sometimes almost Homeric repetition of epithets are also a part of a moral imperative to particularise. Felix’s car, in *An Unofficial Rose*, is always described as the ‘very dark blue Mercedes’, Julian’s hair in *The Black Prince* is described carefully every time she appears – in fact, an interesting study could be made of hair in Murdoch’s novels: so much attention is paid to it that one could conclude that it must have some coded meaning. Very few of her male characters are bald, for instance. However, coded meanings can always be constructed by an ingenious critic, when the author’s intention may have been only to describe each character and situation in all its particularity. Murdoch certainly uses symbolism. A painting, or a place, or rocks or flowers, can all carry symbolic weight. Usually, as she said, it is ‘invented by the characters themselves’ (Biles 125), and in these cases it is quite natural. It is a human tendency, similar to the narrative impulse, to invest inanimate objects with human meaning. Many of Murdoch’s novels have a natural or prehistoric phenomenon – a secluded pool, or an ancient rock carving – which the characters experience as magical in some way. These symbolic patterns can add to the repetitious effect from novel to novel, and occasionally seem perfunctory, but the symbolism she uses in her best novels is well integrated and adds resonance and texture to the narrative.

Murdoch’s distinction ‘between a sort of closed novel, where my own obsessional feeling about the novel is very strong and draws it closely together, and an open novel, where there are more accidental and separate and free characters’ (Rose 66), is an ethical concept, part of her philosophy of the novel. In practice, she seems to believe that the distinction comes down to how self-
contained the novel's world is – whether there are many peripheral characters or not. In the Rose interview, she said she would like to write ‘a novel which was made up entirely of peripheral characters’ (66). Presumably this was not an entirely serious idea; she is a novelist who likes to be read! Some of her best novels, such as *An Accidental Man* or *Nuns and Soldiers*, have a lot of characters, others, like *A Severed Head* or *The Black Prince*, have a Murdochian ‘court’. Over the course of her career, the irrepressible vitality which characterises many of the earlier novels gradually becomes encumbered with superfluous characters who exist merely as examples of literary freedom. In *The Sea, The Sea*, for example, Joyce Carol Oates complains, ‘there are too many sketchy characters’ (7). Murdoch acknowledged this problem in her interview with Frank Kermode in 1963; ‘there is a tendency to oscillate between achieving a kind of intensity through having a very powerful story and sacrificing character, and having the characters and losing the intensity’ (‘House’ 64). But the ‘space in which to develop’ (Todd 101) that she tries to give her characters in the later novels is occupied by more and more detailed description of their mental and emotional processes which actually inhibits their development, because they become over-determined and the reader is not allowed enough space to imaginatively recreate them. More indeterminacy would allow for greater realism.

Murdoch told Rose in 1968 that freedom was no longer her main subject, although it might have been in the past. Later novels nevertheless treat the subject. Morgan, in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, who aspires to be free, cannot achieve freedom because she is incorrigibly selfish; but nobody could describe her selfless husband Tallis as free except in the most abstract
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metaphysical sense. Ann, in An Unofficial Rose, a good, unselfish person, is psychologically not free to marry Felix because of her bond with Randall. Freedom, for Murdoch, comes to be almost a meaningless concept. A character who claims to be free, or wishes for freedom, is almost guaranteed to be in the grip of some undeniable necessity.

Murdoch sees that the novelist is often in the false position of being a judge but trying to discourage others from judging. Her judgmental characters are usually shown to be wrong in their judgments, and she is, as she told Hartill, more interested in truth than justice. Her attention to particulars is important here, and her reluctance to satirise. Satirists are judges, who refuse to understand or to take mitigating circumstances into account. She would prefer to mention, for example, that Julius spent the war in Belsen, than merely to condemn his bad behaviour with no explanation. Murdoch tries to make each character realistic, with a unique inner life: she has criticised herself for making Nan in The Sandcastle and Morgan in A Fairly Honourable Defeat too unpleasant and shallow, because this makes it too easy for the reader to condemn them. Schneiderman comes near to defining an ethical problem when he says, ‘Murdoch attempts to use her imagination to trace the consequences of her protagonists’ need-determined fantasies’ (380). She believes that only a very small number of people are good enough to rise above their fantasies: ‘It is extremely difficult, there aren’t any saintly people’ (220), she told Bigsby. Therefore, either she believes herself doomed to failure, or she regards herself as one of these saintly people, which does not accord with her habitual modesty – in fact, she wrote in ‘The Sovereignty of Good’ that ‘the good man is humble’ (385). James Wood has found that her
aesthetics have a strange, quasi-philosophical circularity. … She knows that Shakespeare is great, philosophically. In other words, her aesthetics is not aesthetics at all, but is philosophy. … In one rather austere sense, her own novels must then seem irrelevant as practice, for they are just shards of this ideal. For if one just knows Shakespeare to be great, then one also knows that, out of sight, there is an even greater artist, the Idea of the artist. In this view of things, one could not only never be as great as Shakespeare or Tolstoy, one could never be as great as fiction itself; one could never be as great as the Good. Thus one could never be great at all. (‘Iris Murdoch’ 179-80)

He goes on to ask ‘why should it be the case that the highest ethics is the suppression of self, or that the greatest artists gloriously smother their personalities?’ (182). She set herself the most exalted standard, realising that she might never attain it, but she believed the effort was an artistic and moral imperative.

And it is partly this constant, if vain, effort to make her characters unique, to show that everyone has their own inner life and everyone can suffer, that there is no-one that doesn’t matter, that makes her such a compelling writer. When her characters betray each other, someone gets hurt. No-one can indulge selfish urges and get away with it: there is always a price to pay. Her novels do not imply that adultery or lying are absolutely wrong, but they have consequences, some more predictable than others, which must be dealt with. She told Jo Brans, ‘I think some people … might read my books because there is a kind of assertion of old-fashioned values, of the reality of virtue. Of course this also annoys other people who regard it as something not proper to be said’ (44). Her values may be old-fashioned, but they are also quite austere, and if there were no escape from the machine of compulsive behaviour and habitual wrong-doing her world would be bleak indeed. Even her good characters can be, like Anne Cavidge in Nuns and Soldiers, ‘too high-mindedly concerned with organizing the defeat of [her own] hopes to have any thought to spare for
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catastrophes which her selfless masochistic morality might be bringing about’ (502). Very often, too, the qualities she praises – imaginative attention to others, apprehending their individuality and difference – can lead to situations like falling in love disastrously. A person with little imagination, like James Tayper Pace in *The Bell*, is less likely to be tempted. She does, however, let some of her characters off, even if that means the consequences fall more heavily on others, like the two children in *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* who suffer while Blaise lives happily with Emily. Life is not fair, but some can salvage happiness, and are not condemned for doing so.

As a realist, which is her highest aim, she is only partly successful. Her novels delight in extreme and dramatic situations. However, even realistic art must be selective, and her plots usually concern those short periods of high, unsustainable drama and stress in people’s lives which can be seen as their defining moments. Kermode observes that love and death are her constant themes, and ‘the reality in which they deal is a different reality from the order of ordinary poetry … The contingent must be got in. … This reality is a difficult vocation’ (‘Bruno’s Dream’ 25). Strange things do happen, people are odder than they appear to be, and to show this is a part of her moral intention, but, as A.N. Wilson observes, ‘the dramas of the books … take place inside the author’s head, rather than in some attempted photographic representation of the real world’ (80). The characters are odd, but they are odd in a very characteristic, and eventually monotonous, way.

Are her characters ‘free’ in her sense? L.R. Leavis quotes her own criticism of Nan in *The Sandcastle* explaining how she feels she could have improved the novel (see Bigsby 227), and goes on to criticise her for
her mentality as a writer: her characters perform roles according to a preconceived pattern, a pattern without artistic inevitability which can be reprogrammed to come out differently. Characters are for her vehicles for concepts, which can without compunction be shuffled around. (‘Anti-Artist’ 142)

This is unfair, but contains a grain of truth. It is not that she sees characters as ‘vehicles for concepts’, although her plots may be seen in this way; it is more that she wants to be just and truthful, and not allow fantasy to skew the picture; and ‘the intellect comes in … to prevent … the plot from being coerced by unconscious forces’ (Bigsby, ‘Interview’ 227). A difficulty arises unless one sees this question of the freedom of fictional characters as a continuum. If characters are either free or unfree, perhaps none would pass the test; but if some characters are more free than others then we can see the measure of her success with characters like Bradley and Julian in The Black Prince, Tim and Daisy in Nuns and Soldiers, even Tallis in A Fairly Honourable Defeat, who is, despite his mythological origins, quite an extraordinary individual. None of these people seem like Murdoch in any significant way, and neither are they like each other. It must be, in the end, a matter of balance, a balance which at her best she achieves, but which is compromised when, in her quest for an all-inclusive realism, she tries too hard to fill in all the details.

Warner Berthoff believes that Murdoch, together with Muriel Spark, are ‘very nearly the first serious English novelists who have not only broken with the exalted ethos of modernism, the supreme commitment to “writing well” and producing masterpieces, but are no longer haunted by it’ (329). But Murdoch had another ‘exalted ethos’ which did haunt her. As James Wood puts it, ‘perhaps some such excessive Platonic scrupulosity on Murdoch’s part infects her practice as a novelist; it may explain the apparent wildness, even the
carelessness, of many of her novels, not to mention the almost disrespectful fecundity of her imagination’ (‘Iris Murdoch’ 180). Bloom regarded her as the most eminent contemporary British novelist, while predicting that ‘her formidable combination of intellectual drive and storytelling exuberance may never fuse into a great novel’ (7). And Frank Kermode sums up his article on Bruno’s Dream by saying that it is ‘disappointing only by the fantastically high standards it contrives to suggest’ (25). The duty of the artist ‘to silence and expel self, to contemplate and delineate nature with a clear eye, is not easy and demands a moral discipline’ (‘On “God” and “Good”’ 352). The intentional fallacy alerts us against judging an artist by her own standards. If Murdoch longed to be a great realist and creator of characters, like Jane Austen and Tolstoy, but was rather a marvellous creator of plots, we should appreciate what she has actually done rather than complain that she has not succeeded in her own impossible, quixotic aims, at the same time acknowledging, and perhaps regretting, the extra handicap she placed herself under by her dedication to her high ideals.